

The background features a dark, textured surface with several smaller emerald gemstones scattered across it. In the foreground, a large, faceted emerald crystal is prominently displayed, partially obscuring the text below. The overall aesthetic is dark and elegant, focusing on the vibrant green color of the emeralds.

EMERALD

ROJO | GEMS
BOOK ONE

CEE BOWERMAN

Emerald
Rojo Gems, Book 1

Cee Bowerman

CLBooks, LLC



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Cover design by: Sweet 15 Designs

Professionally edited by: Chrissy Riesenberg

Printed in the United States of America

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Cee Bowerman Master Book List

The Rojo, Texas Universe

Texas Knights MC (completed)

Home Forever
Forever Family
Lucky Forever
Love Forever

Texas Kings MC (completed)

Kale
Sonny
Bird
Grunt
Lout
Smokey
Tucker
Kale & Terra (Novella)
John & Mattie
Bear
Daughtry
Hank
Fain
Grady
Stoffer
Luke
Clem

Conner Brothers Construction (completed)

Finn
Angus
Mace
Ronan
Royal
Tavin
Chess

**Rojo, TX
(completed)**

Rason & Eliza
Atlas & Addie
Jazmyne & Luc
Kari & Levi
Noah & Tallie
Nick & Cindy
Marcus & Reagan

**The Tempests
(completed)**

Wrath
Creed
Loki
Styx
Thorn
Freya
Sin

**Lonestar Terrace
(in progress)**

1005 Alamo Way

**Rojo PD
(in progress)**

The Dark Side

**Rojo Gems
(in progress)**

Emerald

Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series

Time Served MC (completed)

Boss
Hook
Chef
Preacher
Captain
Bug
Santa
Kitty
Rodeo
Stamp
TS in NY
Hammer
Soda

The Four Families (in progress)

Rico
Zach

Springblood (in progress)

One More Day
Fly Away with Me

The Donovans (in progress)

Drink It Up

Pull It Up
Pretty It Up
Curl It Up
Build It Up
Whip It Up

Mereu
(in progress)

Bear Witch Me - COMING NOVEMBER 15th, 2023!

The Rojo, Texas Universe

In Chronological Reading Order

Home Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 1

Forever Family: Texas Knights MC, Book 2

Kale: Texas Kings MC, Book 1

Sonny: Texas Kings MC, Book 2

Bird: Texas Kings MC, Book 3

Grunt: Texas Kings MC, Book 4

Lout: Texas Kings MC, Book 5

Smokey: Texas Kings MC, Book 6

Tucker: Texas Kings MC, Book 7

Finn: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 1

Kale & Terra: a Texas Kings novella

John & Mattie: Texas Kings MC, Book 8

Angus: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 2

Bear: Texas Kings MC, Book 9

Lucky Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 3

Daughtry: Texas Kings MC, Book 10

Mace: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 3

Hank: Texas Kings MC, Book 11

Fain: Texas Kings MC, Book 12

Love Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 4

Rason & Eliza: Rojo, TX, Book 1

Ronan: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 4

Grady: Texas Kings MC, Book 13

Atlas & Addie: Rojo, TX, Book 2

Royal: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 5

Stoffer: Texas Kings MC, Book 14

Jazmyne & Lucius: Rojo, TX, Book 3

Wrath: The Tempests, Book 1

Luke: Texas Kings MC, Book 15

Tavin: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 6

Kari & Levi: Rojo, TX, Book 4

Creed: The Tempests, Book 2

Noah & Tallie: Rojo, TX, Book 5

Loki: The Tempests, Book 3

Styx: The Tempests, Book 4

Thorn: The Tempests, Book 5

Chess: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 7

Clem: Texas Kings MC, Book 16

Freya: The Tempests, Book 6

Sin: The Tempests, Book 7

Nick & Cindy: Rojo, TX, Book 6

Marcus & Reagan: Rojo, TX, Book 7

1005 Alamo Way: Lonestar Terrace, Book 1

The Dark Side: RPD, Book 1

Emerald: Rojo Gems, Book 1

Bear Witch Me: Mereu, Book 1

Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series

Boss: Time Served MC, Book 1

Sin's Enticement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 1 by Ciara St James

Hook: Time Served MC, Book 2

Executioner's Enthrallment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 2 by Ciara St James

Chef: Time Served MC, Book 3

Pitbull's Enslavement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 3 by Ciara St James

Preacher: Time Served MC, Book 4

Omen's Entrapment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 4 by Ciara St James

Captain: Time Served MC, Book 5

Cuffs' Enchainment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 5 by Ciara St James

Bug: Time Served MC, Book 6

Rampage's Enchantment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 6 by Ciara St James

Santa: Time Served MC, Book 7

Wrecker's Ensnarement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 7 by Ciara St James

Kitty: Time Served MC, Book 8

Trident's Enjoyment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 8 by Ciara St James

Rodeo: Time Served MC, Book 9

Fang's Enlightenment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 9 by Ciara St James

Stamp: Time Served MC, Book 10

Talon's Enamorment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 10 by Ciara St James

Time Served In New York: Time Served MC, Book 11

Ares Infidels In New York: Ares Infidels MC, Book 11 by Ciara St. James

Hammer: Time Served MC, Book 12

Phantom's Emblazonment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 12 by Ciara St. James

Soda: Time Served MC, Book 13

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to Rojo! Since I introduced these characters in the Texas Kings series, readers have been waiting not-so-patiently for them to get their own stories. I have to admit that I've been anxious to tell them both but didn't know until recently that they'd intertwine quite so well.

Emerald Hamilton was introduced in Lout, Book 5 of the Texas Kings MC series. She was just a young girl but strong and fearless, nonetheless. Those traits grew along with her throughout the rest of the books I wrote about my Rojo families. She played a huge part in Nick and Cindy's story from the Rojo, Texas series and was a major influence in several other books in between.

Adam Forrester was introduced in Daughtry, the tenth installment in the Kings series. His story broke my heart and made me happy at the same time. I'm not usually one for trigger warnings, but if I were, I would have to list quite a few for their backstories. Emerald's childhood trauma was enough to bring the most stoic person to tears, but watching her blossom under the care of her new family can warm the coldest heart. Adam's struggle as he coped with the death of his father, a fresh start in a new town, and the events that culminated in his mental health diagnosis ripped my heart out to write and still makes me wonder why in the world I come up with things that hurt so much.

But I know why - because it's what happens in real life. Traumatic events shape people in many ways, but in my stories, I can control the outcome and always be assured that everything's going to be okay and they'll all live happily ever after.

Life is best described as a roller coaster. There are ups and downs with unexpected twists and turns that can take your breath away, but it's the people who are in the seats around you that count. Thank you for taking this ride with me.

Happy reading,

Cee

PROLOGUE

ALMOST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO

ADAM

I leaned forward and rested my elbows on my knees, never taking my eyes off the moon. The man in the moon, if he really existed, was probably the only person out there who wasn't watching me right now, waiting for me to lose it. Everyone else was walking on pins and needles and had been for a week, but that old guy was just chilling up there in the sky, minding his own damn business.

The dream I'd had since I was a kid of joining the military and exploring the world like my birth father and uncles had done was gone, and now, I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I still had some time to figure it out, but the clock was ticking, and I wasn't the kind of guy who worked well under pressure.

I had plenty of options to choose from, though. My mom had insisted that I apply for a myriad of scholarships, "Just in case you decide the military isn't for you." I already had a handful waiting for me. If I worked my ass off over the next year, I might even be able to snag a few more. I was neck and neck

with the smartest kid in our class, and if things went the way I hoped, I'd be salutatorian at our graduation. Not that I cared about bullshit like that, but it made my parents proud, so that had been my goal for a while now. I hadn't set my sights on valedictorian because Bianca Loren, the girl who was inevitably going to hold that title, was a certified genius. She was also a pain in my ass, but so were a lot of people.

Especially when they tiptoed around like they were expecting me to start chasing them through the house with a knife or lock myself in my bedroom and refuse to get out of bed for days at a time, both of which were things I'd done over the years. I wasn't proud of those behaviors, by any means, and I still didn't completely understand what came over me and caused me to do shit like that, but the doctors were on top of it and that was enough to put me at ease and divert my focus.

I didn't blame my family for being cautious, especially since the episodes I'd had seemed to come out of nowhere. I knew that wasn't the case, that there was usually a trigger, but sometimes even that was a mystery. My parents had been nothing but supportive even though the only experience they had with diagnoses like mine were what they'd learned from my past behavior and helping with my therapy. Surprisingly, my birth mother had proven to be my rock over the years. She was more of a friend than a parent and seemed to prefer it that way. Luckily, I could count on her to understand what I was going through better than most people since she had experienced depression herself, and her brother had been diagnosed with the illnesses I was working through around the same time in his life.

Most of the time, I didn't even think about my diagnosis other than when I took my daily meds, but there *were* times that they were there, acting as a roadblock so that I couldn't avoid confronting them. Like tonight. I'd gotten all dressed up, taken the requisite pictures with my prom date, ridden in the limo I'd paid a fortune to rent, arrived at the country club where my friends were waiting for us, and then promptly watched every one of them get stumbling drunk while I patiently sipped my water, knowing that I couldn't partake in what seemed like a teenage rite of passage because it would fuck with my meds.

I learned early on during my high school career, when I attended my first keg party with some of my friends, that being the only sober person in a room full of partiers wasn't really much fun at all.

I sighed and let my head fall forward, trying to talk myself into going back to

the party so I could check on my date and the rest of my drunken friends. All I *really* wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed for a week. Maybe even two.

I should probably tell my therapist that was what I was feeling, but it could wait until tomorrow. So could thinking about the fact that I was going to be stuck here for the rest of my life, and the adventures I'd always dreamed about would never come to be.

I heard footsteps on the gravel and then a woman's sigh before she sniffled and tried to stifle a sob. Shit. Another lesson I'd learned early on was that a drunk was one thing, but a sad drunk? That was a ball of yarn that I was not willing to unravel.

Even though the last thing I wanted to do was try and console an inebriated, crying woman, I wasn't the kind of guy who could walk away from someone who might need help. I took a deep breath and put my shoulders back, ready to face what was most likely going to be an endless supply of snot and tears peppered with some nonsensical bullshit that I didn't want to deal with but would because I wasn't a heartless asshole.

The footsteps got closer, and I perked up when I smelled a familiar scent on the breeze. I jumped to my feet when I realized that it wasn't just some random girl but one of my close friends. That was terrifying, not just because she was upset but because she didn't cry. Ever. Or at least not when there was a chance anyone could see her doing it.

I'd nicknamed her Stone for a reason - she was unbreakable when faced with a challenge, hard as a rock when someone crossed her, and smooth as a river rock when she charmed someone to get her way.

When she lurched around the corner, she didn't see me because she had her hands over her face. She stopped and leaned against the brick wall, then bent forward as her body was racked with sobs. I knew something horrible had happened and was filled with a rage so hot that I worried that I wouldn't be able to control myself when I found out who had hurt her. If she was crying like this, that meant someone needed to fucking die, and I was just the person to help them on their way.

She didn't seem to hear me rush toward her, so I stayed out of striking distance when I asked, "What's wrong, who did it, and how badly do you want me to hurt them?"

"Fuck!" I heard her mumble before she sniffed and moved her hands to swipe at the tears on her face. Without looking at me, she said, "I'm fine, Eve. I

just need a few minutes alone.”

“Fine, my ass,” I barked. “What happened?”

Emerald shook her head, and when she finally looked over at me, the moonlight made the tears in her eyes sparkle. I watched them spill over and trail down her cheeks and felt my heart shatter. This girl was the epitome of stoic strength and poise, yet she was behind a building full of happy people all alone and crying.

“Nothing happened.” She swiped at the tears again. “I’m fine. I just needed some air.”

“Shut up,” I mumbled before I pulled her into my arms.

She resisted me for a split second before she sagged, her body racked with sobs as she clutched at my jacket. I rested my cheek on the top of her head and held her tightly, realizing that right now, she didn’t need someone to charge off and slay the dragon, she just needed someone to hold her until she was ready to do it herself.

After a few minutes, her sobs quieted, and there was only an occasional sniffle. I realized that I had been swaying to the music that was spilling out of the patio doors around the corner from us, and Emerald was matching my movement as she relaxed in my arms.

“You’re not a bad dancer, Eve,” I heard her mumble against my chest.

“You should see me tango,” I quipped. “And I’m pretty good at two-stepping.”

“You’re such a white boy.” Emerald giggled, and I smiled as I started to relax. If she could laugh, then that meant she might be done crying, and that was a relief. Now I just needed her to give me a name so I could go wreck somebody’s face.

“Who upset you, Stone?” I asked as I relaxed my arms to give her a little more space.

“Nobody important.”

“Obviously, but I still want to know.”

“Everybody knows now,” Emerald whispered before she sniffed again and took a hitching breath. “They all know and . . . and now they think I’m something that I’m really not.”

“What do they know, sweetheart?” I whispered as I pulled her close.

“My secret.” Emerald sniffed again.

I knew exactly what she was talking about and my heart sunk. Anyone who had half a brain would realize that Emerald had been too young to understand

what was happening when she got pregnant, and anyone with half a heart wouldn't tease her about it. "They know about Esme?"

"Yeah."

"What did they say?"

"No one said anything to me directly, but I overheard some girls talking in the bathroom."

"And you didn't come out of the stall swinging? You feeling okay?"

"Fuck off, Eve."

"Tell me what they said."

"They were wondering why I was such a prude since I'm not a virgin."

I winced. "Technically, I'd still consider you a virgin."

Emerald laughed softly. "I had a kid, Eve."

"But . . . Well . . . You were too young for that to count."

"It's a double whammy because they think I'm a prude and a slut at the same time."

"Is that dickhead pressuring you to have sex?" I asked, trying to remember how many bones were in the human body and wondering if a person could survive having all of them broken at the same time.

"Sort of. No."

"So, is it sort of, or is it no?"

"I guess I *am* a prude."

"No, he's a douche. I'd say that the fact you wouldn't do more than kiss him means you have good taste."

"I've never kissed anybody," Emerald admitted quietly.

"Really?" Emerald shook her head. "Not even a little bit?"

She leaned her head back and looked at me before she said, "It's either a kiss or not. There's no little bit about it."

"You're right," I conceded. Without even thinking, I said, "You're a beautiful girl, Stone. How have you avoided kissing anyone all these years?"

"I want it to be perfect because . . ." She sucked in a tortured breath and said, "My first time wasn't. This is my only chance for a truly magical first."

I didn't really understand her logic, but it wasn't my place to. "What would make it perfect?"

"He'd have to be sweet about it. And the mood would have to be right with good music, soft lighting . . . You know, romantic."

"Like dancing in the moonlight?"

Emerald nodded, her head resting on my chest again. "And he'd have to

know without a doubt that I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever seen."

"If he's got eyes in his head, he'd have already noticed that."

"You think I'm pretty?"

"I think you're more than pretty. You're stunning, Stone. Flawless. Beautiful. Gorgeous."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. There's also the fact that you're smart. Not as smart as me, of course, but you can hold your own. And you're funny. That's pretty important too."

"He said I was uptight."

"He needs his ass whooped."

Emerald laughed before she sniffed again. "I don't think I'm ever going to get the perfect kiss, so I should just go in there and . . ."

I let go of her waist so I could put my finger under her chin and make her look up at me. There were fresh tears in her eyes, and I hated that but thought I might know a way to make them go away. At least, I hoped that was what would happen.

She stared up at me while we swayed to the music, and I whispered, "You're a beautiful woman, Emerald Hamilton."

"Thank you."

"You deserve the best, and I don't want you to ever settle for anything less than that. And don't be afraid to try something new."

"I'm not afraid of shit."

I smiled at her as I nodded. "I know you're not, but that's not what I mean. Don't be hesitant just because of what happened in the past."

"I just need to get over it and . . . I don't know . . . get it out of the way."

"I thought you wanted romance."

"I do, but it's like I've waited too long now. There's never going to be a right time."

"For a kiss?"

Emerald pulled out of my arms and took a deep breath before she blew it out and tipped her head back to look at the sky. "I'll get through it. That's what I do. And then I'll be . . ."

"Fine. Yeah, I got it."

Her dark skin was highlighted by the glow of the full moon, and the slender line of her neck led down to the most perfect body I'd ever seen. In that second, she went from being a girl I'd known forever to a gorgeous young

woman.

I hated the fact that it had taken me this long to realize that, and I didn't know how to tell her what I was feeling.

I decided to show her.

When I reached for her hand, she opened her eyes and looked at me in alarm. I lifted our joined hands and moved them across our bodies, forcing her to turn in a slow circle. When she faced me again, I pulled her close and wrapped my other arm around her waist as I leaned down to touch my lips to hers.

For just a few seconds, I wasn't that guy with issues and she wasn't that girl with a past. Instead, we were two people who had fallen prey to the rhythm of a slow song and the magic of the moonlight.

And it was beyond perfect.



TWENTY YEARS AGO

EMERALD

“Justice and I thought I might find you out here somewhere.”

Adam raised his head and smiled at me before he leaned it back against the log where it had been propped up and said, “You know me. I'm the life of the party as long as it's a party of one.”

“I don't like the tone of your voice, Eve. What's going on?” I asked as I readjusted the baby I was holding and sat down on the grass beside Adam.

“You've seemed off the last few times I've talked to you. Are you all fucked up in the head or what?”

Adam burst out laughing, and it startled the baby in my arms. He reached out and took his cousin from me and laid him on his chest as he started patting the baby's back.

Once Justice had settled in and was napping again, Adam said, “I thought shrinks weren't supposed to admit people were fucked up.”

“I'm not a doctor yet. Besides, you aren't my patient. You're my friend, so I can be frank with you.”

“I'd rather you be Stone. Frank sounds like a pain in the ass.”

“You can't call me Stone anymore, remember? Sonny and Brenda stole my nickname and gave it to their son.”

“They said they got it from that soap opera, but I don’t believe them. I think they realized how cool it sounded when they heard me call you that.”

“All of their kids are named after people on that show because it had a power couple with names like theirs.”

“Stone’s a cute kid, but I liked it when I could call you that.”

I shrugged and then laid down beside him as I said, “You can still call me that. I kind of liked it. It made me feel special.”

“You are special . . . in that fucked-up, weird sort of way that people like me appreciate.”

I snorted and laughed before I nudged him with my elbow. “Like recognizes like, right?”

“I guess so.”

“How does it feel to be a college graduate?”

“Stifling.”

“Why? I’d have thought you’d be glad to be back home around all the cool kids. You know you missed us.”

“You guys are like a rash I just can’t get rid of,” Adam said with an obviously fake smile.

“Talk to me, Eve. What are you thinking about right now?”

Adam sighed and then was quiet for so long that I wondered if he was going to answer me. He finally said, “Do you ever wonder what your life would have been like if you’d been born a different person?”

“No, because I might be some grump with a permanent scowl who hates the world and . . .”

“So, you think you’d be the same person, just in a different body?” Adam interrupted with a grin.

“I don’t hate the world, I just hate most of the people in it.”

Adam chuckled, but this time Justice stayed asleep. “That doesn’t bode well for success in your chosen profession.”

“A therapist is allowed to have feelings as long as they don’t get in the way of helping their patients.”

“You’ll be great at it. I’ve always thought so.”

“Why do you say that? Because I have personal experience in being fucked up to pull from?”

“No, because you’re a vault.”

“If you know I’m good at keeping secrets, then why won’t you talk to me?”

“You’ll just try to talk me off the ledge.”

I turned my head and studied my friend before I calmly asked, “Are you thinking about doing something stupid?”

Adam looked over at me and frowned. “Not that kind of stupid, Stone, but maybe a little crazy.”

“I can deal with crazy, but I wouldn’t be able to deal with not having you around to tease.”

“If I carry out the plan I’ve been thinking up, you might have to do just that.”

“You’re freaking me out, Eve.”

“It’s nothing bad, but I think I want to fulfill a dream I’ve always had. I won’t be doing it the way I thought I would or on the scale I wanted, but at least I’ll be making it happen.”

“Dreams are good. They mean you’re looking forward to the future.” I thought about how many times Adam and I had escaped our crowded family gatherings just like we were right now and remembered the conversations we’d had about our hopes and dreams. “You’re going to leave us, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, at least for a while.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to ride my bike off into the sunset and chase the clouds.”

“That’s not vague at all,” I mumbled. A little louder, I commanded, “Details.”

“I want to ride my motorcycle in all fifty states,” Adam explained. Before I could say anything, he lifted his hand and added, “Not just ride through them, but explore them.”

“How will you afford to do that?”

“I’ve got some money saved, and I’ll pick up odd jobs as I travel. I’ve been working at the garage off and on for years, and I did a few summers with the Connors on their job sites, so I’ve got some construction experience too. I’ve worked at Gamma’s diner and Maria’s restaurant when they needed someone, so I can always wait tables. I think I can make it.”

“I know you can.” My breath hitched and tears filled my eyes before I choked out, “You’ll come back, right?”

Adam turned his head and smiled at me. “I’ll always come back, Stone, and even if I’m far away, you can always count on me if you need something. You know that, right?”

“No matter where you are, day or night, if you feel like something’s coming on, you call me. Don’t go out there all alone and lose yourself, Adam.”

“I won’t.”

“Promise,” I said as I lifted my hand and stuck my pinky out.

Adam hooked his pinky with mine and held it for a few seconds before he said, “I promise, but you have to do the same.”

“I’m not the one that’s batshit, Eve, I’m just certifiable.”

Adam laughed and pulled my hand down to rest on the grass between us, our pinkies still connected. “At least there’s medication for my shit. You’re too far around the bend for a prescription to help.”

“Promise you won’t stay gone forever.”

Adam squeezed my pinky again as he smiled at me. “I’ll always come back to you, Stone. You’re my rock.”

1.

EMERALD

“I enjoyed our talk today,” I told the young woman who was lounging on my couch. “Are you going to come back?”

She sighed, and I could almost feel her tension before she finally asked, “Are you going to tell my parents what I said today?”

“Nope.”

“You promise?” she asked as she turned to look at me and gauge my expression to see if I was lying or not.

“Listen, Gwen, I’m not going to bullshit you. You’re old enough to understand the ways of the world and that there are certain rules people have to follow . . . Well, that people *should* follow. You’re still a kid, so it’s up to your parents to make sure you’re safe and whole. It’s up to me to listen to you and make sure you know this is a safe space where you can say anything that’s in your heart or on your mind. One way for me to do that is to take what you say and analyze it to make sure your head’s in the right place. If I feel like you need more help than I can give you, I’m gonna ask for help from someone else - either your parents, another doctor, or if it comes to that, the authorities. However, I’m going to do all of that with *your* best interests in mind, not your parents. I’m *your* doctor. You are the only one whose

opinion matters as long as we're in this room. However, if I think you're doing something unsafe or something is happening to you that's unsafe, I'm gonna fix it. Period. No matter who it pisses off."

"But my parents pay for my sessions with you."

"And? I didn't go into this profession to help anyone but my clients, and right now, that's you. I'm not going to talk to anyone about what is said in this room other than in the situations I mentioned before. At some point, that's probably going to tick your parents off, but that's not a *me* problem, that's a *them* problem."

"You don't sound like any other adult I've ever met."

"The best thing about being an adult is that I can make my own rules to a certain extent. I follow the rules I promised to obey when I became a doctor, I follow the law, and I follow my heart. Simple as that."

"My mom is gonna come in here and want a word-for-word report on what I said."

"Then she's gonna leave here disappointed."

Gwen burst out laughing and sat up on the couch to face me. "I like you."

"I like you too." I leaned forward and stuck my fist out as I asked, "Do we have a deal? You talk to me, and I keep my mouth shut?"

Gwen bumped her fist against mine and nodded. "Deal."

"Okay. Our time is up for today, so you are free to go. The bathroom is at the end of the hall. Go wash those tears off, look in the mirror, and say the words we practiced. Just take a minute to set your mind right while I talk to your mom."

"Thank you, Dr. Hamilton."

"See you next week?"

"Definitely!"

I stood and followed my newest patient to the door and reached over to turn off the speaker that piped calming music out into the hallway while I had a patient in my office. My dad had gotten it for me when I complained that I needed an even thicker door than the one he'd installed because I'd found parents trying to listen in while their kids were in a session.

It didn't matter that they'd signed multiple pieces of paper explaining that our sessions were protected by doctor-patient confidentiality and just my rules in general, they wanted to be a fly on the wall, usually so they could grill their kids about what they were saying to me. I understood where they were coming from to a point, but their comfort and peace of mind wasn't my

problem. Making sure that the young kids that trusted me to help them could *really* trust me was my most important task.

Before I was adopted by my parents, I didn't have a soul to talk to that I could really trust. The one time I went to the counselor at school, she immediately called my mom and that caused a shitstorm that lasted for days. The bruises I got from the multiple beatings she gave me for telling a stranger our 'family business' lasted even longer.

Just the thought of one of my patients suffering because they'd had the balls to be honest with another person who was there to help them sent me into a rage that most of my associates in the medical field would have a field day analyzing. But luckily, I wasn't the one on the couch and hoped I never had to be.

I followed Gwen down the hall before we turned the corner and walked out into the waiting room. Mrs. White, Gwen's mom, hopped up from her chair with an expectant expression on her face and rushed across the room toward me.

"So, what did she say?"

I did the same thing with Mrs. White that I did with every parent after their first time trusting me with their child's care. I calmly walked with her into the hallway and stepped closer to the bathroom door in the hopes that the patient could hear us while we talked. I heard the water turn off a split second before I turned toward Mrs. White with a bright smile.

"Our session went very well today. Your daughter is a lovely young woman, and I'm eager to speak with her again soon."

"But what did she say? What did you talk about?"

I lifted my shoulders as I tilted my head and smiled again. I let them drop and shook my head before I told her, "If something comes up in one of our sessions that's worrisome enough for me to consider talking to you about, I'll let you know, but what Gwen and I talk about in our sessions stays behind that office door."

"But I'm her mom."

"I understand that. I'm a mom and want to be right in the middle of my daughter's life, too, but I know I can't. There are things that she might not be comfortable discussing with me, and when that happens, I find someone for her to talk to, just like you did."

"So, how do I know if you're doing anything to help her?"

"I'd love to have a one-on-one with you and talk about what *you* can do to

help her. My job is to listen and give her suggestions and tools that will help her cope with the issues she presents, not to make you feel better.”

“But . . .”

“Would you like to schedule a time to talk? Gwen had the opportunity to talk to someone who won’t judge her for her thoughts or decisions . . . It might be a good idea for you to do the same. If both of you are able to feel a little lighter when you leave here, it might open up some paths of communication you haven’t had available before.”

“What about her father?”

“If he’d like to come in . . .”

Mrs. White rolled her eyes. “I don’t give a shit what he’d like. I want to know what’s going on that makes her feel like she can’t talk to me about their time together.”

“So, in return you wouldn’t mind him grilling her about what she does with you the second she gets into the car, ready to see him after you’ve had your allotted time?”

“It’s none of his fucking business what I do with my daughter! He lost the right to know what happens in my house when he left.”

“But he didn’t lose the right to have a relationship with Gwen.”

“I’m not sure about this,” Mrs. White said in a huff. “You might not be the right fit for our situation.”

“Feel free to talk to the judge, but he is the one who assigned her case to me, so *he* believes I’m the right fit.”

“I’ll be speaking to my lawyer in the morning.”

I glanced down at the watch on my wrist and said, “It’s only a few minutes after four. He’s probably still in his office if you want to talk to him today.”

“Mom,” Gwen said from the bathroom doorway. Mrs. White spun around and opened her mouth to say something, but Gwen put her hand up to stop her. “I had a really good talk with Dr. Hamilton, and there are a few things I want to talk to you about too.”

Mrs. White shot me a shitty smile before she said, “Of course, baby. We can talk in the car.”

“I’d like to say it right now.”

“I’d rather we . . .”

“I’m not the one that got a divorce. I’m not the one that left. I’m just a kid who is trying to figure out how to split myself in half to make everyone happy, and sometimes, it makes me think about hurting myself. I know

enough to know that's not good. I feel better after talking to Dr. Hamilton today and saying that to you. Can you just let me feel better for a while?"

Mrs. White had tears streaming down her cheeks as she nodded. She looked over at me, and I smiled softly before I asked, "Tomorrow morning at about 8:30?"

"Please."

"I'll see you then."



"I'll do everything I can to make sure you're protected but . . ."

"Believe me, I'll be fine," I assured the assistant district attorney, a smart woman who knew how dangerous it could be to cross certain people. If she'd thought about it before she said that, she'd have realized that some of the most dangerous were related to me, by blood or choice, so she didn't have to worry about my safety at all. "I stand by my assessment of the situation, and threats from a man who thinks it's okay to treat women the way he does aren't going to change my diagnosis or recommendations."

"I wish I could get your input on a few other cases I'm working on," Ginger said before she sighed and relaxed back in her chair. "For that matter, I'd love to have your insight into some of my co-workers too."

"Office drama is the worst, or so I've heard. I have a receptionist who keeps me booked solid and on time to my appointments, but other than that, there's no one else working in my office, so I'm safe from those problems."

"Smart woman," Ginger mused. "If I had even half your skills at assessing people, I'd be having a field day around here. Between the lawyers willing to step on anyone to move up in ranks and others who are doing just enough to make it until retirement, I could write a book on office politics and drama."

"Maybe you should. Even if you never publish it, working on something like that would help you get your emotions and frustrations out so they don't fester."

"As soon as people stop being horrible to each other and breaking the law repeatedly, I'll get right on that."

"Honestly, I couldn't do what you do. I was raised in a world where actions

have consequences, and there's no getting around them. I'd take every loss personally and end up with ulcers and a bad attitude." I laughed and then pointed out, "Although, I'm sure you've heard *plenty* about my attitude, so I'm already halfway there."

"Mr. Banks, the lawyer representing Lopez, hates you with the burning passion of a thousand suns, and some of my coworkers are almost as opinionated about your work with our office."

"They don't understand my motivation and can't seem to grasp that I don't actually work for the DA's office, just my clients and the court system."

"Even though it wasn't to my office's benefit, I appreciate what you did with the Albertson case. I knew that man didn't need to stand trial, but my hands were tied."

"I firmly believe that the defense claiming mental illness is blatantly abused, but in some instances, it's perfectly acceptable. Mr. Albertson needs more help than the state could have or would have ever given him."

"And you think that Lopez is beyond that?"

"I know it's not a popular opinion in my field, but I believe some people truly are beyond help. Other than death, incarceration is probably the only way to keep them from doing more horrible things among people who just aren't capable or prepared to deal with encountering someone like Mr. Lopez. He's not mentally ill other than my current diagnosis of antisocial personality disorder, and therapy is the only way to see a difference with that. There's no medication that can balance the severity of his case. As horrible as his crime was against Mrs. Lopez, I'm glad it gave her a chance to get out from under his thumb. I'm also thankful his children will be able to find help so that they can deal with the turmoil that man has created in their young lives."

"I can't believe she kept going back to him, but I feel that way about so many of the men and women I encounter whose spouse is being prosecuted."

"It happens way too often."

"What would you do if a man treated you like I'm sure Mr. Lopez always treated his wife?"

"As much as it goes against my professional outlook of giving people a chance to better themselves and rectify their mistakes, one chance is all someone gets when it comes to my family's safety." I shrugged and then smiled before I added, "And honestly, one chance is all they'll need because if someone hurts anyone I love like Mr. Lopez did, they won't live long enough to ask for another one."

“Hallelujah. I’m right there with you on that one.”

“If that’s all you need from me today, I’ll leave you to your work. Just know that I’ve already blocked out the trial dates on my calendar, so I’ll be available for testimony, and you can call me between now and then for consultations as you need them, of course.”

“Thanks again, Emerald. It’s always a pleasure to work with you.”

I chuckled, remembering the times Ginger and I had butted heads in the past.

“At least this time.”

She was probably thinking of the same circumstances and agreed, “This time. Our next case might not be as pleasant.”

As usual, the other drivers on the road added to my thoughts of trading in my SUV for a military tank complete with armed weapons. The fact that a 90s model sedan followed me from the DA’s office to my own didn’t improve my mood at all.

I had already pulled my pistol out of the hidden pocket in my purse before I turned into my parking lot and had it in hand and ready before I jumped out of my car to confront the other driver. It took them a split-second to realize that whatever plan they had didn’t include an armed victim, and their tires squealed as they sped away. Their vehicle disappeared behind some cars that were parked along the street before I could take down the license plate information, but I recognized the driver as the man I’d conducted multiple interviews with over the last few weeks.

The same man who I would be testifying against in his upcoming attempted murder trial.

I snatched my purse out of the SUV and hurried into my office, my pistol held in my pocket now rather than out in the open for anyone to see.

“Whatever it is, violence isn’t the answer,” my assistant Naomi said the second I walked through the door.

“I don’t even need to hear the question to understand that violence is *always* a good answer. Pull the video feed from the last week. No, make that the last two, and upload it to the cloud,” I ordered as I turned around to watch the traffic passing on the street. “And I don’t want you outside without an escort until further notice, okay?”

“What happened?” Naomi asked.

“You’re still carrying that pistol I bought you, right?”

“Yes. What happened?”

“I want you to schedule a refresher at Protect the Queen for tomorrow

morning and have them clean your gun and make sure it's all in working order while you're there."

Naomi slowly nodded at me with her eyebrows raised before she leaned forward and asked, "What is going on?"

"While I was meeting with Ginger, she got a call from that slimy lawyer that Lopez hired. She told him what I'd found in my assessment and that there wasn't going to be any deal for a lesser charge. I guess news travels fast because I was followed to the office, and it was Lopez in the car."

"Are you sure it was him?"

"I've sat across from that sick bastard for more than twenty hours over the last few weeks. I'm positive."

"Threat level 'Kill 'em all' in place?" Naomi asked. When I nodded, she sighed and asked, "Why didn't I take the job your sister offered when she tried to steal me away?"

"Because you can't stand anyone's children other than your own, and you're a germaphobe who would lose it every time one of them sneezed on your desk." I laughed when I turned around and saw the look of disgust on Naomi's face. Just to twist the knife, I added, "But I'm sure she can still find a spot for you if you want me to give her a call."

"I'd rather take my chances with some psycho in your parking lot than get snot sprayed on me by every toddler in Rojo."

I burst out laughing and then engaged the deadbolt on the front door before I walked past Naomi and ordered, "Call Protect the Queen right now."

Protect the Queen was one of many businesses owned by my father's motorcycle club and managed by men I'd considered my uncles since I met them when I was a young girl. John and Mattie were slowly transitioning toward retirement, but the employees who were taking over the company were members of the MC and family too. Gauge Evans, a young man I'd known since he was born, was in charge of the armory. His little brother, Colt, along with my little brother, Lazlo, worked there while they also ran their own side business attached to Protect the Queen.

I waited until Naomi picked up the phone before I walked past her into the hallway and took a left so I could peek into my daughter's 'office.' My daughter had never been under anyone's care but family because I didn't trust anyone else. Since the day she was born until the present day, and for as long as I could swing it, Aspen would be close by and cared for by either my family or her father's.

I had known Hunter Tempest since his mother married into our extended Colorado family. Since we were close in age, we spent a lot of time together and became very good friends. We almost ruined that by falling in love and getting married, but in our case, divorce was more a relief rather than a traumatic experience. Luckily, we were able to put our differences aside and focus on our daughter. Our friendship had grown even stronger over the past few years as we navigated the ups and downs of co-parenting.

Our daughter, Aspen, was a perfect blend of Hunter and myself. So much so that our grandfather, Papa Smokey, had nicknamed her Little Bit when she was just a few weeks old. He laughingly said, “She’s a little bit of you and a little bit of him, but I bet she’s gonna be more than a little bit of a handful.”

He was right, but I thought we’d done one helluva job so far raising a strong and focused young woman who excelled in anything she set her mind to, was an independent thinker, and had no qualms about expressing her opinion. All of those things sounded like terrific qualities when you were describing Aspen to someone, but they were giving me gray hairs as I dealt with the roller coaster ride of parenting a teenage girl. Luckily, Hunter and I had been able to present a united front so far, which was good because our daughter was testing *every* boundary. Nothing was too insignificant to argue about, and I found myself forgetting everything I’d learned earning my doctorate in psychiatry and all the other degrees I’d earned through the years. I argued with Aspen in ways that weren’t productive for either of us.

I’d found that if given half a chance, almost anyone could piss me off, but none of them could get me as wound up as my own daughter. With just a sigh and an eye roll, she could throw me into a tailspin of emotion that was damn near impossible to walk away from. Other times, she’d say something that made me remember she was my sweet baby that I’d set the world on fire for. Sometimes, those emotions happened within seconds of each other. Parenting a teenage girl was a mystery that no doctorate could explain.

It didn’t help that when I talked to my mom, grandmother, and other women in the family about the emotional chaos my daughter created, they would just laugh. I had to make myself walk away so I wouldn’t lose the fight to stay in control of my emotions and choke them out with my bare hands.

Her nickname still fit, but rather than a little bit of me and a little bit of Hunter, it had changed to a little bit of demon and a little bit of angel with a little bit of what the fuck thrown into the mix.

When my daughter glanced up from the book she was reading and gave me a

brilliant smile, I knew that it was one of those times when my heart would be filled with love and happiness. I would bask in it because that could change in the blink of an eye.

“Hey, sweet girl.”

“This book is so good.”

“I know, right?”

“I’m only halfway through, and I’ve got so many thoughts and questions.”

“Keep reading, and we’ll go over them after class this evening. You should call Esme and tell her you’re reading it. I know she really enjoyed that book, too, and I think she read it when she was about your age. As a matter of fact, I think it still might be one of her top ten favorites.”

“Really? Interesting,” Aspen said as she picked up her phone. “I’m going to text her right now.”

I was so happy that Aspen had a good relationship with Esme Cardenas, the child I’d had when I was younger than Aspen was right now. I’d given my biological daughter up for adoption at birth, and she’d been raised by a loving couple named Nick and Cindy who had become some of my closest friends over the years.

At 28, Esme was a firecracker, just like Aspen. I couldn’t help but grimace when I remembered all the times Cindy had called me complaining that Esme had my attitude and jokingly offered to ‘return her for a full refund.’ Of course, she’d offered up the same deal for her other daughter, Rosie, even though she wasn’t my biological child. Now Cindy was one of the family members who laughed when I complained about Aspen’s attitude, and I often reminded her of those conversations.

One of Nick and Cindy’s other children, Bendicion Cardenas, or Ben as the family called him, was also my biological child and Esme’s half brother. Eighteen years ago, I had volunteered to be Nick and Cindy’s surrogate to round out their family, and even though giving up another baby was hard, knowing that he would be raised in a loving home with people who I had come to consider family made it okay.

Nick and Cindy had been honest with all four of their children about their individual origins and had welcomed me into their family from the start. We’d had an open adoption with Esme, and since I was barely 13 when she was born, we’d grown up like siblings. My adoptive parents had been friends with Nick and Cindy before I came to live with them, but when I chose the couple to adopt my baby, they grew even closer.

I was in college when I became their surrogate, and it was harder for me to get over Ben's birth, both physically and mentally. My family and friends had helped with that, and so had knowing I could see him anytime and watch him grow.

"Esme said she'll be in our class this evening, and she'd like to join us for dinner so we can talk about my book. Can we go to Aunt Maria's and have pasta?"

"Why not? What better way to make up for the calories we'll burn off while we exercise than to have something delicious from Grazie's?"

Aspen's fingers were flying over the keyboard as she asked, "Share a bread pudding after?"

I scoffed. "Share nothing. Get your own!"

"You get bread pudding, and I'll get Key lime pie. You know Esme's going to get banana pudding like she always does. We can share."

"Good plan. That's why you're the brains of this family, Little Bit."

"Do you have any more appointments this afternoon?"

"No, I just have to make some phone calls and take care of some paperwork. Did you finish your assignments?"

Aspen nodded. "All but two formulas. I called Uncle Warren about them, and he said it would be easier for him to explain in person. He's at the office until five and said it would be okay if I came down this afternoon, but I waited until you came back to the office before I walked over there."

I thought about the car that had followed me from the DA's office and shook my head. "No walking today, Little Bit. I don't want you going anywhere alone for a while. I'll drive you over to see Warren later."

"Is somebody gonna find out?"

I laughed before I explained, "I'm not going to give them a chance to fuck around so hopefully not."

Aspen had been through this with me before, so she knew the drill. "When is the trial?"

"It's scheduled for next month, but you'll be in Colorado for at least half of that time."

"That's true, and while I'm here, the rest of the Colorado family will be, too, because *everyone* is coming down for the wedding."

"Half the state, at least," I joked. "I'll be in my office if you need me, and don't forget - I don't want you outside alone."

"Yes, ma'am." Aspen leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up on

the corner of the desk before she lifted her book to continue reading. She gave me another blinding smile and said, "I love you a little bit."
"I love you a little bit more."

2.

ADAM

“I don’t care how much she wants to go, she’s not taking a trip with her boyfriend!” It took all I had not to raise my voice, but I knew that would just throw my ex-wife into a fit that I wasn’t in the mindset to deal with right now. “She’s fucking 14, Bianca, and so is he. You might not remember what boys are like at that age, but I do.”

“His older brother and sister-in-law will be with them.”

“Every second of the trip? Are they not going to sleep?” I tried to remember the dynamics of this boy’s family and realized that the older brother was barely old enough to drink so I didn’t even consider him a real adult yet.

“You think two barely 20-something kids are going to be good chaperones for a horny teenage boy and our daughter?”

“He’s not that bad.”

“I was a teenage boy at one time, and I can assure you he’s *that bad*.”

“Don’t be ridiculous Adam. I thought we’d come to an agreement about Lorelei dating.”

“She’s fourteen goddamn years old, Bianca! I’m not cool with her dating at all, but I caved to the pressure as long as both of you agreed to a few stipulations. Spending the night out of town with her boyfriend was not part

of the deal!”

“Well, I already told her she could go, so you’re going to have to explain to her why she can’t.”

“Of course I will because being the bad guy is always my job.”

“I don’t know if I’m going to be able to let the kids stay with you when I move.”

“I don’t see that you have much choice in the matter. My kids aren’t moving. Period.”

“You know that this move is the next logical step in my career. I’ve been aiming for this position since before you and I got married.”

“I understand that, but occasionally, the duties of parenthood come before career aspirations, Bianca. Not sure how you didn’t get the memo on that one.”

“Are you implying I’m not a good parent?”

“I’m not implying shit. I’m just saying that you’re not going to uproot the kids from their entire family and the life and friends they have in Rojo to transplant them halfway across the world just because you got a new job,” I retorted.

Now, I couldn’t deny I was thinking exactly that, but at least I’d managed to choke the words back so I didn’t start an even bigger argument with the woman who had the ability to make me see red so effortlessly.

I’d talked to my friend Emerald about my problems with Bianca several times, and she’d helped me see my ex-wife’s side of the situation as often as she could. Emerald was my sounding board for a lot of things. It obviously helped that she was a psychiatrist who was trained to weed through emotions and find the root cause of most problems, especially ones that involved teenagers, which was her main field of expertise.

The fact that she dabbled in the field of criminal psychiatry was helpful, too, because her input let me see that I wasn’t a homicidal maniac, just a frustrated divorcee who didn’t understand why his ex acted the way she did or said the things she said. Right now, with the angry thoughts rushing through my head, I had a feeling Emerald might change her diagnosis.

“I’ll drop the kids off at your house this evening since you insist that they stay in this shithole town with you rather than explore the world. Just because you’re fucking nuts and couldn’t follow your dreams doesn’t mean I shouldn’t follow mine.”

“And here we go,” I muttered.

“You’re not going anywhere, and you’re not going to keep me from moving just by holding the kids over my head.”

“Not trying to.”

“Fine! You get your wish! Fuck you and your family. I’m out. I’ll just do it all alone since Jeremy left me.”

“What?”

“He filed for divorce yesterday afternoon.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“I don’t know why I even try when every man I get close to ends up leaving me.” I heard Bianca sniff before she said, “First, it was you, then it was Bob, now it’s Jeremy. All of you left me.”

“That does seem to be the trend, *sweetheart*. I just can't imagine why. Of course, it's not *you* that's the common denominator.” I leaned forward and bumped my forehead on the steering wheel a few times, irritated that I’d fallen into the argument trap and not disconnected.

I realized I’d hit a nerve when she yelled, “Fuck off, Adam!”

Bianca hung up on me, and that was a good thing because the urge to start maniacally laughing while screaming obscenities at the woman was nearly overwhelming. I picked my phone up off the seat and made sure the call was disconnected before I gripped the steering wheel and let out a roar of frustrated outrage.

When I finally calmed down enough to take a deep breath, I realized that I’d had an audience for my hissy fit. My brothers were openly laughing at me.

When I opened the truck door, Joshua asked, “So, big brother, how *is* Bianca today?”

Heath tilted his head up to study the clouds before he asked, “Why is it that a house hasn’t fallen on her yet?”

“Jill said it’s because she’s a fucking demon that slithered up from hell, and she’d just crawl out from under it,” Joshua replied as he, too, looked up at the sky. “It would be fun to watch, though.”

“Jill has always hated her,” I mused, finally laughing, just like my brothers had been trying to make me do. “Mom can’t fucking stand Bianca either, but she fakes it pretty well.”

“I think we inherited our bad poker faces from Jill,” Josh said, referring to our birth mother. “None of us are able to keep what we’re feeling out of our expression.”

“It’s called resting bitch face on a woman, but what is it on a man?” Heath

asked.

“Honesty,” I retorted.

“My facial expressions got me into so much trouble when I was in the service,” Josh mused. “Well, that and my smart mouth.”

“Imagine that,” Heath said sarcastically.

“Were you guys out here waiting for little old me or . . .”

“Well, speaking of demons spawned from hell, Margaret’s in the office, and she wants to talk to you,” Joshua interrupted with a grin.

“Did she ask to talk to me, or did the two of you blow her off so she doesn’t have any other choice?”

“A little of both,” Heath admitted.

“Why did we think this neighborhood thing was a good idea?” I asked rhetorically.

My brothers and I had scrimped and saved to purchase a huge plot of land and houses that originally belonged to the government and was used for housing when there was an army base not far away from Rojo. After it was shut down, the houses started to fall into disrepair. We got everything for a steal, if you counted signing our lives away for a mountain of debt that we weren’t sure we’d ever be able to crawl out of as a good deal.

But things seemed to be looking up. We’d sold a few houses, including one to Margaret, the neighbor from hell. So far, we had kept control of the neighborhood through the equivalent of an HOA. Our homeowners’ association allowed us to keep people out who weren’t serious about making this neighborhood a safe place for everyone to call home.

We did intend to sell every home at some point, but right now, we were keeping the majority as rental properties with a chance to purchase if my brothers and I found that the renter was a good fit for the vibe we were trying to create. Of course, most of the houses we’d sold were to family or friends that were more like family anyway, and that really helped.

“Well, the plan was sound, but we didn’t take the Margarets of the world into account when we made it.”

“So far, everyone else gets along just fucking fine, but there’s gotta be that one pain in the ass that fucks everything up,” I mumbled as I walked past my brothers toward the side door of the admin building right outside the neighborhood I was building with my brothers. “She wasn’t this big of a pain in the ass when she was renting, that’s for damn sure.”

“Hey, wait up,” Josh said as he jogged up beside me and fell into step with

me. “You’ve already dealt with more than your fair share of shit today, so I’ll field this one.”

“There’s no sense in your day being ruined, too, so I’ll take her. You guys can take off. I’m sure you’ve both got plans tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I’ll handle her and then close up the office for the weekend. I’m on call anyway, so it’s no big deal.”

“The kids move in this weekend?”

“Yeah. They’re officially mine full-time starting tonight.”

“Is that what Bianca called to fight about?”

“Of course.”

“She still doesn’t know the kids asked you to go to bat for them, does she?”

“Nah. I told them I’d take care of it so that they’re not putting themselves in the line of fire too.”

“If you need anything, call us, okay? Even if it’s just to talk.”

I smiled at him before I reached for the door. “I’m good, brother, but I’ll call one of you if that changes.”

I watched Joshua and Heath take off around the building, walking toward their own homes that were in our neighborhood. My house was in the northwest corner, Heath lived on the northeast, and Josh was on the southeast, directly in line with the gated entrance that was on the southwest corner. We’d each chosen a house that would fit our needs and made sure that they were spaced out around the neighborhood so we could establish a presence to make sure everything stayed the way we wanted it.

Peaceful.

Calm.

Welcoming.

Everything Margaret was not.

She had been all of those things when she was a renter. That might be because at the time, none of the other houses on her block were occupied. Now that she had neighbors, namely Brighten Duke, Crow Forrester, Emerald Hamilton, and myself as well as several other friends of mine, she’d turned into *that* neighbor.

Margaret was like those neighbors from hell that everyone had heard about but were hopefully lucky enough to never live near. She was the one who complained when someone drove down the street more than twice after ten at night, ran their lawnmower too early in the morning, or didn’t take care of

their landscaping as she thought they should.

I had more complaints from Margaret than I did gray hairs, and since I was a father of two teenagers, that was saying something.

When I walked into the office, the thunderous expression on our office manager's face was almost enough to make me turn around and walk out. If that didn't do it, the sputtering woman standing in front of her desk would.

I nodded at Margaret before I greeted Charlene. "Sorry it took so long to get back, but the meeting ran longer than I expected and then I had an important phone call."

"Oh! I almost forgot! I have a message for you." Charlene scribbled something on a scrap of paper and handed it to me with a maniacal grin before she said, "I'm going to . . . do something in the breakroom."

I glanced down at the piece of paper and burst out laughing.

You don't pay me enough for this shit. If I have to listen to this old bat complain about one more thing, I will burn this building to the ground.

Kiss my ass. I quit. Again.

Charlene

As Charlene stomped toward the breakroom, I looked over at Margaret and sighed. "What seems to be the problem today, Margaret?"

"I had a run in with those . . . those . . . Ugh!" Margaret clenched her fists at her sides and literally vibrated with anger as she tried to find the words to explain what had pissed her off today. In my head, I went through the roster of family and friends I had living out here and tried to figure out who might have been home today and encountered her. My guess was . . .

"Dr. Parker and her sister are just . . . They're horrible!"

I *knew* it! Nobody could make someone homicidal quicker than one of them, but it happened even quicker if they were together. Well, that wasn't completely true. Their father, Grunt, could give them a run for their money without even trying, so everyone assumed they got that trait from him, but any one of my cousins could have been the culprit too.

"What did Jewel and Petra do this time, Margaret?"

"They're stalking me!"

I sighed, not sure whether to believe the woman or not because . . . well, I'd known those ladies since they were kids, and it might be true. Together and separately, they'd done some unbelievable things. Now that Jewel practiced medicine and Petra practiced law, they'd calmed down considerably . . . but not completely. It wouldn't surprise me if they'd played a prank with

explosives, even though that was their older brother's preferred method of . . . Well, anything, actually. Or they might have painted something obscene into her grass with bleach. They'd done that years ago and ended up getting in huge trouble for the prank, so I doubted they'd repeat the same offense, but with these two, you never knew what might happen.

"They came by my house eleven times this morning. Eleven!"

"That's a little much. What did they say when you opened the door?"

"I didn't."

"So, you don't know what they wanted?"

"They didn't stop." I tilted my head and stared at her in confusion, so she finally explained, "They just kept walking past. One time, the blonde . . ."

"Petra?"

"She stopped and bent down. I think she might have been messing with my sprinkler head." I found myself nodding because that would make sense. She'd probably made an adjustment or . . . "She pretended she was tying her shoelace, so I didn't see exactly what she did, but I know it was something nefarious."

"They walked past your house a dozen times and . . ."

"Eleven."

"Okay. So, they walked past your house over and over again, and one time, they stopped so Petra could tie her shoe?"

"She *pretended* to tie her shoe."

"And you came here to complain because they kept walking past your house?"

"Yes." I pulled my lips between my teeth to stop myself from asking the woman what her fucking problem was and took a few deep breaths to calm myself down. "Well, aren't you going to do anything? You should at least give them a fine. An outrageous amount so it doesn't happen again."

I had to make sure I wasn't missing something because this was reaching, even for Margaret. "You want me to fine them because they decided to take a walk around the neighborhood *where they live* and happened to pass in front of your house more than once?" When she nodded eagerly, I said, "I don't think a fine is severe enough for such an offense. Should I draw and quarter them or maybe put them in stocks by the entrance so everyone can learn from their mistakes?"

For at least ten seconds, Margaret seemed to consider the options I'd presented, but finally realized I was being sarcastic. "Are you going to do

anything or not?”

“I will. I promise. I’m going to do something about this,” I assured her as I slowly nodded. “You’ll have an addendum to the HOA policy in your mailbox before lunch tomorrow.”

Margaret studied my face, probably to see if I was bullshitting her again, but quickly realized that the fire in my eyes meant that I was more than happy to change the rules just for her. She smiled at me, and I thought it was a shame that she didn’t do it more often. It softened her features and made her seem more approachable than the pinched ‘something smells bad’ look she usually wore.

“I’ll be looking forward to the addendum.”

I laughed softly as I smiled at the harridan. “So will I.”



I took some time to research the laws regarding HOA amendments and realized they were really all just bullshit rules made by uptight snobs who wanted everything to look cookie-cutter perfect. Some of them weren’t completely stupid, like the ones saying no trash or junk piled up in front of the house, but others that promised fines for cutting your grass outside their specifications were absolutely ridiculous. I finally came up with an addendum that suited this instance and would hopefully block many more. I typed it up and sent it to Charlene for proofing with instructions to have the pages printed for distribution Monday before lunch.

Once I’d locked up, I walked around the building and waved at the security guard who was manning the gates this evening before I entered my code and passed through the small gate for pedestrians that was off to the side. I studied the houses in front of me, happy with what my brothers and I had accomplished so far.

We had almost finished with the houses on the north side of the housing addition and were making plans to start work on the properties south of the main street that came in from the road. When we first started on the houses we’d chosen for ourselves, it seemed like we’d never get anything accomplished, but we had slowly worked our way through the neighborhood. When we’d finally started to see a return on our investment, we’d hired some

employees to help us make even faster progress.

Now the houses were slowly filling up, and the neighborhood had a welcoming, comfortable feel. Even though they were what some would call cookie-cutter houses, we'd worked hard to give each of them a bit of their own character with different landscaping plans and varying muted color schemes. As residents started moving in, they put their own personality into their home and yard, and I loved watching the progress.

I turned left onto the street where I lived, Tumbleweed Drive, and waved at residents that happened to be outside as I passed their homes. A few of them called out to me, and one or two even stopped me to chat, but before long, I was walking up my own driveway, ready to relax as I prepared for the shitstorm that was going to rain down when the addendum went out.

"Will Lorelei get to come home soon, Uncle Adam?"

I looked over and realized Aspen was sitting on the porch, so I cut across the grass to go talk to her.

As I sat down on the step beside her, I sighed and asked, "Is she not answering your texts again?"

"No. Her mom said that she can't talk to me anymore and blocked my number."

"I'll fix that when they get here in a little while. Bianca didn't give me many details. She just said she'd drop Lorelei and Noah off this evening before she leaves for her new job this weekend."

"And they're going to stay? They don't have to go back to her house?"

"She's moving overseas, and they're not moving with her, so they'll be here permanently starting tonight."

"That sucks," Aspen muttered.

"What? I thought you'd be ecstatic about that!"

"I would be! I mean, I am, but I won't be here for a while." Aspen wrinkled her nose when she said, "I was supposed to go to Colorado and stay with my dad for a few weeks after Uncle Marcus and Uncle Reagan's wedding, but Mom decided that she wanted me to go this weekend and come back after."

"Plans change, kiddo, but it will all work out. I'll unblock your number so the two of you can talk as much as you want while you're gone. She'll be here when you get home."

"Good. It's been boring around here because Max had to go visit his dad for a week."

"The family that moved into the corner house on Bluebonnet has a girl about

your age. Have you met her yet?" I pointed down the street where we could see a man mowing his grass while a young man used the weed eater and an even younger girl swept the sidewalk. "They're the Bmani family. They seem really nice, and I bet that girl doesn't have any friends yet since they moved here from out of state."

"She might need a friend." Aspen stood up and said excitedly, "I'll go down and talk to her!" before she sat back down with a sigh and said, "I almost forgot. I'm not allowed to go anywhere alone for a while."

"Did you get grounded?"

"No. Mom pissed somebody off, and now she's worried. I'm sure that's why I suddenly have to go visit Dad now instead of later like we'd planned."

"Is your mom inside?"

"She's in her office."

"I'll go talk to her. Maybe she'll let me walk you down there so you can meet her."

Aspen smiled as she nodded encouragingly. "Thanks, Uncle Adam. You're the best."

"I know, but you should tell everybody just to make sure they're aware."

"I will if you can get me out of lockdown."

"Extortion? Aspen Tempest, I thought you were better than that!"

"I've got to weigh my options. I have a million uncles, and if I start to show favoritism without any negligible return . . ."

"How old are you again?"

"Old enough to get my way."

"It's like taking a trip back in time and talking to your mom."

Emerald had always been a bit standoffish until you got to know her, and Aspen seemed much the same. However, Aspen was more secure in herself and her opinions than Emerald had been when I first met her. My guess was that was because her life had been spent in a stable and loving environment, which was the opposite of how Emerald lived for the first twelve years of her life.

One of my first memories of Emerald was at a cookout, probably at Bird's house, where she sat off by herself pretending to read a book while she watched everyone interact. She still did that occasionally, but age and experience had changed things, and Emerald no longer made any effort to hide the fact that she was studying the people around her. She'd even turned that habit into her career, earning her doctorate and various other degrees

over the years, all of them hinged on her ability to observe people.

“What was my mom like when she was young?”

“Fearless. Wild. Serious. Crazy. Mouthy. Shy.”

“Those don’t all go together.”

“That’s what makes your mom so cool, kid. She’s a mix of everything all at once.” I stood up and walked past Aspen to go inside as I pointed out, “You’re a lot like her, Little Bit, and believe me - that’s a good thing.”

I walked into the house before I called out, “Stone! Where are you hiding?”

“I don’t hide from shit!” Emerald called out from the back room that I’d helped her convert to an office. “What do you want, Eve?”

I stopped and leaned against the door jamb before I asked, “What’s going on that made you put Aspen under lockdown?”

Emerald leaned back in her chair and let her hands drop from the keyboard in front of her. “I’m testifying in a case against a very bad man, and he’d very much like to convince me not to do that.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah. My thoughts exactly. I called Hunter and told him what was going on, and we decided it would be better for Aspen to stay there until the trial. I won’t have to worry about her, and she can have her freedom.”

“It’s definitely free up there with the Tempests,” I said with a laugh as I walked over and flopped down on the couch. I propped my boot up on the coffee table and leaned back against the cushion as I said, “Do you remember when we just wanted to grow up and take care of our own shit instead of having to follow the rules and listen to our parents?”

“What were we thinking? Now we have responsibilities and bills, people who make you want to scream, kids that make you want to scream, traffic that makes you . . . you get the picture,” Emerald said as she bent her legs up and crossed them in front of her, moving around in the chair until she was comfortable. “I wouldn’t change anything, though. We’re the people we’ve become because of all the shit we’ve been through.”

“That’s some shrink talk right there.”

“It’s true, though.”

“When’s the trial?”

“Hopefully soon. They don’t have a set date yet, but Ginger will get back to me as soon as they put it on the docket.”

“Aspen has to stay gone until then?”

“Probably. Things got real the other night when we met Esme for dinner at

Grazie's. The defendant showed up with his new girlfriend."

"Just an unhappy accident or . . ."

"He asked the hostess to seat them at the table next to ours."

"Oh. Intimidation."

"More like finding ways to get me so riled up that he won't live until trial."

"Did you tell your dad what's going on?"

"Did you tell Gamma that Bianca's a horrid bitch that's trying to turn your kids against you?"

"Touche."

We were both quiet for a stretch, lost in our own thoughts, until Emerald asked, "You wanna stay for dinner?"

"Sure. What are we having?"

Emerald hummed as she considered her answer. "Chinese?"

"Sounds good. Can we wait so the kids can eat with us?"

"Of course. When's Bianca bringing them?"

"No tellin'. But, until then, let's go for a walk."

"Outside?"

"You act like I'm asking you to tiptoe around the rim of an active volcano."

"But there are people out there."

"There's a new family that moved in last weekend, and they've got a daughter who's the same age as the girls."

"Okay. Let's go check them out, and you can introduce us."

"So you can become their bestie and swap recipes and shit?"

"No, so I can decide if they can stay or not."

"You know that me and my brothers are actually the ones who decide that, right?"

"Sure."

I shot Emerald a mock glare before I shook my head with a laugh. "Who am I kidding? If you don't like them, I won't have to put them out because you'll run them off anyway."

"Only if they're assholes."

"Then why is Margaret still here?"

"Because you leashed me and said I had to play nice."

"I put an addendum to the HOA policy stating that nuisance complaints will garner a fine. She's gonna shit. And if you get on her ass, too, she might actually sell the house back to me sooner rather than later." I reached up and pretended to unhook something before I waved toward our neighbor's house.

“Consider yourself unleashed.”

Emerald’s giggle was downright disturbing, but I loved it. “You’re so good to me.”

“I do what I can.”

3.

ADAM

“When you get finished are you going to come make my flower beds look pretty too?” Emerald looked up, and I had to stop myself from laughing when I saw the smear of dirt on her cheek and even more on the end of her nose. I realized how it got there when she put her gloved hands up to her face and sneezed twice, leaving even more dirt on her face. “But maybe you shouldn’t plant things that make you sneeze.”

“It’s not the flowers, it’s just plain old allergies. You know how I get this time of year.”

“You’re like that year-round, babe.”

“This is one of the chores that usually falls to Aspen, but with her gone, I had to take over.” Emerald sneezed three times in rapid succession and then sighed. “Maybe I should just let the jungle take over.”

She sneezed again, and I laughed as I told her, “If you were a dwarf, you’d be Sneazy.”

“And you’d be Grumpy.”

“No, I think you’d be Grumpy too. It would suit your multiple personalities. I’m Doc. The smart one.”

“You think?”

“I’m not the one digging in the dirt, am I?”

“What happened with your basketball game?”

“Reagan dropped off your newest cousin to hang out with Noah so I came over and left the game to the amateurs. No sense in making them envious of my spectacular skills on . . .”

“Shut it,” Emerald interrupted as she put her hand out. “Help me up, you blowhard.”

I reached out and took her hand so I could pull her to her feet, then wiped my hand on my pants. As she took her gloves off, I reached out and said, “You’ve got a little dirt on your face.” I brushed it off, then kept moving my hand over her face as I pretended there was more. Finally, knowing how touchy she was about it, I said, “It’s in your hair too.”

“What?” Emerald snapped as she put her hands up to touch her braids. “Where? I don’t feel any dirt . . .”

We both spun around at the sound of a man’s scream of pain, and without a word, sprinted down the sidewalk toward a house near the other end of the street where two men were fighting in the yard. Brighten Duke and Crow Forrester were on the porch with their son Griffin, and as we sprinted past, I yelled, “It’s Reagan!”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Crow vault over the porch railing, and within just a second, he was running with us. Over his shoulder, he yelled at Brighten, “Go inside! Call nine one one!”

We got to the edge of the property when three men and a woman spilled out of the front door, all headed toward Reagan who was grappling with a man on the grass. I saw my son Noah tackle one of the men, his new buddy Cruz right there to help him once he got the man on the ground. A woman screamed as Crow jumped into the air and hit the largest man in the chest with his booted feet, and I slammed full force into the third man, knocking him to the ground.

The next few minutes seemed to take ages, and I glanced up to see Emerald sprint across the grass and take down the man my son had been fighting. I barely had time to blink before my son’s foot appeared, knocking out the man below me with one swift kick to the face. I jumped up, quickly assessed my son and looked around the yard.

The man Reagan had fought was curled up with his hands over his eyes and blood pouring down his face. Emerald had battered the woman’s face so

badly, she was gasping for air with her jaw hanging askew, and now, her attention was focused on the man beneath her. He was barely conscious, but she continued raining blows down onto his face, one after the other. Crow had beaten the man he was fighting so badly, you could barely distinguish his nose from his cheekbones, and he was watching Emerald finish off her victim from just a few feet away.

I ran over and wrapped my arms around Emerald from behind, and she came up fighting like the warrior she'd always been until I screamed, "Stone! Enough!" She went limp in my arms, so I set her on her feet and grabbed her shoulders to turn her around so I could look into her face. "Are you okay?" "I'm fine." I frowned at her, and she admitted, "They didn't get in a single decent punch, but I fucked up my hand."

I realized that the police had arrived in full force, and Noble Hamilton, Lawson Dean, and Zoey Duke were among them. Zoey was kneeling beside the woman that had tangled with Emerald, her hand on the woman's wrist as she took her pulse. Lawson ushered Noah toward me and then knelt down beside the unconscious man and took his pulse before he jumped up and went over to the man Crow had knocked out.

"You get Noah settled. I'll check Cruz."

"Noah's fine."

"He needs to know that these people aren't his family right now, Adam. They're cops, and he just helped us try to kill four people."

"Gotcha." Zoey was talking into the mic attached to her collar when the man Crow had fought woke up swinging. Lawson had him face down on the ground in the next second and then cuffed him as he read him his rights. I glanced over at Reagan and saw that Cruz and Noble were taking care of him, so I jogged over to the porch where my son was standing on the step, watching all the action in the yard. "Are you okay, son?"

"I'm good."

"You know damn near every cop here, but I have to tell you that right now . . ."

Noah smiled at me before he interrupted, "I should use my right to remain silent until you tell me otherwise?"

"Good call, son."

"Who the hell are these people?"

I shrugged before I asked, "Does it matter?"

"Not really, but they won't be the same after today. That's for sure."

“Nope.” I looked at the man on the ground with blood coming out of his eyes and said, “I think they’re already regretting their decision to start some shit because it damn sure didn’t go the way they thought it would.”

“Our family gives a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘fuck around and find out.’”

I pulled my son into my arms, relieved that he was physically okay and a little disturbed that he wasn’t even upset as he assessed the scene before him as I agreed, “That’s a fact.”



ADAM

“How’s she doing?” I asked in a quiet voice as I reached out and rubbed my thumb over the apple of Emerald’s cheek.

Jewel Parker, a friend who was part of our extended family, smiled down at Emerald and said, “She’s annoying as all fuck as usual.” She reached out and adjusted the sheet at Emerald’s shoulder as she explained, “I just looked over her chart, and it seems like they were able to reconstruct the bones in her hand, but she’ll probably have some hardware in there for a while, at least, if not forever.”

“Shit.”

“Did she accidentally hit the pavement?” Lexi asked from her chair next to the window.

Her sister, Leia, was in the chair beside her and said, “If she did that on someone’s face, I’d hate to see what *they* look like right now.”

“Hammered shit,” Spruce, Jewel’s brother, another doctor, said from the doorway. “I just checked on Reagan, and he’s okay. Willow and Lout said they’d be here as soon as they get something to eat and update the rest of the family.”

“Where’s Amethyst? I thought she’d be here. Diamond too.”

“Diamond went home to get Lout and Willow a change of clothes.” Jewel smiled as she explained, “Uncle Lout has Amethyst making the rounds and gathering intel on the bad guys so he knows whether or not he and the others should mount up and raise hell. Terran and Roscoe are lingering around the hospital doing the same thing.”

The elders, as the younger kids in our generation of the family called us, were

a motley crew, but our professions came in handy in times like this. Spruce, Terran, and Jewel were doctors but their sister, Petra, had chosen a different route and become a lawyer. There were a few others in the family that were a bit younger than us who'd chosen the medical profession, like Emerald's youngest sister Amethyst who was a pediatrician, but they mostly ran in a different circle of friends.

Holly, Leia, and Lexi were part of our group, too, and they chose different professions like my brothers and I had. Holly owned a party planning business while Lexi owned an art gallery. Leia was a doctor of sorts, a large animal vet, and my brothers had both recently retired from the military and gone into business with me, restoring houses and building a new community on the edge of town.

We'd all been through some shit in our lives but had stuck it out together, almost inseparable from the time we each joined the Texas Kings and Texas Knights family. There were others in our age group who lived in Colorado, and we were close to them, too, so I knew someone needed to call to give them an update.

"Has anyone called Hunter and let him know Em's okay?"

"I spoke to him earlier," Jewel said as she reached up and adjusted a knob on one of Emerald's monitors. "He said to keep him updated, and that he and Aspen would be driving down first thing in the morning."

"I take it from the fact that she's sleeping soundly that the doctors were able to get her to take something for the pain?"

Spruce scoffed. "She didn't have much choice in the matter. That was a major reconstructive surgery, and it's going to take her a long time to recover. Physical therapy is going to kick her ass if she doesn't get over that."

"She won't," Leia said firmly. "You know how she feels about painkillers."

"She acts like they're going to be a gateway drug to a heroin addiction," Jewel scoffed. "We're going to have to figure something out or recovery will be a nightmare."

"After what happened with her knee, you'd think she would have learned," Spruce said with a sigh. "It was horrible watching her go through that for no reason other than a senseless fear."

"I get where she's coming from, to an extent. I'm terrified of taking anything that might fuck with my meds."

"That's totally different, Adam," Jewel assured me. "Your doctors would

take that into account, and we'd watch out for signs of distress, just like we would for Em."

"She doesn't want to be an addict like her birth mother, and I get that, but she shouldn't have to suffer."

"We'll figure out a way to help her. Hunter will work with us when he gets here." I looked over at Jewel and asked, "Is he going to stay with her?"

Jewel laughed before she answered, "He said he was. That's going to make his girlfriend *really* unhappy."

"Fuck her!" Lexi snapped. "Family comes first, and if she can't accept that, then she doesn't need to join it."

"We can take shifts if it's going to be a problem," Spruce suggested. "We'll have to talk to him about it when he gets here."

"I'll go over as soon as I see his truck at her house. I'm sure I'll have an up-to-the-minute arrival update because Lorelei and Aspen have been burning up the phone lines."

"Sounds good. Let us know what we can do."

It seemed like Spruce was about to say something else but got quiet when Emerald started to stir. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled at me as I leaned closer to say hello. "Eve! It's about damn time you came to your senses."

I could barely understand her slurred words, but I asked, "What did I do wrong this time, Stone?"

"Crawl up into bed and give me some more of those good kisses." Emerald sighed before she said, "I bet a strong man like you can figure out what comes next without little old me having to say much, but we'll see."

"Oh shit," Jewel whispered.

"I always knew she'd be fun if she ever got high," Lexi mused thoughtfully.

"Wait just a fucking second," Leia said with a look of alarm. "When did you kiss her?"

"Um . . . I . . . uh . . ."

"We made a pact, dammit!" Leia snapped, interrupting my stammered reply.

"Yeah!" Spruce said. "We had a fucking pact. Granted, it was made when we were all drunker than skunks, but it still holds!"

"He wasn't drunk," Leia pointed out. "He knows better than any of us what was agreed to that night because he was stone cold sober."

"After what happened between Jewel and Micah, Emerald and Hunter, and then all the drama the younger ones have created getting together and

breaking up, we decided that we'd keep it clean between all of us elders. No hanky panky! Don't shop too close to home," Lexi reiterated, pointing her finger at me like a school teacher would to a wayward student. "It just makes things too uncomfortable when shit goes south."

"That was years ago, and nothing else happened!" I glanced down at Emerald and saw that she was smiling at me dreamily, and I couldn't help but frown down at her. In her drugged state, she seemed to be saying things that I'd been trying to ignore for years.

The woman was my best friend, and if I did what I wanted to do, and what it seemed like she wanted me to do, we could fuck up everything.

Or . . . it could be absolutely magical.

Shit.

"You're so handsome, Eve." Emerald sighed, and her eyes closed for a few seconds before she came to and tried to shake off her lethargy and focus. "I want to do things to you that are so, so naughty! I've been a really good girl, but that's just no fun at all. I want to be bad now."

"Hey, Stone, maybe you should get some rest."

"Maybe if you'd give me a couple of mind-blowing orgasms, I'd be able to sleep. Come on, Eve, shuck those pants and crawl into bed with me."

"That's not a good idea, Emerald."

"Chickenshit!"

"Oh fuck," Spruce said before he bit his lip, trying desperately not to laugh.

Emerald's parents walked in just as she started clucking like a chicken, and everyone in the room laughed. My cheeks were on fire, and I prayed to God that she'd keep her mouth shut in front of her father, but that wish didn't come true.

"Don't be a pussy, Eve! I want you to bang me like a screen door. Put your wand in my chamber of secrets, and let's do some two-person push-ups."

Emerald giggled and then smiled wickedly. "Let's enjoy a little horizontal refreshment, you sexy fucker." She giggled again and then snorted. "You could put me heels to Jesus and do me like . . . like . . ." Emerald's eyes closed as her voice trailed off, and I glanced over at one of the scariest men I'd ever known with, most likely, a terrified expression on my face. His eyes were darting from me to Emerald and then back again with a look of shock on his face that was nearly comical. I thought it was over. Surely, she had fallen asleep again, and we could all forget this had . . . Suddenly, Emerald's eyes opened again, and she spotted her dad. "Oh shit! Eve! Put your dick

up! Dad's here, and he ain't got no sense of humor."

Willow burst out laughing and tried to cover her mouth with her hand, but she really lost it when she saw Lout was completely traumatized. She snorted and then giggled before she snorted again. "Oh shit. That's . . . Oh God . . . I wish I had been recording this."

"Got it," Spruce said as he slipped his phone into his pocket.

"Lout. Listen. I can explain. It was just one kiss. Okay, maybe a few more than that but that was . . ."

"Son, she's 30 years . . ."

"She's 41," Willow corrected.

"She is not 41 fucking years old!" Lout argued. "I'm not old enough to have a 40-year-old daughter, and neither are you. That's bullshit." He looked back up at me and shook his head. "Whatever. She's old enough to make her own good decisions, and I'm not gonna interfere in whatever those are, so if the two of you . . ." Lout cleared his throat and swallowed a few times before he could continue. His expression was pained as he said, "If the two of you think this is the path you want to take, then by all means, hold hands and do it."

"Are you feeling okay?" Willow asked as she reached up to put her hand on Lout's forehead to check for fever. She looked at Jewel and Spruce before she said, "One of you come check him out. He's not . . ." Willow looked over at me and her eyes got wide before she said, "Oh shit! He's not arguing because . . . Oh shit!"

Jewel leaned across the bed and studied Lout's face as she asked Willow, "He's not what? Acting like an overbearing asshole?"

"Right!" Willow agreed as she watched her husband as if he was about to transform into something terrifying or as if he already had. "He's just not himself at all."

"Both of you can kiss my ass!" Lout snapped. "Emerald's a grown woman who can make her own decisions."

"Oh God! He's dying," Leia whispered.

"There's a possibility he has a brain tumor," Jewel said as she walked around the bed toward him. "Uncle Lout, sit down for a second and let me call Terran. He can get you in for some tests. . ."

"Fuck all of y'all . . . except you, Vanilla. You act like I'm a total dick when I've been nothing but sweet over the years."

"You threatened to castrate me when I offered Amethyst a place to live while

they finished her house.”

“That was before. I’m a changed man . . .”

“That was last month!” Spruce reminded him. “You said your girls were off-limits to all of us and . . . What the fuck? Why does he get a pass and I don’t? Amy and I are just friends, and you threatened to bury me in a field and feed my dick to your neighbor’s dog, but we find out that Emerald and Adam are banging and . . .”

“We are not *banging!* Jesus! What are you? Fifteen?”

“You know what I mean! If you’re not yet, then at least you have permission when you start!”

“I just . . . I can’t with you people. I have to leave,” I said as I turned and walked toward the door. “As usual, it’s been a shit show, and I’ll talk to you guys later.”

“Bye, favorite son-in-law!” Willow called after me. “I’ll see you soon!”

I pulled the door shut behind me and walked toward the elevator where I ran into Gamma and Smokey. As usual, Gamma’s eyes lit up when she saw me, and I pulled her into a hug. Smokey nodded, as was his way, before he asked in his gravelly voice, “Are you doing okay, son? You look a little peaked.”

“I’m fine, just . . . there was a misunderstanding in Emerald’s room just now that threw me off-kilter.”

“What happened?” Gamma asked as she glanced over my shoulder worriedly. “Is she okay?”

“She’s doped up on painkillers and saying some off-the-wall stuff that she’s going to regret when she wakes up later.”

“Man, there’s no better way to get honesty out of a person than when they’re all fucked up.” Smokey laughed before he asked, “What is she saying?”

“She was talking about us finally getting together and . . .”

“Finally! Hell yes!” Smokey slapped me on the shoulder and grinned. “It’s about fucking time, son!”

“What?” I looked over at Gamma. The expression on her face was so hopeful that I wasn’t sure what to say that wouldn’t just tear her heart out. I had to be honest, though, so I said, “We’re not together. She’s just saying crazy shit because she’s high.”

“Oh.” Smokey looked like I’d just broken his heart.

I realized I’d done the same to Gamma when she sighed dramatically.

“That’s fine. Just a misunderstanding, I’m sure. The two of you will get a good laugh out of it when she sobers up.”

“I’m sure we will.”

“Well, it’s getting late, and we’re going to check in on Emerald before we go home.”

“Okay,” I said before I gave Gamma a hug and nodded at my grandfather.

“Be careful. I’ll see you at the wedding, if it’s still on.”

“Oh, believe me, it’s still on,” Gamma assured me. “Someone mentioned to Reagan that they should put it off, and he was adamant that it’s still going to happen.”

“I think he’s just not thrilled about having to deal with all the planning again,” Smokey said with a wince. “It’s been a little wild.”

“You know how Holly gets,” I said with an uncomfortable laugh. “Well, okay then. I’ll see you later.”

Gamma reached up and touched my cheek before she tiptoed up to whisper in my ear, “Don’t dismiss the idea so easily, Adam. What would be better than falling in love with your best friend?”

“This is all coming out of left field,” I said in answer as she pulled away.

Gamma tilted her head and smiled at me as she asked, “Is it really, though?”

I glanced over at Smokey, and he shrugged before he put his arm around Gamma and directed her around me to Emerald’s room. I turned to watch them go and realized that Gamma had a point. They’d been together since my dad was just a boy, and even though they had to know everything there was to know about the other, they still loved each other fiercely and couldn’t stand to be apart. I couldn’t imagine a world where they weren’t together and didn’t want to try. They had the kind of love that transcends the ordinary and would be a legend long after they were gone.

They were best friends and had a relationship like most people can only dream about.

How wonderful would that be?

4.

EMERALD

“Are you sure you’re going to be okay here alone?” Aspen asked worriedly as she plumped the pillows behind me and then reached out and lifted a braid over my shoulder. “I can stay and take care of you.”

“That’s sweet, baby, but you don’t need to do that. Besides, when are we *ever* really alone in this family?”

“But you’ll be home by yourself. What if something happens and you can’t call for help?”

“I’ll keep my phone in my pocket and my watch on at all times so help will be just a phone call away. The girls all live within a few blocks, and they can be here in minutes if I need them.”

“Uncle Adam will be right next door too.”

“He will, and since his office is right by the entrance gate, he’s never more than a minute or two away.”

“He’s always taken good care of us.”

“He has,” I agreed. Although, I’d barely spoken to him in the last week. Apparently, my drug-addled brain had let my mouth run away with itself, and I’d embarrassed him so badly that he’d been avoiding me. I’d seen the video and didn’t blame him at all, but every time I tried to apologize, he didn’t want

to hear it. I'd finally stopped in the hopes that if we didn't talk about it, he'd start acting like himself again.

The spectacle I'd made of myself was yet another reason to avoid drugs of any kind at all costs, not that I needed more than the memory of my birth mother to help me with that decision. However, I'd had to take more than I was comfortable with since my surgery to take the edge off the pain. Hopefully, I could make do with over-the-counter pain relievers once I started healing.

"I'm glad he's going to let Lorelei come to Colorado with me for a while."

"You two will have lots of fun with the cousins, I'm sure."

"We always do." Aspen leaned forward and kissed my forehead and then put her hand on my cheek like our Gamma did to those she loved before she frowned and asked, "Are you going to be okay, Mom? You seem sad, and I don't think it's just because your hand hurts."

"I'm not sad, baby. I'm just fine."

Aspen studied my face and then leaned down to kiss me again before she turned and walked toward the door. "I'm going to make sure Lorelei hasn't packed half her house. She does that, you know. Very high maintenance. The girl makes me crazy sometimes."

"I don't understand how you're friends with such a beast," I said sarcastically, knowing my daughter was just as high maintenance as Adam's daughter.

Aspen and Lorelei were closer than just best friends, they were more like sisters. Hopefully, that would continue through the years, especially now that Adam had full custody of his children. His ex-wife Bianca hadn't cared for me in high school and that never changed as we grew older. I wasn't her biggest fan either. I thought she was a self-centered bitch who was too focused on her life plan and didn't pay nearly enough attention to her children.

I'd felt the same way about how she treated Adam when they were married but had managed to keep my mouth shut in the hopes that my feelings about his wife wouldn't hurt our relationship. Adam had been one of my closest friends since we were kids, and even though the girls we'd grown up with had become sisters of my heart, I'd never considered Adam a brother at all.

Instead, he was my dream guy. I'd never admitted that to anyone, but a few people in my family realized how I felt about him when he proposed to Bianca. I was heartbroken. Somewhere in my mind, I'd held onto the hope

that someday, he'd see me as something more than just his friend. When he married Bianca, that hope was dashed. In a way, I was glad that it had happened because it opened me up to a future with Hunter Tempest which gave us our daughter. Even though our relationship hadn't worked out, I wouldn't change the course of events for anything because it had given me Aspen, and she was my world.

Hunter and I had known each other almost as long as Adam and I had, but since he lived with his family out of state, we hadn't grown as close as we might have if he lived closer. Instead, we only saw the Tempest kids on occasion and weren't thrown together with them nearly as much as the rest of our Rojo family. Summer visits, holiday get-togethers, and special occasions helped us stay in touch, but there was still some mystery there. That meant that when Hunter and I were together during family events, we saw each other in a different light than we would have otherwise.

When I moved to Colorado to complete a residency at a hospital near Colorado Springs, our relationship blossomed. I moved into the apartment next to his at Tempest Townhomes, the property his family owned, and we'd gravitated toward each other naturally. Our entire relationship seemed to go that way, easily going from friends to lovers to marriage and parenthood.

After a few years, we realized that what we had wasn't the all-consuming passion we'd hoped it might turn out to be. Instead, we had become roommates who shared a daughter. When we realized that neither of us were happy, we tried to work on our relationship but ultimately decided the best thing would be for us to separate. Luckily, our divorce wasn't a huge blowout that decimated our relationship; it was more of a relief than anything else. We'd had a few bumps in the road since, but with the help of our families' close bond, we'd been able to navigate them and stay friends.

That friendship helped our daughter thrive because she hadn't had to contend with problematic, contentious parents like some kids when there was a divorce. Adam's kids had suffered through that. I'd been his sounding board when he needed someone to talk to and had given professional advice on occasion that I thought might help him navigate the landmines that came with co-parenting.

Of course, Bianca hated the fact that Adam and I had stayed friends through their marriage and had become even closer after their divorce, so she did everything she could to make things difficult for him. She stooped lower than even I imagined that she could by trying to keep our daughters apart.

She insisted Aspen was a bad influence on Lorelei and refused to let them talk. What she didn't understand was that Lorelei was more like her father than she'd realized and wouldn't let someone else's opinion phase her when there was something she believed.

Our girls had remained the best of friends even though it was Bianca's mission to stop that. And somehow I'd managed not to rip that bitch's head off when she said disparaging things about me and Aspen to her children. It had been a close call more than once, but I'd talked myself off the ledge because I wouldn't be able to raise my daughter if I was in prison.

Bianca had no idea how close she'd come to residing in a shallow grave over the years. Now that she'd moved overseas to further her career, I hoped that things would calm down as Adam and the kids settled into their new dynamic.

However, if he kept avoiding me, I wouldn't be able to watch that happen except from a distance. Not a physical distance since they lived next door, but an emotional one that he'd put between us after my drug-induced word vomit that happened last week.

I adjusted my arm on the pillow beside me and winced at the pain such a slight movement caused. My arm throbbed from my fingers to my shoulder, but when I moved, the pain was almost sharp enough to take my breath away. I knew that if I'd just take a pill or two, that would dissipate, but I just couldn't make myself do it.

My birth mother had been addicted to pills along with every other mind-altering substance she could get her hands on, and I was terrified that I'd fall into that cycle. The doctor in me knew that wasn't likely, especially considering the support system I had around me, but my memories of the abuse and neglect I'd suffered at the hands of an addict held more sway.

The way my mind worked didn't make sense to me, and I was a mental health professional. I didn't have a problem drinking on occasion and even imbibed in some of the products that Hunter and his family produced on their farm in Colorado, but I drew the line at narcotics and only took them when pain was unbearable.

I sensed movement nearby, and when I opened my eyes, I realized Hunter was in the doorway, probably checking to see if I was asleep.

"I'm awake," I told him as I lifted my head. "Come on in."

"I hoped you'd be napping," Hunter said as he sat on the side of the bed. He kicked his shoes off and laid back next to me. I winced when he jostled the

pillow my arm was resting on. When Hunter realized what had happened, he sighed and said, “You are so fucking stubborn.”

“And this is news how?”

“I’ve stocked your medicine cabinet with some gummies and even made you some edibles that I think might help take the edge off. If nothing else, they’ll help you relax and get some sleep.”

“Thanks. It’s nice to have my own personal drug dealer who cooks me snacks.”

“I’m not a drug dealer. I’m a licensed professional in a perfectly legal endeavor to bring the benefits of cannabis to the masses. Well, at least the masses who live in my state.”

“I don’t live in your state.”

Hunter grinned and said, “Let’s pretend you do.”

“Did you get the rest of the goodies you brought dispersed around the family?”

“Oh yeah. I’m their favorite Tempest when I show up bearing gifts. Of course, they’d be happy to see me anyway, but several of them eagerly await a Tempest visit just because we’re their favorite cannabis supplier.”

“I’m pretty sure your family is Colorado’s favorite cannabis supplier.”

“We’re working on it.”

“Are you sure it’s not too much trouble to take Lorelei with you? Aspen is a handful, but when the Doublemint twins get together, it can be a little much.”

“Honestly, with the size of my family up there, what’s one more?”

“True. Gamma must have gotten access to the water supply in Colorado too. My mom and the other ladies insist that it’s Gamma’s fault they each had a litter.”

“I’m pretty sure the water had nothing to do with it.”

“So, when are you and Sherry going to have a few kids? Gamma would be over the moon as would your mom.”

Hunter blew out a long breath before he gingerly turned over to face me, his head on the pillow next to mine so that we were eye to eye. “I’m pretty sure Sherry and I are over.”

I formed my words carefully in case that wasn’t quite true. If Hunter did stay with Sherry, she might be my daughter’s stepmom someday. I didn’t want there to be even more bad blood between us than there already was. Just like Bianca had been adamant that mine and Adam’s relationship was unnecessary, Sherry felt the same about mine and Hunter’s easy friendship.

“Do you want that to be the case, or do you think you should try to make peace?”

“You’re always going to be Aspen’s mom, and more than that, we’ll always be friends. She can’t handle that, and in a way, I get it. There’s a history between us, but that’s how it’s gonna stay. We’re still connected, not just by our daughter, but by our families. Is she going to insist I stop coming to Rojo to visit just because you’re here? That’s not gonna happen, no matter how much she insists.”

“And you’ve told her that?”

“Hell yeah, I’ve told her that. Point blank. Many times.”

“And her ultimatum is that you and I can’t be friends?”

“Yeah, and how our relationship is going to go from now on hinges on how she acts when me and the girls get home.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think she grills Aspen on what you and I do together.”

I was instantly filled with rage. “You’re fucking kidding.”

“I don’t know for sure, but last time I was here and took Aspen back with me, things got tense the next day after Sherry and Aspen had been alone together. Sherry had spent the night, and the next morning, I had to go take care of something at work. When I left, they were asleep, but they were up by the time I got home. It was tense, but Aspen wouldn’t tell me why. She just said that everything was fine.” Hunter rolled his eyes and asked, “I wonder where the hell that came from?”

I giggled and said, “I have no idea.”

“I saw the fire in your eyes when I mentioned that she might have grilled Aspen about us, but I want you to bank it for now. I’ll take care of the problem if it arises.”

“I know you will, but I’m more than willing to wade in and be the bad guy if that helps your situation at all.”

“There better not be a fucking situation. She either trusts me or she doesn’t, and fishing for info from my daughter isn’t going to do anything but end our relationship.”

“Good call.”

“Now, back to you and your situation.”

“What situation? I’ll take the shit you left for me, but I’m not going to . . .”

“I’m not talking about your hand, Em.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“Adam.”

“What about him?”

“Don’t bullshit a bullshitter, Em. I heard about what you said in the hospital, and I have a feeling you’re avoiding him because you’re embarrassed.”

“I was on drugs. I didn’t know what the hell I was saying.”

Hunter snorted. “Whatever. You finally admitted out loud what you’ve always wanted to happen, and now you don’t know how to move forward.”

“What are you talking about? I never . . .”

“You’ve never admitted to anyone how you feel about Adam because you won’t even admit it to yourself, but I know you better than most, and I can see it. I’ve always known you had a thing for him, and I’ll admit that when you and I were together, that really got to me.”

“Nothing has ever happened between us, Hunter. I never cheated . . .”

“Oh, shut up. I know you’d never do that.”

“Then what do you mean?”

“Whether he realizes it or not, Adam’s the one we’ve all tried to live up to. He’s smart, funny, driven, and has had his shit together for longer than any of us. I knew you had a crush on him when we were kids, and I didn’t expect that to change when we got together. If I was a chick, I’d crush on him too.”

“I think you might be crushing on him anyway,” I teased.

“I love you, Em, but it’s not the kind of love that stands the test of time. You and I are friends, and we always will be, but what you’ve got with Adam goes beyond that. He knows you better than I ever did, and that’s not a bad thing. We all need that person. You’ve got the girls, and that fills a whole different kind of friendship need. You and Adam went through some shit that the rest of us were lucky enough to never have to experience, and that’s what draws you to each other.”

“You had a fucked-up childhood, and that didn’t bond us together.”

“It helped.”

“It definitely turned you and your siblings into who you are today. I realize that in myself, too, but I try to make sure it’s for good and not evil.”

“We do the same, babe. Sometimes it’s a struggle, but that makes it even more worthwhile.” I closed my eyes and let out a long breath, almost overwhelmed by the pain in my arm. “That last dose is wearing off. I’ll grab you another gummy and get out of your hair.”

“You don’t have to go.”

“I really do. The drive is only a few hours, but with two girls in the car, I’ll

end up stopping at least three times so they can pee and get snacks.”

“Okay. I’ll take another one but make sure Aspen comes up to give me a hug before you leave.”

“Of course.” Hunter was very careful as he sat up, and I smiled when he leaned over and gave me a kiss on the forehead. “Take care of yourself, Em. You’ve gotta get back to fighting shape soon in case something else happens and one of us needs a rescue.”

“I know you’re stressed about the Sherry thing, Hunter. Call me if you need to talk, okay?”

“Will do.”

“Good. I guess I’ll take that dose now. I really need to sleep, and I don’t think I’ll be able to without taking something.”

“Take a pill, Em.”

“Get rid of ‘em. I don’t want them in my house.”

“I’ll get rid of them if you take one now.”

I sighed and just the slight movement of my body jostled my arm and shot pain up to my shoulder. “Okay. Just one.”

5.

ADAM

“Honey, you’re not *moving* to Colorado, you’re just going to visit for a few weeks.”

Even though she should probably stay with me to adjust to her new life living in my house full-time, I had agreed to let my daughter go to Colorado for a while in the hopes that she’d get over this boyfriend of hers. Hopefully, absence wouldn’t make the heart grow fonder. Instead, I wanted it to make the brain forget. That way I didn’t have to admit my daughter was old enough to be interested in dating.

“Right. So I packed enough clothes for at least three, just in case.”

“Do you think Hunter doesn’t have a washing machine you can use or . . .”

“I can’t wear the same outfit twice!” From the look on my daughter’s face, you would have thought I asked her to lick the bottom of my shoe. She acted as if I’d asked her to do something that might change the trajectory of mankind’s future rather than take less than four suitcases for a two-week trip. “I have to have all of this to *live*, Dad!”

I ran my hand over my face and sighed. “Do you really?”

“Yes!”

“Half the time, you wear Aspen’s clothes, so . . .”

“And she wears mine!”

“Can she wash them when she’s done?”

“Dad!”

I knew it was a losing battle, so I just threw my hands up and turned around to go into the kitchen as I asked, “Did he rent a moving truck, or are you guys going up to Colorado with stuff strapped to the roof like the Beverly Hillbillies?”

“Like who?”

“You don’t know who that is?” I asked as I spun around to stare at her. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone out on the porch, and when I looked over, I found Hunter Tempest grinning at us through the glass door. “There you go. That’s something you can do on your drive to Colorado.”

“What?”

“Watch a few episodes of some quality television.”

“Whatever!”

I pushed the door open and walked outside, shaking my head in shame.

“Kids these days. I swear.”

“Yep. They make you crazy, and by the time you figure out just how much, they’re too old to drop at the fire station.”

“It’s a trap. We should warn others.”

Hunter laughed before he asked, “Is Lorelei ready to go?”

“Even if she’s not, you should take her anyway. The longer you leave her in there, the more she’ll pack.”

“Aspen is the same way. She’s got everything she needs at my house already but insists on taking half of Em’s house every time she comes to Colorado, then takes half of my house when she comes back to Rojo.”

“How are we ever going to convince them to tone it down?” I laughed at a memory and asked, “Do you remember that time you convinced some of the younger kids that it was a manly right of passage to camp naked?”

“As if anyone had to work very hard to convince those boys to shuck their clothes,” Hunter scoffed.

I couldn’t help but laugh when I asked him, “How much trouble did you get in for that?”

“I was grounded one day for each bug bite.”

“Holy shit! Are you even supposed to be here right now? Shouldn’t you still be on lockdown?”

Hunter chuckled. “It was really bad. That was the first time I ever saw Styx so angry he couldn’t speak.” He added, “That was the first of many times, though. Looking back, I’m not sure how he didn’t snap and end up on the evening news.”

“We definitely got lucky in the stepfather department.”

“Isn’t that the truth?”

“I’ve worried for years about what kind of man Bianca would marry. Luckily, her last two weren’t that bad; they were just weak enough for her to control for a while before they got smart enough to run.”

“I don’t have that same worry about Emerald, especially now that I know how high she has set her standards.”

I felt myself tense when I asked, “Is she seeing someone?”

A sly smile slowly transformed Hunter’s face. “I was using her laptop for a video conference with a client and found a dating site she had pulled up. Man, there are some real winners in this town.”

“The children set that profile up. They tried to do the same thing for me and my brothers, but we refused.” Hunter understood my reference to the children didn’t mean *our* children but the younger cousins in our family.

“I wish she could find someone more like the men in our family. Someone I knew I could trust around her. Someone who would treat Aspen like his own child without trying to get in the way of my relationship with her or Emerald.”

“That would be the best case scenario.”

“If she could just shop a little closer to home, I’d feel better about the whole situation.” I realized where Hunter was leading the conversation and raised my eyebrows in question. “I’m just saying that Emerald’s a great woman and deserves no less than the best kind of man.”

“I’m not sure Emerald will ever find a partner who can measure up to everything we all want for her.”

Hunter laughed. “She doesn’t have to look far, but he’ll have to quit being a dumbass and figure out what he’s got right in front of him.”

“Did you just call me a dumbass?”

“If the tutu fits, put that bitch on and dance around in it.” I was still staring at him in shock when he changed the subject. He pulled a prescription bottle out of his pocket and handed it to me as he said, “She wanted me to get rid of these, but I know she’s going to need them.” I took the pill bottle. “I convinced her to take one a few minutes ago and then promised to get them

out of her house. I left some edibles that will help her relax, but even our most powerful strains won't take away pain like she's surely in right now. She'll need some actual narcotics."

"Like anyone can convince Emerald to change her mind when she's set it like that."

"If anyone can, it's you, and if you need help figuring out how to do it, just call Willow. She's a pro." Hunter looked over my shoulder at my daughter trying to close an overpacked suitcase and smiled. "I've gotta go, but I want to make sure that you'll be close by to watch over Emerald. She hasn't said much about testifying in that case, but I know it's really worrying her. She'll feel better knowing Aspen is in Colorado with me, but I'm afraid of what might happen now that she's incapacitated. If someone does come after her, she won't be able to protect herself."

"I'll watch out for her. So will my brothers."

"I wondered since you've been avoiding her."

"I haven't been . . . Fuck. It's a weird situation."

"I married a woman who is basically part of my extended family, and then we got a divorce. I know it's weird. I've lived it."

"You don't understand, Hunter."

"You know what I *do* understand?"

"What?"

"That the man who promised to love and cherish that woman forever wasn't able to do it, but there's still a part of him that wants her to have the very best of everything. He's standing in front of you encouraging that scenario while you deny everything he can see in your eyes and read on your face. Maybe you are a dumbass after all."

I didn't have a chance to reply before Aspen jogged across the grass toward us. She stopped next to her father and looked up at me with a worried expression. "Uncle Adam, I'm afraid to leave Mom all alone."

"She's never really alone, sweetheart."

"But she is. There's a lot she can't do, and she's too stubborn to ask for help."

"I'll make sure to take her food when I check on her a few times a day and . . ."

"But it's the other stuff too!"

"What stuff, sweetheart?"

"She can't get out of the tub by herself, and she can't take a shower because

she can't use her left hand to wrap her right hand up well enough to get under the water. She can't button her pants, she can't tie her own shoes, she can't put her hair in a bonnet at night, and . . ." By the time Aspen's voice trailed off, there were tears in her eyes. She shook her head as she looked at her father. "I can't leave with you, Dad. I've gotta stay even though Mom thinks I might be in danger. I promise I'll keep the doors locked and won't leave the house for anything but . . ."

"I'll take care of all that, Aspen. Every bit of it. I'll be over there helping your mom so much that she's gonna be sick of me by tomorrow."

"Are you sure, Uncle Adam?"

"I promise, Little Rock," I said as I put my hand out toward her and stuck out my pinky.

She smiled through her tears as she hooked her pinky to mine, just like her mom had been doing since she was Aspen's age. "You haven't called me that in a long time."

"I'm always reminded of my nickname for you when you act like your mama. The rest of the family may call you Little Bit, but you'll always be my Little Rock. You're just as good-hearted and stubborn as she is, but she's not going to let you stay here to take care of her, so that job will fall to me."

"You won't let her tell you no, right? You know how she gets."

Hunter laughed as he put his arm over Aspen's shoulder and pulled her to his side. He was looking at me when he said, "Adam knows your mom better than anyone, babe. He's been taking care of her for years whether she wanted him to or not. He'll take good care of her now too."

I held Hunter's gaze as I solemnly promised, "I will."

Hunter smiled and replied, "Maybe you're not a complete dumbass after all."



I lifted my head and looked at the baby monitor I'd set on the nightstand beside my bed and waited to see if Emerald was awake or just dreaming again. The day Hunter left town, I went out and bought a baby monitor and then installed the base in Emerald's room while she was sleeping. She still had no idea how I always seemed to know how she needed me, and I liked that she was so mystified.

It was hard to get anything past a woman as smart as Emerald. I knew she'd

figure it out sooner or later, but I hoped she'd have time to recover before that happened.

"Oh shit," I heard her gasp before she sniffed and then let out a long breath.

"Ow ow ow."

I jumped out of bed and was down the stairs in a flash, the dew on the grass between our houses cold on my bare feet before I punched in the code to unlock Emerald's door and then hit the number sequence on the keypad to turn off her alarm. I was out of breath when I skidded to a stop in her bedroom doorway and found her staring at me in shock.

"What the fuck?"

"Hey. You're awake."

"Yeah."

"Just thought I'd come check on you before I went to sleep."

Emerald's eyes narrowed as she looked at the digital clock on her nightstand.

"It's three in the morning. Since when do you stay up this late?"

"Old age is creeping in and messing with my sleep schedule, I guess."

"You ain't gotta lie, Eve. What the fuck is going on?"

"I just had a feeling you might need me to help you with something."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." I stared at her injured arm tangled in the covers and then looked up at her. "Are you stuck?" Emerald sighed before she nodded.

"Want me to help you?"

"No, Eve, I want you to stand there and look pretty. Yes. Please help me."

I laughed as I walked into the room. "I'd forgotten how sweet you are when you first wake up."

"Have you forgotten the rules too?"

"God no," I said as I turned on the lamp beside the bed. "Don't talk, don't touch, don't make eye contact, don't breathe too loudly. Basically, just don't . . . *anything* . . . before you've had your coffee." I leaned over and looked at the tangle of linens and instantly spotted the problem. The hardware that was outside the cast had snagged the comforter and there were threads wrapped around a few of the screws. "Do you have any scissors handy?"

"I was trying to reach the clippers, but they're in the drawer." I reached for the drawer, and Emerald shouted, "No! I'll get them!"

"I can just . . ."

"Eve!" Emerald gripped the comforter with her good hand and pulled it as she tried to move closer to the nightstand. "I'll get them, and then you can

cut me loose.”

“Is there something in that drawer you don’t want me to see, Stone?” When she narrowed her eyes and glared at me, I laughed. “You know I have to look now, right?”

“Touch that drawer, and I will beat your ass,” Emerald growled.

I couldn’t help but giggle at her threat as I reached out with one finger to pull the drawer open a few inches. “Start beating.”

“Fuck you, Eve.”

I pulled the drawer out a little farther and peered into it. “Well, what do we have here?”

“When I get better, I’m gonna shove my foot so far . . .”

“Oh!” I held up a small remote. “You know how I love to be in control of the remote!”

“Eve, I swear to God . . .”

“And this one has a cord attached!” I picked up another remote and spun the wheel on the side and then looked at Emerald with wide eyes when something in the drawer started buzzing. I rolled the wheel some more, and the buzzing got louder as the toy inside jumped around. “Maybe I should leave you tangled up and use this one to improve your mood.” Emerald’s mouth dropped open in shock, and I laughed again before I turned the toy off and then dropped the remotes back into the drawer. As I rifled around to find the clippers she’d been talking about, I said, “I’ll wait until you’re feeling better to do that. That way we can both enjoy it.”

“You . . . What?”

“I’ve been thinking, Stone . . .”

“You should stop before you hurt yourself.”

I ignored her interruption and continued. “I’ve kissed a lot of women in my life but . . .”

“Probably not *that* many . . .”

“ . . . and I don’t remember many details of those kisses, but I remember *everything* about the ones I shared with you.” I found the clippers and held them up as I looked over at Emerald. She stared at me with her eyes as wide as saucers. I leaned over the bed to inspect the problem and started snipping the threads that were caught in her hardware as I said, “For the last week, it seems like all I can think about is that night. There’s got to be a reason why *that* kiss is so important that I’ve never been able to forget a single detail of it.”

“Like what?” Emerald whispered.

“How the moonlight highlighted the planes of your face and made your dark skin seem to glow.” I heard Emerald sigh and had to bite back a smile. I couldn’t hide my other reaction and really didn’t even try. If she looked down, she’d see what the memory of that kiss did to me because I was wearing a pair of thin pajama pants that did nothing to conceal my growing erection. “I remember how soft your body was when I pulled you into my arms and how your gorgeous lips fit mine perfectly.” I glanced up and saw a different fire in Emerald’s eyes, not the angry one that was usually there when you talked to her before her second cup of coffee, but an intense one all the same. “You tasted like peppermint, and since that night, I haven’t been able to chew a piece of gum without my dick getting hard.”

“Oh.”

I watched Emerald’s shock when she glanced down at my crotch and saw what that memory did to me. “I think it’s about time I stopped ignoring what I feel for you and act on it.”

“You do?” Emerald whispered.

I lifted the comforter away and gently picked up her casted arm and settled it in her lap next to her other hand. “I do. But I need you back in fighting shape so you can enjoy my next move as much as I know I will.”

“Next move?”

“Yeah, Stone. My next move.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to unwrap that gorgeous body like a Christmas present and worship you in all the ways I’ve been imagining for the last twenty-five years.”

“You are?”

“Yep,” I said as I reached into my pocket and pulled out the pill bottle Hunter had given me. I opened it and shook out one pill before I handed it to her along with the glass of water on the nightstand. Without even considering what she was doing, she popped the pill into her mouth and swallowed before she took a drink. I didn’t think about it before I murmured, “That’s my good girl.” Emerald took another sip and swallowed audibly before she handed me the glass. “Do you need me to help you with anything else while I’m here?”

“Um,” Emerald glanced at the bathroom door and then back at my crotch before she looked at my face. “I’m good.”

“I bet you are, but I’m going to have to wait a little while to find out.” I

moved aside and motioned toward the bathroom door before I said, “Go ahead, Stone. I’ll go home so you can get some sleep.”

“Okay,” Emerald whispered as she stood up, her arm held gingerly to her chest. “Thanks.”

I leaned forward and touched my lips to hers for a brief second before I said, “Anytime.”

Emerald walked toward the bathroom as if in a fog, and I had to hold back a laugh at the look of confusion on her face when she turned to close the door and realized I was still standing there. “Bye, Eve.”

“Sleep well, Stone.”

6.

EMERALD

I snuggled into the pillow and tried to get back to the dream that something had interrupted. Adam was just about to rip my panties off with his teeth so he could devour me like I was Little Red Riding Hood and . . . I felt movement at my back, and my eyes shot open.

Aspen was with Hunter. I should be the only person in my house.

I paid close attention to my breathing and focused on keeping it deep and regular as if I were still sleeping as my hand slowly crept under my pillow toward the holster hidden between the headboard and the mattress. My fingers had just touched it when I heard my friend Jewel mumble, “If you shoot me, I won’t help you get in and out of the tub.”

I let out a relieved breath and asked, “Bitch, what are you doing in my house?”

“Bitch, when was the last time you took a shower?” she asked before she snuggled further down in the bed. “Smelly skank.”

“I planned on taking a shower today, thank you very much.”

“Good luck doing that by yourself,” Jewel mumbled sarcastically. “Why do you keep talking? Quit being a pain in the ass and go back to sleep like a

good patient.”

“If I was your patient, I’d beat you to death with an IV pole.”

“They don’t pay me enough to put up with you before you’ve had your magical bean juice. That’s why there’s a thermos full of caramel macchiato on the nightstand. Wake me up when you’re human again.”

“You brought me coffee?”

“How long have I known you?”

“Since you were an annoying little shit. Oh look! You still are.”

“Of course I brought you coffee. I learned long ago that you don’t walk into the lion’s den without some sort of sacrifice or *you’ll* become the sacrifice.”

I decided to tap dance on that one nerve that was guaranteed to get Jewel all worked up and whined, “I can’t reach it.”

“Bitch. You haven’t even tried.”

“But I need your help. It’s so far away.” Jewel grunted, and I knew I was getting to her. “I’m injured and can barely move, but you set it way over there. That’s so mean. Don’t you love me?”

“No.”

“But look at all I’ve done for you over the years.” I did my best to imitate a dramatic snuffle, even going so far as to let my lip quiver as I willed tears to fill my eyes. “Help me, Jewel. I’m so thirsty.”

“Good. Maybe you’ll die.” I sniffed again and then pretended to stifle a sob. “You know what else, whiny ass? There’s a lemon bar over there too.”

The fake sniffles were gone in an instant, and I lifted my head to look at the nightstand. “You brought me something sweet to go with my coffee?”

“I brought you two sweet things.”

“What else? Is there one of those S’more bars that I . . .”

“I’m the other sweet thing. Jeez. Ungrateful ho.”

“I’m ungrateful? I’ve let you live this long, so you should be the grateful one.”

“Whatever. I could kill you in ways that the coroner would never even question.”

“I might need to tap into that knowledge base at some point, so I should probably be nice to you.”

“Probably.” Jewel sat up in bed, and I heard her feet hit the floor. “I guess since you insist on talking, I’m not going to get a nap, so get your ass up and take the offerings I’ve brought to tame the beast. You know how I hate you when your other personality is in charge, and the only way to get rid of her is

to drown that bitch in coffee. That's why I brought such a big thermos."

"Do you talk to all your patients like this?"

"Bitch, you're not a patient, you're family."

"Geez, how did I get so lucky?"

"I know, right?" For all of Jewel's bluster, she was very careful as she pulled the covers away from my injured arm and then stood nearby as I sat up and scooted up the bed to relax against the headboard. Once I was upright, she handed me the thermos she'd brought, even making sure that the hole in the lid was closest to me so I could take a sip the second I had it in my hand.

"Instead of a shower, why don't I run you a bath?"

"That sounds heavenly, but I can't get in and out with only one hand."

"That's why I'm here. Duh."

I took another sip of the delicious brew and asked, "Who made this? It's got a different flavor." I took another small sip and held it in my mouth for a second before I said, "It doesn't taste bad, but there's a bitter note at the end."

"If it doesn't taste bad, then why are you bitching?" Jewel asked as she rolled her eyes and walked into the bathroom. "How are you feeling, by the way?"

"I feel good. I had a problem in the middle of the night when my hardware got tangled in the comforter, but Adam showed up and cut me loose so I could go pee."

"He told me about that when he called this morning."

"What else did he tell you?"

Jewel's head appeared in the doorway, and she looked at me curiously.

"What else is there to tell?"

"Nothing."

"Liar." Jewel disappeared again, and I heard the water turn on right before I smelled the bubble bath that I loved. I must be dying if she was trying to pamper me like that. Apparently, I only had a few days to live so I should just accept my fate while I enjoyed my coffee and lemon bar. When Jewel came back into the bedroom, my mouth was full so I couldn't respond when she asked, "Did he tuck you in and tell you a bedtime story?" I shook my head, but the memory of him snooping through my nightstand drawer must have made me blush because Jewel stared at me for a few seconds and then tilted her head in question. "What's going on, Emerald Hamilton?"

"Nothing," I said before I took another big bite so I didn't have to talk.

"Something." Jewel looked around the room and then back at me. "You had Adam Forrester in your bedroom, and you didn't rip his clothes off and have

your wicked way with him?” I slowly shook my head. “Chickenshit.”

“He was acting funny.”

“He doesn’t know how to be funny.”

“Shut up.”

“I love how you defend his honor like he’s a sad, pitiful victim. You’ve always done that, so that’s why I make sure to insult him every time his name comes up.”

“You insult him because that’s your love language, Jewel.”

“I insult you, and I think you’re a horrible bitch. What does that mean?”

“You’re good at reading people.” I popped the last bite into my mouth and savored it as I twisted my body around so I could put my feet on the floor. My arm was starting to throb again, and I knew that once I started moving, it would just get worse, so I took a deep breath before I stood up. The pain wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be, especially when I held my hand above my heart and rested it on my chest. “I’m never going to hit anyone ever again.”

Jewel burst out laughing and then, still chuckling, she said, “Yeah. Right.”

“Nope. I’m too old for this shit. I don’t bounce back the way I used to. If someone needs an ass whooping, I’ll hire to have it done.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s illegal, but that’s Petra’s area of expertise, not mine,” Jewel said as she followed me into the bathroom. Rather than wait for me to try and undress myself, she reached out and grasped the hem of my T-shirt and lifted it up, not caring that I was naked underneath.

I wasn’t shy around Jewel. We’d been almost constant companions since I was 12 and she was 9. Just like sisters, although we were technically cousins, we’d become comfortable with each other, and neither of us was shy around the other. Of course, in that time, we’d seen each other in all sorts of situations, and now, when I needed her most, she was here for me.

Once my shirt was off, I used my good hand to push down my sleep shorts and panties and then stepped into the bathtub. I looked at the water and the sides of the tub, trying to figure out how I could lower myself down without getting my cast wet or falling because I could only balance with one arm.

“This is how we’ll do it,” Jewel said as she reached out and put her hand on my bicep, above the cast that covered my elbow. “I’m going to hold your arm up, nice and steady, and you do whatever you have to do to get down, using my hold to help balance yourself.”

“You’re not any stronger than I am, and you think . . .”

“Do what I said before I go get a tranq gun and lay your ass out.”

As I settled into the hot water, I asked, “Do you talk to your patients like this?”

“My bedside manner is legendary.”

“I’m sure but in the worst way.”

Jewel placed a folded towel on the edge of the tub and slowly lowered my arm to rest on it. “You can sink down and stay in there until you’re pruned, just keep your arm up here.”

I lifted my foot and turned on the hot water with my toes, and while it was running, I asked, “Will you shave my legs?”

Jewel burst out laughing as she shook her head. “My friendship only extends so far, hooker. Not happening.”

“I got a bird’s eye view of your nasty cooch when I helped deliver your baby, and you won’t repay me by shaving my legs now? I’m an invalid, Jewel. I need your help.”

“Don’t bullshit me. You’ve been getting waxed for so long, I’m surprised there are even any hair follicles left on your body.”

I laughed because she was right. “There probably aren’t. Everything should be fine. I’d gotten a wax the morning all that shit went down, so I’ll be good for at least another two weeks.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to figure something else out when all of you go to prison for trying to kill those poor, innocent people.”

Jewel and I both started cackling like lunatics. Those “poor, innocent people” had admitted that they arranged for my uncle to show them the house. They had planned to kidnap him in retaliation for his involvement with the court system as he and my Uncle Marcus applied for guardianship of a young man named Cruz. The woman who I’d beaten to a pulp was Cruz’s mom, and the man I fought with was his uncle. They were in jail without bond along with the others who were part of the plot. Jewel’s younger sister, Petra, a lawyer in practice with my Uncle Marcus, assured me that there would be no charges filed.

“I’m not going to jail because I took the trash out.”

“Nope, and you shouldn’t. To quote our sweet Gamma, ‘Some people just need killin’.’ They’re lucky you didn’t take her advice this time.”

I sipped the coffee Jewel handed me, then set it on the edge of the tub when she sat on the floor next to the bathtub and handed me a small gift-wrapped package.

“What’s this?” I asked as I studied her face. “You bought me a present?”

“Shut up and open it.”

“But it’s so sweet. Give me something to cut the tape. I don’t want to tear the . . .” Jewel snatched the box from my hand and ripped the paper off before she handed it back. She glared when I grinned at her because she’d fallen into that trap a million times before. “I know how that irritates you, and it just never gets old.”

“I’m not sure why we’re still friends. At some point, I’m going to stop feeling sorry for you and just ghost your ass.”

“That would make family holidays a little uncomfortable, *Aunt Jewel*.”

“You know what’s funny?”

“Your face.”

Jewel sighed as I opened the box, and I squealed with delight when I saw what was inside. Just like the rest of my family, she knew how much I loved decorating for Christmas, so when there was a gift-giving occasion, she bought me an ornament that would elicit a memory of something that had happened recently.

This time, the ornament was a miniature pair of metallic pink boxing gloves.

“These are awesome!” I put them back in the box and said, “Thank you, skank. You’re so good to me.”

“I give you trinkets to stay on your good side in the hopes that you won’t snap and kill me someday.”

“Good plan. What were you going to say earlier? Something was funny.”

“Oh!” Jewel relaxed against the cabinet behind her and propped her feet on the edge of the tub. “Robby had an assignment to do his family tree for one of his classes. He turned it in and then got an email from his teacher that said something to the effect of ‘please don’t embellish for artistic effect.’ I had to call her and explain that he wasn’t stretching the truth at all. His older brother is cousins on both sides with your daughter and various other twists and turns.”

“Our family is one tent away from a full-blown circus.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” We were quiet for a few minutes and then Jewel asked,

“What’s going on with Adam? Did he finally quit avoiding you?”

“He showed up last night and was acting . . . He was . . . Uh . . .”

“Well, look at you all flustered,” Jewel teased. “What did he say?”

“He kissed me!” Jewel’s eyebrows took off for her hairline as she gasped. “I know, right?”

“Did he just walk in and lay one on you or . . .”

I told her how he’d appeared in my bedroom just when I really needed him and then gave her a word-for-word playback of our conversation. I had to pause for a minute while Jewel got herself together after I told her he’d discovered my vibrators, so I sipped my coffee and glared at her until she calmed down.

“Now tell me about the kiss,” Jewel ordered. I opened my mouth to give her the details, but she put her hand up to stop me as she shook her head. “The *first* kiss.”

“He just kissed me before he left and . . .”

“No! After your surgery when you invited him to jump your bones, you mentioned your kiss. I want to know about that one and why in the hell you haven’t told any of us about it before.”

“It was my secret,” I whispered, more to myself than to give her an explanation.

“Even as close as all of us are, I guess we’ve each got our secrets,” Jewel said quietly as she leaned back against the cabinet. There was a mysterious look on her face, and I was dying to know what she was thinking about, but Jewel was a vault and would only tell me when she was ready. I could tell that time was not right now. “When did it happen?”

As soon as I said the word “prom,” Jewel knew what I was talking about. I didn’t have to explain how hurt I’d been when I heard those girls talking about me because Jewel had encountered some of the same taunts that I had since she’d had Porter while she was still in high school.

“He danced with you and kissed you in the moonlight,” Jewel said dreamily before she sighed. “I didn’t know good ol’ Adam had it in him.”

“It was perfect.”

“Why didn’t either of you take it any further? You were just buddies for years, but we all knew that you had a secret crush on the guy. Well, at least the girls knew. The boys were oblivious as always.”

“He said he’d never forgotten how I looked that night, and now, he’s planning his next move.”

“Really?”

“He said I need to get back in fighting shape so I can enjoy it, whatever that means.”

“Still waters run deep.”

“Huh?”

“That old saying. Adam’s our calm center and always has been. There’ve been times when we’re all riled up about something or someone, and if you look up, Adam is just chilling off to the side as he thinks things through.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“It’s the quiet ones you’ve got to keep your eye on.”

“Valid.” I nodded. “Some of the scariest people I’ve encountered in my career were those types. You never knew exactly what they were thinking.”

“I’m not talking about Adam being the crazy, wild one of our group. I mean it’s the planners, the ones that see everything and analyze it before they act - they’re the wildest when the time is right.”

“Adam’s always been that way.”

“His brothers too.”

Jewel and I were both quiet for a bit, and I found myself starting to get drowsy. “I think this warm water is lulling me to sleep.”

“Might be.” Jewel used the side of the tub to push up to her feet. “Wash up while I put clean sheets on your bed, and we’ll get you tucked in for a nap.”

“I should be wide awake. All I do is sleep.”

“It’s important for healing.” Jewel said as she started walking out of the bathroom. “Enjoy it while you can because once those pins come out, you’re going to have a long road of therapy ahead.”

I groaned, not ready to face that hurdle quite yet. It would happen, and I’d endure it, but I knew it was going to be a long, painful process. We’d been wild and crazy when we were young and had all suffered our fair share of injuries, although this was my worst so far. I’d stood by helplessly while some of the others and several of the younger kids had gone through long bouts of healing and recovery after fights, accidents, wrecks, or just plain stupid stunts that we should have had enough sense to avoid.

Soon, it would be my turn to work my ass off to get back into fighting shape or as close to it as possible.

But this time, Adam might not be content to sit on the sidelines and watch. I had a feeling he might be right by my side through it if he followed through with what he’d said last night. Hopefully, he’d be naked at some point in that process too.

ADAM

“Finish your Danish,” I urged, pushing Emerald’s plate closer to her. “I’m not leaving until I get you settled in again.”

“I am not going back up to bed,” Emerald argued. “I’m going to stay down here and go over some case files before I catch up on some emails.”

“Fine, but do it with a full stomach.”

Emerald took another bite of the Danish I’d brought over for breakfast, and I had to grip the table to stop myself from leaning over and licking a smear of cream cheese off her lip. I bit back a groan when her tongue came out and ran across her full bottom lip.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think she was trying to kill me. Although, knowing Emerald, she just might be. The woman was going stir-crazy being stuck at her house, but the alternative was to stay with her parents where she’d never get any rest at all.

Lout and Willow Hamilton, Emerald’s parents, had as many kids as my parents. Just like my mom and dad, they’d started out with three children who didn’t share their blood but were their children all the same. Both couples had then proceeded to have six more children.

My youngest siblings, Loyal and Harley, were just now 20 and branching out to live their own lives, while Emerald's youngest brothers, Jett and Onyx, were still in high school and living at home. They were good friends with my son, Noah, so I saw them often and knew just how loud they could be even on the rare occasions when they were trying to be quiet.

Willow hadn't even tried to convince Emerald to stay at her house because she knew just how stubborn she was, but I knew that she and Lout had stopped by every single day since Emerald was released from the hospital. Others had come over too. In fact, so many that the men working the gate had jokingly asked if they could just leave it open because they were worried about the integrity of the equipment since there had also been a steady stream of family coming in and out over the last week.

There was a knock at the front door, and I glanced up as I asked, "Are you expecting anyone this morning?"

Emerald sighed. "I was hoping I'd have some time to work today."

"I'll tell whoever it is that you're not up for visitors."

"Don't do that."

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I'll tell them to come back this evening. How about that?"

"Thank you," Emerald said as she picked apart the last few bites of her Danish. When she saw me looking at the food, she rolled her eyes before she put another bite in her mouth. "My hand is broken, Eve, not my stomach."

"Take a few more sips of coffee while I deal with your visitors," I ordered before I nudged her mug a little closer. "You're still cranky."

"I'm always cranky," Emerald huffed. I smiled when I saw her pick up the mug, and heard her take a sip as I walked across the living room.

I could still hear her mumbling about my being an overbearing ass as I opened the front door, so when I saw who was on the porch, the smile on my face just got wider.

My aunt, Summer Forrester, who also happened to be Emerald's aunt, was standing on the porch with my grandmother, Martha Forrester. There wasn't a chance in hell I could deny either of these women entry, so I unlocked the glass door and held it open for them. Summer tiptoed up and kissed my cheek before she walked past, leaving me there with Gamma.

"Hello, gorgeous," I said before I leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"Handsome," Gamma said as she reached up and patted my face. "You're

here early.”

“I came over about an hour ago to make Em’s coffee and get her set up for the day,” I explained as I took the foil-covered dishes Gamma held in her hands. “Fridge or freezer?”

“One in each,” she ordered before she walked past me.

“More in the car?”

Gamma smiled at me over her shoulder. “Of course.”

“Has Smokey bought stock in this glassware company yet?” I asked sarcastically as I followed her through the living room. “I’m pretty sure every one of your grandchildren has at least three of your dishes in their freezer at any given time.”

“Then I should get to work. That’s not nearly enough,” Gamma teased.

“You’ve been taking care of our girl?”

“Doing everything I can.”

“I knew you would,” she said as she rounded the corner and caught sight of Emerald. She leaned down and kissed her cheek, eliciting a genuine smile from the usually irritated non-morning person, and I laughed.

“Maybe you should be the one to come over and deal with Stone in the mornings. I think you might be the only person that doesn’t make her growl.” When I walked into the kitchen, I found Summer pouring coffee for her and Gamma. After I put one dish in the fridge and the other in the freezer, I leaned against the counter and asked, “Are you going to stick around for a while today?”

“We planned on it. Is that a problem?” Summer asked with one eyebrow cocked in question.

“Why would it be?”

“You might have something nice planned for the two of you.”

I shook my head as Summer grinned. “None of you know how to stay out of our business.”

“That’s not in our job description.”

“So meddling is?”

“Absolutely. I think that might be one of the top three priorities, right up there with worrying about things we can’t fix and wondering if we’re doing everything wrong. You’re a parent. You know how it goes.”

“I don’t think of Emerald the way a parent thinks of their kid.”

“I know. I heard.”

“What did you hear and from who?”

“You know I’ll never cite my sources, but I heard that Em got loose lips while she was on the good drugs and that you weren’t exactly opposed to the idea.” I raised my eyebrows in question, and Summer laughed. “And I don’t hear you arguing about it now.”

I shook my head and sighed before I said, “If I say anything to you, it’s going to spread through the family grapevine like wildfire.”

“Of course it will. You know that’s how we work,” Summer said, not even pretending to deny that what I’d said was true. She reached out and nudged my shoulder before she cajoled, “Come on. Talk to your Aunt Summer.”

“I’m working things out in my head and need some time to bring Emerald around to the idea. You know how stubborn she is. If she thinks that I’m trying to pull her in one direction and it’s the same direction everyone in the family is trying to push her, she’ll resist even more than she normally would. She’ll overthink it to death.”

“That’s true on all counts.”

“I need you to put the word out, but do it gently so it doesn’t get back to Stone. And not just to the originals but to the elders and children too.”

“I’ll have you know that the originals are all for the two of you getting together.”

By originals, my aunt meant the men and women of her generation in the family. Since our families were all so intertwined, we never differentiated between who was blood and who wasn’t - or who was a Forrester and who wasn’t. The rest of the Texas Kings MC family, the Texas Knights MC, and the Tempests in Colorado were also part of the collective.

That included my Gamma and Papa, Martha and Smokey Forrester, and Tink and Sandra Marks, their best friends. Gamma and Papa Smokey were the pillars of our family and the Texas Kings MC, just like Tink and Sandra were the pillars of the Texas Knights MC and their own family. Since both MCs had been connected for years through friendship and then romance and marriages, it had turned into a huge band of people who were all family one way or another.

That meant that I didn’t just have my parents with their nose in my business, I also had all of their friends who I considered aunts and uncles along with my *actual* aunts and uncles meddling in every damn thing. It was exhausting sometimes, and occasionally, it made me want to pack up and move to Siberia, but I’d never do that. My year away from home proved to me that I could live without them, but I really didn’t want to.

The entire time I knew my ex-wife, she had been dying to get away from Rojo. She never even tried to fit in with my family. She said it was because none of them really liked her, and that may very well be true, but I thought it had something to do with her ambition to move up in her field and explore the world at the same time. If she let herself get close to my family, she might never get the gumption to leave Rojo after all.

Obviously, I didn't have to worry about that now since she was settling into her new home, new job, and new life without any reminders of Rojo, including our children.

"We've always thought you would be perfect for one another," Summer admitted. "It will take a good man to make Emerald happy - not that Hunter is anything less, but he's there and we're here. He isn't going to move away from his family in Colorado, and even though it's just a few hours from Rojo, Emerald felt the pull to come home from the day she moved there to work on her residency. She tried, but we all saw how hard it was for her. No matter how much she might argue the point, Emerald needs her family around her. Lout and Willow swooped in when she needed them most, and even if she's not willing to admit it now, she still needs them nearby. They just want her to be happy and know that she'll be even happier if she has a strong partner."

"And they think that may be me?"

"They've secretly always hoped it would be."

"That explains why Lout didn't just kill me that day in her hospital room," I admitted. Not that Lout *would*, but I knew he'd deliver a beatdown if he thought one was warranted. Thankfully, he demurred, so I was still standing upright and able to see out of both my eyes today. "I think it might be enough if you just take care of the originals. Em's going to want to talk to the girls so the elders can take sides as they see fit. They'll know better than to push her."

"She needs her girls by her side, elders or not. Jewel, Lexi, Leia, and Holly have been her sounding board for years. You and the boys have, too, but it's just different with a woman's girlfriends."

"They're thick as thieves, that's for sure, just like you and Mom and the rest of the aunts."

"Exactly. I couldn't have survived raising a house full of Forresters without their help." Summer took a sip of her coffee and then picked Gamma's up from the counter. "If you need any help, feel free to call. If I don't know what advice to give you, I'll find someone that does."

I blew out a breath, knowing I'd have to make that call sooner or later. Stone was a handful, and she'd take me on one helluva roller coaster ride before the dust settled, but if I could just stay the course, we'd both end up happier than we ever imagined. Or, at least, I hoped we would.

Summer reached out and put her hand on my cheek just like Gamma always did. She smiled at me, and I saw her eyes were bright with tears as she said, "I've adored you since the first time we met, and so has my sister. You were just a gangly teenager in the midst of so much chaos that both of us just wanted to pull you into our arms and hold on tight. Willow will be beside herself when I tell her that I talked to you today." She rubbed her thumb over the apple of my cheek and whispered, "You're a good man, Adam Forrester, and our Emerald is a damn good woman. The two of you have always made one helluva team, but *together*, you'll own the world."

"If she gives me a chance, she'll be my world. In a way, she always has been."

The tears finally slipped free and rolled down Summer's cheeks. "You're a Forrester down to your core, just like my boys. They may have been born with a different last name, but just like you, they blossomed when they came into this family. So did Emerald and her sisters." Aunt Summer laughed softly as she let her hand drop and said, "Now, I'm going to go back in there and entertain Emerald while you go about your day. Is there anything I should know? Anything I should do?"

"She's gonna need a nap soon. She insists she's not going back to bed, so prop her up on the couch or in the recliner. One of us will bring you guys lunch."

"I'm sure your Gamma will want to cook something while she's here. You know how that goes."

I shook my head. "Not lunch. Let one of us bring it over." Summer tilted her head in question, so I added, "Trust me."

Summer laughed softly. "No matter how old you get, I can still see that kid inside who's probably planning something nefarious."

"With those kids of yours, you've had plenty of practice spotting the signs."

"I'm an expert at this point. Believe me."



EMERALD

“Are you gonna spoon feed me if I don’t finish my soup?”

“Probably.”

I glared at Adam but took another bite. I had to admit, the soup was delicious, but his incessant need to feed me was getting old. I had finally started feeling well enough to venture downstairs but still had the need to nap throughout the day, so I hadn’t gotten any exercise in the last week. If I kept eating like this and didn’t at least start going for occasional walks, I wouldn’t be able to fit into my clothes when it was time to go back to work.

“What’s the weather like outside?” I asked.

“A little breezy, but not too bad.”

“I think I’m going to go for a walk before I settle in for the night,” I told Adam before I picked up my soup mug and drained the last of the broth.

“Thank you for dinner.”

“You’re welcome. Did you get enough to eat?” He glanced from my soup mug to the half-eaten sandwich on my plate and then asked, “Want some dessert?”

The look in his eyes made me wonder if he was talking about something other than a sweet treat, so I decided to play along and asked, “Is there something good on the menu?”

Since that night in my bedroom, Adam and I had been tiptoeing around the kiss we’d shared. Neither of us had mentioned it, and I wondered if it was just a fluke. However, I’d seen him watching me when he thought I wasn’t paying attention, and the fire in his eyes told me that it was definitely not a fluke. Adam Forrester was into me in a big way. I didn’t know where that had come from, and it terrified me to consider following through with the dream I’d always held.

Dreams were just that. Dreams. They were the ultimate idea of what a person wanted. Adam had always been my ultimate. My dream man.

Part of me was fearful that the reality of actually having him as mine wouldn’t live up to the idea, but a bigger part of me was positive that he’d exceed all expectations.

Adam had been part of my family since Daughtry fell for Jamie. Even before he was willing to admit that she was the one for him, Jamie’s sons, Adam, Joshua, and Heath, had become part of our family. Once Gamma spotted a kid in need - whether it was in need of a hug, a champion, or just a good meal - that child became one of her flock. She’d welcomed Jamie’s boys with open arms and been their Gamma since the day they met. If Daughtry and

Jamie hadn't worked out, she'd still be their Gamma.

Time, distance, turmoil - none of that mattered. Once you were in, you were in forever, and there wasn't much you could do to change that . . . other than some type of abhorrent behavior that would not just get you booted from the family but buried in a field somewhere. When they were kids, Gamma had taken in my father as well as Uncle Marcus and my aunts. She'd made them part of her family, and in turn, my sisters and I became part of her family the second Lout and Willow rescued us from our mother and her nefarious plans.

Like Jewel had mentioned the other day when she came to help me in the bath, our family tree went on forever with leaves and branches that intertwined in so many ways that even I couldn't explain them all. For instance, Adam and I shared an aunt - Summer. My adopted mother, Willow, was Summer's younger sister. Aunt Summer was married to Bird Forrester, Adam's adopted father's older brother. Therefore, we shared an aunt but weren't technically related in any way.

Adam and I had grown up together and seen each other through dating, breakups, makeups, burgeoning friendships, new and old enemies, marriage, pregnancy, parenthood, divorce, and even dating after divorce, which was an adventure that neither of us were prepared for or enjoyed at all.

Dating Adam was a fantasy I'd held onto for so long. He was my first crush, and then he was my first kiss. Those were two things a woman didn't ever forget and some never got past. I know I hadn't. Sleeping with Adam was something I had fantasized about for more than half my life. Marrying him and living happily by his side was a pipe dream I had never even allowed myself to imagine . . . until a few days ago. He'd taken on the task of caring for me while I was injured, and he'd done it in a way I had never expected. He was the first person I spoke to when I woke up in the morning and the last person I saw before I fell asleep at night, and all of this togetherness was wreaking havoc on my psyche . . . and my libido.

"I've got something for you, but I don't think either of us is quite ready for it yet."

"Huh?" I asked, so caught up in my musings that I'd lost track of our conversation. When I realized what he was saying, my entire body jolted in awareness.

"Dessert."

I decided to play along. "You think you've got something I'd be interested

in, Eve?”

“I know I do.”

“You seem pretty sure of yourself.”

“I know you better than I know myself, Stone, and believe me when I say that you’ll be interested in what I’ve got to give.”

“You think so, huh?”

Adam rested his hands on the table before he stood up, leaning over it in a fluid motion that put his face just inches from mine. He stared into my eyes for a second, then his gaze went to my lips. I knew I was playing with fire, but I couldn’t resist. I pulled my bottom lip in and caught it with my teeth before I let it go and ran my tongue over it. Adam’s eyes flared with heat, and I heard a rumble that took me a second to recognize.

What the hell?

Adam Forrester had just *growled* at me, and it set every nerve in my body on fire.

New. Kink. Unlocked.

8.

ADAM

I rolled over *again* and forced myself to close my eyes. I had to get some sleep. My brothers and I had a big day tomorrow, and I needed to be on top of my game during our meeting with the city inspector who was coming to tour the unfinished half of the property we owned - the other side of the neighborhood my brothers and I were developing.

I'd had a busy day that started early with breakfast at Emerald's, then a dozen different fires I had to put out with contractors, plumbing issues, and my daily dose of Margaret. I knew Emerald wasn't feeling herself lately, but I was sure that once I unleashed her and let her loose on that old bat, she would bring mayhem, injured hand or not.

I had told my brothers that I let loose the tornado of chaos that was Emerald Hamilton on a mission, and we'd had a good laugh while we tried to guess what shenanigans were on the horizon. Jewel and Petra would be involved, most definitely, and even though Holly wasn't quite as bloodthirsty as the Parker sisters, she was one of the girls and not afraid to get her hands dirty. Neither were Lexi and Leia.

Those women could conquer an army in less than a day and have every one

of the losers thanking them for their lessons by the next afternoon. By herself, Emerald was a force to be reckoned with. When she put her mind to something, it was going to happen - no matter what the scenario happened to be. But when she got her girls involved, things escalated rapidly and the fallout was almost nuclear. Poor Margaret wasn't going to know what hit her.

Kind of like me.

Emerald and I hadn't talked about that night a week ago when I discovered her vibrator stash, but that didn't mean I hadn't thought about it. In the shower, washing dishes, driving across town, sitting at my desk, mowing the lawn - I hadn't felt a moment's peace since I discovered that little collection and had taken myself in hand no less than three times a day trying to relieve the pressure that was building inside as I waited for Emerald to recover so I could sweep her into my arms and . . .

"Adam," I heard Emerald's breathless whisper. I sat up in bed, ready to spring to action. Emerald needed me. She might be hurt. What if she'd fallen? What if she . . . "Oh God! Adam!"

"Fuck me," I grumbled as I slammed myself back on the bed hard enough to make my entire body bounce. "She is *not* getting off and calling my name right now."

I heard a faint buzz and then Emerald whimpered.

"Son of a bitch," I grumbled as my dick sprang to life, not caring that I'd jacked off to thoughts of Emerald less than an hour ago when I was taking a shower. I couldn't help myself. After our walk around the neighborhood and an hour spent visiting with friends and family who came out to greet us as we passed, I helped Emerald prepare for her shower. I then sat on her bed and waited for her to get finished in the bathroom before I helped her put on a silk bonnet to protect her hair while she slept.

Even wearing a neon pink wrap on her head, a faded tank top, and a pair of basketball shorts that I was positive she'd gotten in high school, Emerald was the sexiest woman I'd ever seen. The urge to slowly undress her as I worshiped her body with my hands and tongue was almost overwhelming. As soon as she was settled into bed, I ran out of her house like my ass was on fire, straight to my bathroom and took my cock in hand, visions of Emerald's damp skin burned into my brain and the smell of her lotion still in my nose. I came so hard that I saw stars.

But that wasn't enough. Nope. When I heard her start to toss and turn

through the speaker beside my bed, my dick got hard again, and I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep until she was settled, so I damn near killed myself in the home gym I had set up in the spare bedroom. When I couldn't take anymore and was dripping with sweat, I staggered to the shower hoping against hope that I'd be able to sleep tonight. But, of course, thoughts of Emerald stole back in, and once more, I was beating off in the shower imagining what her body would feel like, what she would taste like, the sounds she would . . .

Her breathy moan came over the speaker again, this time a little more frantic as she called my name before she groaned long and low.

There was a gasp and then an incredulous, "No! No no no no!" A pause and then, "Oh hell no!" I heard her snap, her voice louder than it had been before, all traces of her impending orgasm gone. "You have got to be fucking kidding me!" The sheets rustled, and I heard a drawer open. She kept grumbling as she rifled through the drawer, and then I heard it slam before she let out a frustrated howl. "Where are the goddamn batteries?"

I burst out laughing, my cock still throbbing in my hand, as I listened to her lose it. The funniest part was that I couldn't just hear her through the baby monitor speaker, I could hear her through my open window, and so could anyone else who happened to be nearby.

I could tell by her frantic movements with drawers opening and closing that she was searching for batteries, so I hopped out of bed. I pulled my pajama bottoms up to cover my cock, even though they couldn't camouflage that I was still hard, and grabbed my phone before I raced downstairs to raid the junk drawer and find an array of batteries to suit damn near anything.

Once I had a sandwich bag full of at least four of each size - AA, AAA, 9-volt, and even a couple of D - I hit the button on my phone to disengage Emerald's alarm system and then silently went in through the laundry room door. I knew I was taking a risk considering every woman in our family was armed to the teeth and more than comfortable with whatever weapons they had in their possession, but at this point, I would take a bullet to be able to take care of Emerald Hamilton.

Very good care of her.

The best.



EMERALD

I held my arm up and threw myself back on the pillow, frustrated beyond measure and ready to scream until the roof caved in on top of me. Of all the times to run out of juice, my vibrator died about ten seconds before I had a mind-blowing orgasm that *might* help take the edge off. I said *might* because I knew it wouldn't completely take away the need I felt for Adam Fucking Forrester.

And yes, I created a new middle name for the man because he had me so sexually frustrated that I was about to crawl out of my own damn skin. The heated looks, the innuendos with almost every word he spoke to me, the gentle caresses - my hand, my arm, my cheek - it didn't matter where. Every part of me he looked at got warm, and every cell in my body caught on fire when he touched me.

I had been feeling much better since he'd started taking care of me, so much better that rather than have my mind in a haze from the constant ache and sharp pains shooting up my arm, I had begun to think about other things. Adam things. Great big cock deep inside of me, thrusting so hard the headboard slammed into the wall and knocked off the carefully arranged art I'd placed there things. Our skin slapping together, the sound of my wet pussy taking him in over and over again so loudly that I'd be self-conscious if there were anyone nearby. Lips, teeth, tongue, fingers, hands - every part of us would be involved when we came together. Biting, nibbling, nipping, licking, thrusting, rubbing . . . all the -ings. Every goddamn one of them.

A hard, rough fuck - complete with a bunch of those sexy growls like I'd heard at dinner tonight.

I let my hand slip down my naked body, underneath the sheets I'd flung over my body, down between my legs. My knees fell to the side, giving my hand better access to my pussy, and I slowly pushed one finger deep as the heel of my hand pressed against my clit.

I pictured Adam above me, his face a mask of concentrated passion as he positioned his cock at my entrance. He'd hold himself there, barely touching me, until he saw that I was right on the edge. I'd tilt my hips up just a fraction, trying to take him deeper, but he'd retreat, teasing us both because we knew what was about to happen. I heard a gasp and then that sexy growl, so I pushed my finger in deeper. When the growl happened again, I realized it wasn't just my imagination.

I had *heard* it. I didn't imagine it. *I heard it.*

My eyes flew open, and I saw Adam in the doorway, his shoulder propped

against the frame, and his eyes on me. I yanked my hand up, completely mortified, and started to sit up.

“No,” he barked, shaking his head as he pushed away from the frame and stalked my way. “Don’t stop, Stone.”

“What the fuck are you doing in my bedroom in the middle of the night?” I yelled, more pissed that he’d caught me masturbating than I was that he had full access to my home. “How the hell did you get in here?”

“Don’t. Stop.” He tossed something heavy on the nightstand and then reached out and flicked the covers aside, baring my naked body to his gaze. His eyes set me on fire, and I watched them trail slowly from my face down my body until they rested on my bare pussy. Without even thinking, I slowly moved my hand down between my breasts and over my stomach before I cupped my sex and rested my hand there. “Keep going, Stone.”

“Make me.”

“You want me to make you come?”

“Yes,” I whispered, only because I still had enough of my faculties to restrain myself from begging like I really wanted to do. “Help me, Eve.”

“Fuck yeah,” Adam mumbled as he put his knee on the bed beside mine. He pushed my thighs apart and then settled in between them, his wide shoulders spreading them apart almost painfully, helped by his hands that pushed them even further. I lifted my head and watched his face as he studied me. I gasped when I saw his mouth open and his tongue slowly extend from between his lips. He stopped just a breath away from my clit, and I squirmed beneath him, my eyes locked on his mouth, the anticipation almost too much to bear. “Look at me, Stone.”

My eyes shot up to his, and in the next second, he swiped his tongue across my clit. I watched and waited for him to do it again, but he pulled back, readjusting his body as his thumbs moved closer to my weeping entrance. He pushed them in, not too deep, just enough that he could spread my pussy wide to his gaze before he put his lips on my clit and sucked hard.

I came with a shout, my pussy convulsing on air for a split second before he pushed two fingers deep inside me, his mouth never stopping as he hummed against my clit. I fisted my hand in his hair, not sure if I wanted to push him away because he was torturing my sensitive clit or pull him closer so he could suck even harder. I alternated between begging him to stop and begging for him to fuck me, but he did neither. Instead, he settled in, his fingers never stopping, and his mouth torturing me until I came again. And

again.

I couldn't catch my breath, and my voice was hoarse as I screamed his name. By the time he finally stopped, I was covered in a fine sheen of sweat, panting, with my voice nearly unrecognizable.

The last thing I felt before I fell asleep was Adam's soft lips as he kissed the inside of my thigh and pulled his fingers out of my sated pussy.

My last thought was that none of the fantasies I'd had about my dream man came close to the real thing. Not close at all.

EMERALD

“This punishment is worse than a prison sentence, I swear,” I mumbled to myself as I stared at the bra I’d thrown onto the bed. I’d chosen a front-clasp bra, hoping it would be easier for me to hook, but I got it all tangled as I tried to get it on over my cast and up onto my shoulders before I realized I couldn’t even clasp it after all. “Shit!”

“What’s the problem, Stone?”

I let out a startled shriek as I spun around to find Adam standing in the doorway. I got over my shock quickly when I realized he was staring at my bare breasts, so I lifted my hands to cover myself. I had no idea why. He’d seen all of me hours ago when he came in and . . .

Everything I’d tried to pretend was a dream came crashing back when I saw the easy smile on his face. I wondered if he was going to ignore what happened last night like he’d seemed to ignore that kiss more than a week ago, but I didn’t have to wonder long.

“Don’t cover up, baby. At least let me look at them for a little bit. Last night, I was too busy to appreciate that beauty.”

I let my hand drop down to my side and turned to face him, letting his eyes roam over my body as I watched his face change from amusement to fiery

lust.

I wasn't self-conscious of my body - I'd given up my vanity long ago. I knew that I didn't have anything even close to the perfect body that magazines and television touted. I had a *real* body. One that had grown three children. A body that still bore the marks from each of those children that I wore proudly.

I had a myriad of scars to go with my stretch marks, some from the horrible part of my childhood that was spent as my mother's punching bag and others from the wonderful part that was spent getting into all sorts of scrapes with my cousins and friends. I'd crashed on dirt bikes, go-karts, skateboards, rollerblades, and even a motorized beer cooler once. Not many people could say that, but then again, not many people had a scar to show for it either.

"Fuck, you're a goddess," Adam mumbled as he stalked closer to me. He didn't walk. He didn't strut. He stalked me like a panther who had just spotted his prey, and I loved it. The fire in his eyes let me know that he felt just as hot for me as I did for him, maybe even more so. "I always knew that when I finally got you naked, I'd never want to let you get dressed again."

"Always?" I squeaked out before I cleared my throat and tried again.

"You've imagined me naked?"

"Lots of times," Adam admitted as he reached over and picked my bra up off the bed.

"What else have you imagined?"

"How you'd taste. I don't have to imagine that anymore."

"Was it good?" I asked as I took a step back, trying to keep some distance between us. Hopefully enough to let me catch my breath and analyze the situation before I pounced on the man like the sex-starved woman I was trying so hard not to be.

"Better than the finest wine, the most decadent dessert, and the sweetest honey."

"Oh."

Oh? That's all I could come up with? *Oh?* Where had my brain gone? It was out to lunch right along with my ability to speak in full sentences. How could I when he was so close and smelled so fucking good? And the look on his face was pure hunger and lust, probably just like my own.

Adam lifted my bra up and said, "I had hoped to get you out of one of these contraptions someday, but instead, I have to help you cover those beauties up. It's a sin, really. I'm not sure I'll ever be able to recover." He looked

back at my chest and then up at my face before he asked, “Why are you putting this thing on anyway?”

“I have to go to work and . . .”

“Like hell you do.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“You’re hurt, Stone. I’m not sure how you missed the memo but . . .”

I scoffed, all traces of lust forgotten the second he told me what I was *not* going to do. “The world doesn’t stop spinning because I hurt my hand.”

“Hurt it? You shattered damn near every bone!”

“Whatever. There are still people that depend on me and . . .”

“You’re not going to work, Stone. You’ve got a follow-up appointment with your ortho and you’re coming home to rest after that.”

“I don’t know where you get off thinking you can tell me what I can and can’t do.”

“I’m the one standing here holding your bra because you can’t even put the thing on by yourself, and you think I’m not going to have an opinion?” He looked at my breasts before he smiled and said, “Because believe me, sweetheart, I’ve *got* an opinion.”

I wanted to hear that opinion more than I wanted my next breath, but I was too pissed off to admit that. Instead, I argued, “Give me my fucking underwear and get out of my bedroom.” I thought about it for a second and finally asked, “What are you doing in my house anyway?”

“I was making you breakfast.”

“What?”

“Food. Generally consumed in the morning hours.” Adam sighed like I’d just asked him to do something painful before he said, “Lift your arms so I can put this thing on you.” When I just stood there with my hands over my breasts, he lifted one eyebrow and asked, “Today?”

“You’re not going to dress me, Eve.”

“Okay. I’m fine with you eating breakfast topless, but it might be a little uncomfortable when my brothers join us.”

“What . . . Why . . . I just . . .”

“I know it’s difficult, Stone, but most people can speak in full sentences even before they’ve had coffee.” Adam held the bra between us and ordered, “Arms up.”

“No.”

“Please? I just wanna get a little touch to tide me over until I can finally put

my mouth on them.”

“What? I . . . You . . . Oh! It is way too early for this bullshit.”

“You’re so cute when you’re cranky, which is a good thing because you’re always cranky.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Eve? Did you bump your head after you left last night? Should we call Terran and get you checked out?”

“I didn’t bump my head, but I think you pulled at least half my hair out.” He laughed at the look of shock on my face before he continued, “I don’t need a neurologist, Stone. I just need you to understand that my eyes have been opened to possibilities I never imagined could come true, and I’m going to pursue them.”

“What happened last night was great, and I’m sorry I didn’t reciprocate but . . .”

“Did you hear me say I’m going to pursue the possibilities?” Adam asked as he stepped even closer to me, so close that my bare breasts brushed against his soft shirt. He took a step closer, and I had to lean back to look into his eyes.

“Pursue what?” I had completely lost my train of thought when our bodies connected. I could feel the heat emanating from him, even through his shirt, and my nipples were hard enough to cut glass.

Adam leaned closer until our noses were almost touching and whispered, “You.”

“Are you high?”

“No.”

“Am *I* high?”

Adam shrugged as he said, “I don’t know. Are you?”

I touched my forehead with my good hand and closed my eyes, ready to take a few deep breaths and find my center before I lost my shit and started screaming. Somehow, the world had fallen off its axis in the middle of the night. At the time, I’d chalked it up to an insanely realistic dream and blamed it on the residual effects of whatever strain of weed Hunter and his family had cooked up.

Honestly, if what happened last night was because of that strain, my daughter’s inheritance was going to make her *stupid* rich - Maseratis and mansions rich.

When I woke up this morning, still languid from the array of orgasms Adam had served - all of them mind-blowing, but a few more intense than others, I

tried to tell myself it had all been a dream. I had even tried to convince myself it was a hallucination.

Until now.

It wasn't nighttime anymore, and it had been hours since I had taken anything for the pain. I knew that because my entire arm was on fire, and I could feel my heart beating in the tips of my fingers. My pulse was racing right now, so fast that I wondered if I should call a doctor for myself and not just for Adam's head injury.

Adam was still so close that I could feel his breath on my cheek. When he got closer to my ear, I shivered as he whispered, "You're awake, and I'm right here in front of you, Stone. Open your eyes to a whole new world."

I opened my eyes and found him staring into them, his gaze intense and very, very serious. "I am so confused right now."

"I've been thinking about this since that night under the moonlight."

"You have?"

"Tell me you haven't, and I'll walk away and pretend last night never happened and that I never got to see your gorgeous tits on display with your hard nipples begging for my mouth."

"I've never lied to you."

"Don't start now. You can quit lying to yourself, too, by the way."

"My brain is so muddled with pain that I'm not sure what is real and what isn't."

"You can feel me standing right here, Stone." Adam tilted his hips so that his hard cock touched my belly. He grinned when he said, "Believe me, that's real."

I had always thought it was cute how the edges of his eyes crinkled when he smiled, but now I found it extremely sexy. Okay, I was lying to myself now. I hated that and refused to fall into that trap.

Adam was my dream man and had been since before he gave me my first kiss in the moonlight. I found everything about him sexy, from the laugh lines beside his eyes to his crooked smile. I loved the way his hands looked - the blunt fingernails and rough skin along with his muscular arms were signs that he worked hard for a living. That alone was sexy.

But that body. Dear God, that body. It had changed over the years, and he'd occasionally gotten thicker, depending on what was going on in his life. But since he and his brothers had started renovating houses, he'd toned up and begun to gain even more muscle than he'd had when we were younger.

Recently, he'd gotten so big that I had the almost irresistible urge to lick his bicep every time I saw him shirtless.

No matter where we were or who was watching, I wanted to stick my tongue out and run it from his elbow to his shoulder and then follow that with my hand. And when I was finished exploring his arms, I wanted to run my hands over his pecs and dribble water over his stomach to watch it run in rivulets across his abs. I wanted to nip at the skin above his hip where that sexy line pointed to his cock like a neon sign. I wanted to explore his muscular legs and . . . Oh, his thighs. Lord, the man had some great thighs. They were like tree trunks just begging to be rubbed. More than a few times, while I'd been using my vibrator, I'd imagined how hard they'd be underneath my ass as I rode him until we were both sweaty, breathless, and sated.

I'd always thought he was sexy but never allowed myself to admit it. But here I was, topless and wearing a pair of ugly panties while Adam Frickin' Forrester was standing so close that I could feel his hard cock jutting against my belly.

"Fuck it. If this is a dream, I'm all in," I mumbled before I used my good hand to grab the back of his neck so I could pull him closer to me and touch my lips to his.

The kiss was explosive just like it had been that first time all those years ago. I saw stars behind my eyelids and every nerve ending in my body lit up like a live wire. I couldn't breathe, but at the same time, I was panting like I'd run a marathon. It felt like I was floating, and suddenly, I realized I was!

Holy shit! The man had picked me up and was holding me against his chest with one arm while his other cupped my ass before it ran its way up my side and covered my left breast. When my back hit the dresser, he lifted me effortlessly and sat me down on the edge so he could use his other hand to palm my other breast. I let my head fall back and had the presence of mind to lift my injured arm up to rest on the top of my head, praying that he'd remember to watch out for it while he fucked me so hard, I saw stars.

"Fuck me, you're skin is even softer than I imagined," Adam mumbled against my lips as he ran his hands up and down my sides. "And you smell so fucking good. I want to taste you again so bad, Stone, but . . ."

"Hello!" I heard a man call out from downstairs. I recognized the voice as one of Adam's brothers and groaned when he yelled, "Adam? Em? Everything okay?"

I panted for a second before I whispered, "Go downstairs, tie them up, stuff

them into the coat closet, and then come back and finish what you've started."

Adam chuckled before he turned his head and called out, "Grab a cup of coffee. We'll be down in just a second."

"Second? Fuck that!" I hissed. "This better take way more than a second!"

"Gotta get you dressed for company, Stone. Don't want my brothers to see my prize."

"Your prize?"

"I've been a very patient man, Emerald. I've been waiting for this day for *years*. Another day isn't going to kill me, even though I feel like it might right now. I can wait until we have plenty of time to enjoy each other."

"I can't. I'm a firm believer in instant gratification."

"Honey, when we get together, nothing is gonna be instant," Adam murmured against my neck. He nipped at my earlobe and whispered, "It's gonna be hot." He nipped again. "It's gonna be sweaty." He nipped one more time before he licked his way down to my collar bone. "It's gonna take *hours* for me to explore you the way I want." He pulled my nipple into his mouth and suckled until my back arched, and I had to bite back a moan.

"And when we're all finished, and we're messy and breathless, I'm going to put you in the shower, wash you off, and then start at the beginning again."

"You can't leave me like this, Eve," I pleaded. "Make them go away."

"Can't do that, baby," Adam said sadly. I leaned back and bumped my head against the wall, my eyes still closed as he pulled away from me. I felt him move closer again and assumed he was going to help me down off the dresser, but my eyes flew open when I felt his finger brush the inside of my thigh. I watched him move my panties to the side and realized he'd reached over and pulled one of my vibrators out of the drawer. He grinned at me before he whispered, "Can you keep quiet, Stone?"

I nodded furiously, my lips already pressed together in anticipation.

"If you make a sound, they'll think something's wrong and rush up the stairs. You know that, right?"

I nodded again. "I'll be quiet."

"Your door is open, and it's a straight shot down the hallway to the top of the stairs. If they come up, they'll see us here and know exactly what I'm doing to you."

"I said I'd be quiet," I snapped. Adam's finger started circling my clit, and I whimpered. In a much nicer tone of voice, I begged, "Please. Please do it."

I couldn't take my eyes off his hand where his fingers had disappeared underneath my panties, but I could hear the smile in Adam's voice when he asked, "How bad do you want it, Stone?" I didn't answer him. I couldn't answer him. Finally he ordered, "Look at me."

I looked up and saw the fire in his eyes and realized he was just as close to the edge as I was. I knew there wasn't anything I could do about it right now and silently vowed to tease him until he begged me for release just like I had begged him a second ago.

"Fix it, Eve," I growled. "Either you fix it, or I'll do it myself."

"Tsk tsk tsk," Adam chided. He took a step back, and I realized that, at some point, he'd reached down and pulled the waistband of his track pants underneath his cock, leaving it free and weeping, just for me. I watched him wrap his big hand around it and roughly tug up before he smoothed it back down. I was shocked when I heard someone whimper and then realized it came from me. "How much do you want me, Stone?"

"Too much."

"I can't wait."

"Then don't!"

"You want me to fuck you like this? What about romance? Don't you think we should wait until everything is perfect?" I was mesmerized by his hand as he roughly stroked his cock and wanted more than anything to feel it inside me. "I think we should wait until the stars are aligned and the moon is bright. I'll lay you down and . . ."

"Give me the fucking vibrator, and I'll do it myself, you sadistic asshole!" I snapped, reaching out to try and grab the little egg. Adam slowly shook his head, holding the egg and the remote too far away. In order to get it from him, I'd have to jump down from the dresser, and if his brothers heard the thump when I hit the floor, they'd come running.

"Ask me nicely, Stone."

"No. There's a fucking drawer full of toys over there that I can . . ."

"We'll explore those later," Adam promised. He turned his head so that he could call out to his brothers, "We're gonna be another few minutes. You guys go ahead and start eating."

Heath and Joshua acknowledged they'd heard him, and then I could hear their murmured conversation drifting up the stairs as they opened and shut cabinets, probably looking for plates and silverware.

"We've got another few minutes," Adam said slyly. "I think I should tease

you some more.”

“I think you should help me down off this dresser so I can kick your ass before I go into the bathroom and take care of business since you’re too big of a pussy to . . .”

I didn’t have a chance to finish my sentence because Adam moved quicker than any human should be able to. He had my panties in his fist within the next second. I heard them tear as he yanked them aside. I gasped when his arm went around my waist, and it felt like I was falling when he yanked me off the dresser and then pressed me against his chest. My legs wrapped around him of their own volition, and I groaned when I felt the tip of his cock at my entrance.

“Fuck romance, Stone. We’ve got the rest of our lives for that shit. Right now, I’m going to fuck you senseless and then feed you breakfast.”

“Then shut up and do it, Eve.”

My back hit the wall beside the dresser just as his hard cock split me in half. I gasped at the intrusion, but he didn’t give me time to relax. Instead, he touched the egg to my clit and turned it up to the highest setting. His lips covered mine just as I was about to scream, and I heard him grunt as he pulled out and then slammed back into me.

I was so worked up that it didn’t take more than a few thrusts before I was coming in a way that I knew no encounter would ever match. Nothing would ever be the same for me. I would never feel the way I felt in that second or the seconds after when I felt him spill deep inside my body.

My world had tipped off its axis and was spinning out of control, and that was all because I was full of my best friend's cock and riding an orgasm high like I’d never experienced.

“You’re mine, Stone. Forever.”

I didn’t have time to process what had just happened or what he’d just said because Adam’s lips touched mine in a kiss so soft that I knew I’d never forget it.

A kiss like I hadn’t experienced since the first time his lips touched mine.

10.

ADAM

I was on pins and needles waiting for Emerald to come downstairs. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop glancing over at the staircase, willing her to come down just so I could see her again. I wanted to tell my brothers to get the hell out so I could go back upstairs and crawl into bed with her, but if I did that, they'd know something was going on between us.

I didn't have a problem with the world knowing about us, but Emerald was an extremely private person, or as much of a private person as one could be with a family like ours. She'd demonstrated that when she pushed me away and hissed, "Stop saying sweet shit and go entertain your brothers before they figure out what we just did."

Not exactly romantic words, but at least she hadn't kicked me out of her house.

I'd have to get her alone to find out what she was thinking, but even then, it would be like pulling teeth. Stone was the type of person that liked to take her time and think things through, sometimes for months, before she acted on or even mentioned what was going on in her head.

Over the years, some shady shit had happened with various family members, and I *knew* she had details, but she'd never once spilled any information no

matter how often one of us had tried to get her to talk. She was close to her mom and the rest of the women from the MC, our aunts and honorary aunts, as they may be. That meant she was privy to lots of information that the rest of us kids didn't know and never would.

Emerald was a vault and always had been. I had told her some of my innermost secrets over the years and never worried that she might spill the beans, even to her girls, and it seemed like they told each other *everything*.

"You're awfully antsy for a man who should be napping right now," Heath said quietly as he lifted his mug to take a sip. Joshua wasn't prepared for Heath's comment and sucked in a breath, choking on his bite of waffle. I glared at them when they started laughing, but neither paid any attention. When their laughter died down, Heath asked, "Is this thing between you and Em new, or have you guys been hiding it for a while?"

"This thing?" I asked, feigning innocence.

Heath wrinkled his brow while at the same time, raising one eyebrow, and said, "You know I don't sleep, right?"

"And?"

"Sometimes when I'm feeling antsy, I'll take Scar out for a walk."

"And?"

"We just happened to be on one of those walks last night when I heard a commotion."

Joshua started giggling. It was that same infectious laugh that usually had me cracking up right along with him, but not this time. Instead of laughing, I reached out and smacked him upside his head like I'd been doing since we were young. He grimaced but didn't stop giggling. Instead, he leaned out of my reach and kept at it.

"Shut up, fucker," I snapped.

"I heard a scream and thought someone might be dying, so I took off toward the sound, but when I got closer, I heard that same person screaming your fucking name," Heath said, acting shocked but really just eating up the attention he was getting with my angry glare and our brother's maniacal giggle. "Over and over and over again."

"Props to you, man," Joshua choked out. I tried to smack him again, but he was too far away, and that just set off another fit of laughter.

"So, is this a new thing?"

I glared at Heath for a second before I answered, "It's a none-of-your-fucking-business thing *and* a breathe-a-word-of-it-to-anybody-and-I'll-gut-

you-like-a-fish thing.”

“Oh. Big brother is testy,” Heath said before he pursed his lips and made a tsk-ing sound. “You’d think he’d be a little more mellow, but not Adam.”

“You better not say a fucking word to her.”

“Man, I may be a complete dick, but I’m a gentleman too. I wouldn’t say shit to Em. Hell, if it had been anyone but you up there making her scream, I probably wouldn’t have said shit about it, but since it’s you, I had no choice.”

“I might have to kill you.”

“You could try,” Heath challenged.

“Gentlemen!” Emerald said as she came down the last few steps and joined us in the kitchen. “The last time you started brawling, your blood ruined my carpet. I didn’t complain because I wanted hardwood floors anyway. The time before when you started brawling, you broke one of my barstools. Those were vintage, and I never found a replacement to match the rest of the set, so I had to buy different ones - which, by the way, I still hate. As far as the score goes for brawling in my house, I don’t care who won or lost the fight. I gained new flooring and lost a favorite item of furniture. That means you’re currently one for two. If you break something in my house, I’ll stab both of you. With a fork. Multiple times. If you don’t want me to stab you, then I suggest you go out back and break my patio furniture because I’d really like some new pieces before summer gets here.”

“He’s not gonna hit me,” Heath said with a grin.

“Good because at some point you have to grow up and stop hitting people who piss you off. Use your words.”

“Says the woman who has a cast on her arm because she broke her hand on some woman’s face,” Joshua teased.

“Says the woman who can cry at the drop of a hat, especially when she’s on the phone with her father telling him how sad she is that those damn Forrester boys upset her,” Emerald said with a very convincing sad face. Suddenly, she smiled and added, “And then I won’t have to use any words except for the ones that I come up with for your eulogies.”

“You play dirty,” Heath complained.

“If you’re not cheating, you’re not competing,” Emerald retorted with a grin. Throughout the entire exchange, Emerald didn’t look at me once. Not even a glance. Instead, she focused on my brothers, so I decided to wade into the fight just to see if I could catch her attention.

“A few weeks ago, you said you’d like to expand the living room. You could

do that if you'd let me throw him through that wall over there." Emerald looked at me but then quickly looked away. I had to push it, so I asked, "Want me to go ahead and start the demo?"

"Maybe he should throw *you* through the wall. It would make a bigger hole."

"She called you fat," Joshua teased.

"I did not. Adam's built differently than Heath. He's got broader shoulders and a stockier build. He'd knock out more drywall."

"Okay," Joshua agreed. He looked over at Heath and said, "She called you puny."

"She did not."

Emerald nodded. "Technically, I did."

I laughed right along with my brothers, their easy banter breaking the ice of what could have been a very uncomfortable situation. I still wanted to toss them out in the yard and lock the door so I could take Emerald into my arms and see what her pulse was like. I know mine was still racing from our quickie in her bedroom, and I wondered if she was having the same problem. If she wasn't, a few kisses and well-placed caresses might bring it up to speed. If not, I had a few more tricks up my sleeve. I honestly couldn't wait to show them to her.



EMERALD

I waded into the brothers' argument, one that was a lot tamer than usual since their go-to was violence, while I tried very hard to act naturally. It almost killed me. I wanted to walk straight up to Adam and mold myself to his warm body, but I resisted. We had an audience, and I wasn't sure I was ready for that yet, or if I ever would be, for that matter. I also wasn't sure how Adam would feel about everyone else knowing what we'd done and what I hoped and prayed would happen again soon.

And just like everything else in all of our lives, if one person found out about it, the rest of them would soon hear. It was like that old game where you sat in a circle and whispered something to the person next to you and then they whispered that same thing to the person beside them. By the time your "secret" got back to you, it had taken on a life of its own and was barely even

recognizable.

In our family, news happened a lot like that game. One raindrop could turn into a storm that could wipe out an entire town. I wasn't quite ready to deal with the fallout, especially from my dad. He loved Adam because Adam was one of the family. He also knew he was a good man. However, neither of those things came into play when he'd have to consider that Adam was *my* man. It had been hell when Hunter and I got together. Even though Dad knew him and loved him dearly, he was pretty vocal about the fact that he thought we weren't right for each other.

And, sadly, he was correct.

I didn't want to go through that again and wasn't sure that our friendship could withstand a breakup. That was why I'd never even considered pursuing my feelings for him. Adam was my best friend, and I couldn't fathom a life without him, so I had never acknowledged how I really felt. I thought that our friendship outweighed the possibilities, and now I realized he'd been considering the same thing and had decided the possibilities were much more rewarding.

At least for right now.

I wasn't sure what he meant when he said I was his forever. I'd always thought we'd be friends forever, but what we'd done last night and then again this morning was a different kind of relationship that he and I had never explored. I'd dreamed about it and fantasized about it, but I wasn't ready to analyze it or even talk about it, for that matter. I wasn't usually this big of a chicken - communication was my profession, for God's sake. You'd think I'd be good at speaking my mind, but I wasn't when it had to do with my own life.

"You're mine, Stone. Forever."

Those words kept echoing through my head, the memory of his raspy, breathless voice gave me butterflies every time I thought about it. My body was aching in all the right places, and now I had whisker burns on my breasts and neck that matched the whisker burn between my thighs. It was a delicious kind of pain that I enjoyed a little too much.

The only thing holding me back from a blissful post-orgasm nap was the pain in my hand. As if he could read my mind, Adam walked around the island and opened the cabinet where I'd stashed my pills and started gathering the ones I needed to start my day. An antibiotic, an anti-inflammatory, and an over-the-counter pain medicine were all I was going to take. The narcotic I'd

been prescribed had gone home with Hunter, and I was perfectly okay with that.

Surprisingly, the pain in my hand had been bearable, which was impressive considering I had enough hardware sticking out of it to set off a metal detector from ten feet away. I had my fingers crossed that my added hardware would be gone in just a few hours. I'd still have to deal with a cast, likely for quite some time, and then there would be months of physical and occupational therapy to get through before I could even come close to considering myself completely healed.

"Here you go, babe," Adam said as he handed me my pills along with a glass of water. Before I'd even finished swallowing them down, there was a mug of coffee in front of me. As he turned toward the stove, he said, "I'm going to scramble some eggs with cheese to go with your waffle."

"I don't need all of that. The coffee will do."

Adam looked at me over his shoulder, his gaze going from my face down to my chest and then back up before he said, "You need to keep your strength up."

"Is she gonna run a marathon?" Joshua asked. The look on his face told me he was trying to be smart, not just asking an innocent question, and I went on high alert.

What did he know? I knew without a doubt that Adam wasn't the type to kiss and tell, but the vibe in the room changed. Adam stood up a little bit straighter, and I saw his shoulders rise as he took a deep breath.

"Yes. I go walking . . . out in the moonlight . . ."

The second Heath started singing, Adam's head swiveled around, and he glared at his brother. In a growl most people would find terrifying but I found extremely sexy, he said, "Fucker, I hope you trip over a crack in the sidewalk and bust out your front teeth."

Joshua burst out laughing, and I couldn't help but join him. In the way that only siblings could do, Heath spun Adam into orbit with just a few words, and he wasn't even sorry about it. I wasn't sure what that was all about, but I didn't care. I was too focused on the muscles working under Adam's T-shirt as he stirred my eggs. He had such a strong back. And that ass. I wanted to nibble on that ass. For years, I'd wondered if I could actually bounce a quarter off of it. Hopefully, I would have the opportunity to answer my own question very soon. And that perfect ass was connected to the best thighs on the planet. Powerlifters aspired to have thighs like Adam. Tree trunks

wanted to be as thick and strong as those thighs. They were perfect and so muscular that they stretched the fabric of his pajama pants when he . . . I heard a giggle and looked over to find Joshua and Heath watching me.

“What are you looking at Heath Bar?” I shifted my glare to Joshua and asked, “Got a problem Giggle Bunny?”

“No problem at all, *babe*,” Joshua retorted.

In that second, I knew that they knew. My face must have shown my shock because I could tell by their expressions that they knew . . . that I knew . . . that they knew. Or something like that.

“You dick!” I hissed in outrage, my glare going to Adam’s back.

He turned and looked at me in shock before he asked, “What did I do?”

“You told them about us!”

Adam turned around with my plate of eggs in hand and slid it across the counter before he retorted, “I didn’t confirm a damn thing, but you just did.”

“If you don’t think you can keep your lips zipped, I’ll be glad to sew them together for you,” I threatened, my stare drilling into Heath and then Joshua.

Heath winced. “If someone besides us knows what’s going on here, it’s not on me.”

“Then how the hell would anyone else find out?”

“I wasn’t the only one out and about last night,” Heath hedged.

“Out and about?”

“He has insomnia and takes Scar out for a walk almost every night,” Adam explained.

“And?”

“Last night, right before I left, you asked me to open your window so you could feel the cool breeze.”

“Fuck me,” I muttered.

“Not it!” Joshua said cheerfully.

At the same time, Heath chimed in, “That’s his job.”

“Both of you can eat glass.” They immediately shut up and looked down at their waffles before I said, “Same time for breakfast tomorrow morning? I’ll cook.”

“I’m not telling a soul.”

“Who else was outside?” Adam asked.

“Margaret,” Heath and Joshua said in unison.

This time it was mine and Adam’s turn to speak in chorus. “Shit.”

EMERALD

“Mom, I’m perfectly okay to drive.”

Her voice sounded worried over the speaker when she argued, “I’m not comfortable with you driving just yet, Em.”

“You go take care of whatever chaos the boys have created at the high school, and I’ll get myself to my appointment.”

“I’d feel a lot better if someone else took you,” she argued.

“It’s too late for me to call one of the girls. I’d hate to interrupt them while they’re at work, even if they could pull away to drive me . . .” I stopped talking when I heard the lock on my front door disengage.

Adam appeared in the doorway just as my mom said, “I made arrangements to get you there. As soon as I leave the school, I’ll come to the office to be with you, and then we’ll go to the grocery store.”

Adam bowed and then swept his arm toward the driveway before he said, “Your chariot awaits, ma’am.”

“Good! He’s already there! I’ve got to run, but I’ll see you in just a bit. Love you!”

I didn’t have a chance to respond before my mom hung up, so I looked up at

Adam and asked, “This isn’t going to fuck up your day, is it?”

“Spending time with you is the highlight of any day.” When I just stared at him blankly, he asked, “Did you finish your coffee?”

“Why?”

“You seem cranky. I can make you another cup.”

“It’s not magical juice, Adam. I’m always cranky.”

“By this time of the day, you’re a little more . . . Okay, you’re right, but you’re not usually *this* cranky.”

“I can drive myself to the doctor.”

“No, you can’t.”

“Yes. I can.”

“I’m tellin’ ya. You can’t operate a motor vehicle.”

“Why the hell not? It’s not like I drive a stick and need this hand to shift,” I argued as I lifted up my right hand and waved it toward him.

Adam chewed on his lip before he sighed and let his head fall forward. After a few seconds, he looked up at me and asked, “How does your hand feel?”

“It feels fine.”

“Doesn’t hurt? No shooting pains? Nothing?”

“No.”

“And you think over-the-counter pain relievers did that?”

It took me a second, but then it hit me. I had barely felt any pain since Adam started taking care of me. As a matter of fact, the only time my hand ever really hurt was when I woke up in the morning. But by then, it had been at least eight hours or more since I’d seen Adam. And on the mornings when he didn’t come over to check on me, Jewel did.

“You’ve been drugging me!”

“Yep.”

“That’s illegal.”

“I’m not sure what the technicalities are since the prescription is in your name and it was given to you by *your* doctor. Isn’t that just facilitating doctor’s orders?”

“By slipping shit into my food?”

“Or your coffee,” Adam mumbled.

“You’re fucking kidding!”

“I can’t stand to see you in pain, Stone, and I’ll do whatever it takes to take that from you,” Adam said as he walked closer to me. He reached out, and without thinking, I put my hand in his. He pulled me up off the couch and

didn't let go until we were chest to chest, and I had to tilt my head back to look into his eyes. "I know you're afraid, baby, but we're here to make sure nothing happens."

"You know why I don't take narcotics."

"I do."

"And yet you *drugged* me."

"You make it sound like I slipped you a roofie or something." Adam laughed softly before he said, "I'm not even giving you a full dose, Stone. Just enough to take the edge off the pain."

"That's just wrong, Adam," I snapped, feeling like I'd been betrayed. He knew my biggest fear, and instead of respecting my feelings, he underhandedly did something he *knew* I would be adamantly against. My chest started burning, and at first, I thought it was rage, but when tears filled my eyes, I realized it was sorrow. As I pulled out of his arms, my voice choked with emotion as I asked, "How could you do that to me?"

"Oh, baby, no!" Adam whispered as he slowly shook his head. He reached for me, and I stepped back. "Don't cry. I'm sorry. I just . . . Fuck, Stone. That's not how it . . ."

"Please leave."

"I need to take you to . . ."

"Leave," I said in a firmer tone.

"Fuck!" Adam shouted as he stomped toward the front door. He stopped and turned around to say something else, but when he saw the look on my face, he let his head drop forward and stared at his boots for a few seconds before he took a deep breath and walked out.

I felt like he was taking my heart with him. In all the years I'd known him, Adam and I had rarely ever argued. He'd always been the one I could depend on. Even if he wasn't in the mood to deal with my shit, he'd show up if I needed him. He was the one I went to for advice about . . . well, everything. I could talk to my girls and even Adam's brothers and the other guys in our family, but Adam was my go-to. He called me Stone, but really, Adam was *my* rock and always had been.

Until now.

I picked up my purse and fished out my keys but then realized that maybe I really shouldn't be driving. I had no idea what sort of drugs were flowing through my system. What if I wrecked? I could kill someone. I could be that person who goes out, gets in the car thinking they're just fine, and ends

up destroying an entire family. It might not happen, but it could.

I shook my head when a memory of riding in the car with my birth mother struck me like a flash of lightning.

I was in the back seat holding one of my sisters in my arms. Since she was the only baby in the car, I had to assume it was Diamond, so it had been before Amethyst was born. I wasn't in a seatbelt, and there wasn't a car seat in the back with me. My mother and one of her friends were in the front, and it was dark outside. The music was loud, and I could tell that my mother was high.

Even when I didn't see her take something, I could tell from the way she held herself and even just the tone of her voice that she was on something. It was a sense I developed from a very early age. When most kids were learning how to ride a bike or to rollerskate, I was learning that certain pills made her sleepy, others made her wired, and some even made her so giddy that she was like a completely different person.

But on that night, she wasn't happy or wired. She was nodding off. Her head would start to fall forward, and she'd jerk herself awake only for it to happen again just a few seconds later. We were on the highway, and I couldn't remember where we were going, but we ended up in the ditch. It happened so suddenly that I barely had time to brace myself. The car veered sharply to the left, hit the concrete median, and then shot across the highway and off into the grass. We spun for what felt like an eternity before everything was still. The car sat motionless as did my mom and her friend. I managed to crawl off the floor with the baby on my shoulder, and when I looked into the front seat, my first thought was that they were dead. There was blood on my mom's forehead from where she'd hit the window, and her friend was crumpled on the passenger floorboard.

After a brief moment of panic, relief set in. If she was dead, I wouldn't have to worry about how mad she'd be that the car was messed up. If she was dead, someone else would take care of us. If she was dead, she'd never lose her temper with me again. If she was dead, then . . .

With a gasp, my mom woke up. As if that weren't bad enough, within the next second, she was yelling about her fucked-up car, her fucked-up life, her fucked-up . . . everything, including her fucked-up daughter.

My phone chimed with an incoming text message, and the sound jerked me out of my memory and back to the present day, standing in my living room with my heart shattered on the floor, about to be late to a doctor's

appointment if I didn't figure something out.

I looked at my phone and saw a message from my friend Rain. Without missing a beat, I hit the button to call her, and she picked up on the first ring.

"Hey, lady! Are you up for some company?"

I ignored her question and asked, "Can you pick me up and take me to a doctor's appointment?"

"Uh, sure. When do you need . . ."

"Now. I need a ride now, or I'm going to be late."

"Okay. I'll be there in a second."

"I'll be out front."

I set the alarm and then locked the door behind me before I stepped out onto the porch. I was happy to see that Adam's truck wasn't parked in his driveway, meaning he'd left like I asked. When I looked the other direction, I saw one of my neighbors power walking down the sidewalk toward my house and groaned.

I could tell by the determined look on her face that this was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

Before she even had a chance to open her mouth, I warned, "Today's not the day, Satan, and I am not the one."

Her pinched look got even more intense when she stopped at the corner of my yard and flicked a hand at the flowers I had planted there. "Your property is an eyesore."

"So is your face."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Well, if you keep fucking with me, I'm probably going to rearrange it."

"Good! Just pull them up and . . ."

"I was talking about your face." This wasn't my first interaction with Margaret, by any means, and she'd become accustomed to my threats. It seemed like she wasn't even worried that I might follow through, and that was a mistake on her part. The mood I was in today might be hazardous to the old bat's health. "What are you bitching about now?"

"These weeds!"

"That's not a weed, dumbass. That's a flower."

"It is not!"

"Well, I planted it there so I'd be the one that knows."

"It's ugly."

"So is your fucking attitude."

“I’ll report you!”

“Do it!”

“I’m going to make it my mission to get rid of the neighbors around here who are doing nothing but decreasing my property value.” She motioned toward my flower bed that was filled with tall zinnias, bushy cosmos, and a hodgepodge of other flowers that I loved. They were all mixed together in a chaotic jumble and gave me great joy. “If you won’t take care of them, then I will.”

“And how exactly do you propose to do that?”

“I’ll either poison them or dig them up.”

“You sure you want to throw down that gauntlet?” I asked as I took the steps down to the sidewalk and then slowly started walking across the grass toward the nasty woman who had been nothing but a pain in my ass since I moved into my house. “If you’ll take a second and think about it, you’ll realize that’s a *very* bad idea.”

The bitch looked me right in the eye as she reached out and yanked off a handful of blooms. Her cocky smile faltered when I smiled back. It wasn’t the sweet smile that I’d been complimented on all of my life. No, it was the predatory one that my mom had jokingly referred to as the “early warning symbol” that meant bad things were on the horizon for some unlucky fool.

And today, the shittiest day I’d had in fucking years, Margaret had just taken that title.

The sound of pipes echoed off the houses as we heard several motorcycles start up. Margaret got more tense, if that was even possible, and then she spun around to find the source of the sound.

Four motorcycles turned the corner just a few blocks away and headed in our direction. They pulled to a stop at the curb in front of Margaret and left their engines running as they studied the woman. Margaret took a step back as the bikers assessed her. That dead stare Kale Forrester was known for was on all four faces, and it worked wonders on my pain in the ass neighbor. She shrunk back and then scurried off, the petals of the destroyed flowers trailing behind her as she darted across the grass toward her house.

I watched her go, and when I glanced back at the bikers, they were grinning at me.

“Are you good to ride, or do you want me to park so we can take your . . .” Rain Forrester called out over the engine noise.

I shook my head in answer as I walked closer, pulling the strap of my purse

over my head so it could hang at my hip while I held onto my friend. I nodded at Rain's brother, Ruf, and couldn't help but smile at Koda, his son, who was seated in front of him on the tank with a custom painted helmet pronouncing him the youngest member of the Texas Kings MC. Kale's other sons, Rocky and Ransome, were on the other two bikes, and his youngest daughter, Rylee, was riding with Rocky. She waved at me, and I waved back as Rain put down the footpegs so I could mount the bike behind her.

"Where are we going?" Ruf yelled.

"Dr. Sims' office. It's just down from . . ."

"I know it," Ruf interrupted. He turned his head and told his siblings, "The bone doctor."

As I rested my good hand on Rain's shoulder, ready to throw my leg over the bike and get settled, she said, "That's the doctor our parents always use when one of the boys does something stupid. Dad and my uncles swear that Forrester money paid for that building."

"Well, Hamilton money is paying for the upkeep," I joked as I wrapped my good arm around Rain's waist. "I'm ready."

Rain nodded at her brother, and we took off from the curb and roared through the neighborhood. We turned right to go through the gate at the entrance, and I spotted Adam standing next to his truck, holding his phone to his ear. All of the Forresters waved, and he waved back, but I noticed that his eyes never left mine.

We rode past, leaving him behind, but I knew I wouldn't be able to avoid him forever. He was my next door neighbor, the president of my HOA, and a family member. Adam Forrester was still my best friend even if he had broken my heart.

EMERALD

“Hey, sweetheart,” my mom said as she put her arm around my shoulder and gave me a side hug. “What did I miss?”

I sighed and then looked at the floor before I answered. “Nothing. He’s not going to take the pins out today.”

“Why not?”

“He said . . . Well, I sort of . . .” My throat was so thick with tears that it was almost impossible to speak. My mom walked around me and sat on the rolling stool the doctor had used earlier. She scooted closer to me and leaned forward, looking into my face and giving me no choice but to meet her eyes.

“I told him how to do it because I’ve been doing it for years.”

“What?”

My mom shrugged and then let out a long breath. “Do you remember how hard it was to get Josie to take medicine?”

“Our cat?”

“Yeah. He got into that scrap with the neighbor’s dog and had to be on antibiotics. It was an all-out war trying to get the damn pills down his throat, so I finally had to go to the vet and ask what to do.”

“Okay.”

“The vet suggested I crush the pills and put them in some yogurt.”

“Are you fucking kidding right now?” I snapped.

My mom’s eyes narrowed before she said, “Such language.”

Chastised, even at 41, I mumbled, “Sorry.”

“When you had your wisdom teeth out and refused to take the meds the doctor prescribed, I asked Cindy if I could do the same thing for you that I did for the cat. She said that would work, so I crushed up your pills and gave them to you in your yogurt.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Then you scared the hell out of us with that gall bladder fiasco . . .”

“I thought it was cramps!”

My mom cleared her throat before she continued, “Again, you refused to take anything for the pain even though you had an incision as long as my fucking arm along with drain tubes and all sorts of shit, so I made sure you had plenty of yogurt. And banana pudding. And homemade whipped cream on top of the pie Gamma made for you. And cream cheese frosting on the cupcakes Aunt Summer brought over. And . . .”

“You drugged me? Again and again?”

“Damn straight, and I’m not even sorry about it.”

“That’s just . . . How could you?”

“Honey, you’re a parent. You’ve been lying to your daughter since the day she was born.”

“I’d never do something like *that!*”

In an alarmingly good impression of my voice and mannerisms, my mom said, “Here you go, Aspen. I made you a smoothie. It’s green because I know that’s your favorite color, not because I put powder in it to supplement your diet because you refuse to eat anything but chicken nuggets and macaroni and cheese.”

“That’s not the same at all.”

“Make sure you eat your gummy candy so you can grow big and strong.”

“But that’s a multivitamin and not a narcotic, Mother!”

“Did she agree to take it?” Before I could answer, my mom shook her head and continued. “No. She didn’t. She refused to take her vitamins, so you tricked her into thinking they were magical candy. You did that because you love her, and her health and happiness are your top priorities.”

“I’m a grown-ass adult!”

“Then fucking act like one!”

My mom and I locked into a stare down, just like we’d done a million times when I was a teenager. I caved just like I had then. But this time, it wasn’t just an argument about my curfew or because I ran my mouth at one of my teachers. No, this time it was one of my biggest fears.

As a medical professional and someone who prided myself on having the best, most current information on hand to help my patients, I had never mastered the ability to help myself. Years of childhood trauma still affected my thoughts, fears, and feelings all this time later. Rather than face, discuss, or analyze them, I let them rule me.

My quick temper and penchant for violence aside, there were a million other things that I did and ways that I acted that were due to fear. Fear of becoming a woman like my mother. Fear of losing myself to addiction like she had. Fear of doing *anything* like she had. The woman had been out of my life longer than she’d ever been in it, and I still asked myself, “What would she do?” and then I made sure I did the exact opposite.

That bitch was ruining my life from the grave, and I had no idea how to stop her.

“You’re not her. You’re nothing like her. You’re never gonna be like her. Do you know why? Because you are a strong fucking queen who rules her empire with loyalty, love, and understanding. But even a queen needs help, baby. And when you’re hurting and you’ve got wounds on your body and metal sticking out of your fucking hand, your mama . . . me . . . *not her* . . . is going to help you however I can, whether you want me to or not because that’s what a mother does.” There were tears streaming down her cheeks, just like my own, and her voice was choked with emotion when she said, “I’ve been doing it since the second I saw you through that window, and I’ll keep doing it until I take my last breath. If crushing up pills and finding creative ways to get you to take them so your body can rest and heal is the way to do that, then I’m in.”

“What if I lose control?”

“The fact that you’re so terrified of that happening means that you’d never let yourself fall, sweetheart. And if something happened and you started to tip that direction, you’ve got a hundred people around to help keep you straight. But it’s never going to come to that. You’re the strongest person I know, Emerald. You’ve been through so much shit that it’s amazing you’re sane and functional, but that strength is gonna be your downfall if you don’t let the

people who love you help whenever they can.”

“He lied to me, Mama.”

“He damn sure did because he loves you and watching you in pain hurts his heart in a way he can’t handle. When Hunter was staying with you after you got out of the hospital, he called and asked how he could get you to take at least half a pill. I told him, and he said he could never do that. He still loves you, Em, but not enough to take a hit if you find out that he’s been tricking you. When Adam called me and said you were in pain and he didn’t know how to fix it, I gave him the same instructions that I’d given to Hunter. Adam told me that if you ever found out, you’d be so pissed that you might never talk to him again. I agreed. But then he said that he’d rather spend the rest of his life watching you from afar than to see you in pain for another second.”

“He did?”

“That’s real love, baby girl. That’s the kind of love that you need in your life. Whether he’s your best friend or the man of your dreams, he only wants to take care of you. It’s the kind of love your dad and I have given you and what we have wished for you to find for yourself. Your mother was a horrible person and tried to break you. Don’t let her win. Don’t let her get in the way of something that could be as beautiful as falling in love with your best friend.”

“How can I ever trust him again? How will I ever trust *you* again? Two of the most important people in my life have betrayed me, and I don’t know how to deal with that.” My mom pressed her lips into a tight line and looked at the floor. That was one of her tells and always had been. If there was something she was dying to say but couldn’t for one reason or another, she did exactly what she was doing right now. “Just tell me what you’re thinking right now.”

“No.”

“Why? What else is going on?”

“We’ve taken up this room for God only knows how long, and this is a doctor’s office, so I hate to think that we’re the reason there are people out there waiting who . . .”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“You’re not the only one in this family that’s a vault, sweetheart. Let’s just leave it at that.” I tried the stare, but it didn’t work this time. Whatever secret she was holding was going to stay that way. She wiped the tears off

her face and then ran her hands over her thighs to dry them before she asked, “Are you going to do what the doctor, a man who has *years* of experience and training, ordered, or are you going to put him off and just keep all that hardware until it fuses to your fucking bones?”

“They won’t do it unless they can give me something for the pain.”

“Well, then I guess you’re gonna be the girl with the robotic arm because there’s no way in hell he’s going to put you through taking all that shit out of your body without giving you something and no way in hell I’d let him if he tried.” Mom stood so suddenly that the stool she’d been sitting on slid across the room and bumped into the wall. “Come on. Let’s get you home.”

“I can’t leave this stuff in my arm.”

“Then quit being a pussy, step up to the plate, take the goddamn medication, and get your shit done.”

I took a deep breath and wiped the tears off my face before I whispered, “Will you stay with me while the doctor works?”

“Wild horses couldn’t drag me away.”



ADAM

“Are you going to leave the house standing, or do I need to call the inspector back to get a different kind of permit?”

I let the sledgehammer I was holding drop down and thump against the concrete before I looked at my brother and asked, “Are you gonna mind your fucking business, or do I need to use this thing on you?”

Heath laughed. “Always with the violence. I’ve noticed that’s a trend with some members of our family.”

“Some?” Joshua asked sarcastically. “As if you’re a fucking pacifist.”

“I am!”

“I’ve been stuck in traffic with you. I call bullshit,” Joshua retorted. He looked over at me and said, “Well, either get to killin’ him or get back to work. I’ve got to be somewhere at six, so I’m not staying here all night.”

“If he takes out any more drywall, this house is gonna give a whole new meaning to ‘open concept floor plan.’”

I’d had enough. Heath had been cracking jokes and fucking with me since

the city inspector left, and I couldn't take anymore. Before I even realized I was moving, my shoulder hit Heath's midsection, and we were flying through the air. There was a loud crash and then blinding pain when my brother twisted our bodies in midair and landed on top of me.

I was still trying to catch my breath when he sat up, straddling my stomach, and asked, "Feel better yet?"

An almost inhuman wheeze escaped as I tried to take a deep breath, and I heard Joshua's laughter getting closer. I lifted my head and looked around the brother that was sitting on me only to see my other one stepping out of the empty window frame into an overgrown flower bed.

Joshua's fucking giggle started up again, and if I'd had control of my extremities, I would have pushed Heath off my stomach so I could tackle him next.

Instead, I wheezed, "Fuck you."

Through his laughter, Joshua said, "He sounds like Grandpa from the Simpsons."

Heath started laughing so hard that he snorted and sent Joshua into a whole new round of hysterics.

"You sound like a goddamn chicken." I could barely breathe, so I wheezed, "Get your big ass off me before I suffocate."

"You know what's fucking awesome?" When we heard our dad's voice, we all turned our heads toward the sound. He was walking in the middle of the street, but he wasn't alone. All three of his brothers were with him, and every one of them was grinning. "I'll tell you. That window is broken, and two of you are bleeding, but I don't have to pay for any of it. Not a dime. And what's even better than that is I'm not taking anyone to the emergency room, and I'm also not gonna have to figure out how to replace that window. There is justice in this world after all."

"He stuck the landing, that's for sure," Uncle Kale said as the men got closer. They all stared down at me, and I had to admit that if I didn't know them so well, it might have been terrifying.

My dad was a long-haired biker with an even longer beard. He'd been a mechanic all his life, and I was almost positive that he didn't own a single pair of jeans without at least one grease stain. His shirts weren't much better since almost every one was purchased at a motorcycle dealership, either locally or on a trip he'd taken at some point in the last thirty years. He was a gruff man with an even gruffer look, and he didn't give a shit what anyone

thought about it. That was probably what I respected most about him.

Uncle Bird was a little more stylish. By stylish, I meant that some of his shirts had logos displaying things other than his favorite motorcycle brand. Often, they were shirts representing one of the bars our family owned, but lately, he'd branched out and started wearing T-shirts that displayed the logos of some of my generation's new businesses. Today, he had chosen a dark maroon T-shirt with a drawing of a small-statured man in a boat. He was holding a fishing pole, but at the end of his line, there was a coffee bean rather than a fish. The words above the picture said, "Flick That Bean."

Our friend Piper had recently opened a coffee truck, and obviously, she had a great sense of humor. Her truck had become popular not just for the drinks she sold, which were fantastic, but also for the logo and company name that she'd had to fight the city about so she could get the necessary license and permits to open her business.

Of course, during the back and forth that included lawyers and the occasional sound bite for the evening news, our family had backed her completely. I'd even let my kids skip school one day so they could stand outside the courthouse with about two dozen other family members and show their support for Piper during one of the city council meetings. I was still traumatized from the event. Showing up to drop off the kids and seeing my Gamma holding a handmade sign that said, "If you flick it, they will come!" and chanting "Flick that bean!" in chorus with the rest of the women in my family was enough to make a normal person need intensive counseling.

That memory reminded me that I still needed to schedule that appointment.

Uncle Clem was dressed much the same as my dad, but like Uncle Bird, his hair was much darker and shorter. His fashion choices were right on par with his brothers, though. Today, he had on a navy blue shirt with a curvy, naked female pig wearing heels and seductively holding a red and white checkered tablecloth. The logo beneath it was for our friend Dylan's barbecue restaurant called "Rub My Butt." Dylan clearly had quite the sense of humor, too, although he hadn't had to fight the city council about it.

Uncle Kale - or Cabbage, as some of my brave family members had started calling him since that was the nickname his grandson used - had hair like my dad's and a beard that was almost as impressive. His clothing choices were usually more vulgar than the ones his brothers wore. Today's T-shirt said "Fuck Around and Find Out." I'd seen it before and remembered that I appreciated what it said on the back almost as much as I liked what it said on

the front. In bold letters, it read, “Would you drive any better if I shoved that phone up your ass?” Kale didn’t have a problem expressing himself, and if called upon, he wouldn’t have a problem following through either.

All four men could be intimidating. I’d seen it happen more than once. But as they stared down at me, I had the fleeting thought that most of the other people who had looked at them from this angle were probably in the process of being covered with dirt and weren’t seeing smiling faces. But then again, those people probably weren’t seeing much of anything by the time it got to that point. If I could say anything about that generation of the Forrester brothers, it was that they were very thorough and very deadly when the situation called for it.

Kale took a step back and motioned for his brothers to do the same. “Let the boys keep going until someone taps out. I call winner.”

“I’d like to see you roll around in the fucking grass, old man. Liable to break a hip,” Clem retorted. “Did you leave your walker at home today or is it back in the truck?”

“Read the shirt, bitch!” Kale replied, pointing at his chest.

“Gentlemen,” Bird jumped in using his smooth diplomatic tone. “We’re not supposed to let the children hurt each other. The wives get cranky when that happens.”

“Fuck that. They don’t live at home anymore.”

“Thank God,” my dad mumbled. “I thought that fucker was never going to move out of the basement.”

“Let ‘em play!” Clem finished. “My money’s on Adam. He’s got some anger issues, but he knows how to aim it at the right spot.”

“I’ve got Heath. No man who smiles as much as that fucker is completely sane,” Kale retorted. “Joshua’s damn near just as bad.”

“None of you are sane,” I snapped before I shoved my brother to the side, pushing him to the grass so I could sit up and finally take a deep breath.

“And my anger issues aren’t nearly as out of control as any of yours.”

Kale winced before he agreed, “The boy’s got a point.”

“Speaking of anger issues, it always helps when I break shit,” Clem said cheerfully. “Got any demo work that needs done?”

Joshua stood up and brushed the grass off his pants as he answered, “I think Adam might have left at least one wall standing. You can have at it if you want.”

“Can I use the sledgehammer? I love those things.”

“Completely insane,” I muttered before I laid back on the grass and blew out a breath. “Go for it, Clementine.”

“I’m down for breaking some shit,” Kale said as he stepped over me to get to the sidewalk. “Whatcha got for me?”

Clem and Bird followed my brothers into the house, leaving me alone on the grass with my dad. I tilted my head so I could see him better and asked, “Aren’t you going to go break shit with your brothers?”

“Nope. I’m here to check your pulse, but I’ve got a pretty good idea where it’s at considering what I saw when we were walking up.”

“Tell me you haven’t ever just wanted to knock the shit out of him.”

“Every goddamn day from the time he was 13 until he was 21.”

“Exactly.”

Dad sat in the grass beside me and said, “I got a call this morning from your Aunt Willow.”

“Our family gossip line is faster than high-speed internet.”

“Isn’t that the fucking truth?” Dad sighed before he asked, “Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really, no.”

“Well, you’re gonna have to. If you don’t, then your mom’s gonna show, and you’ll have to talk about it anyway.”

“You two realize that I’m in my 40s right?”

“What the fuck does that have to do with anything?”

“Emerald and I had a . . . disagreement, and she kicked me out of her house.”

“That’s what I heard.”

“She’s probably never going to talk to me again.”

“That girl can hold quite a grudge, but you’ve got her mama *and* her daddy in your corner, so I’m pretty confident that things are going to work out.”

“There’s more at play than just the medicine.”

“I’m talking about all of it. However you handle it, they’re gonna back your play. They’ve got a vested interest, so they’ll be pulling for you.”

“They know?”

“Of course they fucking know. She’s their daughter!” Dad shook his head.

“And don’t give me that bullshit about her being a grown woman. Shit in their family works just like it does in ours. I’d prefer not to have to admit my age, and if I pretend that you’re not an adult, I won’t have to do that.”

“Is Lout gonna kill me?”

“Hell no. He’s been running off every boy that’s so much as glanced

Emerald's way for more than twenty years while he waited on you to get off your ass and see what was right in front of your face."

"You're joking."

"Listen, when a man has a daughter, he devises a certain standard that the person she's going to spend her life with has to meet. Most of the time, that daughter doesn't fucking listen, but we're patient men and can wait shit out."

I burst out laughing at that obvious lie, and my dad flipped me off. "For example, I'm patiently waiting for your sisters to pull their heads out of their asses, but I'm not getting any younger."

"I bet you feel better now that Scarlett isn't on the road with the band."

"That helps. I knew Lucky and the guys would take care of her, but I feel better having her home for sure. And Dahlia . . ." Dad shook his head and sighed loudly. "That girl is gonna be the death of me."

"What did she do now?"

"Same shit she's been doing since she could walk. If there was a mangy puppy or scrawny kitten anywhere in town, she'd try to bring it home so she could take care of it. I thought that was bad enough, but then I realized that her taste in men went that direction too. I swear to God, if she brings home another jobless loser, I'm gonna lock her up for her own safety. At the rate she's going, we're going to have to buy more land and get another backhoe."

"We've got a few acres to spare on the outside of our property."

"That's good to know. When Lorelei starts dating, you'll have somewhere to start."

"I don't even want to think about that."

"Well, brace yourself. Your time's coming."

"I've never felt like this about a woman before," I admitted, changing the subject abruptly.

My dad chuckled. "Yeah, you have."

"No. With Bianca, I . . ."

"Fuck Bianca. I'm talking about Emerald. You've loved her for ages. It was just a different kind of love since you didn't let it grow. Now that you have, it's taken over the whole fucking yard and gone through the fence to the neighbors, and you're not sure what to do with that since you think she just took it away."

"She kicked me out of her house."

"I've kicked you out of my house. Don't mean I don't love you, boy. You know I do. But sometimes that's what happens when emotions are high, and

sometimes it's fucking necessary to get their ass to moving in the right direction."

"The only direction she wanted me to go was away from her."

"Our Emerald has a teeny problem with managing her emotions."

"You don't say?"

"It's not that she doesn't want to show them; it's that hers get so big, they consume every part of her. I think she's afraid that if they escape, she'll be like a balloon that's lost all of its air. Prove her wrong. Push her until she lets them out, but do it at your own risk. She's a pistol, and beyond that, I'm positive she owns more than a few of them. And while I'm encouraging you to do this, know that you might not like the results. She very well may dig in and greet you with a big, fat 'fuck you' every time she sees you for the rest of your days. But anyone that's watched you together would probably agree that's not how it's gonna play out. When she lets it all out, it's gonna cover you. Her love is going to wrap you up so hard that you'll never be able to break free."

"I'll never want to."

"Good, son. A woman like her is a precious gem, and you should never let her out of your sight."

EMERALD

“I’m here to wade in,” Jewel said when she appeared in my bedroom doorway. “I know the other girls are going to be here soon, and that’s fine. We may need them.”

“Why?” I asked, alarmed. “Did something happen today?”

“Obviously.”

“What?”

“You found out Adam was doing what you should have been doing on a four-to six-hour schedule, lost your shit, kicked him out of the house, and basically broke his fucking heart because you’re a stubborn little pussy bitch who won’t listen to medical professionals.”

My head reeled back as if she’d slapped me. “Well, fuck you too.”

“The man’s your best friend, Emerald. You can trust him with your secrets, your emotions, and your dreams, but you can’t trust him to do what’s best for you? If that’s the case, then you don’t trust him at all. Me either. Or Leia. He didn’t throw us under the bus, and I appreciate that, but I’m not going to let him take the hit for us when he wasn’t acting alone.”

“You didn’t.”

“Yep.”

“But . . .”

“Seriously, how often do I bring you coffee? Never because I’m not wired that way. I bring you me, and that’s enough of a gift. Too much and you might get spoiled. But since you went Xena Warrior Princess on that bitch, I’ve been bringing you snackies like a good best friend should.”

“You drugged my coffee?”

“Yep. Every morning. Actually, it was the whipped cream that I drugged because I knew you’d plow through that first.”

“You’re not fucking serious.”

“I really am. I told Leia I was going to tell you, and she said if I hadn’t volunteered, she would have spilled the beans today anyway.”

“When did Leia . . . how did she . . .” I thought about it and felt my eyes go wide. “She drugged my protein shake.”

“Ding ding ding. What does she win? You get a car and you get a car and . . .”

“Shut up for a second, and let me think.”

“I brought you a coffee. How does your hand feel? That local wearing off yet?”

“I can feel my heartbeat in my fingertips.”

“Hold it against your chest above your heart. It might be a good idea to let me put an ace bandage across your chest to keep it there.” She reached out and repositioned my hand against my chest and said, “It’s your natural reaction to let your hand rest at your side, and when it hurts you’re not going to want to lift it, so keep it up.”

“I have one in my first aid bag. It’s . . .”

“I know where your shit is, and I know what’s in it. I’m the one that gave it to you.”

“Oh, yes. How could I forget? Happy birthday to me.”

Jewel rolled her eyes. “Practical gifts are the best kind. And at least I got the month right last year.”

I watched her walk up the stairs and then sat down at the bar. I leaned over, pulled the thermos of coffee toward me, and sighed. Yes, my hand was killing me. It was shooting pain all the way up my arm. I couldn’t concentrate on anything because the feeling was coming back gradually, and I was tense just knowing how bad it was going to hurt soon.

Jewel reappeared with the bright red duffel in her hand. She saw me eyeing the coffee and said, “It’s not like we put oxy in your food, Em. The dose

you've been getting is barely enough to maintain your pain control. When Aspen fell and twisted her ankle, I gave her a higher dose of painkillers than we've been giving you for the last two weeks."

"Really?"

"Really. We knew you'd be pissed if you found out, but it goes against the grain to watch someone we love in pain, so we did what had to be done."

"You love me?"

"I pretend to, and apparently, I'm doing a bang-up job."

"I love you too."

"Obviously. What's not to love?" Jewel asked rhetorically as she sifted through the first aid supplies. She pulled out a bundle wrapped in plastic and started tearing at the packaging. When she got it open, she walked around the counter toward me as she said, "I see you're not kicking me out of your house like you did to Adam. Is that because you're not dying to get me naked?"

"Shut up."

"Because if that's the case, I'm a little offended. You're not exactly my type either, but I've been toy shopping with you. I know what you've got because I've got a few of the same things, so we could probably make it work." I sighed and leaned forward so she could wrap her arms around me and adjust the bandage. "Oh look! We're hugging."

"It's not a hug, and you know it."

"It's as close as I'm gonna get."

"Thank God."

Just to be a bitch, she kissed my temple as she pulled away. "Now we'll have to tell Heath we made out, and he missed it. Remember when he got drunk and asked for that on his birthday?"

"If you think that's making out, I'm going to have to get everyone to pool their money and buy you a male prostitute."

"Heath's taking money now?"

I laughed as I shook my head, leaning back in the chair so she could finish the wrap. "I'm pissed at you, Jewel."

"Okay. Still not apologizing."

"You know, you could lose your medical license for doing that."

"And I could kill you before you have a chance to testify." I snorted, and Jewel shrugged her shoulders. "I'm one of the few people on this planet that isn't afraid of you. Don't test me, asshat."

“I feel like I’ve been betrayed.”

“We haven’t betrayed you. We’ve lied to you. Of course, it’s not technically a lie if you never asked us a direct question . . .”

“Still a lie,” I interrupted.

“Whatever. We tricked you, and I get why that would piss you off, but I’d do it again in a heartbeat to make you feel better.”

“The doses you’ve been giving me aren’t going to turn me into my mother?”

“Honey, demon possession couldn’t turn you into your mother.”

“But what if . . .”

“What if you do what the doctor ordered for as long as you need to, taper off as your hand starts to heal, and then go on with your life like millions of healthy people do after they’ve recovered from an injury?”

“She used to get so fucked up that she’d fall asleep sitting up.”

“Yep.”

“She acted like it was nothing to stumble around the house bumping into shit or pass out on the floor in her own vomit.”

“Mmmhmm.”

“She didn’t even try to hide it.”

“Because, addiction or not, your mother was a horrible human being. I never had the misfortune of meeting her, but I’ve heard Uncle Lout and Uncle Marcus make offhand comments, and Jaz and the girls have said things over the years that helped me piece the rest of the puzzle together. It wasn’t just the drugs that made her an awful mother, it was the fact that she didn’t have a soul.”

“You’re right.”

“And you, my friend, do have one. It’s black and twisty just like mine, but it’s there. You’d walk through fire for your little girl. You’d *set* fires for your little girl. You’d do the same for anyone else you love, and we’d do it for you. If you were ever close to the edge, we’d see it and pull you back, just like I’m sure Lout and Marcus tried to do for your mother time and time again.”

“I’m all fucked up, Jewel.”

“All the best people are.”

“I think I’m in love with Adam.”

“I think you have been since we were kids, and I think he’s felt the same way about you, but you both wrote it off as friendship. And it is, but it’s got layers that my friendship with him doesn’t. I envy that and always have. It

makes me a little jealous to see the easy relationship between you two because I've never felt that."

"Yes you have."

Jewel sighed. "Okay, I have, but it was years ago, and that's over and done with."

"You're all fucked up too."

"Very much so, but luckily, one of my besties is a shrink, so she can talk me through my issues."

"I don't know who that poor woman is, but I pity her."

"Fuck off."

"What am I gonna do?"

"You're gonna sip your coffee, spend the evening with your girls, and then come to the realization that what you and Adam have is a precious thing that shouldn't be squandered. Once you've done that, then you can rip his clothes off with your teeth, suck his soul out of his body until he's whimpering your name, and then climb on for the ride of your life."

"What if it doesn't work out and things get weird between us?"

"You work at it until you can't work anymore, and then you take a step back and readjust until you find a way to have that comfortable friendship you've always enjoyed, just like you did with Hunter."

"Like you didn't do with Micah."

"It's not my turn on the couch today, Dr. Hamilton. It's your time to shine." Jewel stopped and assessed her work before she motioned toward the counter. "Now, explain to me why you've got a dozen packages of cheap hotdogs. I've been dying to ask."

"Well, I have an idea . . ."



ADAM

"Do you care if I go hang out with Darrow and Duel?" my son asked as he walked into the spare room where we'd set up our home gym.

"Are you spending the night?"

"Probably. We're just gonna hang out. I'll text you if we decide to go somewhere."

"That sounds good. Tell Chess that if he needs backup or a place to escape,

he can call me.”

“Mr. Conner’s cool with us hanging out there,” Noah assured me.

“Well, give him that option. If you’re not staying over, I want you home by midnight.”

“Gotcha,” Noah said as he stuck his fist out to bump mine. “Love you.”

“Love you, too, boy. Be safe.”

The front door opened but didn’t close. Just as I was about to call out for Noah to shut it, I heard Emerald’s voice.

“Are you going out?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, I’ll tell you the same thing my dad always told us. Don’t add to the population, don’t take away from the population. Don’t end up in the hospital, newspaper, or jail. If you do end up in jail, establish dominance the second the doors close behind you, and don’t open your mouth until Marcus gets there and gives you permission to do so.”

Noah laughed before he replied, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Go forth and enjoy yourself, young man, but don’t forget the rules.”

“I love you, Auntie Em. You’re the greatest.”

“I love you, too, Noah’s Ark. Is your dad home?”

“He’s working out. Do you want me to get him for you?”

I set the bar on the rack and reached for my towel as I waited to hear her response.

“I’ll find him. You go on and play with your little friends.”

“My friends are some of the Conners. I don’t think they’ve ever been little,” Noah’s voice faded as he walked away, and a few seconds later, I heard the front door shut and the alarm engaged.

Emerald knew my alarm code just like I knew hers. As a matter of fact, she knew my house just as well as she knew her own since she’d helped me furnish and decorate it. Which meant that she knew exactly where I was in the house, so I waited for her to appear in the doorway.

I heard the refrigerator door open, then the pantry door, before I heard one of the cabinets open and shut. A few seconds later, Emerald appeared in the doorway holding a Gatorade under one arm and a plate with cookies and a mug of milk in her hand. Her other arm was held against her chest with an elastic bandage. I assumed that her doctor had done that at her appointment today.

“You’ll have to take the bottle,” Emerald said as she got closer. I reached out

and took it from under her arm as I watched her settle onto the mat beneath the heavy punching bag. As she crossed her legs and set the plate down in front of her, she ordered, “Drink that. You never remember that you have to stay hydrated to be healthy.”

“Thanks,” I said as I picked up the bottle. I took a long chug and then put it back down before I said, “I thought you weren’t ever going to speak to me again.”

Emerald finished chewing a bite of cookie before she replied, “I can’t go more than a few days without talking to you, and you know it.”

“Usually, but you’ve never been as mad at me as you were this morning.”

“I wasn’t mad so much as I was hurt about the whole situation.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“But you’re not sorry you did it?”

“Nope. Not at all.”

“Why did you do it?”

I watched her dunk another cookie and decided to open up in a way that I’d never done with any woman before and admitted, “Because I’m in love with you, and I can’t stand to see you hurting.”

“You love me?”

“I’ve always loved you, Stone, but that’s not what I said. I’m *in* love with you. That’s a whole other dimension that I hadn’t admitted to myself until just a few days ago.”

“What’s changed?”

“Nothing. I’ve loved you for years, I was just too big of a pussy to do anything about it because I was afraid you didn’t feel the same way.”

“Why tell me now?”

Another cookie came out of the milk and passed her gorgeous lips, and I realized I was jealous of a piece of food. How sad was that?

“Because we’re too old for this shit, Stone. I know I’m never going to be the perfect man for you, but I’m of the age where I know I’ll go to my grave trying to be. If you don’t feel the same, then that’s fine too. I just know I can’t go on without letting you know how I feel.”

“What would happen between us if I didn’t feel the same way?”

“You’d still be my Stone, I’d still be your Eve, and we’d still be all up in each other’s business like we have been forever.”

“What happens if I do feel the same way?”

“Well, we have a few options there. My brothers and I can build a walkway

that connects our houses, and we can put the kids in one and let them fend for themselves while we live in the other, or we can pick a house where we can all cohabitate and rent out the other one.”

“Shouldn’t we date for a while first?”

“When was the last time you went on a real date?”

“It’s been a while.”

“You didn’t pick one of those internet match-ups the kids roped you into?”

“No.”

“Why?”

She answered so softly that I almost couldn’t hear. “Because none of them were you.”

“How are we going to do this?”

“I vote that we move into your house, move the gym equipment over to mine, and leave my home office there. We can rent it out to one of your little brothers or one of mine when the time comes.” I felt my heart swell as I listened to her plan our future. *Our future*. Together. “What do you think?”

“I like that plan.”

“The next question is do we tell the girls while they’re in Colorado or wait until they come home?”

“It might be better for our eardrums if we do it while they’re there. Let the Tempests deal with the freak out that’s most definitely going to happen.”

“They’ve been sisters since the day they were born. This just makes it official.”

“Since you’re moving in, does this mean you love me?”

“Maybe,” Emerald hedged. “But I’m still mad at you.”

“I can deal with that.”

“I might be planning something that’s going to cause a tiny bit of a problem for you, and if it does, then we’ll call it a wash.”

I closed my eyes and let my head fall forward before I asked, “What are you gonna do?”

When I looked up at her, she shrugged one shoulder and said, “Nothing *highly* illegal, just a little bit vindictive and possibly passive aggressive.”

“Two hits in one. Are you gonna tell me?”

Emerald slowly shook her head before she said, “Mom and Dad have this term they use: plausible deniability. Mom even got it as a tattoo.”

“I remember seeing that and wondering why in the hell she’d have that put on her body.”

“It’s a thing between them.”

“Do we have a thing?”

Emerald took the last bite of the cookie and then lifted the mug to drink down the milk before she swiped her hand over her mouth and nodded. “We have a lot of things.”

“I suppose we do,” I said as I set my bottle of sports drink on the floor beside my foot and then scooted to the end of the bench. “I’m missing one important thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

I slid off the bench to my knees and then leaned forward and put my hands on either side of her crossed legs. “You haven’t said the words yet.”

“I told you I was going to move in.”

“You did,” I whispered before I leaned to the side and kissed my way along her jaw toward her ear. “But I want to hear the words.”

“Growl.”

“Huh?” I started to pull back to look at her face, but she reached up and fisted her hand in my shirt and held me still.

“Right there by my ear. Do that growl thing.”

“What growl thing?”

“That thing you do.”

“When have I ever growled?”

Emerald let go of my shirt and trailed her hand down my body to cup my hard cock and balls in her hand. “When you’re turned on.”

She stroked her hand up and down my cock through the fabric of my shorts, and I made a sound low in my throat. That was apparently what she was waiting for because she sighed and then shivered.

“Was that it?”

“Yeah.”

I did it again, and she lifted her hand and grabbed my shirt as she slowly laid back on the mat. “Kiss me, Eve.”

I settled my body between her legs as I propped myself up on my forearms to make sure I didn’t hurt her arm. “You’re way too bossy. You know that, right?”

“I may have heard that once or twice.” She stared into my eyes for a few seconds before she finally whispered, “I love you, Adam Forrester.”

“I love you, too, Emerald Forrester.” Her eyes got wide, and I laughed.

“Too soon?”

“Possibly.”

I laughed before I leaned down and kissed her soft lips. She lifted her hips and wrapped her legs around my waist as she kissed me back, and it was even better than it had been before.

We finally pulled apart, and I licked my lips and grinned down at her. “Remember what I said about your peppermint gum?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m gonna feel the same way about cookies now.” Emerald giggled, and it was the most beautiful sound I’d ever heard. “Let’s spend the evening in bed, and let me show you exactly what the taste of you makes me feel.”

“Oh, I can feel it,” Emerald said as she wiggled her hips, rubbing against my cock. “But we can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“My girls are coming over to take care of me this evening, so I have to hang with them.”

“After they leave, can I sneak over to your house and do wicked things to your body?”

“Maybe.” Emerald looked thoughtful for a second before she asked, “Does this seem a little too easy for you?”

“Stone, nothing that has anything to do with you is easy, but I know what I’m signing up for.”

“I mean this whole thing. We were friends and then lovers, and now you want me to move in with you and be happy forever and ever.”

“Yep.”

“It’s too easy.”

“It’s us, sweetheart. We fit together seamlessly and always have.”

“Why did we wait so long?”

“Because perfection takes time, and we weren’t ready yet.”

“Perfection?”

“Yeah. That’s what we’ve got, baby. Perfection.”

EMERALD

“I got Leia settled in my bed, and she’s already sound asleep,” I told Adam as I shut his front door. “I locked the doors but didn’t set the alarm in case she wakes up during the night and wants to go home.”

“She had a little too much to drink, I guess,” Adam said as he put the book he’d been reading aside and took off his glasses. Once they were folded on the nightstand, he looked back at me and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“You’ve hit all the high points. This is going to be a picture I carry in my mind forever.”

“What?”

“You shirtless with your chest all . . . edible . . . and the sheets barely covering that magical cock that I can’t wait to get my mouth on . . . and when did you get reading glasses?” I closed my eyes and bit my lip, trying to control the urge to pounce on the man before I took a deep breath and looked at him again. The need to take a flying leap and land on his cock was almost overwhelming because while I’d had my eyes closed, he’d flipped the blanket aside so I could see *everything*. “Oh, sweet baby . . . Damn, Eve. I had no idea.”

He winked at me before he said, “You wondered didn’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“You can look your fill, but I’d rather you touch.”

I’d taken the time to freshen up before I left my house to walk over and join Adam, so I was only wearing my robe, which was perfect because it was easy to untie it before I shrugged it off and let it pool on the floor at my feet.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful, Stone.”

“You make me feel beautiful,” I admitted as I put one knee on the foot of the bed between his splayed legs. “I’ve been fantasizing about this for longer than I care to admit.”

“Well, stop imagining and crawl up here so you can experience the real thing.”

I decided to do just that but to take my time getting there. It was going to be difficult with only the use of one hand, but I’d persevere and hopefully make Adam as crazy as he made me in the process. I walked closer to his body on my knees, forcing him to spread his legs even wider until I was settled on my heels between them.

I studied his body as I ran one finger up and down his thigh, back and forth, from the bend of his hip to his knee, causing him to shiver. His hard chest had a smattering of hair, but not too much, just the perfect amount. His abs were just as beautiful as I remembered, and I knew I’d need to take some time to explore them some time soon. His hard cock was jutting out from the nest of short curls at the base, and I was happy to see the man knew what manscaping was all about. That boded well for my future and his, too, if I had my way.

He started to sit up as he reached for me, but I put my hand on his chest and pushed him back.

“I wanna play for a little bit first. You got your chance the other night, and now it’s my turn.”

“By all means,” he said as he laid back against the headboard. “Please, play away.”

I leaned forward and rested my hand beside his hip so I could bend and lick one nipple and then the other. He hissed at the contact, and then his abs contracted as I kissed my way down his stomach. I trailed my hand down his side and laughed when he started to squirm.

“Ticklish?”

“Little bit.”

“Good to know.”

I put my hand on the bed beside his hip and braced myself as I moved my legs back so I could lay on my stomach. This put me in close proximity to his cock, and it jumped in anticipation. I didn't take too long to get to my task and licked him from the base of his cock to the tip and then back down again. I did this over and over until he had his hands fisted in the sheets at his side. His teeth were clenched together so hard that it must be painful.

I decided to be truly evil and moved down to his balls instead of taking him into my mouth. I showed them the same attention I'd shown his cock, and before long, he was moaning and squirming beneath me just like I'd been when he put his mouth on me.

“Stone,” Adam said breathlessly. “Crawl up here, baby.”

“Not yet,” I said right before I gripped the base of his cock and pressed my head down until I'd taken him all the way to the back of my throat. He let out a shout as his entire body went taut when I laughed, and he felt the hum of vibration along his length.

I worked him into a frenzy, using my mouth and one hand as I carefully rested the other next to his hip. I could feel him getting closer and closer to the edge as I made a concerted effort to get him to lose control.

“Fuck, stop, shit, don't stop, oh shit,” he mumbled, his words guttural and intense as he tried hard not to lose control.

Suddenly, he sat up, and in one smooth motion, reached down and hooked his hands under my arms before he dragged me up his body. My legs naturally fell to the side of his, and his cock filled me as I slowly lowered myself down. I wasn't finished playing yet, so I started moving slowly, up and down with a twist of my hips on each downstroke.

Soon, he was panting again, but he was able to focus on me long enough to reach up and wrap his hand around the back of my neck to pull me closer to him. He held me tight with one hand as his mouth devoured mine while his other hand slipped between us to play with my clit and bring me closer to the elation he was experiencing.

Apparently, I wasn't moving fast enough to suit him, so he started lifting his hips up and slamming them into mine as I came down, causing his thumb to press against my clit with each stroke and bringing me to one of the most fantastic orgasms of my life. He'd obviously been waiting on me because the second I started to pulse around him, he let out a loud roar and came deep inside me.

I rode him until my orgasm waned and then relaxed against his chest as he nibbled at my lips and murmured words that made my heart melt even more than it had earlier today.

“So fucking perfect. So beautiful. Love you. My girl. My Stone. My heart.”

“Love you, too, Eve,” I whispered before I closed my eyes, content to lay here forever with my head on his hard chest and his arms wrapped around me. “You’re my everything.”



A shrill scream jerked me out of my sound sleep, and I felt Adam jump out of bed. Since he’d left the bathroom light on and closed the door until there was just a crack of light showing, I could see him hopping into his pajama bottoms.

The terrified scream came again, and then there was a man’s angry voice cursing in rapid-fire Spanish. There was a loud grunt and then a woman’s scream right before Adam yanked open the nightstand drawer and pulled out a pistol.

“Call nine one one!”

“What’s going on? Who is that?” I asked as I jumped out of bed and reached for my phone that I’d left charging on the dresser.

I dialed the number just as Adam said, “That’s coming from your house. Someone’s hurting Leia.”

I rushed into Adam’s closet as the 9-1-1 operator answered, and I was shocked to hear my daughter’s voice on the other end of the line.

“Esme, I need cops at my house right now. Someone broke in, and they’re attacking Leia. Adam’s on his way over.”

“Fuck,” Esme said as I heard her typing rapidly, her hands flying over the clicking keys for a split second before I heard her barking orders in code I didn’t understand. “Where are you?”

“I’m at Adam’s house, but I’m . . .”

“Stay there and stay safe. I’ve got units on the way.”

“No,” I snapped right before I hung up the phone.

I yanked on a T-shirt and then stepped into a pair of thermals that were folded on the shelf above Adam’s running shoes. As I darted out the door I

commanded my phone to call Brawley Dumont. I was at the bottom of the stairs when he answered, his voice groggy, and I barked, "Intruder. My house. Leia's screaming, and Adam's on his way with a gun."

"Fuck!" Brawley roared before he, too, tried to convince me to stay inside.

I hung up on him and told my phone to call Brighten Duke, knowing that I'd get at least one more Forrester in the mix the second she answered.

"Em? Is everything . . ."

"Someone broke into my house. Leia was there alone. Adam's there and . . ."

"Hawk! Wake up! Someone is inside Emerald's house. Watch for Adam!"

"And Brawley!"

"Brawley's on his way. I'll call Crow," Brighten said as I pulled a stool in front of the refrigerator and stood on it to get into the cabinet above it.

"Hawk's coming, Em. Stay safe."

I felt around for a second before I found what I knew had to be up there. I pulled out the pistol I'd seen Adam stash a few weeks ago after we came back from an afternoon of target shooting at Protect the Queen.

It was difficult to do with my left hand, and I cursed the hard cast the doctor had put on today, but I finally managed to open the chamber and check to make sure the gun was loaded. The second I saw it was, I snapped the chamber back into place and ran toward the open front door.

I had just spotted Hawk running across the grass, his brother Crow not far behind, when I turned toward my own front porch. The door opened just as I hit the bottom step, and I screeched to a halt as I lifted the pistol and aimed it at the man in front of me.

I could hear sounds coming from inside my house, so I knew there were other people inside, but I prayed Adam and Liea had them in hand while I dealt with the trash at my front door.

"Get back in the house."

"Fuck you, bitch. What are you gonna do?" Mr. Lopez asked before he took another step onto the porch.

I moved the gun a fraction to the left and shot the door frame before I aimed it back at him and said, "I'm gonna fucking shoot you."

His eyes got wide, and I heard Hawk and Crow in the grass behind me.

"Check the back and go in that way, I've got the front covered," I ordered without glancing their way.

"Want me to do it?" Crow asked.

“I’ve got this,” I replied. “Go on. No witnesses.”

“Gotcha,” Hawk said before he darted around the house with his brother.

When he heard how matter of fact we were discussing things, Lopez got an idea that he might be in over his head. He put his hands up in front of him in a placating gesture and started shaking his head.

“Don’t puss out now, bitch boy. Isn’t this how you like it? A woman all alone? Problem is, *this* one isn’t defenseless. Back. The fuck. Up.”

He found his bravado and asked, “Why?” while at the same time, he stepped back into my house.

I took another step toward him, making sure to stay just out of reach, and ordered. “Another.” After he stepped back, I ordered him to do it again.

Once he was a few feet inside my house, I stepped into the doorway and braced my legs like my father had taught me to do.

“Let me go,” Lopez ordered. “I’ll stay away.”

“Can’t let you go, buddy. Roaches like you are never really gone until they are forced to be.”

“I promise. I’ll . . .”

“Sorry. I can’t hear your lies over the sound of me shooting a fucking intruder,” I said right before I pulled the trigger. The bullet pierced his chest, perfectly aligned in the middle of his body, but just in case it hadn’t done its job, I shot him again before he fell backwards onto my hardwood floor.

I heard movement behind me and spun around, my pistol at the ready in case Lopez had reinforcements.

Brawley put his hands up, and I dropped my weapon to my side before I said, “I shot an intruder. He was coming at me.”

Brawley glanced at the man on the floor gasping for air and said, “He sure was,” right before he took the stairs two at a time to join the fray. He wasn’t even halfway up when two more shots rang out and then a third. There was silence upstairs, and Brawley turned to look at me just as we heard sirens in the distance.

“Go home and pretend you have no idea what’s going on, Brawley Bear.”

“But I . . .”

Hawk appeared at the top of the staircase with Leia in his arms. Brawley ran down in front of him so he could bring her downstairs, and I asked, “Is everything okay up there?”

“Two are still breathing for now, and Adam’s hog-tying the other one,” Hawk informed me before he set Leia on her feet. I saw that her face was

bruised, and she had scratches on her neck, but her clothes were intact, and the fire in her eyes could burn down the city.

Crow had come down behind his brother and said, “Adam’s tying him up, but the others . . .”

“You three need to get out. We’ll deal with the cops. None of you were ever here.”

“I’ll . . .”

“What did I fucking say, Hawk?” I snapped, using the same tone I’d resorted to when he and his brothers were kids seeking out trouble like it was their mission from God and I was the gatekeeper. “Code Blue. Go. Now.”

“Back door,” Liea ordered as she spun around to find the police speeding up the street toward my house. “Run.”

The men took off like a shot, jumping over the growing puddle of blood on the floor before they raced out under the cover of night.

“Eve!” I yelled, wondering why he hadn’t appeared at the top of the stairs yet.

“I’m good, Stone. Talk to the cops. Tell them what happened and that I’m up here with two dead and one incapacitated.”

“Gotcha,” I yelled back. I looked at Liea and asked, “We good?”

“We’re good,” she said before she cleared her throat and let out a sob. Tears filled her eyes and she asked, “Is this alright?”

“You got it,” I told her before I did the same thing. “How about me?”

“A little more,” she ordered before she turned to the open doorway and watched two uniformed officers rushing up the lawn, their guns drawn.

I bent at the waist and set my gun down on the carpet in front of me before I let out a sob and raised my hands.

The first officer saw Liea’s bruised and tear-stained face and reached through the doorway to pull her out onto the porch as the other officer asked, “Are you okay, ma’am?”

“I had to shoot him. He was coming at me,” I lied before I let out a tortured sob. The officer had seen the gun on the floor and kicked it aside before he reached for me and said, “Go outside.”

“My boyfriend is upstairs. There were more and he . . . he was helping . . .”

Another sob, and I heard Adam’s voice from the top of the stairs. He had his hands up as he said, “I shot two of them and tied up the third one.”

“By yourself?” the cop asked incredulously as he pushed me toward the open door.

“Leia almost had them in hand when I got here,” Adam lied. “Is she okay?” The cop looked at me, and I swiped at the tears on my cheeks before I said, “That’s Leia.” He nudged me toward the door, and the other officer took my elbow and yanked me outside. I heard the officer order Adam to come downstairs, and in the next few seconds, there were police swarming through my house, multiple ambulances parked in the distance, and every neighbor within a five-block radius gathering at the end of the street.

Finally, Adam’s arm encircled my waist and pulled me into his chest as he reached for Leia to do the same. She huddled next to me in the shelter of his arms, and Adam whispered, “We good?”

I let out a dramatic snuffle and felt Leia press her face between my shoulder and Adam’s chest before she let out what sounded like a giggle masked by a snuffle of her own.

I took a deep breath and let it out before I answered, “Just so you know, from now on, I don’t take out the trash. That’s your job.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Adam said before he dropped a kiss on my temple. “I’ll be here to do that.”

“Damn right, you will.”

Leia’s voice was muffled when she asked in a shocked whisper, “What the fuck is happening right now?”

“Love, girl,” I retorted. “Me and my man Eve got it going on.”

“Holy shit.”

I didn’t even try to analyze how hearing the news that me and Adam were together was more shocking than the body laying just inside my front door or the others that were upstairs. There was no point in trying. That was just how me and my family rolled, and we always would.

Stronger together than we could ever be apart.

ADAM

“There were police cars everywhere!” Margaret yelled as she pointed toward Emerald’s house. “I moved into this neighborhood because you assured me it was going to be kept safe, and now . . .”

“Four men broke into a woman’s house, assaulted another woman with the intent to do horrible fucking things before they killed her, and you’re pissed that the fucking lights woke you up? Are you mental?” Margaret’s eyes got wide as she backed up from my desk, bumping into the bookshelf and then veering to the side so she was standing in the doorway. “Do you want to know why those men broke into Emerald’s house? You don’t give a shit, do you? Even if you found out there was a good reason for all the commotion, you’d find something else to bitch about, so I’m gonna leave you in the dark on this one. Suffice it to say that the woman you keep fucking with is *my* woman. You better tread carefully because she’s not someone you want to cross. The man that broke into her house last night figured that out when he left in a bodybag.”

Margaret let out a tiny squeak and then spun around and rushed down the hall toward the front door. I wondered what sort of shitstorm my outburst was

going to cause. I hadn't actually threatened her, I'd just implied that messing with Emerald might not be a good idea. Stone clearly already had something up her sleeve that she was keeping very quiet about, and I knew she had the support of her girls. The thought was fucking terrifying, and I hoped Margaret heeded my warning.

I'd seen some of the shit those girls had pulled together, and I feared for the woman even though she was a ball-busting bitch who'd been a thorn in my side for months now.

"That went well," Charlene said as she stepped into the doorway. "Impressive restraint, by the way. I was about to go off on that bitch, but you handled it like a champ."

"Thank you," I said with an appreciative smile. "I'm afraid it's just going to escalate things but . . ."

"Most definitely, but she can't say that she wasn't warned."

"Are you okay being alone here for the rest of the day? My head is killing me, and I'm exhausted. I need to get a nap now because my daughter's coming home sometime this evening."

"It's nothing that can't wait. I just needed to . . . It's nothing. You go home."

"Charlene. What do you need?"

"I've finally got my son convinced into moving into a rental while he saves up to build a house."

Charlene's son was a prickly sort of guy, but I really liked him. We'd known each other since we were kids, but lost touch when he went to prison. I wouldn't hold his past against him though. He was a good man who worked hard and was raising a little girl by himself. "Where's he been staying?"

"In our RV on the land he inherited from his birth mother's side of the family."

"They've been living in an RV?"

"Yes. For more than a year."

"Damn. My grandparents have a sweet RV, but I don't know that I'd want to live in it."

"Especially with a young daughter and her two service dogs."

"She's got two now?"

"Rufio's in training, but he's by her side constantly learning from Falcor while he chases Scoot around. Falcor is already 6, and Ripley thought it would be a good idea to get him some relief before Scoot makes him old

before his time.”

“Scoot’s adorable. She’ll be starting school soon, won’t she?”

“Next fall. She’s in a special program this year, but Ripley needs to live in a good school district to make sure the kindergarten program she enters has facilities that will help her learn while still accommodating Rufio.”

“I’ve got some houses here that would work for them, Charlene. The school district is excellent.”

“That’s what I was going to ask. He does have a record, but . . .”

“He’s a good man, and I’d be proud to call him my neighbor.”

“Thank you, Adam. That’s such a relief. A few of the places he’s applied to rent from won’t allow felons to apply.”

I chuckled and said, “If I declined felons, half my family wouldn’t be allowed to live here. Besides, the only reason he’s a felon and I’m not is because he got there first.”

Charlene gave me a sad smile and said, “Lonestar Terrace would be perfect since his land borders your property.”

“Have him come by whenever he gets some free time to choose a house that works for him. If there’s one available that backs up to his land, we can put a gate in the fence at the property line. He can get back and forth that way.”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all. You know which houses are available just as well as I do. Figure out which one he wants, mark it down as occupied, and he can move in whenever he’s ready.” I thought about it for a second before I asked, “Does his land border the back of Margaret’s?”

“No. Thank God.”

“You’re right. I’d hate to do that to Rip. I like him too much for that kind of torture.”

“I’ll put him in 2012. It’s right next door to Leia and she can help him get to know his new neighbors.”

“Sounds like a plan. You know the drill,” I said as I stood up and pushed my chair under the desk. “I’ll see you Monday morning.”

“Yessir.” Charlene was almost out the door before she turned and said, “Congratulations on the thing with Emerald. I was wondering when you’d finally see the goodness that was right in front of you.”

“That seems to be the theme lately, but thanks. I’ll let her know that she’s got your stamp of approval since she knows you’re instrumental in keeping me on track.”

“She knows that the boss is only successful if he has a good assistant telling him what to do and when to do it,” Charlene said haughtily before she pretended to fluff her hair and shine her nails.

“Well, we’ve got the best of the best, so me and my brothers are going to go far.”

The walk home was quicker than usual since I didn’t meander on my way there, stopping to talk to residents that waved or veering off to check out something on the property that caught my eye. I pulled my phone out of my pocket when it sounded and smiled when I saw a picture of Emerald, a sleepy look on her face as her head rested on my pillow.

My steps were quicker and lighter just at the thought of her waiting in bed for me. I was inside the house within the next few minutes and already pulling off my shirt as I hurried up the stairs.

“I thought you’d never get here,” Emerald said before she yawned hugely and then burrowed deeper under the covers. “What took you so long?”

“I stopped to talk to Charlene,” I explained as I tossed my shirt into the hamper and started unbuttoning my jeans as I toed off my sneakers.

“Ripley’s going to move into one of the vacant houses, probably this weekend if Charlene has her way.”

“Which one?”

“It’s over on Texas Drive next to Leia. He’ll share the corner with Heath.”

“As much as I love seeing you naked, I think you should put some clothes on.”

“I will. The girls will be here soon, and I don’t want us to get caught unaware if our nap lasts too long.”

“Usually, I’d be all about a quickie before we nap, but I don’t think I have it in me right now. Besides, I’m still dickmatized from last night’s fun.”

“Dickmatized?”

“It’s a thing. You wouldn’t understand.” I laughed as I pulled the covers back and crawled into bed beside Emerald. She lifted her head so I could slip my arm underneath her pillow and then molded her body to mine with a sigh. “We fit together perfectly.”

“We do. If we would have realized that sooner, we could have been sleeping like this for years.”

“It wasn’t the right time.”

I had to agree. “You’re right. It took a lot to get us to where we are now, and I wouldn’t change a thing.”

“Neither would I.”

“Has your phone been blowing up as news spreads?”

“About what happened last night?”

“Well, I was talking about everyone finding out about us, but last night’s events might overshadow that, I suppose.”

Emerald scoffed and then pressed herself even closer. “What happened last night was only interesting to Ginger because she doesn’t have to try that case now.”

“So, they were all aflutter about us then?”

“Yep. Of course, a bunch of them were a little upset since it was Aunt Terra who won the pool.” Emerald sighed before she said, “I can’t believe they were betting on when we’d finally get together.”

“You know how the old folks are. They’re always wagering on something.”

“At least they were all for us and not against us.”

“They’re pretty wise. We’ll probably be like them someday.”

“We’re still young. We’ve got a while before that happens.”

“We’re in our 40s, babe. That’s not very young.”

“But it’s not too old for things either.”

I turned toward her and ran my hand down Emerald’s back to cup her ass as I said, “I can show you just how young I am.”

“About that,” Emerald said hesitantly.

I stilled. “About what?”

“Now, I’m not saying I want to in a definite way, but I *am* saying that the thought has crossed my mind.”

“The thought of . . .”

“What if we made a baby that was half Hamilton and half Forrester?”

The thought didn’t terrify me as much as I thought it might as I considered it.

“You think we’re up for that?”

“I think we are. The girls would be beside themselves if we gave them a little brother or sister.”

“When Noah and Lorelei were small, I wished that they had a mom like you,” I admitted. We were both quiet for a minute, and I finally said, “I’d like to have a baby who grows up with a little bit of you and a little bit of me.”

“Gamma’s gonna lose her mind.”

“Does that mean we’re doing this? Already?”

“We’re not getting any younger, Eve.”

“Then let’s start trying, Stone. I’m all in if you are.” The smile on Emerald’s face said it all, and I pushed her to her back so I could have better access to her lips and that body I loved so much. “Love you.”

“I love you too.”

EPILOGUE

EMERALD

“Why are you dressed like a fucking ninja?” I heard Holly ask.

“It’s not a goddamn fashion show, sister. We’re here to fuck some shit up!”
Petra retorted. “Let’s get this party started.”

“Everyone have their hammers?” I asked.

“And our hot dogs,” Jewel replied. “This is insane but brilliant.”

“I know, right?”

“Adam’s gonna kill us all if he finds out,” Lexi said worriedly.

“I have ways to make him get over being upset.”

“La la la la,” Jewel chanted softly. “I can’t hear about this again. It’s unfair
that you got the man of your dreams, *and* he’s a beast in bed.”

“She told you about that growling kink?” Leia asked.

Lexi sighed. “That’s so hot.”

“I know, right?”

“Don’t gloat,” Leia snapped. “It’s not becoming.”

“I’ll be coming later, that’s for sure,” I boasted.

“I hate your face,” Petra said grumpily.

“I had my birth control removed,” I said out of the blue.

All movement stopped, and I bumped into Jewel's back. It was really dark outside but I could still see the shocked looks on their faces as they turned to me in unison.

"Have you lost your fucking mind?" Jewel asked loudly.

"Be quiet! Stealth, bitch! You know the drill!"

"You don't drop information like that when we're creeping around in the dark getting ready to commit a felony and not expect . . ."

Petra interrupted Holly. "Technically, this isn't a felony. It's a misdemeanor at most. Possibly a trespassing ticket, and if they're reaching, we might get one for littering too."

"Focus, Petra! This bitch thinks she's gonna have a baby, and it won't make her lose what little bit of her mind she's been clinging to up until now," Jewel hissed.

"I think it would be nice to have a baby around again," Lexi admitted. "Holly's girls are still squishy, but they're already walking. Soon, they'll start talking and lose all the cuteness."

"I want a baby," Leia admitted. "I'm not too old."

"Are you saying I'm too old?" I asked.

"How old was your mom when she had Onyx?" Leia asked.

"I think I was 25, so she was about our age."

"She's a badass, and you kind of are, too, so I'm sure it will be fine," Holly said. "I've been thinking that I might want another baby when the girls get a little older."

"What does Damien think about that?"

"I haven't broached the subject yet, but I think he might be up for adopting a toddler. Maybe a sibling group."

"And here we go," Jewel said with a dramatic sigh. "Y'all are gonna get the fever, and then it's gonna spread. We'll be up to our asses in dirty diapers when it's almost time for us to be donning diapers of our own!"

"She has a point," Lexi admitted.

"Are we doing this or not? I'm not even sure I can still get pregnant, so it might be a moot point anyway."

"Whatever. You and Adam have been going at it like rabbits for weeks now, and I'm . . ."

"What'cha doin'?" I heard a small voice ask from somewhere to my left.

"Well, shit!"

"Yeah," a man's voice whispered. "What the fuck are y'all doing?"

“Mind your business, Forrester, and take your spawn with you,” Jewel ordered Ruf when his eyes appeared over the fence. “There’s nothing to see here.”

“Are you fuckin’ shit up? Can I help?” Koda, Ruf’s son, asked eagerly, watching our progress through the spaces between the fence pickets.

“That’s gonna cost ya,” Ruf mumbled.

“Shit,” Koda whispered.

“That is too.”

We were still giggling when another face appeared, and I realized that we had quite an audience.

“Well, hello, ladies,” Crow said, and I could tell by the crinkles at the corner of his eyes that he was smiling. “What are you up to?”

“We’re helping karma balance the universe by using natural means that will compost and feed the earth as it feeds us,” Petra replied regally. “Now, mind your fucking business and back off.”

Koda’s voice was sweeter than sugar when he asked, “Can I *please* help?”

Petra smiled sweetly before she said, “Of course you can, baby, but you’ve gotta be quiet, okay?”

“I can do that,” Koda whispered. I could tell by the sounds coming through the fence that he was trying to climb over. “Boost me up, Pop. I’ve got shit to do.”

“Fuck’s sake,” Ruf grumbled. “I’ll go with you, but let’s use the gate.”

“If he’s coming, then I’m coming,” Crow said petulantly.

“Well, if you’re coming, be quick about it, and you’re gonna need hammers.”

“I’ve got a few in my truck,” I heard a voice I didn’t recognize say. “I’ll go get ‘em, and then we’re in.”

“Who is that?” Petra whispered.

“Dammit! That was Ripley,” Leia hissed. “I’m never gonna live this down.”

“If he’s an accomplice, then he can’t say shit,” Petra pointed out.

“We’re never going to get away with this,” Holly said worriedly. “Especially if half the neighborhood’s going to join us.”

“Dammit. Scoot’s with him,” Leia whispered frantically. “I can’t let her see me doing illegal shit. I’m supposed to be a responsible adult.”

“That ship has sailed, sister,” I retorted. “Besides, you should teach them the ways while they’re young so they know how to get away with shit when they’re older.”

“I don’t see your kids here,” Leia snapped.

“So, you’re claiming his kid now?” Petra asked, her mind whirling at the implication. “Do tell, because I’ve never wanted to save a horse more than I do every time I look at *that* cowboy. Age has treated him well. He sure didn’t look like that when we were kids.”

“Shit. We’re all going to jail,” Holly moaned.

I slapped my hands, making sure it wasn’t loud enough for the sound to travel very far. “Look alive, people. We’ve got mayhem to cause, and I want to get home before Adam wakes up and figures out I’m gone.”

“Just distract him with a blowjob,” Lexi suggested.

“Not something I want to think about,” Crow grumbled as he walked through the gate. “I don’t want to hear about oral sex from the women who used to babysit me.”

“She was your babysitter?” Ripley asked.

“They all were,” Ruf answered. “Some better than others, but at one point or another, they all took care of us.”

“That’s what the elders are supposed to do, Ruf,” I said as I hooked my elbow through Crow’s. “We’ve been saving your asses since you refused to put on clothes, and that’s not about to stop now.”



ADAM

“Well, fuck,” Heath grumbled when Margaret came jogging down her porch steps, most likely to intercept us before we got past her. “I knew we should have taken the long way.”

“I’m so close to home,” I whined. I pointed up the block where I could see Emerald sitting on our porch with a book in hand. “It’s just right there.”

“I need to report a crime!” Margaret screeched as Heath stopped the Gator in front of her house.

“What is that smell?” he asked before he gagged and pulled his shirt over his face. “Oh my God.”

“Shit. Is that the sewer?”

“It’s hot dogs!” Margaret yelled. “They’re all over my yard!”

“Well, pick them up!” I retorted before I pulled my shirt over my face and held back a gag. “Jesus, that’s horrible.”

“I can’t pick them up because they’re buried!”

“Why did you bury hotdogs in your yard?” Heath asked.

I looked toward my house and saw that Emerald had abandoned her book and was sitting with her hands over her mouth as she rocked back and forth with laughter.

“Shit,” I mumbled, remembering all the packages of hotdogs she’d separated out and put on trays in the freezer. “Fuck me.”

“What?”

I sighed. “Nothing.”

“Go ahead and walk home. I’ll take care of this.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.” Heath looked toward my house and said, “Besides, it might be easier for you to get to the bottom of things by going to talk to Emerald than sitting here trying not to puke.”

“I’m gonna kill her.”

“No, you won’t.”

“You’re right. But I’m at least gonna spank her.”

“What the fuck is that gonna do? If you haven’t realized by now that spanking takes on a whole different connotation at our age than it did when we were younger, we need to have a chat, big brother.”

“Fuck off. You know what I mean.”

“I hope I don’t. Go on. Escape while you can.”

“Thanks, man.”

“What are you two mumbling about?” Margaret asked as I got out of the Gator. When I started to walk away, she yelled, “Hey! Where are you going?”

I ignored Margaret and kept my eyes on Emerald as I walked the short distance to our house. She was still laughing when I got there, but now, she had her girls on video chat, and they were laughing right along with her as she aimed her phone down the street where Heath was still arguing with Margaret.

“What have you done, Stone?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Lead with the blowjob!” I heard Petra call out from the speaker on Emerald’s phone.

Lexi cheered her on. “It’s time for donut face, Em!”

“Work it, girl,” Leia ordered.

Without a word, Emerald hung up on her friends, and I put my hand out to help her stand on the step in front of me.

“What did you and your girls do, Stone?”

“Nothin’,” Emerald lied before she grinned. She looked so much like Lout that I had to shake my head.

“We’ve gotta get out of here. When she’s finished with Heath, she’s gonna come find me so she can rant at me for fifteen minutes about shit I’m gonna have to pretend I don’t know anything about.” I looked down at Emerald’s shoes and let my eyes trail up her body, making sure she was dressed appropriately before I suggested, “Let’s take a bike ride. We can stop at the clubhouse and have a drink and then go to dinner later when you get hungry.”

“Can’t do it.”

“Why not? Did I forget about something with the kids?” Emerald shook her head, but she was still grinning at me. “What? Why won’t you ride with me?”

“Because it’s not safe for the baby.”

“The what?” Emerald nodded, and I felt my heart in my throat. “You’re pregnant?”

“I am. Wren confirmed it today, and I have a sonogram scheduled for next week.”

“Holy shit!” I yelled as I picked her up in my arms and jerked her off the porch. “I can’t believe we’re gonna have a baby!”

Emerald kissed me, and I stopped spinning and held her close. “I’m glad you’re happy.”

“Are you happy?”

“How could I not be when I’m about to marry my best friend?”

“Is that a proposal?”

“It is.” Emerald nodded. “What do you say, Eve? Wanna get hitched?”

“I can’t think of anything I’d rather do than marry my best friend.”

THE END

Please take just a few minutes to leave a review of this book on Amazon and feel free to share the link with your friends. I enjoy discussing my books and characters and would love to hear from you. Check out Cee Bowerman on Facebook. You can also find information about the author and her books on www.cebowermanbooks.com.

COMING SOON

**Bear Witch Me, Mereu, Book 1 - COMING
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Single motherhood isn't for the weak, especially when there's not just one but two children with the sole intent of making you absolutely crazy. It's chaos running a successful business and raising twins who act feral more often than not, but Calliope is doing her best to make every day better than the last even after the man she loved tore her heart to pieces.

Her fresh start at life in a new town is full of experiences she never would have imagined, including the realization that magic is real and not just something you see in movies and read about in books. Almost everything she dreamed about having when she was with Beau has come true, but she has to find a way to be content without him.

Beau Tulok is a man with secrets, and those secrets ripped apart the relationship he had with the woman of his dreams. Now he's trying to survive without the other half of his soul, but his future looks bleak without Calliope.

Calliope comes to Springblood after receiving the shock of her life. Once there, a chance encounter realigns her with the future she and Beau dreamed of having. Circumstances she never thought possible bring her to Mereu, and she quickly realizes that she never wants to leave.

Life pulled Calliope and Beau apart after their relationship was plagued by misunderstandings, secrets, and too much time apart, but now the small mystical town in the mountains of Colorado is going to help bring them together. Join Cee Bowerman in Mereu, a place where magic is all around and fairy tales come true.

About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over fifty published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

You can find her on Facebook @ceebowerman or online at www.ceebowermanbooks.com.

Look for more fun romances in the coming months and get updates on the Facebook page for more information on characters and stories that are in progress.