



ONE FOR THE ROAD

A STONE KINGS MC XMAS NOVELLA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DAPHNE LOVELING

ONE FOR THE ROAD

A STONE KINGS MC CHRISTMAS

DAPHNE LOVELING

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It's Christmas in Lupine, Colorado.

Stone Kings Motorcycle Club president Greyson and his wife Seton are getting ready to head to Denver with the rest of the MC to go see Cal's rock star wife Andi and her band Hard Candy play the last gig of their North American tour.

But someone lurking in the shadows is planning a dark act of revenge against the club... and Andi and Cal's children are in the crosshairs.

This story was previously released as part of the now-unpublished anthology Twelve Bikers for Christmas.

SETON



“Merry Christmas, Mommy!”

My sister-in-law Andi’s little cherubs — five-year-old Abigail and three-year-old Chloe — sang the words as they waved frantically at their mother’s face on the tablet screen.

Andi laughed and waved back. “Merry Christmas, my babies! Mommy is almost home!”

“How many more sleeps?” Abigail asked excitedly.

“Well...” Andi tapped her chin in an exaggerated pantomime of thinking. “In one more sleep, you’re coming with Auntie Seton and Uncle Grey to see Mommy and Daddy. We’re going to have a big party! Then you’re going to go with Daddy to see Mommy play with her band. Does that sound like fun?”

“Yes!” Abigail and Chloe chimed together. With Chloe’s tiny lisp, the word came out sounding from her more like *yeth*. “But Mommy,” Chloe frowned. “Can’t you come tuck us in tonight? Auntie Seton said you and Daddy are in Denver, and Denver is in Colorado!”

“Yep, we are in Denver, baby. We just got here. Denver is the last stop on our tour! But we’re at a hotel all the way on the other side of the city. It’s too far from Lupine for us to drive there today. Plus, Mommy and Daddy have some work to do tonight. But we’re both so excited to see you tomorrow. We can hardly wait!”

“Us too!” the girls chorused.

Andi listened as the girls chattered excitedly about everything they had been doing at our house today — the games they had played, the hot cocoa I had made them earlier — and as they promised their mother they were being so good that Santa Claus would be proud of them.

“I’m so glad you’re being good for Auntie Seton and Uncle Grey,” Andi told them. “And I bet Santa is, too. Babies, can you put Auntie Seton on the phone for a minute? I need to talk to her about a few things.”

“I’m here, Andi.” I angled the tablet over my way so the camera angle would pull me into the screen. “Girls, why don’t you go play now? Say bye to your mommy.”

“Okay! Bye Mommy!” the girls echoed.

“Bye-bye, babies! I’ll see you tomorrow! Love you!”

“Love you!”

The girls ran out of the room like a tiny pink stampede. Sigh-laughing, I picked up the tablet and settled into my favorite living-room chair.

“So, how was the trip to Denver?” I asked Andi, who besides being my sister-in-law was also my best friend. “Are you guys all settled in at the hotel?”

“It was fine. I’m absolutely exhausted, though. The trip from Kansas City was long, and as usual, I didn’t manage to get any sleep on the bus. God, I will be so glad to be done spending my life on the road for a little while.”

Andi was the bass player and lead vocalist for her band Hard Candy — formerly The Nopes. Until two years ago, Hard Candy was moderately successful, but not exactly a household name. They were a solid presence on the local music scene here in Colorado, playing shows around the Denver area and in our home town of Lupine. And then, one of their songs went viral. Seemingly overnight, they were catapulted into the realm of superstardom. And, to Andi’s simultaneous excitement and dismay, into the realm of what she called *perpetual touring*.

“I can’t believe your tour is finally over,” I replied. “I can only imagine what it’s like to be on the road for that long.”

“I can’t either. God, See, it feels like I’ve been gone forever. I never would have made it without these FaceTime calls to the girls. And without having someone I could really trust and count on to take care of them. I seriously owe you forever.”

My brother Cal had been holding down the fort at home with their daughters until he decided to meet up with the band for the last few weeks of their tour. “It’s been fun, honestly,” I replied. “Kendall and Wyatt have loved having so much time with their cousins. Kendall especially. Wyatt would probably deny it, though.” At eleven years old, my twins were just on the cusp between tween-hood and teen-hood. They both adored spending time with their little cousins, which seemed unusual given their age gap. Abigail and Chloe brought out the maternal side in my otherwise tomboyish Kendall. She loved babysitting the girls, inventing games for them to play and urging them to run and jump around outside. My son Wyatt, on the other hand, put on a big act pretending like being surrounded by females was a tremendous burden. But he didn’t really fool me, no matter what he said. It was easy to catch him tickling his little cousins and carrying them around on his back when he thought no one else was watching.

“Well, even so,” Andi continued, “you guys are life savers. And please thank Grey again for letting Cal come with me on the last leg of the tour.”

“You can thank him yourself tomorrow,” I reminded her. My husband, Greyson, was the president of the Stone Kings Motorcycle Club, and Cal was one of the members.

“That’s true. Lord, the party tomorrow is going to be the weirdest scene ever. Our band, partying with the Stone Kings Motorcycle Club, and a big passel of kids.” She chuckles. “Check out our rock and roll lifestyle, America!”

Hard Candy’s last stop on their cross-country tour had been scheduled for Denver on purpose. It was the homecoming victory lap, right before Christmas. Instead of an

after-party, tomorrow's pre-show party was just for the families and close friends of the band. The party was going to be family-friendly and Christmas-themed.

"How's the hotel, by the way?" I asked, peering at the room behind her. "Looks nice, from what I can see."

"Oh my God, Seton, it is sooooo over the top luxurious!" Andi's eyes widened expressively. "We've stayed at some nice places and some okay places on the tour, but this place is by far the best." She paused and picked up the tablet, giving me a virtual tour as she walked around the suite. "Do you know, they actually call this room the rock star suite? Apparently, Mick Jagger has stayed here. Check it out: it has a grand piano in the living room!"

"Wow," I marveled, staring at the instrument and the floor-to-ceiling windows behind it, which showed off a view of the Denver skyline. "Just think how many songs we all know and love might have been composed on that very piano."

Andi turned the screen back to her face. "More likely, how many rockstar offspring have been conceived on the lid, you mean."

I laughed. "You're probably right about that. Do you think you'll ever get used to all this grandeur?"

"Good lord, I hope not. This place is fancier than anyone has a right to. I still can't believe this is my life. If you had told me ten years ago I would not only be staying at the nicest hotel in Denver on the last stop in a twenty-five city American tour, but that I'd also be staying in the penthouse suite, I'd have said you were high. If I ever start taking this stuff for granted, you have my permission to slap me silly." The camera bumped suddenly, and Andi's face disappeared. "Christ, that feels good," she groaned.

"What feels good?" I frowned. "Wait. Don't answer that if Cal is doing something X-rated to you while you're on the phone with me. I do *not* want to know."

Peals of laughter erupted through the speaker. "No, no. He's not even here. It's this *bed*." Andi's face came back into

view, her head now resting on a luxurious-looking pillow. “I can’t believe how comfortable it is. If I fall asleep during this conversation and start snoring, you’ll know why. I need to check the label on this mattress. We are so getting one of these.”

“Where is Cal, anyway?”

“Oh, he’s downstairs, going over some security stuff with the hotel,” she sighed. “He’ll be up in a few minutes.”

“Don’t you have a team for that?”

“Yeah, but we’ve been having some problems with them. Rudy had to fire the lead security guy earlier in the tour because she caught him smoking weed with some fans when he was supposed to be on duty.” Rudy —actual name Kerri Rudolph— was the band’s manager. “Someone almost stole one of our guitars when that dude was supposed to be guarding them. Can you believe that?”

“Wow. That’s nuts.”

“Yeah. It’s too bad. I liked the guy. But I guess he got really nasty when Rudy fired her. Verbally threatened her and the band and everything.” Andi sighed again. “So, Cal has kind of stepped into the breach, since the tour’s almost over and it’s too late to hire someone else.”

As Hard Candy suddenly became one of the hottest musical tickets in the country, the band had been faced with the reality of screaming fans and the occasional stalker practically overnight. Even before this tour, they encountered mobs of excited followers whenever they were in any major city for a performance or a TV appearance. According to Andi, the band had gone through a series of problematic relationships with a few different security firms. They were still trying to find the right fit, not very successfully.

“At least the tour’s almost over,” Andi continued. “I can go back to Lupine and breathe for a while.” The band had resisted all the urging of her agent and record industry types to move to California. The other members of Hard Candy lived in Denver, but Andi had preferred to stay in our town, which

was small and out of the way enough that she could live a mostly normal life away from the fame when she was here.

“Oh, by the way,” I cut in. “Just to warn you, Chloe is super, *super* excited about Christmas. It’s all she talks about lately. Abigail started talking to her about Santa Claus, and then my kids joined in on it to get them both pumped up. Every day Chloe has been asking me how many days there were until Christmas. We finally made a calendar to put on the fridge. We’ve been crossing off the days. This morning, she came barreling down the stairs screaming, *Two more days!*”

“So, what you’re saying is, our children are more excited about Santa coming than they are about seeing their parents again,” Andi said wryly.

“Well, I’m sure they’re excited about both,” I said diplomatically.

Andi laughed. “I mean, at their age I would have sold my mom down the river for Santa Claus. I know how I rate.” She winked at me. “Speaking of which, Santa Claus will be making an appearance at the party tomorrow.”

“Oh my God,” I exclaimed. “The kids are going to love that!”

“Well, for sure Abigail and Chloe will. And Gracie and Mia, too. Oh, and Lincoln!” Andi agreed.

Levi and Cherish’s kids — Gracie, ten, and Mia, six — definitely still believed in Santa, as did Trig and Eva’s youngest kid, Lincoln, also six.

“It’s too bad Wyatt and Kendall don’t believe in Santa anymore,” Andi remarked. “Did you have any trouble making sure they didn’t spill the beans to Abigail and Chloe?”

“Not at all. The twins are fully embracing being part of the ‘older’ group of Stone Kings children, along with Zoe.” Zoe, Trig and Eva’s daughter, had just turned sixteen. To look at her, though, you’d think she was older than that. She was a stunner, a real beauty — much to her parents’ consternation. Boys flocked around her like moths to a flame. Eva worried about Zoe getting a big head about it. Trig, on the other hand,

was focused more on the boys who wanted to date her — and what he worried were their less-than-honorable intentions.

“I just talked to Eva yesterday, actually,” Andi said. “Apparently Zoe is having a teen moment about the party. Eva wants Zoe to be the babysitter and keep an eye on the kids during it, but Zoe is having none of it. She wanted to bring a bunch of her friends along, to show off her connection to the band. Eva said no, that this is just a party for family. I guess Zoe has been pouting and giving her the silent treatment for the last few days.”

“I can’t say I blame Zoe, honestly,” I admitted. “Gosh, can you imagine how cool it would have been for us to know some hugely famous rock stars at that age?”

“Hugely famous rock stars,” Andi repeated. “God, that’s still so weird.”

“Yep. Your band’s name is practically a household word. Your picture is plastered on album covers, tabloids, and social media all over the country. Of course Zoe wants to show that off — and show off that she is cool by association.”

“It is surreal. It’s great in so many ways, but...” Andi trailed off, then seemed to mentally shake herself. “Well, anyway. I don’t mean to sound ungrateful.”

I didn’t ask her to elaborate. I was pretty sure I know what my best friend was thinking. Success was great in some ways, but fame had a lot of downsides. A lot more than she had expected, in fact.

Andi hated that, outside of Lupine, she couldn’t really go out in public these days without being noticed. Paparazzi hounded her whenever she was in LA or New York. And boy, had she learned some hard lessons about social media. Even though lots of fans followed her on her various accounts, there was a fair share of trolls and haters, too. And they could be vicious. Andi had eventually hired someone else to do the posting for her. These days she rarely looked at her accounts. And she never, ever looked at the comments. Instead, she had her security team check them for threats, and trusted that they

would tell her anything she needed to know if there was ever a question of her own safety.

Just then, I heard a distant beep through the phone. Andi looked off-camera and smiled. “Seton, Cal just walked in. I’m gonna get going, okay?”

From somewhere far-off, I heard my brother shout, “Hey, See!”

“Sounds good. Tell my brother hi back.”

“I will. Kiss the kids for us, okay? And remind them we’ll see them tomorrow. You’ve got all the info on which entrance to use, so you don’t have to fight the crowds?”

“Yep, no worries, we’re covered.”

“Oh, and don’t forget their ear protection for the concert. I should have packed the noise-canceling muffs in their bags. I didn’t forget, did I? The red ones are Abigail’s, the—”

“Andi,” I interrupted her. “It’s fine, I have them right here. We’re all set. Don’t worry, Grey and I have it all under control. Okay?”

“Okay,” she mumbled. “Do I sound just a little overprotective?”

“You sound like a mom,” I laughed. “Now, go hang out with your husband. The girls and us will see you tomorrow.”

GREY



“**I**n your face, Stone!”

My daughter Kendall whooped with glee as her brother Wyatt failed to make a three-pointer from the end of the driveway — the same shot that Kendall had just nailed moments ago. “That’s HORSE, you’re out, Wyatt!” she shouted. “Now it’s just me and Dad!”

“Ugh, fine,” Wyatt muttered, tossing the ball away. “You beat me. I’m done.”

My kids and I were taking advantage of this unseasonably mild December day to shoot some hoops before dinner. From the sidelines, the twins’ cousins Abigail and Chloe clapped and did some weird cheerleader-like dance, using their mittens as makeshift pompoms.

“You can play the loser when this game is done, Wyatt,” Kendall teased her brother, making an L with her fingers against her forehead.

“Nah, I’m gonna go hang out in my room until dinner.” Wyatt grimaced. “Dad, you need to avenge me.”

“I’ll do my best,” I told him.

Wyatt loped off into the house, the screen door slamming behind him. A few seconds later, the familiar muffled strums of an electric guitar carried through his closed bedroom window.

As I stood in the center of the driveway contemplating my next shot, I couldn’t help admiring the way Wyatt just took the

loss to his sister in stride. One thing Seton had always stressed when the kids were little was that ability sports, or any hobby, had nothing to do with being a boy or a girl. She wanted to make sure that Kendall never felt at a disadvantage for being a female — but she also wanted to make sure that Wyatt never grew up thinking girls were less than, or that it was some sort of assault to his masculinity if a girl bested him in something.

Even though they were pretty evenly matched in basketball talent, Wyatt was much less competitive than Kendall when it came to sports. Kendall was athletic and physical, a tornado of a girl since she learned to walk. She ran track in middle school, and was planning to try out for the basketball team next year. Wyatt, on the other hand, was physically gifted as well, but he was quieter and more introspective. His passion lay in music, more so than in sports. We had gotten him a guitar last year, and ever since then Wyatt spent hours each day teaching himself to play. Wyatt went deep on whatever he was interested in — he had that in common with his sister — and he was a damn good player already. His Aunt Andi had told him more than once that he had what it took to be a seriously good musician. That was high praise, coming from one of the best-known names in music. Andi's encouragement spurred Wyatt on to work even harder at developing his skill on the instrument.

I watched Kendall now as she tossed me the ball, wondering not for the first time how my two twin children could be so alike but so different. Wyatt had my wife Seton's light hair, but my strong brow and chin. Kendall, on the other hand, had my dark coloring but See's features. They were both tall like me, though. At only eleven years old, they were on the verge of being as tall as their mom.

“Come *on*, Dad! Shoot the ball!” Kendall complained impatiently, interrupting my thoughts.

“All right, all right.” I dribbled a couple of times, trotted toward the basket, and did a reverse layup that went right in. My height gave me an advantage on this one. A year ago, Kendall wouldn't have been able to make it. Today, though, she grabbed the ball, took a few steps back, and tossed it up.

“Easy,” she announced as it fell through the hoop.

I made a big production of groaning. “You’re getting too good at this.”

“I’m just coming into my prime, Dad. I’m young and feisty. You’re trying to hang on to your fleeting youth.”

“Oh, so we’re trash talking now, are we?” I shot back.

She spread her arms wide and grinned. “I’m just stating the facts, old man.”

“Old, huh? So does that mean I’m too old to hang out with?” I clutched my heart like she had just shot an arrow through it. But even though I knew we were just joking around, I still got a twinge at the thought. I knew that pretty soon Kendall and Wyatt wouldn’t want to spend time with their lame-ass parents, much less be seen in public with us. I’d gotten used to Kendall being attached to me like a little shadow since the moment she could walk. I couldn’t imagine her wanting to spend more time trying on makeup with her friends than hanging out in the garage or shooting hoops with me.

But like Seton often said to me, our job as parents was to give our kids roots and wings. I knew I’d need to let go when the time came. Hopefully, Wyatt and Kendall would still come to shoot hoops with their old man from time to time when they were adults and off on their own.

“I suppose your aunt Andi is too old to hang out with, too, then.” I let out an exaggerated yawn. “Maybe you don’t wanna go to the concert tomorrow.”

“That’s different, Dad,” Kendall smirked, not taking the bait. “Aunt Andi and Uncle Cal are cool!”

I glared at her. “Shoot the ball, hot stuff.”

The game was close, but I ended up edging Kendall out by calling a bank swish shot that she couldn’t replicate. She howled her protest, and tried to challenge me to one more game, but Seton called us in for dinner before we could start one.

“Wash your hands, everyone, please!” my wife sang out as we trooped inside.

“Even me?” I joked.

“Especially you.”

I swatted her ass and grabbed her into my arms for a kiss. “What have I told you about ordering me around?” I murmured in a low voice.

“You can order me around later in the bedroom if you’d like,” she whispered against my ear.

“Dammit, woman, don’t get me worked up.”

“Or else?”

“Or else I’ll —”

“Auntie See!” Little Chloe’s voice cut through our romantic moment. “Can you help me wash my hands?”

“Of course, sweetie!” Seton gave me a quick wink and went into the kitchen with her niece. *Later*, she mouthed.

At the dinner table, all of the kids kept up a steady patter of excited conversation. The little ones chattered about Christmas and about seeing their parents tomorrow. Kendall got excited talking about some show she was watching on YouTube. Wyatt told me about a song he was working on. “It’s from Hard Candy’s new album,” he explained. “Ash does this wicked guitar riff. It’s killer.”

“You’ll have to play it for him when you see him tomorrow,” Seton commented.

Wyatt shook his head, suddenly turning beet red. “Nah. I mean that’d be weird.”

I knew my boy had a shy streak. I made a mental note to mention to Andi that Wyatt was working on the song. I was pretty sure she’d make a point of telling Ash about it.

After dinner, it was Wyatt’s turn to clear the table, and Kendall’s turn to do the dishes. Seton took the girls upstairs to do bath time and put them to bed. I took advantage of a rare

moment of peace to sit in the living room in the glow of the Christmas tree, listening to the sounds of my family.

Life was good. Damn good.

Eventually, Seton's low voice wafted down to me from upstairs as she read Abigail and Chloe a bedtime story. A few minutes later, she came into the living room and joined me on the sofa.

"All good?" I asked.

"All good," she sighed. "I'm actually going to miss having those little girls around. It's making me miss when Kendall and Wyatt were small."

"Yeah, those were some great days," I grinned. "I was just thinking about that today. How pretty soon Kendall and Wyatt are gonna be teenagers. It's gone damn fast."

"Ugh. Don't remind me. Every time Eva tells me about some teen moment Zoe has, I clench up. Tell me it's not going to be terrible."

"It won't be that bad." I shook my head. "They're good kids. I'm just not looking forward to them getting to be too cool for their parents."

"My mom told me it lasts about ten years," Seton said. "The teenage crazies. So, if the bad years start at fourteen, they'll pull their heads out of their asses at around twenty-four."

I groaned. "Shit. And people said the toddler stage was bad. That sounds like a cake walk in comparison."

Seton eyed me speculatively.

"What?"

"Nothing." She was silent.

"Uh-uh. Not nothing. I know you better than that. Out with it, woman."

"It's just... Do you ever think about having another kid?"

That brought me up short. "Whoa. Seriously?"

“Yes, seriously. Why not?”

I tried to think of what to say. “I dunno. I just, uh, thought we were done with that.”

She contemplated my words. “Well, I don’t think we ever actually *said* so, did we?”

“No...but...”

Huh.

Funny. I guess we never did consciously decide to stop having kids.

After Wyatt and Kendall were born, See went back on the pill. And then, we just got to work with the business of being parents. For some reason, I assumed that having twins was sort of a one-and-done thing. After all, it was Seton that had to go through the hard part of being pregnant. I figured she was happy to get a two-fer, and to only have to do it once.

“So?” she prompted me.

“Shit, See. I honestly never thought about it before. But...”

“But?”

“I mean...” I paused, uncomfortable in the knowledge that I was stalling. “I like the part where we do the thing that *makes* babies...”

Seton snorted. “Don’t you try to act dumb with me, Greyson Stone. I know you love being a dad.” She snuggled up against me. “So the question is, would you ever consider doing it again?”

I thought about earlier, how I was sad to think about Kendall and Wyatt growing up. And about how much damn fun they were when they were Chloe and Abigail’s age.

I’d go back in time and do it all over again with the twins in a heartbeat, if I could.

But another kid?

Now?

I guess she knew me well enough not to push the conversation. But it was working on my mind, and I was still mulling it over later as I followed Seton up to bed. There were two warring images fighting for space in my head.

One was Seton and me seven years from now, when we'd be empty nesters. I'd have the whole house to chase her around like the horny young kids we once were.

The other was me, old and gray. The oldest dad in the neighborhood. Throwing my back out playing catch with my youngest kid.

Jesus fuck, Grey. You ain't that old. Get it together, asshole.

As I was mentally wrestling with myself, See came out of our bathroom, naked and smelling like soap and her own sweet scent. Jesus, after all these years together she could still get my engines revving, just at the sight of her. She climbed into bed, the mattress sinking a little from her weight as she lay down next to me.

“You're not falling asleep on me, are you?” she teased.

“Never. As you can see.”

Her eyes traveled down to the tent under the bedspread just below my waist. She made a purr deep in her throat. “Now, that's what I like to see,” she murmured.

Seton slid across the sheets, pulling the spread down, and took me in her mouth. I let out a hiss. Jesus, this woman still stole my breath. She knew just how to play me, to make me so hard I could barely think. I knew I before long I would be seconds away from coming, except that my girl always knew how to draw it out until I came so hard I saw stars.

“Get up here,” I growled, pulling her off me. “You ain't doin' that before I get a taste of you.”

At first, I thought she was gonna protest, but she didn't argue with me, just gave me a saucy look. She straddled me then, and leaned down until her tits were brushing against my chest. I grabbed her hips and resisted the urge to pull her down

onto my thirsty cock, but just barely. Instead, I guided her upwards, until her sweet pussy was angled over my mouth.

“Give yourself to me, darlin’. Need to taste you,” I repeated.

Seton’s breath caught in her throat as she lowered herself onto my tongue. *Oh, fuck yes.* My girl tasted like honey and heaven and sex and every damn good thing. I lapped at her greedily, my cock throbbing. Seton rode my tongue, her hips thrusting as she whimpered her need. I listened to her soft, helpless cries as she climbed higher and higher. A half a dozen times, I pulled her away as she was close to the edge, suppressing a chuckle as her moans grew more impatient. Finally, when I knew she couldn’t take any more, I sank my tongue deep inside her then drew it out, slowly, as my lips closed over her clit and sucked her in.

Seton’s whole body went rigid. A second later, she shattered.

Her body was still quaking and pulsing when I lowered her onto my shaft. She was hot and tight, and any thought I had of drawing this out, of taking my time, went away. I had to have her, had to drive into her deep and fast before I lost my damn mind.

“Jesus, baby. It never gets old,” I gritted out.

“Greyson,” she moaned.

“Gonna come, babe.”

“Yes. Oh, god, yes...”

“Jesus. Jesus fuck, yes...” I felt my cock thicken, knew I couldn’t hold out any longer. I rammed into her harder, faster, and then she clamped down on my shaft and I lost my damn mind. I exploded inside her, heat and fire releasing deep and fast as she clung to me and the world ended.

My mind went completely blank. After a while, it started to come back online. Seton was lying on top of me, both of us covered in a thin sheen of sweat. I was stroking her hair as the two of us inhaled, exhaled, inhaled together. Like we were one person. One soul.

Even after all this time, I still had moments like this. Moments where I couldn't believe that this life was mine. That this woman — this gorgeous, sexy, fiery woman — was my wife.

No one had a life that was better than ours was. I was far luckier than a flawed man like me had any reason to be.

And as Seton drifted to sleep, I couldn't help but marvel about how perfect everything was right now. Didn't she see that? Didn't she feel the same way?

Or when she asked me if I'd think about having another kid, was she telling me she wanted more?

In a world that could be downright shitty a lot of the time, we'd found the sweet spot. We were happy. If another kid came into the picture, would that be tempting fate? Would we be messing up a good thing?

SETON



The next day, Grey and I piled into the car with all the kids and made the drive up to Denver. At the hotel, we parked in the ramp and Grey checked in at the reception, where he had to show his ID to verify that we were with the band. A couple of minutes later, a large, muscular man in a suit with an earpiece came out to the lobby and approached us.

“Mr. Stone?” he asked. At Grey’s nod, he said, “I’m here to take your party up to the Hard Candy event.”

If the security guy was surprised by Grey’s MC cut, he didn’t show it, even though I was pretty doubtful we looked like the hotel’s usual clientele. Maybe he was used to rock bands and the motley assortment of people they brought in as guests. He did look a little surprised by the troop of youngsters we had with us, though.

Security Guy led the way past a bank of public elevators to a smaller one that needed a key card to access.

“We’re going in the fancy elevator,” Kendall whispered to Wyatt.

“It’s not fancy inside, though,” he whispered back when we stepped into the car. “It’s just regular.”

The guard used his key card again on the elevator panel and punched a button with no lettering or numbering next to it. The car rose up for close to ten seconds in a sort of limbo, bypassing what I assumed were the floors for regular hotel guests, toward the top buttons, which read P1, P2, P3, P4. A penthouse for each band member, I guessed.

But we didn't go quite to the top. The elevator slowed, then stopped, at a floor whose button had no label.

"Here we are," he intoned.

Then the doors opened, and we stepped out into a Christmas scene that could have been straight out of Macy's.

Well, Macy's with bikers and rock stars.

The event space had been festooned with all manner of tinsel, ornaments, and other decorations in a silver and red theme. An enormous Christmas tree stood in pride of place at the center of the room. Rock and roll Christmas classics blared over the sound system. On one end was a long table filled to the hilt with food. A wet bar was next to it, staffed with two bartenders in hotel uniforms. To the right, there was another small room. Through the open door, I glimpsed a Santa throne, with large decorative presents all around it.

"Wow," I breathed. "Is this just for us?"

"Looks like it," Grey murmured.

A bunch of the Stone Kings and their families were already there. Shouts of greeting welcomed us. Andi herself was standing not far from the Christmas tree and spotted us. She called Abigail and Chloe's names and knelt down, spreading her arms out to grab both of her daughters in a hug as they ran towards her.

"Oh, my gosh, I have missed you so much, my little munchkins!" she cried, kissing the tops of their heads. "I could hardly sleep last night, I was so excited to see you!"

"We missed you, too, Mommy!" Abigail announced.

Andi looked up and smiled. "All the others are already here," she told us. "And all the kids, too, of course."

"Is Lincoln here?" Abigail asked her.

"Yep, Lincoln and Zoe are here with their mom and dad. And Mia is here, too." She pointed. "See, they're right over there."

“Yaayy!” Chloe and Abigail shouted, and ran off to find their friends.

Andi got to her feet. “So glad you guys are here,” she said to me, enveloping me in a hug.

“We wouldn’t have missed it.”

“This is some spread,” Grey remarked. “Damn, you guys must be important or something.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Andi grinned and turned to embrace him too. “The hotel pulled out all the stops. I suspect it’s because... well, never mind. Anyway, they went all out.” She pointed. “Wet bar, food, the works. Ask for anything you want.”

Cal walked up a few seconds later. “Hey, y’all!” he greeted us, lifting a bottle of beer. “Merry Christmas, et cetera. Thanks for bringing the kids.”

“No prob,” Grey said. “They’ve been bouncing off the walls all damn day, excited as hell to see the rest of their crew.” He nodded toward the pack of kids over by the Santa chair. “What’s with the throne?”

“The hotel arranged a special visit from Santa Claus himself just for the kids.” Cal took a swig of his beer. “Let’s hope they don’t fuck that up, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“They screwed up some security stuff when we arrived. Some fans got in and managed to swarm the band in the lobby. Security couldn’t handle the volume of people, and it got pretty hairy. So Rudy lost her shit on them. Said if they couldn’t provide the level of service that was agreed on in the contract, the band wouldn’t be paying for their stay here. The hotel is falling all over themselves to make up for it.” He swept his hand around the room. “All this? Comped. With a thank you to Hard Candy for staying here and an implied ‘please don’t trash us on social media’.”

While we were talking to Andi and Cal, Trig and Eva sauntered up with Kai, the drummer for Hard Candy. The slight limp that Trig, the Stone Kings VP, walked with since

he'd been shot in the leg years ago gave him a distinctive gait. He had one arm around his wife, and in the other hand he held a few mini-bottles of alcohol, the kind they serve on airplanes.

“Ho ho ho, Prez!” Trig boomed in his deep bass voice, handing one of the bottles to Grey. “Meeerrrrry Christmas!”

“You bought me a tiny bottle of Jack Daniels?” Grey smirked. “Shit, your generosity knows no bounds.”

“Nah. I ain't even that generous. They decorated the upper branches of the Christmas tree with these things. Adult ornaments!”

“That was my idea,” Kai smirked, and tipped back a mini-bottle of tequila. Trig high-fived him.

“Hey, you guys!” Cherish appeared at my side, flanked by Levi, and their two kids, ten-year-old Gracie and six-year-old Mia.

I gave Cherish a hug. “Great to see you!”

“Have you checked out the spread over there?” Cherish whistled. “It's huge! There's enough food for three times as many people as there are here. They have these flaky Greek triangle pastry things? With spinach and feta?”

“Spanikopita?” I asked.

“Yes!” She snapped her fingers. “I knew you being a chef would know what they're called. Anyway, they are sooooo good! I could eat a million of them.”

“About the food, Cherish,” Andi cut in. “Can your shelter use the extra leftovers we have? We ordered way too much, and there's sure to be a ton that doesn't get eaten. I can't bear to think of all this food going to waste.”

Cherish operated a shelter for women and children on the outskirts of town called Safe Haven. Though it was stable and reasonably well-funded for a non-profit, it could always use more help. Andi was one of its biggest donors — mostly anonymously — and she was always thinking of ways to give the place some assistance, financial or otherwise.

“Are you sure the hotel would let you do that?” Cherish asked.

“They’re going to, whether they like it or not,” Andi said firmly. “I can arrange for it to be packed up and transported over when we’re done, if that’s okay.”

“That would be great! I’ll call our staff to let them know they won’t have to cook dinner tonight!”

Cherish got out her phone and moved away to make the call. Meanwhile, little Gracie looked up at me sweetly. “Is Wyatt here?”

I stifled a smile. Gracie had had a crush on Wyatt for years.

“Yep, he and Kendall are both around somewhere. Why don’t you go find them?”

Gracie did just that. Then Mia, shyer than her sister, tugged at my shirt. I bent down and Mia whispered something in my ear.

“Yep, Santa is going to be here soon!” I answered her. “Are you excited?”

Mia bobbed her head. “I wrote him a letter already!”

“Well, I bet he’ll be excited to hear you tell him in person what you asked for. I’m sure he’ll remember!”

Mia ran off to play with the rest of the kids her age. Levi watched her go. “Good to have you two back,” he said to Andi and Cal.

“It’s good to be back,” Andi agreed. “After this tour, I’m planning on a long rest. I don’t want to see the inside of a hotel or a tour bus for a long, long time.”

“Well, while we’re here, I’m gonna go take advantage of the free booze,” Levi smirked.

“I’ll come with you,” Cal offered. “Prez? VP?”

“Yep,” Grey nodded. The four of them wandered off, Kai with them, leaving Andi, Eva, and me.

“This is still so surreal,” Eva remarked, looking all around her. “Andi, I always just kind of forget you’re a huge star when we’re in Lupine.”

“Me, too,” I agreed. “And I’ve been around since basically the beginning, when Andi and I were just a lowly bartender and server at The Cactus. That seems like so long ago.”

Andi giggled. “God, remember when The Nopes got our first regular gig at the Oasis here in Denver? We thought we had hit the big time. Can you imagine? We had no idea what was coming.”

“Do you miss those days?” Eva asked.

“Sort of. It was simpler back then. We played what we wanted. There were no record companies trying to tell us what would sell and what wouldn’t.” Andi looked pensive. “If I could just do everything I’m doing now, but without the fame, that’s what I’d choose. I was thinking the other day how different our lives would be if no one knew what we looked like, you know? You really don’t realize how hard it will be when you can’t just walk down the street without security with you.”

“I can only imagine,” Eva murmured.

“And it’s hard to keep the kids away from that, too. They deserve the most normal lives we can give them.” Andi turned to me. “That’s why it was so great that you and Grey were willing to have them stay with you while Cal came with me on the last part of the tour. It would have made me nuts to have them around the craziness and the danger.”

“Danger?” Eva looked at her, puzzled.

“Yeah. We’ve had some threats recently come through social media, and an incident in Kansas City.” She shrugged. “It’s hard to know how seriously to take that stuff, even though it usually ends up being nothing. It’s one thing when it’s just me, but if I had to worry about the kids, too...”

Andi trailed off. A wave of sympathy filled me as I gazed at her creased forehead. I was even more glad now that Grey

and I had taken Abigail and Chloe to stay with us these past few weeks.

“Hey, ladies.” Cal comes up to Andi and wraps his arm around her waist. “The Santa is here.”

“Thanks, Cal,” Eva said, then called out to Zoe, who was across the room. “Zo, can you help me get the littles together and lined up to go see Santa?”

Zoe, who was on her phone, put it away and came trotting over to her mother. “Can I at least take pictures of the band and stuff to send to my friends, since you wouldn’t let me bring them?” she said sulkily.

“You can take all the pictures you want, once you help me take pictures of the kids with Santa.” Eva pretended not to notice Zoe’s attitude. Zoe let out a sigh but nonetheless started rounding up the kids and leading them into the other room, where a very tall but not very fat and jolly-looking Santa was taking a seat on his throne.

“Couldn’t they find anyone a little more roly-poly for the job?” Cherish murmured.

“He’s probably just some bellboy they forced into the position for the night.” I shrugged. “The kids likely won’t notice, though. All they’ll see is the suit and the beard.”

And I was correct, of course. Abigail and Chloe were first in line, and they never seemed to care that their Santa wasn’t a carbon copy of the ones on the TV specials they watched. Abigail went first, and Andi got an absolutely adorable picture of her on Santa’s lap. Chloe had an unexpected fit of shyness and tears when she was next to go up. I asked her if she wanted to skip her turn, and she said yes at first — until Lincoln, behind her, said he wanted to go. Suddenly, Chloe ran up and stood next to Santa, claiming him like he was her territory. She wouldn’t sit on his lap, but when Andi coached her and repeated Santa’s question about what she wanted for Christmas, she murmured an answer that he pretended to hear.

The other youngsters went after, one by one, and I took pictures of them all, as did the other moms. I was feeling a

little nostalgic, to tell the truth. At eleven years old, Wyatt and Kendall had definitely aged out of the believing-in-Santa phase. That had been such a sweet, innocent time. I missed it. My mind went back to my conversation with Grey from last night, about whether we should think about having another child.

I wasn't sure where the question had come from, exactly. I hadn't planned to ask it. And then all of a sudden, it just burst from me.

And ever since, I hadn't stopped thinking about it.

I hadn't brought it up with Grey again, though. I wasn't sure how to, or whether I even should. He didn't seem exactly thrilled at the idea. And I couldn't imagine trying to force him into it. For one thing, no one ever forced Greyson Stone to do anything he didn't want to. And for another, I certainly didn't want to have a child with a father who wasn't one-hundred percent on board with it.

All of which meant, I had no idea whether the topic would ever come up again. And that made me suddenly, unbearably sad.

Once all the kids who wanted to had gone through the Santa line, Mr. Claus was invited to stick around and have some food and drink. He didn't talk much, but he did grab a plate and fill it as high as if he really was the rotund Jolly Old Elf. When he had finished his massive plate, he disappeared, probably to go back to whatever his hotel job was.

Not too long after that, Carter, the rhythm guitarist for Hard Candy, let out a shrill whistle. "Hey, band! We need to leave for the sound check," he called.

Kai, Emmy, and Ash, the other band members, moved toward the exit, along with the band's tour manager and a few other people associated with them. Andi set down her drink and prepared to follow them. She gathered up her daughters and pulled them into a hug.

"Bye, babies! Mommy will see you at the show, okay?"

The girls gave her kisses and squeezed her tight. Andi straightened and turned to me. “There will be three limos downstairs to take all of you to the arena for the show later. Rudy will have someone come up and get you when it’s time to leave. Until then, enjoy the space. If anyone needs some time away or a nap or anything, our penthouse is P1. You can have someone take you up there.”

“Sounds great, babe. Break a leg!” I gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks!” Andi flashed me her beautiful smile. “One more show, and then it’s off the road for this girl!”

GREY



“I could get pretty damn used to this scene, brother,” Levi said to Cal, picking up another mini-bottle of booze from the pile on the coffee table in front of him.

The party room — or whatever this luxury fucking suite was called — was a lot less crowded once Andi’s band and their people had left for the sound check and the concert. Most of the kids had gone into the room where the Santa guy’s throne was, leaving the adults out in the main room. I could hear the muffled shouts and screams of their playing through the half-open door. Periodically, some hotel employees would come into the suite and refresh the steam trays and platters of food, or bring in some more booze for the bar.

My Stone Kings brothers and I were sprawled out on oversized leather couches and chairs by the floor-to-ceiling windows, relaxing and shooting the shit.

“Shit, this is the fuckin’ life,” Patch, our medic, said. “Prez, the MC needs to up our game to come up with the kind of scratch to afford this rich-ass lifestyle. How we gonna do that?”

“Shit, we don’t gotta do anything,” Moose, our enforced, joked. “We just gotta keep Cal around. Or rather, Cal’s old lady. That way we live like kings without payin’ for any of it.”

“You’ve seen how we live at home,” Cal pointed out. “This shit ain’t normal reality for us. Besides, the part of Andi’s tour that you don’t see is that they spend most of their time on a goddamn tour bus. It’s a nice fuckin’ bus, don’t get

me wrong. But still. I've done that shit the last few weeks, and it ain't great. It's just basically being cooped up in a fancy-ass cage. It's boring as shit, no fresh air, and bad food. This is not a representation of the touring lifestyle, trust me."

"Yeah, but still. I'm talking about when you're not on tour," Moose insisted. "Andi and them rub elbows with the rich and famous all the time. Hell, they *are* the rich and famous."

"Speaking of rubbing elbows and other parts," our newest member, Frankenstein, cut in. "That keyboard player chick? Jesus Christ, she is hot as shit. Emmy, is that her name?" He shook his head. "I would rub any fuckin' thing she asked me to against her."

"She is damn good-looking," Trig agreed. "Not that I noticed, of course."

Levi snorted. "Eva ain't even here, ya pussy. You don't have to cover your ass."

The old ladies had all gone upstairs to look at Andi's penthouse suite about half an hour ago, taking Zoe and Kendall with them.

"You think Emmy would slum it with a guy like me?" Frankenstein pressed.

"Depends how drunk you can get her," I said.

"I dunno, maybe Frankie's got a shot," Cal frowned. "Some chicks like ugly dudes."

"Fuck off, Cal," Frankenstein shot back.

Laughing, I got up to get myself a refresher on my beer. At the bar, the bartenders were just getting ready to change shifts. The new ones came in through the main door, wearing the same uniforms as the old ones. The Santa guy slipped back in with them. He was still in his Santa suit, even though he had left our party a while ago. He looked kind of different now, though. A little fatter, somehow. Not quite as fat as a Santa should be, but at least not as skinny as before. Maybe he had another party gig after ours and the hotel finally wised up and got him some fuckin' padding for his outfit.

As the Santa passed me by, his eyes flicked to mine. He started to raise a hand toward his beard, like he was planning to adjust it, but then lowered it at the last second and turned his head away from me.

“You forget something?” I asked.

He nodded and grunted something that might have been a yes as he made his way toward the room where his throne was. He seemed pretty uninterested in talking. Not much of a ho-ho-ho type, that’s for sure. I hoped he did better with the kids.

Grabbing my beer from the new bartender, I went back to my seat at the couch with my brothers.

A couple minutes later, Zoe and Kendall came back down to the party room, without the rest of the old ladies. Zoe had her phone in her hand, half-distracted by it.

“How come they sent another Santa down?” she frowned as she scrolled on it. “Did the new one come back to see if there were any more kids who needed to see him?”

“Yeah, I noticed the guy was here again,” I said. “I guess he must have forgot something and came back for it.”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head. “This is definitely a different guy. This one has a tattoo on his hand. The last one didn’t.”

“That’s weird,” I said. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. The other one definitely didn’t have tattoos at all that I could see.” She raised a brow. “It’s weird that a fancy hotel like this wouldn’t make this one put Santa gloves on or something to cover them up. Everyone else who works here is so uptight and straightlaced.”

“Yeah, I see what you mean.” I shrugged. “Maybe they’re hard up for labor or something.”

Trig cocked his head at his daughter. “Where’s your mom, Zo?”

“They’re all still up in the penthouse,” Zoe told us. “It was cool up there, but we got bored after a while.”

“There really is a grand piano in their living room,” Kendall marveled, eyes growing wide as she spoke. “With a big chandelier above it!”

“And a big black velvet love-pit sofa, too,” Zoe added. “I hope they clean that thing *very* well between check-ins. Ew.”

Kendall looked up at Zoe, confused. “How come?”

“Ahem,” Trig cleared his throat. “Zoe, watch it.”

Zoe rolled her eyes at her dad. “Ugh. Sorry.”

“What?” Kendall repeated, frustrated.

“Nothing, kiddo. Zoe was just making a weird joke.”

Kendall sighed dramatically. “No one tells me anything.”

“Hey, Zo, go in and check on the younger kids in the other room, will ya?” Trig told them. “Make sure no one’s bleeding or anything. We got club business to talk about.”

That earned Trig double eye-rolls from the girls, but they did as they were told.

“Wow, Zoe making sex jokes,” Cal remarked after they left. “It’s freakin’ weird how she’s almost grown.”

“Yeah, I feel like an old goddamn man, but it creeps me right the fuck out that she even knows what sex is,” Trig groaned. “That girl is gonna be the death of her mother and me. There’s a boy she likes who’s been sniffing around her lately. Can’t remember his name. Taylor or Tyler or some shit. He’s got that hungry young wolf look in his eyes, you know? Makes me feel about ready to go full papa bear and beat his ass, every time I see him.”

“Parenting girls is way fuckin’ harder than parenting boys,” Levi commented.

“How the fuck do you know?” Trig laughed. “You have two daughters.”

Levi shrugged. “Yeah. And I don’t know what the hell goes through their mind half the time. At least I get how boys think.”

“You mean, like fuckin’ pigs?” Trig shook his head. “Sometimes I get the feeling I’m being punished for my sins by having to parent a teenage girl who’s pretty enough to make all the boys around her lose their damn minds. I swear I can see every thought in their heads like they’re thought balloons when they look at her. Just like the thoughts I used to have about pretty girls when I was their age.”

“We’ve been lucky with Kendall so far,” I said. “She ain’t interested in boys at all. I doubt she will be for a while, either. She’s all about the sports and about helping me out in the garage. She told me the other day she wants to get a motorcycle of her own when she’s older.”

Cal snickered. “Oh yeah, right. I bet See will go for that, no problem.”

“Yeah, unlikely. But Kendall asked me to help her butter her mom up, to get her slowly used to the idea, so that when Ken turns sixteen Seton will be open to it.”

“Are you gonna do it, Prez?”

“I value my marriage.” I took a swig of my beer. “I also value my balls, and I’m not interested in having ‘em twisted off and handed to me.”

Zoe came out of the other room over to us, looking worried, trailing her little brother Lincoln behind her.

“Abigail and Chloe aren’t here,” she said.

“What?” Cal rose up halfway out of his chair. “What do you mean? Where are they?”

She looked down at her brother seriously. “Lincoln, tell Uncle Cal and the others what you just told me. Where did Abigail and Chloe go?”

“They left with Santa Claus,” Lincoln said.

SETON



Zoe was in tears. “It’s all my fault! I was supposed to be watching them!” she sobbed.

“Stop it, Zoe,” Trig said, cutting her short and putting an arm around her. “You need to stay calm. It’s not your fault. We’ll get them back.”

“We need call Andi,” I said urgently, reaching for my phone. But Cal stopped me before I could make the call.

“No, See. Not yet.” He was grim-faced but resolute. “There’s nothing she can do from the arena, and if we tell her right now, she’s going to fall apart. It won’t help anything.”

“Oh my God, we just can’t keep from her that her children are missing, Cal! She’s their mother!” I insisted.

“And I am their goddamn father!” he snapped back. “And I am Andi’s husband. You need to back it the fuck up and put your fucking phone away, Seton, right the fuck now.”

“But —”

“Babe.” Grey’s hand was on my shoulder. “He’s right. Put it away.”

I gaped at them both. Not telling Andi that her babies were in danger felt like betraying her. But the set, determined look on both Cal and Grey’s faces brooked no argument. Silently, helplessly, I slipped my phone back into my pocket. I said a silent apology to Andi in my head, and a prayer for the girls’ safety. *Please Lord, let us get them back before anything bad happens.*

Cal turned to my husband and Zoe, suddenly all business. “How long ago did you see the Santa guy?”

“Maybe fifteen minutes ago,” Grey answered.

“I came back downstairs with Kendall about ten minutes ago,” Zoe hiccupped, rubbing a wet eye with the heel of her hand.

“And Lincoln said he saw the girls leave with him out that door,” Eva murmured, pointing. “He said they looked happy. So they must not have been struggling.”

“Fuck, of course not,” Cal muttered, raking a hand through his hair. “Who better to kidnap some fucking kids than Santa himself?”

“But why? Why would he kidnap them?” I cried.

“Who knows?” Grey said. “Money, maybe, if he knew they’re Andi’s kids. That’s the most likely answer. Or...”

He trailed off. Whatever else he was thinking, it was clear he decided it was better not to say it.

Levi and Cherish burst through the doors a second later, a sharply-dressed man in a suit trailing behind them. “This is Mr. Hassan, the hotel manager,” Levi said. “He says he doesn’t know of any employees at the hotel who have obvious tattoos, on their hands or anywhere else.”

“Not front-facing staff, anyway. It’s against our policy,” Mr. Hassan explained. “A few of our staff do have tattoos. But they are obliged to keep them covered when they are at work.”

“What about other employees?” Cal asked. “Maids, janitors, maintenance, kitchen staff?”

“Anyone who has contact with our guests would be subjected to that policy. But yes, possibly kitchen staff or some physical plant and maintenance workers could have more visible tattoos.”

“You must have security cameras here,” Moose broke in. “We need access. Need to see footage of all the entrances and exits for the last hour at least.”

“I’m afraid I can’t—“

“Look,” Grey barked, cutting him off. “I don’t think you understand.” He took a step closer, so Hassan could see the six inches of height Grey had on him. “We’re getting access to your camera footage. Now.”

Hassan blanched. “I—“

“You won’t like what happens if we don’t. You also need to secure all entrances and exits right the fuck now,” Grey growled. “No one gets in or out.” When Hassan didn’t immediately react, Grey shouted “*Now!*”

Hassan jumped, then with shaking hands pulled a small coms device from his pocket and started talking into it. When he disconnected, Grey spoke again. “Now you’re gonna get access to the security cam footage for my men Moose and Patch here.”

This time, Hassan did as he was told with no argument. He called another number, spoke briefly, and ended the call. “Someone from Security will be here in a few moments to take your men to view the footage from our security cameras.”

“All right,” Grey nodded. “Now, you call all the heads of all the departments in this hotel and tell them to meet us in the lobby ASAP.”

As Hassan moved off to make the calls, Grey turned to Zoe. “Zo, what did the tattoo on this guy’s hand look like?”

She blinked. “It was, like, a crab. Realistic, and kind of creepy-looking. I remember wondering what it meant. Like maybe Cancer was his zodiac sign or something.”

Beside me, Cal sucked in a breath.

“Holy shit,” he said. “You mean like this?” He reached for a cheap ballpoint and a pad with the hotel logo on it that were lying on a table, and quickly scribbled out a design, then showed it to Zoe.

“Yes! That’s it!” Zoe cried. “Exactly like that. But how do you know?”

Cal turned to Grey. “Schipper.”

Oh, shit,” Frankenstein murmured.

“Who?” I asked, confused.

“Richie Schipper,” Grey growled. “A prospect we had a few years back.”

“We used to joke that he had crabs,” Cal interjected. “Him and his buddy... shit, what was his name?”

“Dog,” Frankenstein supplied. “That was what we called him, anyway. Guy’s name was Something Dogson.”

“Shit, I remember, yeah,” Grey said. “Those two barely made it to prospect before we tossed them out for some shit or other.”

“For disrespect.” Frank’s lip curls. “Schipper kept talkin’ back and asking questions when we’d ask him to do shit. I remember because I hadn’t been patched too long before they came around. Pissed me right the fuck off.”

“Yeah. That, and not knowing the difference between club girls and old ladies,” Cal muttered. “If I remember right, Schipper tried flirting with Andi once. She kicked his balls up into his throat for it.”

“Fucking hell,” Grey bit out. “Okay. Let’s work on the assumption it’s him. We gotta move. Spread out.” He sent a few of the men down to monitor the parking garage exits, the service elevators, and the loading dock. “Time is everything here. Cherish, Eva, you stay here with the kids. Make sure they’re calm. If you can get any more info out of Lincoln or any of the others, call Levi or me. Cal, Trig, and Seton, you come with me.”

We rushed to the elevator. On the way down, Grey called Moose and put him on speaker. “Find anything on the hotel cams?”

“Not yet.”

“Ask the security guys if they know anyone on staff with a crab tattoo on his hand.”

Muffled conversation. “Nope.”

“Okay. Keep looking at the film. We’re working on the theory that this guy is a former prospect to the club. Guy named Schipper.”

“Fuck,” Moose swore. “I remember that asshole.”

“Not a hundred percent sure, but sounds like he might be our guy. Keep in touch.”

“Gotcha, Prez.”

Down in the lobby, a couple of heads of the departments were already there, standing next to the reception. When they were all assembled, Grey asked them whether anyone on their staff had a tattoo of a crab on the back of his hand, possibly named Schipper.

The head of housekeeping spoke up. “There’s someone who works in the laundry with a tattoo like that, but his name isn’t Schipper. He was just hired recently.”

“Is he working today?”

She furrowed her brow. “I don’t think so. I believe it’s his day off.”

Grey, Cal, and Trig continued to interrogate the hotel workers. While they were talking, an idea occurred to me. Desperate to help, I turned to Mr. Hassan.

“Is there a place where the person you hired to be Santa for our party would have stored his things and changed into the costume?”

“Yes, there’s a staff locker facility.”

“Can you take me to it?”

He hesitated. “The locker rooms are separated by gender.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do you really think that matters right now?”

Hassan looked like he wanted to refuse, but then glanced at Grey and seemed to think better of it. He nodded once, curtly. “This way.”

I turned to follow him. As I did, Grey noticed and threw me a questioning glance. I mouthed *I'll be back* and made a phone gesture with my hand. *Keep your phone handy.*

Hassan took me to a door behind the reception area and used his card to open it. Inside was a long corridor which led to a stairwell. We descended a floor and then emerged into a maze-like series of hallways. He strode purposefully forward, and I had to hurry to keep up with him.

“How long does it take to learn your way around here?” I asked. He didn’t answer.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out. It was Grey.

“Where’d you go?” he asked without preamble.

“I’m having Mr. Hassan take me to where the staff lockers are.”

“Shit, See, you can’t be walking around here without one of the men with you. It’s too dangerous.”

“You said yourself time was of the essence, Grey. I’ll be fine.”

Just then, a man came out of a door to the right at the end of one of the hallways. He was maybe late twenties, medium build, a bit of a paunch, brown hair. He was too far away for me to see his hands to look for a tattoo. But he was carrying a bundle that looked like fabric.

Red, velvety fabric.

“Hey!” I shouted.

The man looked back, startled. He dropped the bundle and stumbled backwards, reaching for something as he did.

“Gun!” I screamed.

Hassan yelped as I pulled him into a doorway. A shot rang out. Then footsteps as the man ran away.

“Seton!” Grey’s frantic voice came through the receiver.

“Grey! It’s him! He just shot at us and ran!”

“Where are you?”

I looked at Hassan, who was pale as a ghost. He stammered a few words and I repeated them back to Grey.

“Stay low! We’re coming!”

“No! He’ll get away! I’m going after him!”

“Seton, no! It’s too —“

I ended the call and sprinted down the corridor, leaving Hassan in my wake.

GREY



“Seton!” I shouted into the phone. “Goddamnit motherfucking son of a bitch!”

Jesus Christ, my wife was being shot at. “Get me down there!” I yelled at the security guard who was with me. My gun was out and in my hand in a second. The guard wasn’t happy, but when he saw the expression on my face he wasn’t about to try and stop me.

As we ran, I shouted back at my VP. “Trig! Get in contact with the other Kings! Make sure no one has left the parking garage or any of the exits!”

Cal came sprinting after us, catching up quickly. “What—“

“Cal, your girls are still in this building.” I told him in a couple words what had happened.

“We’re not losin’ ‘em,” he growled, his face drawn but determined.

“Damn right we’re not.” Down in the underground corridor, we found Hassan. He told us he hadn’t moved since Seton took off. “She went that way,” he said, nodding down the hall. “She followed him through that exit door.”

“Where did he come from?” Cal demanded.

Hassan pointed at a door behind us. “He was coming out of there. Those clothes on the floor were in his arms. He dropped them when he started running.”

At our feet was a Santa costume. Cal swore and bent to pick it up.

“Go through the pockets, and check out that room,” I told him. “I’m going after Seton.”

I tore off down the hallway and pushed open the heavy fire door. On the other side, I stopped to listen. I thought I could hear the pinging of shoes on concrete, and sprinted off that way. The fuckin’ security guy didn’t follow me, the pussy. I was on my own down here.

I rounded a corner and almost collided with two women in maids’ uniforms, who shrieked at the sight of my gun and flattened themselves against the wall.

“What’s down here?” I demanded, pointing.

“Uh... laundry,” stammered one of them.

“You see anyone else come down here running? A woman, small, long hair, pretty?”

“Yes, a minute ago...”

“Get out of here. It’s dangerous,” I told them, and kept going. My phone buzzed. “Talk to me!”

“It’s Cal. There’s a guy unconscious in the room the guy came busting out of. Looks like a head wound. I think it’s the original Santa guy. I’m trying to wake his ass up to see if he can tell us anything.”

“So we know the first Santa wasn’t in on whatever this is.”

“You find Seton and the guy?”

“Workin’ on it.”

Just then, a scream ripped through the air. “Grey!”

“Seton!” I yelled.

I hung up on Cal and ran in the direction of the scream. I found my wife on the floor, clutching her foot.

“Jesus, See, are you hurt?”

“I lost him!” she yelled, screwing up her face in fury. “I stepped wrong running after him. I did something to my ankle.”

I think it's at least sprained. God, I'm such an idiot!"

"You sure as hell are," I retorted. My relief that she was okay came out as anger. "What the fuck were you thinking, running after a guy with a gun?"

"Someone had to!"

"Not someone who wasn't armed, Seton. Are you fucking crazy?"

"Grey, now's not the time!" she said frantically. "He'll get away!"

"He can't escape. Whoever it is can't smuggle out two little kids without being noticed. All the exits are covered."

Seton was panic-stricken. "But what if he does something to the kids here, and then gets away?"

Her phone ringing interrupted us. Distractedly, she pulled it out to look at the screen. Her face paled.

"It's Andi," she whispered. "What do I do?"

"Don't answer it. Not until we get the girls back."

She nodded, pale with worry. "Go, Grey! Run after him! I can limp back the other way. I'll be fine."

"What's he look like?"

"I didn't get close enough to see. He's wearing jeans and a light gray T-shirt. Average build. Brown hair. I don't know if he's the one with the tattoo on his hand. Grey, you have to go!"

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes! But be careful with the gun. He could have the girls close by."

I pulled out my phone and punched in a number. "Frank! Seton's down in the hallway leading to the laundry. She's hurt her ankle. Come get her and get Patch to fix her up."

"On it, Prez."

My phone buzzed with an incoming call. I hung up with Frankenstein and answered it. "Grey," Levi gritted out. "We

nabbed that fucker Dogson, Schipper's asshole friend. He was waiting in a van down by the loading dock just now, tryin' to pretend he was just here picking up someone staying at the hotel, if you can believe that bullshit. Seems pretty clear he's the getaway car."

"Schipper's gotta still be in the hotel tryin' to get the kids out," I agreed. "You take Dogson's phone from him?"

"Yepper. We got him sittin' in the van so he looks like he's still waiting. But there's a gun shoved into the back of his head, in case he gets any ideas about warning Schipper."

"Let Cal know ASAP. You be fuckin' careful with the firearms down there, you hear me? We got two little girls who gotta make it out of this unharmed."

As I rounded the next corner, still talking to Levi, a guy emerged into the corridor on the far end, pushing an industrial-sized laundry hamper piled high with linens. He was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt and white hat. The sheets were piled high, mostly obscuring his face.

"Hey, you should get out of here," I barked at him. "There's a dude down here with a gun. We're looking for him. You see anyone running around down here?"

The man averted his eyes, shaking his head. He pushed the hamper past me, speeding up as he went.

But then, from the depths of the hamper, I heard a muffled voice:

"Uncle Grey?"

The guy glanced up, his wide eyes locking with mine. Recognition flashed in my brain. I broke his gaze and looked down at the tattoo on the back of his hand. He started to reach back toward his waistband, but I caught him in the chin with the butt of my piece. Bone cracked as his head snapped back. Before he could recover, I punched him hard in the gut with my other fist. He fell forward and collapsed, crumpling to the ground.

Just then, running footsteps clanged down the hall. I pivoted, ready to take aim and fire...

“Grey!”

Cal.

“It’s him!” I shouted. “The kids are in the hamper!”

Reaching behind Schipper, I yanked the gun from his waistband. He groaned, clutching his gut and wheezing loudly. I kicked him hard in the gut again, just for good measure, and then pushed him onto his stomach. I took off my belt to tie his hands behind him, and when I was sure he was secure and couldn’t try anything, I left him on the ground and stepped back a few paces. Then I called Trig.

“We got ‘em, brother. Schipper’s here with me and Cal. Dogson was involved, too. Levi’s got him outside at the loading dock.”

While I was talking, Cal had flung all the sheets and towels out of the hamper, revealing little Abigail and Chloe at the bottom. They were blinking and confused, but not hurt, and not scared.

“Thank God,” Cal breathed, pulling his daughters out, one by one. He gathered them into arms, squeezing them and whispering in their ears like he’d never be able to let them go.

“Where’s Santa?” Chloe whimpered. “Is he okay?” She pointed down at the ground. “Who’s that man?”

I placed my boot on the asshole’s head, putting just enough weight on it so he wouldn’t get any bright ideas to reply.

Santa’s fine, baby,” Cal answered her, struggling to keep the emotion out of his voice. He turned his daughter’s away from Schipper’s prone form. “Why did you girls leave with him, sweetheart?”

Abigail cut in. “He said you and Mommy said he could take us on an adventure.” Her lip started to quiver. “He said it would be okay!”

“Shhh, it’s okay, baby. It’s okay. Santa had to leave, though. He had, uh, some other stuff to do.”

“He told us to get into his basket!” Abigail protested, pointing at the hamper. “He was going to put presents in it too,

and take us up on the roof!”

“The roof?” Cal frowned. “Why the roof?”

Chloe pointed skyward. “That’s where his sleigh is! With his reindeer! They’re waiting for us!”

Understanding dawned on Cal’s face. “Santa had to, uh, take off in his sleigh, babies. He said he was sorry, and asked you to tell your mommy hello from him at the concert. Let’s go do that, okay?”

“Okay!” Abigail said. Chloe nodded.

Just then, the coward security guy came running down the corridor with another guy in the same uniform. I pressed down a little harder on Schipper’s head with my boot.

“Looks like the calvary are here, just in time to save the day,” I quipped, working hard to keep the fury out of my voice, for the sake of the girls. “Cal, get your babies out of here. I’ll take care of the rest of this, and meet you back upstairs.”

GREY



When I got back up to Andi’s penthouse suite, Patch was wrapping Seton’s ankle with an Ace bandage. Wyatt and Kendall flanked their mom on the bed. They took turns clamoring for more info about what had happened, with a mixture of excitement and anxiety at the knowledge that their mom had been in danger.

Cal, for his part, was still getting the story from his own kids. Thankfully, Abigail and Chloe seemed entirely untraumatized. Apparently, they never saw “Santa” take off his outfit, so they had no idea the guy wheeling them in the hamper was the same person. According to Abigail, Santa told them Mom and Dad said it was okay for him to take them up to see his reindeer — which is how he convinced them to come with him without a struggle.

“He said the reindeer were in a secret place,” Abigail explained. “So we had to close our eyes and get in the basket so he could take us to his sleigh!”

When Cal was satisfied the girls were truly okay, he called Zoe over. “Zoe, can you take the girls back down to the party room to Eva and Cherish and the other kids.”

Zoe’s face was red and shiny from crying. “Do... do you trust me to do that?” she asked.

“Aww, Zo.” Cal wrapped a consoling arm around her. “This isn’t on you. You know that, right? The guys who did this had probably been planning it for a while.”

“But they wouldn’t have been able to if I was watching!” she wailed.

“Or, they would have hurt you in order to get to them.” Cal grasped her by the shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. “It wasn’t your fault, darlin’. Okay?”

In response, Zoe burst into tears.

When she had finally quieted down, Zoe took Abigail and Chloe by the hands and led them downstairs, with a tearful backward glance at all of us.

Cal turned to me. “Jesus, this has been a hell of a day.”

“You ain’t kidding. How you holdin’ up?”

“You mean other than trying to figure out how I’m gonna tell Andi about all of this without giving her a heart attack?” He chuckled darkly. “Not great, I gotta admit. More than anything right now, I want to take those assholes into a dark alley and beat them to death. I fuckin’ hate that we had to let the law take over on this.”

Normally, our club takes care of our own shit. We got our own version of the law. An eye for an eye. The fuckers who tried to steal Cal’s children would never have seen the light of day again, if it was up to me. But since the hotel security and staff were there to see what happened, the Stone Kings couldn’t take care of Schipper and Dogson ourselves before the cops arrived on the scene. We had to let them arrest those two assholes, and Cal’s gonna have to press charges. They wanted him to come right away, but since Cal’s wife is the lead singer in one of the most famous bands in the country — and the final concert in their tour is tonight — they let him wait until the next day. The fuckin’ irony of one of our won going down to the cop shop on the right side of the law wasn’t lost on any of us.

“I know you’d rather take them down yourself, Cal. Hell, we all would.” I clenched a fist. “But those two pieces of shit are gonna be headed to prison. And when they get there, we’ll have guys on the inside, waiting for them. They’re gonna wish they’d never been born when we’re done with them.”

Cal's face transformed, spreading into an evil grin. "Merry Christmas to us."

Pretty soon it was time to round up everyone and head to the concert. Just like Andi promised, there were limos waiting downstairs for us to take us to the arena. We all piled in, and when we got to the venue, security met us there — complete with a wheelchair for Seton so she wouldn't have to walk on her fucked-up ankle.

They led most of our party to a private elevator, which would take them to a fancy luxury box, like the ones where the corporate fancy-pants assholes hang out for NFL games. But Cal, Seton, and I and our kids were taken back to the green room so that we could say hello to Andi before the band went on stage.

"Mommy!" Abigail and Chloe chorused as they burst through the doorway to the green room toward Andi. She was dressed in tight leather pants, high boots, and a shimmery black tank top, with dramatic makeup that accentuated her features. Even though she was my sister-in-law, I had to admit she was goddamn gorgeous. Kendall and Wyatt ran in afterwards, and I wheeled Seton through in her wheelchair.

"Hey, everyone! You made it!" Andi hugged her little girls, picking up Chloe and setting her on her hip. Her gaze turned to Seton. "What happened to you, Set?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Seton flushed pink. "Um, it's a long story," she stammered. "I'll tell you later, after the concert."

"Mommy, you look so pretty!" Chloe exclaimed, fingering the sparkles on Andi's top.

"Thank you, baby!" Andi kissed her on the forehead. "Did you have a good time at the rest of the party?"

"Yeah! Except Santa Claus never took us to see his reindeer!" Chloe pouted.

"His reindeer?" Andi asked in confusion.

"Yeah," Abigail shrugged. "He put us in the basket and covered us all up, but then he went away!"

“I don’t... what?” Andi looked quizzically at Cal.

“Uh, we better get out there and let you guys get ready,” he said, grabbing Chloe from her. “I’ll tell you all about it later. Get out there and break a leg, Doll.”

Andi’s face cleared. “Thanks, Romeo.”

Call kissed his wife, then plastered a smile on his face. “Okay, let’s get outta here.”

We all filed out, and the security guys escorted us to the luxury box where the others were already waiting. The warmup band had just left the stage, one of the guards told us. Hard Candy would be starting any minute.

Eva, Cherish, Seton, and even Zoe got the kids settled in. Cal and the other men grabbed some beers and spread ourselves out in the stadium seats. I I lifted Seton out of her chair and put her at the end of one of the rows, then slid in between her and Cal.

Cal let out a deep, tired sigh. “Damn. I don’t say this very often, but that is enough fuckin’ excitement for one day.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you, brother.” I lifted my bottle in a toast and took a drink.

“So, what do you think those sons of bitches were gonna do with your kids if they had managed to nab them?” I asked him. “You think this was more about revenge on the Stone Kings, or more about money?”

Cal’s jaw clenched. “Both, I’d bet. I tell you what, this is gonna make Andi even more determined to stop going on the road.”

“That good or bad?”

“Good, I guess. I’d rather have her home. But I hate to hell that this would be the reason she decided to stop doing it.”

“If she was leaning that way already, I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“She was, for sure. She says hiring bodyguards and personal security is getting harder and harder. The band has a

tough time finding reliable people. It makes the tour shit hard.” He shook his head. “This is exactly the sort of shit she worried about. She always said it was too hard to find people that she could trust. And after today, I’m not ever gonna want her to go out on the road again. I hate not knowing she’s safe.”

We sat there for a couple minutes in silence.

Then I said, “Huh.”

“What?”

I turned to Cal. “What if she *could* hire people she could trust? People she already knows. People with experience dealing with all sorts of shit?”

“What do you mean?”

“What if she could hire Stone Kings Security?”

“Holy shit.” He paused for a beat. “Fuck. That’s a good fucking idea, Prez.”

“What are you two talking about?” Seton asked from my other side. “You’re not talking club business on your time off, are you?” she teased, rolling her eyes.

Just then, a low bass rumble erupted from the sound system. The first few notes of one of Hard Candy’s most famous songs followed. The lights went up. The band walked out onto the stage to thunderous screaming and applause.

I took Seton’s hand in mine. She leaned her head against my shoulder. “Thank God everything turned out okay today,” she breathed against my ear.

“Except for your ankle, that is,” I pointed out.

Seton giggled. “There’s a silver lining to that, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, someone’s gonna have to carry me over the threshold when we get home tonight.”

“Yeah...” I paused. “I can probably get Frankenstein to come over and do that.”

Seton punched me. “Asshole.”

“Merry Christmas, babe.”

“Merry Christmas, Grey.”

Later, about halfway through the concert, Andi stepped up to the mic in between songs. “Thank you! It’s so good to be back in Denver for the last show on our tour. And to celebrate, we’ve got a little Christmas present for you!”

The crowd cheered.

“This is a new song,” Andie continued. “We’ve been working on it for a while, but this is the first time we’re ever playing it live. It’s called ‘One For the Road.’ And I want to dedicate it to my husband, Cal, who’s here tonight. I love you, Romeo.”

With that, she looked back at Kai, who counted off the beat. And then, Andi began to sing. Her familiar voice swelled over the other instruments, filling the arena with a slow, melancholy melody. She sang about life on the road. About her kids, and her family, and about how she always knew that home is with Cal.

YOU ARE MY ONE.

For the road.

For my life.

For my home.

Wherever we may ride

Wherever we may roam.

You’re my home.

BESIDE ME, I felt Seton sigh and nestle in closer, her head still on my shoulder.

And then, a thought came out of nowhere, and hit me out of the blue.

I realized that Seton was right about maybe trying to have one more kid.

Why the hell not? After her, Wyatt and Kendall were the best things that had ever happened to me. Being a father was the best gig I'd ever had. Even better than being MC president.

Who wouldn't want more of that?

As the song went on and Andi continued to sing, my mind went back to the day the twins were born. To seeing Seton in that hospital room, tired but beaming, with two tiny bundles in her arms.

Yeah, I think.

I could do that again.

Maybe just one kid this time around, though.

Seton caught me smiling to myself. "This isn't usually your kind of music," she said against my ear. "You getting sentimental on me?"

"Just thinking," I murmured back.

"What about?"

"I'll tell you later." I smirked. "Or actually... I'll show you."

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER



“Merry Christmas, you guys!” Andi was beaming as she opened the door. “Come on in! Thanks for coming to warm the house with us!”

Cal and Andi had just closed on a converted farmhouse on ten acres a few miles north of Lupine. They invited all of the Stone Kings families here for a Christmas housewarming party, exactly one year to the day after the attempted kidnapping of their daughters during Hard Candy’s final concert on their tour.

As we walked through the entryway of Cal and Andi’s new home, our kids were awestruck by the size. “Wow, this place is freaking enormous!” Kendall exclaimed.

“Yeah, you could totally play hockey in here,” Wyatt agreed, poking his head into the living room.

I held out a festive bag to Andi, then shrugged out of my coat. “Housewarming present,” I told her as she pulled out a bottle. “It’s my favorite special occasion wine. I figured that since I can’t drink it, someone should get to enjoy it so I can live vicariously through them.”

Andi laughed. “The not drinking part is the crappiest part of being pregnant,” she agreed. “Well, that, and the swelling, and the peeing all the time, and the fatigue...”

“Stop!” I held up a hand. “Ugh.”

“Eyes on the prize, girl. In a few months, you’ll have a gorgeous little one, and you’ll forget all about the pain and

suffering every time you look into his or her little eyes.”

I felt my lips curling upwards into a smile as my hands slid over my slight baby bump. “Yeah,” I sighed. “That’s gonna be... amazing.”

It’s funny. I thought I’d be the most excited member of our family about this baby. Kendall and Wyatt are pretty psyched, too, of course. But it’s Grey who’s *really* over the moon about it. When I told him I was pregnant four months ago, I thought he was going to explode with happiness. He’s been to every single doctor’s appointment with me. He got Wyatt and Kendall “Big Bro” and “Big Sis” T-shirts as a surprise for when we told them. He has already finished painting the nursery the muted teal color I picked out (and sent me on a spa day with the other old ladies while he was doing it, so I wouldn’t have to smell the fumes).

We were the first to arrive at Cal and Andi’s housewarming, but within half an hour all the other Stone Kings and their families were there as well. Cal and the men immediately went out to the back yard, where Cal had set up a bunch of picnic tables, Adirondack chairs, and outdoor heaters. “It’s his version of a man cave,” Andi explained with a laugh. “At least for now.” Abigail and Chloe were excited to show the kids what would eventually be their basement playroom, which Andi had set up well enough for them to hang out in during the party.

Andi took the old ladies — and seventeen-year-old Zoe — on a tour of the house.

“We’ve got four bedrooms on the second floor,” she narrated as she led us up the stairs. “And a huge attic that’s just begging to be turned into a master suite. Cal is going to get to work on that after New Year’s. The girls are ecstatic about their rooms.” She showed us Abigail’s bedroom first — an explosion of pink, with toys already scattered everywhere. She had a huge bay window overlooking the front yard, the perfect spot for a young girl to read, play, and dream.

Chloe’s room was next. It was painted a sunny yellow, and had large windows, too. Her stuffed animals were lined up on

a low shelf that had been placed at kid level. “The only problem is that Chloe is having a little bit of separation anxiety right now at night,” Andi told us. “I think this big house is making her feel like her dad and I are further away than we are.”

“She’ll get over it, in time,” Eva said. But I get it. It’s got to be weird having that big room all to herself.”

“I think you’re right. Plus, I think I have a great way to distract her from that. The girls have been clamoring for a dog for a while now. And with all this space, I think we can finally get them one. And...” Andi put a finger to her lips. “Don’t tell them, but we’re even thinking about getting some horses, since we have a barn now.”

“Oh my God, they are going to *die!*” Zoe squealed. “I would have killed for a horse growing up!” She looked at Eva, who laughed and said, “Sorry that you had to go through such hardship and deprivation, my poor daughter. Please don’t sue us for emotional damages.”

“What are you going to do with the rest of these bedrooms, Andi?” Cherish asked as we continued down the hall.

“I’m not even sure!” Andi replied. “Right now, this one here” — she pushed open a door — “is my music room. But there’s a pole barn on the property, in addition to the barn we’re going to use for the horses, and we’re planning to renovate that for my music space. That won’t be until at least next summer, though.”

“This place is just so great,” Cherish enthused. “It’s so beautiful out here! And the house is already amazing. I bet it’s going to be stunning when you’re all done.”

“We originally wanted to get a house out here north of town because it’s a shorter drive to Denver for me,” Andi explained. “But yeah, now that we’ve actually moved in, I’m just so happy about how much room the girls will have, inside and out. And how quiet it will be out here.” She paused a beat. “And safe.”

None of the women said anything in response. We knew Andi was thinking about what had almost happened to Abigail and Chloe last Christmas. I reached over and gave her shoulder a squeeze. She put her hand on top of mine.

“So, is Hard Candy planning any upcoming tours?” Eva asked after a moment.

“Rudy is trying to talk us into it,” Andi said. “We’ll be in the studio this spring to start working on a new album. Of course, that generally would mean a tour once the album’s out, to promote it. I was suggesting to the band that we could do a limited run of shows just in the US, but more spaced out. Like, instead of doing one big tour, maybe a few mini-tours instead, where we’d only be gone for a week or two at a time.”

“That sounds a lot more doable,” I say.

“Yeah.” She smiled. “And if the Stone Kings are doing security for us, that means it’s better for them, as well. And for all of us, really.”

The MC had been working as Hard Candy’s private security team for the past nine months or so. From everything I understood, both the band and the club thought it was going well. The pay to the club was fantastic, and the gigs were not all that frequent. Since the band hadn’t been on tour, the travel during that time had been mostly to interviews and appearances on late-night TV shows. Everyone was happy about the arrangement. Especially Cal and Andi, of course.

We finished the tour of the house. Back downstairs, the old ladies took over the kitchen and started making delicious blender drinks (virgin for me) and sampling some of the fantastic food. Andi had had the party catered by The Mockingbird, the restaurant where I worked as a chef — though I hadn’t had anything to do with the preparation or the delivery. (“This is a party for *all* of us,” Andi had told me on the phone a few days ago. “For once, that means none of us women are going to lift a finger to do any cooking. That includes you!”)

The three separate parties — the men, the kids, and the women — eventually converged into one around Cal and

Andi's Christmas tree. There was eating, drinking, laughter, hugs, presents... and mostly, just happiness. I found myself patting my belly more than once, smiling at the knowledge that this little one was going to enter a world full of love and family. At one point, Grey caught my eye and smiled, and I knew he was thinking the same thing.

After dinner, most of the adults retreated to the back yard. Fairy lights were strung in the trees, giving the night a festive glow. The outdoor heaters took the chill out of the air, but Andi had also put out a stack of blankets, and some of us wrapped ourselves in them as we sat under the stars, enjoying the night.

"I don't think we're going to get a white Christmas this year," Levi commented. We had yet to see any snow so far that year.

"Have faith, babe," Cherish said to her husband, and winked.

Zoe, sitting next to Eva, looked down at the glow of her phone. "Mom, can Tyler come pick me up later?" Zoe asked. "His parents are having a Christmas party, too, and they invited me to come."

"It's fine with me," Eva replied. "Go ask your dad. He won't want you to be out too late, though. Lots of people out drinking at parties and then driving this time of year."

Zoe rolled her eyes. "Dad's gonna say be home by ten or something ridiculous like that."

"Well, then you'll have to be home by ten, won't you?"

Zoe flounced off. Eva watched her go, laughing. "Trig is not dealing well with Zoe's first serious boyfriend. He has really put that boy through his paces. I have to hand it to Tyler, though. He's a very respectful kid, and he seems to treat Zoe well. He's kind of scared of Trig, but he tries not to show it."

"It's tough watching them grow up," I said, as I watched Gracie walk casually over to Wyatt and start talking to him. "In the blink of an eye, all of a sudden they're acting like little adults, you know?"

At least I have one more little one coming, I thought.

A baby, who will stay a baby for just a little while longer.

THAT NIGHT, when Grey had driven us home and the kids were in bed, he made us a fire in the fireplace. We sat together on the couch, watching it, not quite wanting to let the evening end.

“Are you still sure you don’t want to find out the sex of the baby before the birth?” I asked him.

“Nah. We already got one of each, right? I’m looking forward to this one being a surprise.”

“Any ideas on names?”

“Whatever you want, babe.” He pulled me closer. “I’m just happy to be along for the ride.”

“Speaking of,” I murmured, moving onto his lap. “How about we move this up to the bedroom and you take *me* for a ride?”

“Damn. You don’t have to ask me twice, babe. Is this my early Christmas present?”

I chuckled as I straddled him. “Well, my darling husband, if it is, then Christmas is every day of the year.”

**Thank you so much for reading this Stone Kings MC
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IRON FIST: Lords of Carnage Ironwood MC

IRON BOND: Lords of Carnage MC

COLD FURY: Royal Bastards MC, Minneapolis, MN Chapter

Sports Romance

Redeeming the Player

The Player Next Door

Fake Dating the Player

Daphne Loveling is a small-town girl who moved to the big city as a young adult in search of adventure. She lives in the American Midwest with her fabulous husband and the two cats who own them.

Someday, she hopes to retire to a sandy beach and continue writing with sand between her toes.