

SUGAR

CEE BOWERMAN



BOOK ONE



Sugar
Time Served MC: Nomads
Cee Bowerman
CLBooks, LLC



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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

2011 Texas Drive

Rojo PD

(in progress)

The Dark Side

Rojo Gems

(in progress)

Emerald

Rojo Kings

(in progress)

Lucky - COMING FEBRUARY 15, 2024!

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

Time Served MC: Nomads

(in progress)

Sugar

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

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
Texas Kings MC Nomads: Sugar, 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,

I'm so happy to bring you stories about some of the Time Served MC Nomads and their adventures away from Tenillo. Each nomad got a fresh start with Pop but then drifted away - either back to the place he grew up or another adventure where he could start a new life after serving his time.

This series will be filled with books that can stand alone but shouldn't. The men's connections to each other, through shared history and the brotherhood of their MC, are still strong as steel, no matter how much distance is between them.

However, every man has a story to tell, and while he does that, we get to explore his surroundings as he navigates a life outside the prison walls in a world that he's not quite sure he'll ever fit into again.

The inspiration for Sugar's book came from a trip I took with my family to Whitefish, Montana. It's a small town near Glacier National Park, a place my father described more than once as "the most beautiful place on earth - it's so calm and tranquil that you can feel God sitting with you while you admire the wonder he created." Since that was where our dad found such peace on earth, my brother and I decided to make that his final resting place. We met there to spread his ashes and spend some time remembering him in a place he dearly loved while reconnecting with each other in a beautiful house on the side of a mountain.

With a few additions and changes, that house became Sugar's home. I plan to visit it again someday - although, I hopefully won't have nearly the string of adventures Juni has during her stay.

Thank you for joining me on this wide open road of new adventures with the varied and loved nomads. I can't wait to tell their stories and explore their worlds with you along for the ride.

Happy reading,

Cee

PROLOGUE

ALMOST FOUR YEARS AGO

SUGAR

“Boss told me it was touch and go for a while. I’m glad you pulled through, old man,” I said as I leaned a hip against the edge of the hospital bed that held the man I respected more than any other in the world. “Did they say how long before you’re up and around?”

Considering the amount of machines surrounding the bed and the number of cords, wires and tubes that were hooked to him, I knew without a doubt that what he told me was a lie when he said, “Maybe a day or two. A week at the most.”

“I’ve got some time before my next job, so I can stay in town for a while to be with you if you want,” I assured him.

“Don’t tell me you drove all the way to Texas just to hang around here listening to me whine,” Pop grumbled. “Explore the world, Sugar. Find yourself a good woman, settle down, and make some babies. My son would have lots of kids for me to bounce around by now ...”

Pop’s eyes fluttered for a second before they finally shut. I was sure the drugs the nurse had added to his IV a few minutes ago had something to do with that. Well, either the drugs or the bullet wound his frail body was trying to recover from. I adjusted the blankets, tucking them in around him, and then stepped back for one last look before I left.

I knew he was in good hands. From what I understood, Boss and a few of the other men from our MC were going to take care of the riffraff that had consumed Tenillo, and in the process, I was sure that they’d find whoever did this and act accordingly. As much as I wanted to stay and help, I couldn’t be part of that right now.

I had business to take care of before I went back to the quiet life I'd created in Montana. I'd have to be quick about it because the snow would be falling soon, and I didn't want to be stranded in town for the next few months. If that happened, it was more likely I'd end up in prison again. Too many people and too much interaction was a recipe for disaster in my book, and I tried to avoid that at all costs. I'd spent enough time locked up to know I never wanted to go back. If, for some reason, I did, it would break this old man's heart almost as much as it had when his own son faltered and fell back into the system for the last time.

Prison wasn't for me, just like Texas wasn't either anymore. There were too many demons in both locations. I needed to stay as far away as possible to keep myself out of trouble and on the right side of the law.

But first, I had a few things in my hometown that needed my attention, namely the only woman I'd ever truly loved. Althea was celebrating her seventieth birthday in a few days, and one of the other foster children she'd helped raise had organized a blowout party that was shaping up to also be a reunion. I still spoke to the true friends I'd made while I lived with Althea and didn't care if I ever saw the rest of them again, but I'd deal with all the fake smiles and bullshit that getting everyone together entailed just so I could see the joy on Althea's face when she had all of her kids together at the same time.

I owed my life to Althea, whether she wanted to admit it or not. Even though she had a hand in sending me to prison, I didn't blame her for testifying against me at all. I was probably better off for having served my time, and I had one mission in life now: never go back.

She'd been telling me since the day we met that I should always have a goal to strive for, and staying a free man was at the top of my list.



I looked around the room as I sipped my water, wondering how long I'd have to stay to make Althea believe I'd enjoyed myself, and knowing to my bones that every minute was going to be a test of my patience.

Over the last forty years, Althea and her husband had fostered thousands of children, some for just a few days and others for months or even years. Usually, children in the system like me bounced around from one home to another. The only stroke of luck I'd ever experienced in my life was getting placed at Althea's house when I was about five. It wasn't the first time the state had taken me away from my mother, but it *was* the first time I remembered feeling safe and secure. I stayed with Althea just long enough to get comfortable before the social worker snatched me up and sent me back to my mother for another round of the alcohol and drug fueled roller coaster that was my life at home. Luckily the next time I got taken away, this time along with my new little sister, we were sent to live with Althea. And again the next time. And all of the times after that.

For the next twelve years, my occasional stays at Althea's home were the highlight of my life. Sometimes, we'd get to stay for a few months, but then our mother would find a sympathetic judge that fell for her bullshit and gave her yet another chance to fuck up not just her life but mine and my sister's too.

Through the years, Althea was the only constant in my life and the only adult who had ever shown me unconditional love. She didn't care how surly I became over the years; she loved me anyway. That was why, when I walked into her house and found one of her new foster's beating her because she refused to give him the code to the safe where she kept her cash, I grabbed the closest weapon I could find and ended his life.

It wasn't the first time I'd committed an 'act of violence,' as the court deemed my behavior, and since I was already on probation for fighting at school and under investigation for beating my mother's latest boyfriend into a coma, the second-degree murder charge didn't exactly come as a shock. It had broken my heart to see the tears on Althea's face when she'd

been forced to tell the court how she'd desperately tried to get me to stop stabbing the asshole who had already beaten her so badly that she could barely stand, but hearing her say she loved me anyway had glued it back together.

"Don't you know that the whole point of this party is for us to mingle with all the other rescues?" a woman said as she sat down in the chair beside me.

"I guess I didn't get the memo."

"Oh, you got it just like the rest of us, but you probably tossed it straight into the trash."

"And?"

"Looks like you've found a place to fit in since you got out," Sherry said as she studied my cut. "Time Served MC sounds fitting."

"You have no idea," I said drolly.

"Nomad? Does that mean you roam all over the country on your motorcycle?"

"Something like that."

"Have you missed me, Sugar?"

"Give me a second to come up with a suitable lie while I try to remember your name."

Sherry, a girl I'd messed around with years ago while we'd both been living with Althea, knew I recognized her. How could I not? She had been my first in many ways, and she knew that. I hadn't been hers, but I'd benefitted from all the knowledge she'd acquired in her young life, that was for sure.

Now, the strikingly beautiful young woman I remembered had a harder look about her, which I understood completely. Life for people who got their start in situations like ours wasn't usually roses and rainbows and tended to make us harder than others our age. Some kids were fortunate enough to find a place to land that helped them grow into healthy, normal people, but kids like me and Sherry had seen too much to ever be considered normal. We became adults with trust issues and a handful of unhealthy addictions that we used to help us cope

with the maelstrom of emotions that well-adjusted people would never understand.

“You were always such a prick.”

“If I recall correctly, you didn’t seem to mind.”

“I don’t mind it now either,” Sherry said as she took her hand off the table and slipped it into my lap. “Why don’t you and I take a little time to have a reunion of our own?”

I studied her face as she rubbed her hand over my zipper.

“What’s in it for you, Sherry?”

She laughed softly, but it wasn’t a pretty sound. Her voice was bitter when she said, “There’s only one thing that men like you are good for, Sugar, and even when we were young, you were *really* good at it.”

“Fuck it,” I said as I pushed my chair back. “Are you staying here or at another hotel?”

“Where are *you* staying?” she countered.

“I’m in 518.”

“I’ll meet you there.”



“I missed you, sweet girl,” I said as I got down on one knee and scratched the sides of her neck. “Were you good for Miss Laura?”

“Butter moped around like she does every time you’re gone,” Laura, the woman I’d hired to help me manage the property after my business took off, said as she picked up her purse from the table beside the door. “I’ve got to run into town for some last minute supplies before the storm. You made it back just in time.”

“I know. I should have stopped hours ago but I pushed through because I didn’t want to get stranded in town.”

“You wouldn’t have been stranded, and you know it.”

“True. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve walked through the forest in a blizzard.”

“We’ve got eleven cabins rented for the week and three for the next month. I’ve already made sure they’re stocked to the gills and know what to do when the storm hits. And, of course, the rest are booked for this weekend.”

“Three of them will be here for a month?” I asked with a sigh. “What kind are they, and how much am I going to hate them?”

“What kind are they? It’s like you’re asking what species of wild animal will be staying on your property.”

“I’d probably get along better with the wild animals.” I stood up and watched as Butter sniffed my boots. I looked down and laughed. “She’s checking to see if I cheated on her and petted another dog.”

“I’ll pick Claire up while I’m in town,” Laura told me. “Your mail is on the table at the house, Tyson has your fridge stocked, Jake’s replacing the water heater in 16, and Alex is installing the new irrigation lines in the greenhouse. You’ll see what I mean when you get in there.”

“I’ll check in on my way to the house,” I assured her.

“Oh, and we got a one-star review last week.” I shrugged, and Laura asked, “Don’t you want to know why?”

“Sure.”

“Because for some reason, one of the guests mentioned Tyson’s weight while she was praising his cooking, and he responded by telling her he was fat because every time he fucked her mom, she made him a sandwich.” I cleared my throat to mask the laughter that bubbled up as Laura glared at me. “You’re gonna have to talk to him again, Sugar.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I replied, as if she were the boss and I were the employee. That seemed to be happening more and more lately, and I didn’t mind it at all. Laura was on top of things, and I rarely even had to pay attention to the everyday tasks around the property. Instead, I could focus on Claire while she was home and work on my hobbies when she wasn’t. “Thanks for your help, Laura. You’re the best.”

“I know.”

“You could be a little less boastful about it,” I muttered.

“I could be.”

“Go get your shit done before the weather turns,” I said grumpily.

“Yessir, Sugar. Your wish is my command.”

“If that’s the case, then ...” I let my voice trail off, knowing she’d take the bait.

Laura scoffed. “You wouldn’t know what to do with a woman like me.”

“You could teach me,” I assured her with a grin.

“Maybe I should. I’ve been here for years and never once seen you bring a woman home. We should rename the place Monk’s Resort instead of Sweet Haven.”

“You know why I never bring women home,” I told her.

“Yeah, because you’re supposed to take the trash out, not bring it into the house.”

“Ew,” I said with an exaggerated grimace. “That was a harsh burn.”

“Harvest yourself some aloe vera while you’re in the greenhouse,” Laura retorted before she jogged down the steps of her cabin. “See you in a little bit.”

“Come on, Butter,” I said as I walked down the steps. “You’re the only one around here who respects me at all.”

I walked around Laura’s house to the path that would take me to my own home, located in the middle of the forest quite a distance back from the road and out of sight of the cabins I’d built over the last six years. The first cabin had come from necessity since I needed appropriate shelter, and then the second was built as a ‘close to nature, rustic living’ rental for tourists. Three hours after the online post went live for reservations, the cabin was booked solid for the next eighteen months. The deposit money I received gave me enough capital to build two more that were a little nicer and more

comfortable. The same thing happened when those were posted even though the prices were double of the original cabin.

The next year, I built four more cabins and used the profits from those to build a large house on the back edge of the property along with a smaller cabin near the rentals for a rental manager to live in.

The luckiest day of my life was finding Laura even though she felt that she was the lucky one. Fresh out of prison and looking for any job at all, she was stunned when I called and offered her a salary along with a place of her own to live on the mountain and away from the prying eyes of the nosy townsfolk who looked down their noses at her for her past mistakes.

Within the next year, I had hired three more employees, all of which were freshly released from prison in Texas and referred by Pop. Jake and Alex took care of the maintenance and upkeep of the cabins and even pitched in to help with construction of even more cabins after I bought more of the surrounding property. The third hire, Tyson, was a five-star chef who had spent time in prison for accidentally killing a food critic who got a little too personal in the review he posted online and then got mouthy when confronted about it. His position as chef at the resort made him responsible for creating and delivering meals for the guests that chose to pay the extra money for his service.

He was temperamental and irritating, but his reputation in the food world preceded him. Six months later, at his and Laura's urging, I built a large building that we used as a dining hall and hired four new staff members to help him keep the guests fed and happy.

The more cabins I built, the more people I employed. I now had so many people working for me that I rarely had to do anything. So, of course, since I wasn't the kind to be still for any length of time, I'd turned my favorite hobby into a new business venture that was turning out to be quite profitable. Who'd have thought that the son of a drug-addled hooker

would turn into a multi-millionaire landowner with not one, but *two* profitable businesses?

It damn sure wasn't me, but I sure as hell wasn't about to complain about it.



NINE MONTHS AGO

JUNI

“She’s been in and out of consciousness since she came in, but there’s no guarantee that she’ll be able to speak to you if she wakes up,” the nurse explained as I walked down the hall beside her.

“When are they going to take her in for surgery?”

“She won’t survive a surgery at this point, sweetheart,” the nurse said as she gave me a sympathetic look. “You need to talk to her and let her know that you’re here for her so she can make the decision about whether to fight or to let go.”

“My sister loves a good fight.”

“I’m afraid this is one she might not be able to win,” the nurse whispered.

“Why hasn’t anyone mentioned the baby?”

“The baby?” the nurse asked, her eyes wide with shock. “Your sister is pregnant?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know if she is right now or not. I’m talking about her daughter. I guess she’s probably close to two by now.”

“I haven’t heard anything,” the nurse assured me. “The paramedics that brought her in didn’t mention transporting a child, so you should talk to the investigator when he gets here.”

My heart lurched. If Brian had aimed his rage at the baby, she might not have survived long enough for the paramedics to be

of any help. I was probably going to have to bury her with my sister when she inevitably died.

“I’ll let you have some time alone with her,” the nurse said as she stopped in front of a curtained area. “Is there anyone I can call to be with you?”

“No. My sister is the only family I have,” I mumbled before I took a deep breath and put my shoulders back. “There is someone who will want to say goodbye if that’s what it’s going to come down to, but I’ll call her myself.”

“Okay,” the nurse said with a nod. “You should make that call soon, ma’am.”

“Yeah. I will.”

I took another big breath to steel myself and then moved the curtain aside so I could walk into the small room. I let out a sob when I saw my sister’s condition and wondered how in the world she was still alive. It looked like she’d been hit by a truck, not attacked by the man who had promised to love and cherish her for the rest of his days.

“Oh, Sherry,” I whispered as I stepped up beside the bed. I reached out and used one finger to brush her hair behind her ear, careful not to touch her bruises or the swelling around her eyes. “What in the world did you get into this time?”

I was shocked when my sister’s eyes fluttered open ... well, as open as they could be considering how swollen they were. She tried to speak and then swallowed with a wince before she tried again. “Take care of Sweetie.”

“I don’t ... I’m not sure ...”

“He did what he said he would.”

“Brian?”

“Sugar.” I knew that my sister must have had a head injury, so it wasn’t surprising that she wasn’t making sense. “It’s Sugar.”

“You should rest, Sher. Did they give you enough to help with the pain? Do you want me to ...”

“He found out.”

“Brian?”

“Sugar.”

“What did Brian find out? Why did he do this to you?”

“Not his baby.”

“Oh no,” I whispered, not really shocked that Sherry had tried to play off another man’s child as Brian’s, considering the man’s status and wealth. Those attributes had been her focus for as long as I could remember, and Brian Dexter had both in spades.

“Althea.”

“I’ll call her,” I said as I pulled my phone out of my pocket.

“Insurance.”

“Don’t worry about that, Sherry,” I whispered as I leaned closer to her. “You need to focus on getting stronger so they can help you get better.”

“Take care of Sweetie.”

“Did he hurt her too? Where is she?”

“Althea.”

“Althea has her?” I asked, hopeful that my niece was okay.

“Call Sugar.”

“Sugar? Why do you ... No, Sherry.”

“Don’t tell her I’m bad,” Sherry pleaded.

“You’re going to get through this, Sherry.”

“Love her, Juni.”

“I will.”

“Sugar too.”

I sighed as tears streamed down my face. “I don’t know about that, Sher.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise. I’ll take care of Sweetie and tell her you love her, but I want you to get better so you can ...”

My voice trailed off when the machines around the bed went haywire. Alarms started to sound, and I could hear people rushing down the hall as my sister’s body started to seize. I turned toward the curtain to call for help as the nurse who had shown me to the room rushed inside followed by other people I’d seen in the hall.

All of my life, I’d known that Sherry would take things too far one day and pay the price, but I thought she’d end up in prison or get herself into something she could work her way past. I never imagined that her choices would kill her, but it seemed like that was exactly what had happened.

1.

“I can protect myself.”

Juni

PRESENT

JUNI

“I know exactly where you can go,” Althea assured me as she picked her phone up from the table and touched the screen. “All I have to do is make one phone call, and he’ll welcome you and Sweetie like the family you are.”

“I’m not his family, Althea.”

“But that little girl is, and you can’t tell me any different,” Althea said, her gaze intense as she studied my face. “I didn’t make it this far in life without learning how to pay attention, Juni, and I remember what happened that night at my party.”

“I wondered how she reconnected with him.”

“It took all I had to keep those two apart when they were younger, so it didn’t surprise me at all when they disappeared together that night. She was gone the next morning, and that didn’t shock me either since she didn’t realize that there’s more to Sugar than what he lets on.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s made a name for himself.”

“I’d say so,” I muttered.

“I’m not talking about the past, Juni. If I were, I’d remind you that you followed him around like a lost puppy when you were a little girl.”

“All that says is that I’ve always had horrible taste in men.”

“Sugar’s a good boy,” Althea said emphatically.

I laughed softly before I pointed out, “He’s not a boy anymore, Althea. Sugar is an ex-con who’s gotta be at least fifty by now.”

Althea frowned at me. “He’s barely five years older than you, sweetheart, and he served his time for what happened.”

“I know,” I said softly before I looked at the sleeping girl on the couch that was just a few feet away from where I’d witnessed something horrible happen.

I had been rushing down the stairs to try and protect Althea from Dayton, a troubled boy who had come to stay with her less than a week before, when Sugar appeared. I stood frozen on the bottom step and watched him spring into action and then cowered in fear as Althea started screaming for Sugar to stop. I couldn’t look away, but that wasn’t what upset me most.

I knew that I would’ve done the same thing if I’d gotten to Dayton first.

Even after all these years, I couldn’t walk through Althea’s living room without remembering what it had looked like that day as the police escorted me and the other children out the front door to our new placements since Althea wouldn’t be able to care for us while she recovered from her injuries.

I had worried about Althea then, and I was worried about her now since she was still taking in troubled kids. But I couldn’t dwell on that since I had danger in my own life too.

My worry was that I’d be in the same boat she had been in when the man who was terrorizing me was finished. I just prayed that I’d be able to protect Sweetie if that ever happened.

“I want you to keep that notarized copy of my will in the safe in case something happens, okay?”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you, Juni, but if it does, the girl should go to her father, not me.”

“Do you really think that’s the best option for her?”

“Honey, I think that’s the *only* option for either of you right now.”

“I can protect myself.”

“But it would be better if you had help, wouldn’t it? And even better than that would be the ability to disappear at the same time.”

“Disappear?”

“Sugar lives in the middle of the Montana forest in some of the prettiest country you’ve ever seen. I know you’ve seen quite a bit of the world, so that’s saying something, isn’t it?”

“What does he do there?”

“He rents cabins to rich folks who want to take in nature and all its glory.”

“So you’re saying I could rent a cabin from him and be safe up there?”

“Something like that,” Althea hedged. “Leave the baby here and go pack some warm clothes for the two of you. I’ll give it some time and then take some of the older kids over to pack up the house and get it closed up so it can wait for you to come home.”

“I don’t know, Althea. I’m not comfortable with running away ...”

“But it’s not just you that needs to get away from danger. You’re a mother now, and that means Sweetie’s safety is even more important than yours. Sugar can give you that safety. I promise.”

“Make the call and see if he’ll help, but I don’t want him to know that Sweetie’s his daughter until I make sure he’s as good a person as you seem to think.”

Althea sighed. “You’ll see, Juni. You’ll see.”

“I’ll go pack and gas up the truck,” I told her as I stood and walked around the table. Once I’d kissed her cheek, I said, “Thank you again, Althea. You’re the best mom a kid could ask for, and we’re all luckier for having you in our lives.”

“Go on now, sweetheart. This monster has progressed to the point that I don’t think we have much more time to get you and Sweetie to safety.”

“I’m afraid you might be right.”



I didn’t drive straight home when I left Althea’s. Instead, I went the other direction to the seedier part of town where Sherry and I had grown up between our stints at Althea’s until Sherry finally ran away. A few years later, I left for boot camp. I didn’t have many reasons to come to this area, but sadly enough, each time I did, I saw that not much had changed for the better. If anything, things had gotten worse.

The homes were more rundown with lots of boarded up windows and yards that didn’t have a single blade of grass since they were used as parking lots instead of play areas. I did have some good memories of living in this neighborhood. They weren’t all horrible, but the good ones were few and far between.

It hurt my heart to know that there were children in some of these houses that were living in the same type of hell I’d survived, and they might not ever have an Althea in their life to help them see that there was good in the world. I passed the park where I used to play with some of the neighborhood kids and smiled at the memory. But the smile disappeared when I turned the corner and saw the copse of bushes where my best friend and I, who were both nine at the time, found a dead body while we tried to find a place to hide before the little girl who was ‘it’ finished counting.

I sighed when I saw the group of young men loitering in front of the corner store. It looked just like it had for years, with the same faded sign across the front announcing that you could get your beer, smokes, snacks, and lotto tickets inside. The building hadn’t changed and neither had the group of thugs hanging out near it. The only difference between these guys

and the ones that were around when I was growing up was the style of clothing and the model of their cars.

I pulled into the lot, and instead of parking in one of the spaces, I stopped behind the group of young men. A few of them turned around to watch me and the youngest one, probably their runner, sauntered over to my car with a smirk on his face.

I rolled the window down as he got closer and watched the cocky look disappear when he saw the pistol in my lap.

“I’m not here to buy anything or cause any trouble,” I assured him. When he glanced over his shoulder, probably to signal his buddies that I wasn’t all I seemed, I said, “Call Darius and tell him that June Bug is here and wants to see him about something important.”

“June Bug?”

“Just give him the message,” I ordered before I rolled my window up again.

An older kid knocked on my window, and I turned to look him in the eye before I shook my head. He knocked a little harder, intent on questioning me, so I rolled my window down just enough to warn, “You break my fucking window, and I’ll whip your ass until Darius gets here, and then I’ll make sure he whips your ass after I’m gone.”

The man started to say something, probably a threat of his own, but before he could speak, one of the men behind him who was holding a phone in his hand called out to him, and he walked away without saying another word. It wasn’t more than five minutes before a car slowly drove by, causing all of the boys on the corner to stand a little taller. I knew that my old friend had arrived.

I waited patiently for the driver of the car to get out and walk around the vehicle and then watched him open the door and step back as he assessed the area, alert and watching for either the cops or one of Darius’ enemies to appear. Without saying a word to the men on the street, Darius walked to my car and opened the passenger door. As soon as he was in the seat, I

put the car in Drive and slowly pulled out onto the street that would lead us deeper into my old neighborhood.

“You should put your seatbelt on, Dari. Not wearing it is dangerous and against the law.”

Darius burst out laughing but reached for the belt before he said, “What are you doing, June Bug? You don’t belong here anymore.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “But I don’t know any other way to contact you, and I need a favor.”

“How have you been? I heard you came home when Sherry was killed.”

“Yeah. I got out when I hit my twelve years but stayed in El Paso because my boyfriend was stationed there. I was going to take Sherry’s daughter down there, but he and I broke up because he wasn’t ready for parenthood, especially if it involved raising someone else’s child.”

“You’re gonna keep the kid?”

“The kid is a little girl. Her nickname is Sweetie, and she’s almost three.”

“You need *my* help?”

I glanced at him over the top of my glasses and said, “She’s not yours, Dari.”

“You sure?”

I laughed before I told him, “She’s as pale as I am.”

“That’s a relief. The last thing I need is a kid.”

“I didn’t realize that you and Sherry still had something going after all this time,” I mused. I thought about it for a minute before I said, “She must have known the baby wasn’t yours when she married Brian. If she’d looked like you from birth he probably would have killed them both when she was born.”

“How’d he find out the kid wasn’t his?”

“The investigator said that they had been trying to have another baby with no luck, so without mentioning it to Sherry,

he talked to his doctor and got tested to see if he was the problem. When she dropped Sweetie off with Althea that day, she said that things with Brian had been off lately, so she wanted to spend some quality time getting their relationship back on track.”

“It had been off the rails since she met him.”

He knew my sister well enough to understand what I meant when I shrugged and said, “It was Sherry.”

“She told me she wasn’t going to come around anymore because once she was pregnant, he’d marry her and she’d be set for life.”

“That sounds like something she’d do.”

“It didn’t surprise me either. Since you’re not here to hit me up for child support, what are we doing? You need me to take care of something for you?”

“Althea.”

Darius’ voice was intense when he asked, “Somebody fucking with her?”

“No,” I assured him. “Somebody’s fucking with me, and I want to make sure she doesn’t experience any fallout when I disappear in a few days.”

“You need me to take care of it?”

“If I knew who it was, I’d say yes,” I told him honestly.

“You have no ideas?”

“Honestly, the list is so long that it’s kind of hard to say.”

Darius chuckled and said, “You’ve always had that way about you, June Bug.”

“Maybe, but you still like me, so there’s that.”

“Only because I haven’t talked to you in years. You used to make me so fucking crazy sometimes that I just wanted to smack the shit out of you.”

“I have that effect on people.”

Darius laughed again. “Always have.”

“Whoever’s watching me has to know about Althea, and I don’t want him to mess with her to get to me. I’m not even sure he’d take it that far but ...”

“I’ll watch out for her.”

“She probably wouldn’t mind if you stopped in to visit now and then, you know.”

“I’m not exactly a shining example of what she wants any of her kids to turn out like.”

“Obviously, you’re a successful businessman with multiple employees. How could anyone knock that?” I asked sarcastically.

“Fuck you, June Bug.”

“Althea knows what you are, Dari. She doesn’t give a shit, and you know it. She loves you anyway and would be happy to see you.”

Darius ran his hand over his bald head a few times before he said, “Fuck. You’re right. I’ll go see her. That could prove to be an effective reminder to whoever might be watching her house that she’s not to be fucked with.”

“Give me your number so I can check in every once in a while,” I told him.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m gonna go stay with Sugar.”

“Althea set that up?”

“Of course. I’d have never even thought to consider hiding out anywhere near the man.”

“Did Sherry tell you who the baby’s father is?”

“She told me right before she died.”

“Does he know it’s his kid?”

“Nope, and I’m not gonna tell him until I make sure he’s on the up and up. That could take some time.”

“So, you wouldn’t have told me if the baby was mine?”

“I’d have taken the secret to my grave.”

“Good call,” Darius said sadly. “Do you need me to do anything else?”

“I need a couple of phones that can’t be traced back to me, a clean vehicle - preferably an SUV with tinted windows and all-wheel drive, and a driver if you can spare someone you trust.”

“Done.”

“You’re not nearly as bad as everyone thinks you are, Dari.”

“You’re wrong, June Bug. I’m worse.”



SUGAR

“Dad! Your phone’s ringing!” Claire called from the porch as she jogged down the steps with my phone in her hand. She put it to her ear and smiled as she walked across the grass, and I heard her say, “Hello, Grandma. How are you?”

I smiled, glad that Claire had answered so Althea could grill her about her life instead of asking me a million questions. I took the opportunity to finish the stack of wood I was cutting while they chatted. When I had the split logs stacked on the cart, I wiped my face with the bandana I had stuffed into my back pocket and then held my hand out to my daughter. She said her goodbyes and promised to call Althea soon before she handed the phone to me.

“Dinner will be ready in half an hour.”

I nodded before I put my phone up to my ear and said, “Hello, beautiful.”

“Hush,” Althea chided with a girlish giggle.

We made small talk for a few minutes as I walked into my house. I pulled a bottle of Gatorade out of the fridge and twisted off the top before I sat down at the bar and wondered

how long it would take Althea to get around to telling me why there was so much tension in her voice.

Finally, she let out a long breath and said, "I need a favor, Sugar."

"Anything."

"Juni needs a place to go, and I want you to take her in."

"I thought she was in the army."

"She got out a few months before ... Did I tell you what happened to Sherry?"

"No."

Althea sighed heavily before she explained, "Her husband killed her and then was in a standoff with the police for a few hours before he killed himself."

"Oh shit," I muttered without thinking. I knew how much Althea hated to hear any of us cuss, so I corrected myself. "Shoot."

Althea didn't even get onto me for my language, so I knew she was truly upset.

"Someone's scaring Juni, and she can't figure out who it is. The cops are involved, but they don't have any more idea about who it might be than she does. She wants to get out of town and go some place where this person can't find her. I thought hiding out in a snowdrift with you might be just the ticket."

"She must be scared if she's running. From what I remember of Juni, she's never been one to back away from a challenge."

"She's a mom now, so she's got to think of more than just herself."

"Could I be the baby's father?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"I'm positive, Sugar," Althea said sadly.

"How do you know, Althea?"

“I just know.”

I considered that for a second before I asked, “Who else knows she’s coming up here?”

“No one.”

“What about the cops?”

“I’m not sure how she’ll handle that, but I know she’s probably got it all planned out. I need you to give them a safe place to stay.”

“I can do that.”

“Take care of them for me, okay? Juni’s important to me just like you are, and that little girl ...”

“Don’t worry, Althea. I’ll protect her like she’s my own child.”

2.

“We need six, you’re gonna want sixteen, so pick out a dozen.”

Chicken Math

SUGAR

“Good afternoon, Mr. Sweet. Your usual?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I smiled at the young woman behind the counter and nodded before I said, “I’ll need my daughter’s drink also. I can never remember how to order ...”

“I’ve got it.” She handed me a cup along with a marker and then shook her head as she turned to start our order. “Your daughter is a lucky girl, Mr. Sweet.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

I admired the younger woman, wondering exactly how old she was. She’d been serving me drinks at least three days a week for several years now. Since I usually came in before the school day ended, that meant she was probably in her early twenties. I had been considering asking her out on a date for a while and wondered if we would be able to find anything in common. At most, there was only a decade between us, but in this day and age, and considering my life experience, that was a lifetime.

Whitefish was a small town, and there was a distinct lack of single women my age living here. Over the years, I’d dated a few women, but things always fizzled out when they realized that I wasn’t looking for forever, just easy companionship. Lately though, I’d been reconsidering that stance. Claire was getting older and wouldn’t be living with me much longer. She was about to start driving, and I knew I’d see her less and less when that happened. In just a few years, she’d be going

off to college, and I'd only see her on holidays and in the summer, if I was lucky.

When I first got out of prison, I wanted nothing more than a willing woman who was up for a little fun. I found plenty of those in and around Tenillo, the small town in Texas where I lived for almost a year after I got out. My life there wasn't just spent trying to find willing bed partners, though. It was time that I passed learning how to fit into the free world. I went to prison when I was just seventeen and was spit out into the world seven years later as an adult who didn't know shit about the most basic things like taxes and credit scores. Pop and some of the other men helped me figure out how to navigate the world as an adult while they also helped me build my first motorcycle. It was perfectly natural for me to join the motorcycle club that was attached to Pop's compound, and I had just become a patched member of the Time Served MC when I got the call about my sister's death.

I lost touch with her while I was in prison but was actively searching for her to reconnect when I found out that she had died. The story I got from neighbors and friends here told me that my sister had found a place she could fit in, where no one knew that she was one of those 'poor Sweet kids' whose drug-addled mother was the town whore.

Carra found a place where nobody assumed she'd turn out just like her mom because of her family history and accepted her for the bright, cheerful girl she was. They thought of her as the impetuously crazy young girl with stars in her eyes who met an older man while he was vacationing in Texas and followed him to his home in Montana. Claire was born soon after Carra arrived, and from the stories I'd heard from the friends she'd made in her short time in Whitefish, she'd been blissfully happy with the little family she had made. She was a doting mother to Claire and devoted partner to Claire's father. She was happily planning their wedding when fate stepped in and called a halt to the life they were creating together.

Since Carra's husband didn't have any family and I'd lost touch with her years before, Claire went into the foster care

system while they tried to locate any relatives that might be willing to take her in. Two days after I got the call, I packed my meager belongings and moved to Montana and then worked my ass off to build a home that the social worker would consider a decent place for me to raise my niece. The rest was history.

Now, I didn't just have a decent home, I had a very nice one, and I didn't just have a job that would give me enough money to raise that little girl, I had several lucrative businesses that would give her a college education and a stable future. All of which I'd never had growing up and was more than happy to give my niece.

But over the last few years, I started to want more. I craved companionship that lasted longer than one night but hadn't been lucky enough to find that yet. I wasn't actively looking, per se, but I was open to it. It had recently started to become apparent that I had probably missed my window of opportunity.

I knew that was my fault since I wasn't exactly a sociable person and essentially lived like a hermit. Living in the middle of nowhere made finding someone to date even more difficult, and the few women my age from town that I knew were already in long-term relationships, many were even married with children. I'd dated one or two of the available women, but it never worked out.

As Claire got older, I missed the giggles and laughter that had filled the house when she was young. I longed to hear that again. I had looked into becoming a foster parent, but with my history, that was laughable. The only way I'd be able to have a family of my own at this point was adoption. I was open to that, but I wasn't quite ready to jump through the hoops it would take to get me on the lists with the state, so I hadn't pursued it more than just giving it some serious thought.

I should do that soon, considering I wasn't getting any younger.

I finished writing on the cup, and when the young woman turned around to take it from me, I decided to just go for it.

“Can I ask you a question, Mr. Sweet?”

“Sure,” I said as I lifted my drink and blew across the top of it. She was making me feel ancient, so I reminded her, “You can call me Sugar, Elizabeth.”

“Are you single, Sugar?”

“I am.”

Holy shit! Great minds must think alike because ...

“So’s my mom.” I took a gulp of the hot coffee rather than the small sip I planned and cleared my throat as it burned its way down to my stomach. “I think you two would be really cute together.”

“You do, huh?” I choked out.

“I’ve been trying to convince her that she should start dating, but she said she’s not ready.”

“Well, let me know when she is,” I said with a smile.

“I will,” she said with an excited grin. “I keep telling her that she’s not getting any younger, but she just rolls her eyes and tells me to shut up and leave her alone.”

“I’m no expert on women, but even I know that pointing out a woman’s age isn’t really a way to get on her good side.”

“You’re probably right,” she conceded. “One of these days I’ll get her to agree, and then I’ll get back to you.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I said as I took my card back from her. “I better run. Good luck with your mom.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As I walked down the sidewalk toward the dentist’s office to wait on Claire, I thought about how embarrassing it would have been if I’d asked Elizabeth to go out with me when she obviously thought I was old enough to be her father. Maybe I really wasn’t cut out for this dating shit after all.

I was still pondering that when my cheerful daughter walked through the front doors out into the sunshine. I laughed

because her smile got even wider when she saw the coffee in my hand.

When she read the words I'd written on her cup, something I'd been doing since she was a little girl who enjoyed acting grown up while she enjoyed her fancy hot chocolate, she said, "You *do* love me!"

"Only a little bit," I teased. "How was your checkup?"

"Fine."

"Liar."

"Did they already call you?"

"No."

"Then how did you know I was lying?"

"I'm just that good."

"Seriously, Dad," Claire huffed.

"When you were here for your last cleaning, he mentioned that there was a spot on your x-rays that looked like it might turn into a cavity, and right before I left to get our drinks, I heard the hygienist mention that she'd need to get you on the schedule for a filling."

"It's next Tuesday at 2:30."

I laughed softly before I bumped her with my shoulder. "Remember all those times I got onto your ass about brushing your teeth?"

"Is that your version of 'I told you so'?"

"Possibly." I grinned as Claire groaned. "Definitely."

"What else do you need to do in town today?"

"I guess we need to go to the craft store," I said with a dramatic sigh. When Claire squealed in excitement, I laughed. "And I've got a few things I need to pick up from Wally World for Laura."

"We should get some toys for the little girl," Claire suggested. "How old did you say she was?"

“Althea said she’s a baby,” I hedged.

“You’re such a man,” Claire chided as she pulled her phone out of her pocket.

“What does that mean?”

“Details, buddy. Details,” Claire muttered as she made a call. We were walking next to each other, so I could hear Althea’s voice when she answered, happy to be getting a call from Claire, who she considered one of her many grandchildren.

I listened with half an ear as I let my thoughts wander while Claire grilled Althea about Juni’s little girl.

Juni Dawson had been a thorn in my side since the first time I met her. Even as a kid, she cussed like a trucker, had the attitude of a rabid wolf with his leg caught in a trap, and insulted everyone she met like she was paid good money to do it. The last time I talked to her, she was all arms and legs, a gangly girl on the cusp between child and teenager who had just gotten out of juvie for running away with one of her friends. Of course, the cops were irritated that she’d run off but even more irritated that she’d done it in a car her friend Darius had helped her steal. I hoped that the army had been able to tame some of her impulsiveness, but I doubted her attitude was much different than it had been back then.

I wasn’t sure how long she and her daughter would be staying with us, but I knew we were going to be in for quite an adventure. I didn’t have any choice but to put up with her shit for the duration because I knew that Althea would feel better knowing I was looking out for one of her children. Luckily, there was a cabin on the far end of the property that was in the process of renovation, so it didn’t have any reservations for the next few weeks. I planned to get Juni settled in there as soon as she arrived, and if she was still as big of a pain in the ass as she had been before, I would just avoid her as much as possible. The property was big enough that I could easily do that, especially since mine and Claire’s house was tucked into the forest away from the cabins and dining hall.

“That’s not a baby!” I heard Claire say before she nudged me with her shoulder. “She’s already potty-trained, Dad.”

“Good.”

“I kind of wish she was a baby,” Clair mused, and I wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or Althea, so I didn’t respond. “She also told me that the lady probably wasn’t able to pack a lot of toys, so we should get some.”

“Ask her what she likes, and we’ll pick a few up,” I ordered.

Claire listened to Althea for a minute or so and then laughed before she said, “Yeah, we’ll get her some warmer clothes too.”

I waited until Claire was finished talking to Althea before I asked, “So, how old is this kid?”

“She’ll be three next month.”

“Hmm.”

It wasn’t a question, but my daughter took it as such. “Yep, that’s what Grandma said. So, we’ll need to get her plenty of toys and clothes.”

“You’re going to have a lot of fun with this, aren’t you?” I grumbled.

“Most definitely, mister. Prepare your credit card.”

“That’s just great. I guess Juni will need some warm clothes, too, but I don’t know what size she wears.”

“Well, is she my height or taller? What’s her body shape like?”

“I don’t remember. I haven’t seen her since she was younger than you are now.”

“Really?”

“I guess I should warn you about Juni or the Juni I knew back in the day, at least. She’s ...” I was quiet for a few seconds as I searched for the right description. “Abrasive. That’s a good word for it.”

“Abrasive?”

“Yeah. Her personality is like sandpaper on an open wound.”

“But Grandma loves her.”

“Grandma loves everybody, sweetheart. Even me.”

“That is difficult sometimes,” Claire teased.

“Now, tell me more about this kid. She’s about to be three?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Hopefully, she behaves better than her mother.”

“You knew her mother too?”

“We just talked about that. I’ve known Juni since …”

“The little girl isn’t her daughter. She’s her niece. I guess her sister died, and she took the baby just like you took me.”

“The baby belonged to Sherry?”

“If that’s her sister, then yeah.”

As Claire kept babbling about all the things we’d need to buy, I thought back to the last time I’d seen Sherry. At Althea’s party. Not quite four years ago.

Holy. Shit.



“Hey, I’ve got a question for you,” I said in greeting when Laura answered her phone.

“Your ears must be burning because I was about to call you. You have company.”

“She’s already here?” I asked. It had been less than two days since I heard from Althea. I had assumed that it would take Juni at least three days to get here, if not four or five. The drive itself took almost thirty hours, and with a toddler in the car, it would take much longer. I’d made the drive with Claire before, and with the number of bathroom stops on the way, I always planned for at least four days of travel to get to Althea’s.

“Live and in person, and she brought friends,” Laura said, suspicion in her voice.

“Shit,” I hissed. “Get them settled in Cabin 2, and I’ll sort things out when I get there.”

“Cabin 2? It’s not available, Sugar. It’s on the calendar.”

“I know it’s closed for reno but ...”

“Jake started tearing the floors out this morning.”

“Fuck.”

“I already put them in your house, man. I didn’t realize ...”

“That’s fine. I’ll figure something out. If we get any cancellations, let me know so I can move them ...”

“There’s not going to be,” Laura muttered.

“There’s almost always at least one. You know that.”

“Two words, Sugar: Writers. Retreat.”

“Shit,” I hissed. “Already?”

“Happens once a year. We’ve got every cabin packed full of women from now until next Monday. How could you forget?”

I sighed. “I blocked it from my mind because of past trauma, Laura. I just need a fucking cabin to house those two and whoever else they dragged halfway across the country with them.”

“Well, they’re in your house, so I’d suggest that you come on home and deal with it because I’ve got shit to do,” Laura snapped.

“Snap at me, and I won’t buy any baby chicks, woman.”

“Aww.” Laura’s voice went soft. “You’re gonna buy me some?”

“I was.”

“You know what I like, Sugar,” Laura said cheerfully. Then, back to business as usual, she said, “Gotta go. My boss is an asshole, and if he catches me on the phone, there’ll be hell to pay.”

“You’re fired.”

“Again? Really? Get some new material, funny guy. You wouldn’t know your ass from your elbow if it weren’t for me.”

I couldn’t argue so I just said my goodbyes and put my phone in my pocket. I sighed as I saw Claire looking at me expectantly.

“We could use six, and you’re gonna want sixteen, so pick out a dozen in case a few don’t make it. I’ve got to get a few more supplies, so I’ll meet you back here in a minute to look over your choices.”

Claire squealed as she jumped up and down, and a lady who was standing a few feet away smiled at me before she said, “You know chicken math!”

“Yeah. I’ve picked it up over the years.” I gave my daughter a mock glare before I said, “You’re in charge of them, Claire.”

“I know!” She was still vibrating with excitement as she leaned over the edge of one of the troughs, and when she looked up, I swear I could see the little girl I’d fallen in love with the first time we met. “Thank you, Dad. You’re the best.”

“Remember that when I’m yelling at you about your chores,” I grumbled. She didn’t hear me because she was lost in chicken land and wouldn’t be able to think of anything else for days.

As I walked off, I heard Claire and the woman discussing the different breeds we already had at home. I knew that she’d still be standing there trying to decide which chickens to get when I was finished shopping. Inevitably, I’d end up taking home more than the dozen I’d agreed to, but I’d deal with that later.

Right now, I needed to hurry up and get home so I could greet the invaders who were probably roaming around my house, pawing through my shit, and most likely taking whatever wasn’t nailed down.

I dealt with that growing up in foster care and then again while I was in prison. I wasn’t about to put up with it again.

3.

“Not much in this world scares me, but nature is up at the top of the list.”

Darius

JUNI

When we finally found the road that would lead us to Sugar’s cabin, I thought it was going to take us to a one-room shack or something equally rustic. Instead, the GPS led us to an office building. While I used Darius’ phone to call Althea and verify the address she’d given me, he got Sweetie out of her car seat so she could stretch her legs and run off some of her pent-up energy.

I watched my old friend and his bodyguard follow Sweetie around, nodding occasionally when her chatter included a question. I was happy that they were entertaining the little girl because I needed a few minutes to myself. I hadn’t had any time alone since we left Althea’s house under the cover of darkness two days ago.

I was exhausted and on edge, my body ached from inactivity, and my head was spinning with all the changes that the last few days had wrought on my life.

I had never wanted anything more than I wanted to be finished with this trip. Once Sweetie and I were settled somewhere safe, I would need at least a week to recover in the relative peace and safety of some sort of stable structure, whether it was a shack in the woods or a shithole motel. At this point, I didn’t care because if I had to get back into the car for any reason, I would lose my shit.

I’d been through a lot in my life and survived some *very* perilous situations. I grew up in a neighborhood that was considered one of the most dangerous in the country. I’d witnessed muggings, beatings, a couple of stabbings, and been

in the crossfire of more drive-by shootings than I could count. I had been robbed at knifepoint *and* gunpoint, fought off an attempted kidnapper, and been taken hostage by a carjacker who was running from the cops. Sadly enough, all of those events happened before I was even old enough to vote.

Once I was old enough to enlist in the army, I was more than happy to go to boot camp just so I could get some peace from the chaos and danger that had been part of my life since the day I was born. I didn't just survive, I excelled at boot camp and then went through hours and hours of training that would break a lesser person. Over the years, I had traveled around the world, fought insurgents who were intent on killing me after they did unspeakable things to my body, and had even been stranded in enemy territory for six days.

I'd been involved in actual *war*, and it wasn't nearly as traumatic as a two-thousand mile car trip with a toddler.

The phone was still ringing in my hand as we parked in front of a building where a woman was walking out onto the porch. I pushed the button to disconnect the call in the hopes that she might be able to point us to Sugar's cabin.

"Welcome to Sweet Escape," the lady said cheerfully. "Can I help you with your reservation?"

"Sweet Escape?"

"Are you lost?"

"Maybe. Yes. Probably."

"Long drive?"

I motioned toward Sweetie who was squealing excitedly as she held her arms out and turned in circles. "It feels like we've been in the car for a hundred years."

The woman burst out laughing and then asked, "What name is your reservation under, and I'll get the key to your cabin."

"We don't have a reservation. We're actually looking for our friend's place. You might know him since he lives around here. His name is ... um ... I don't know his real name, but he goes by Sugar."

“Oh,” the woman said with a nod before her eyes got wide and she said, “Oh! You’re the woman from Texas!”

“You know him?”

She motioned toward the large sign that said, “Sweet Escape” before she answered, “Sugar is the owner.”

“Of this whole ...” I motioned toward the building behind her and then the few cabins I could see set off in the trees. They weren’t just cabins, but works of art made out of rough-hewn wood. I was amazed to think that the Sugar I’d known had any part of this. “Really?”

She nodded as she answered, “He started the retreat with one cabin in 2013 and has gradually expanded since. Right now, we have twenty-four cabins spread out over 130 acres.”

“Holy shit,” I heard Darius whisper from behind me.

“He wasn’t expecting you for a few days, so he’s in town with Claire, but he should be back soon. Let me show you to his house so you can start to get settled in while you wait.” She pointed at a tricked-out golf cart that was parked at the end of the building next to a whiskey barrel full of colorful flowers and asked, “If you and the little girl would like to ride with me, the others can follow in the SUV.”

“Follow?” I asked. “Which cabin is his?”

“His house is near the back of the property. It’s a bit of a hike, so it’s better to just drive.”

“You take Sweetie, and we’ll be right behind you,” Darius said before he called out to Simon and told him the plan. Simon picked Sweetie up and carried her to me. When I took her out of his arms, he looked so relieved that I was almost positive I saw tears in his eyes.

“Well, let’s go! I’m sure you would all like to get unpacked so you can relax after such a long trip.” I followed the woman to the ATV as she said, “I’m Laura, by the way. You must be Juni.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m sorry I didn’t introduce myself. I’m a little overwhelmed.”

“You must be exhausted,” Laura interrupted. “When Claire gets home, she’ll probably jump at the chance to take care of your little girl. If I were you, I’d take her up on it.”

“Claire?”

“Sugar’s daughter. She’s fifteen and absolutely loves children. We don’t get a lot of them here, but when we do, she’s always on hand to babysit.”

As tempting as that seemed, I knew I couldn’t make a decision until I met the young woman and got to know her myself. That would take some time, and as I did that, I’d get to know her father again and see what kind of man he’d become. Hopefully, he had changed from the cocky ass he’d been as a teenager, but I doubted it. There was an old saying that a leopard couldn’t change its spots, and I had a feeling that applied to Sugar. Once an ass, always an ass ... no matter how he tried to disguise it.



When I first caught sight of Sugar’s “cabin” as we drove up the mountain, I’d been stunned speechless. As Laura explained that Sugar had built it himself with very little outside help, I’d gaped at her in shock.

The Sugar I knew couldn’t even be bothered to rinse his own dishes after dinner. He was so lazy that he’d been known to sleep for days at a time without ever leaving his bedroom, even when Althea begged him to come downstairs to eat.

I would have never guessed he had enough ambition to build a structure out of Lincoln Logs, let alone actual logs that were milled from the place where he’d chosen to build his home.

It was a work of art, like houses I’d only seen on television or in magazines. He had made it fit into the surrounding forest rather than stand out to become the showpiece it could easily be. The dark green structure seemed to incorporate itself into the treeline and backed up against the mountain in a way that made it all seem one.

The ground level of the house had steps that led onto a large porch which was covered by the second-story deck that wrapped around the house and led out onto the grounds behind it. The third level had private balconies with furniture tucked here and there. The thought of relaxing there with a cup of coffee as I watched the sun rise over the mountains in the distance seemed to call to my soul.

I shook off that thought and reminded myself that I was a guest here and had more important things to do with my time than laze around. I had a little girl to nurture and raise while I did everything in my power to figure out who was threatening us and how I could make them stop. I didn't have time to pretend I was anything other than an unwanted guest with a limited window of time to hide out in Sugar's elaborate tree house.

Once Laura led us inside and gave us a quick tour, she assured us that she would call Sugar and let him know that we'd arrived and ordered us to make ourselves at home. She'd been gone for at least five minutes, but I was still standing in the middle of the living room as I took in all the details of the beautiful home.

And it was a home, not the showroom I expected when I studied the outside of the house. The interior was clean and tidy, but well lived-in with little bits and pieces of Sugar and his daughter all over the house. Pictures of them were scattered around, and I was happy to see a large photo of Althea front and center on the mantle next to framed snapshots of Sugar and his daughter over the years.

"Sugar leveled up," I heard Darius say as he set my suitcase down beside the staircase that led to the second and third levels of the house. "Damn. The man's got taste."

"Can you believe this is his?"

"And he built it. That's what's fucking me up. City boy's gone country. Woods and shit," Darius mumbled as he walked toward a sliding glass door that led to the side porch. "Did you see all the other stuff outside?"

“I guess not,” I said as I walked toward him. I glanced over at Sweetie and saw that she was enthralled with a video on her tablet, so I followed Darius outside.

He motioned toward the distance and said, “While we were unloading the truck, that lady told us about the other buildings.”

“More buildings?”

Darius motioned toward a large structure that was nearly hidden by the trees. “That’s a barn where he’s got animals. I guess he grows his own food too.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Looks like Sugar turned into Old MacDonald or some shit.”

“I don’t think Old MacDonald lived in a house like this.”

“Like I said, Sugar leveled up.”

“I can’t imagine him growing food. Pot maybe, but not food.”

Darius burst out laughing before he said, “Well, it is Sugar. There’s probably some pot growing somewhere around here.”

“Did you bring in all the bags?”

“We got all of your stuff, but I ain’t staying out here in the forest. Wildlife scares the shit outta me.”

“At home, you *are* the wildlife.”

“Because there aren’t fucking bears at home. If there were, I wouldn’t be at the top of the food chain. My ass would be staying in the house where it’s safe.”

I burst out laughing. “Are you really leaving tonight?”

“Tonight? There’s still plenty of light out, girl. My ass will be in another state before dark. I just want to make sure he doesn’t give you too much shit before I leave you here alone with him.”

“I’m sure it will be okay. Althea said I could trust him.”

“Althea trusts me.”

“Shit. You’re right.”

“You’ve got that cash I gave you and the phones too. I’ll have Simon mail you more when you get low.”

“Thanks, Dari. You didn’t have to do all this for me.”

“I did too. No one else likes you enough to help you.”

“Fuck you.”

“You think I’m playin’?”

I sighed. “I’m not the same girl I was when I left for the army, Dari.”

“June Bug, we’re all the same deep inside. That never changes. It’s just how hard you fight it that makes people see you differently. I don’t fight it, but I can tell you do. Looks like Sugar’s pretty good at it too.”

“I guess we’ll see.”



SUGAR

“Is that her car?” Claire asked as we drove past the black SUV that was parked in front of the house. I pulled up next to the porch to make it easier to unload what needed to go inside so that when I took the trailer down to the barn, I could unhook it and leave it there to unload later. “It looks like the Kardashian SUVs.”

“It disturbs me that you equate blacked out SUVs with those people instead of the president’s motorcade.”

“I don’t watch the president on a weekly show, Dad.”

“And that disturbs me even more,” I muttered as I opened the door to get out of the truck. “Remember what I said about Juni, Claire. She’s hard to take even when you know her, but I won’t have her hurting your feelings. I want you to tell me if that happens, okay?”

“I can take care of myself.”

“You tell me, okay?” I asked again, a little more firmly.

“Yes, sir.”

“Get your chickens, and I’ll help you set up the mudroom once I get Juni and the kid settled in.”

“Do you want me to start bringing in the stuff we bought for her?”

“Gather it all up and give me a few minutes to talk to Juni before you come in.”

“I can ...”

“Have you gone hard of hearing?”

Claire sighed before she shook her head. “I’m just trying to be a good hostess.”

“Oh good Lord,” I grumbled as I walked up onto the porch. “I’ll let you know when I’m ready for you to come inside.”

“I’ll be here,” Claire answered with an exaggerated pout. “Bored, alone, and at the mercy of the elements.”

“Dial it back, drama queen.”

Claire was still laughing as I walked into the house through the side door, but I didn’t find the situation humorous at all. It felt like I was getting ready to go under attack and needed to steel my spine for battle. Juni Dawson had been hard to deal with when she was a kid, and I couldn’t imagine that had changed much over the years. If anything, it had probably gotten worse.

Rather than take my boots off like I usually did when I came in, I left them on just in case there was a problem and I needed to move swiftly. I passed through the mudroom and stopped in the doorway of the great room when I realized that the people in my house were sprawled out on the furniture, napping peacefully.

Rifling through my shit and stealing my valuables must have been exhausting.

I walked farther into the room in the hopes of getting a better look at Juni and the little girl cuddled together on the sofa but stopped when the man dozing in the recliner opened his eyes

and stared at me. I recognized him immediately, and it took everything I had not to order him, along with the rest of them, out of my house.

He put one finger up as he used his other hand to put down the footrest before he stood and motioned toward the front of the house. I waited for him to start down the hall and then followed him, ignoring the other man who had just opened his eyes and was watching me intently.

Once we were on the front porch, I pulled the door shut behind me and then stared at Darius, waiting for him to speak since he was the one who thought we should come outside. He looked the same as he had when we were teenagers, hard and wary, ready for anything life had to throw at him because he'd seen it all at least once already. He'd been a young thug when I knew him, and over the years, Althea had mentioned how worried she was about him now that he was a grown thug.

"I can tell you're not thrilled about having me in your house."

"In your defense, I'm not thrilled about anybody being in my house, but you're right. What are you doing here, Darius?"

His slow smile came off as predatory, and I wondered how scary it must seem to his enemies on the streets back home. "I'm not staying, Sugar. I just wanted to make sure you weren't going to kick Juni out and force her to hide in the forest or some shit."

"Althea asked me to let her stay, and I said I would. I'm not going to kick her out. She's not going to be here for long anyway."

"I don't know about that. On the drive up, she told me about some of the shit that's been happening to her. If she were my woman, I'd hide her out until I had this fucker's head mounted as a trophy on my wall."

"You better get to work on that then. Happy hunting."

"She's not my woman, but I'm doing what I can to help her stay safe until the cops get to the bottom of this."

"You're in for the long haul then because the cops I knew back home couldn't figure out the difference between their ass and a

hole in the ground.”

“The military police are in on it too,” Darius informed me sagely. “It’s bigger than some guy she pissed off in line at the grocery store, Sugar. It’s someone who knows how to hunt and kill, not some douche who got his feelings hurt and wants to trash her online.”

“How are the MPs in on it? I thought she was out of the army.”

“It started happening before she dropped out to take care of Sweetie.”

“Sweetie? Really?”

“I didn’t give her that nickname. Her mama did.” I shook my head before I turned to look out over the yard. Lots of people called kids “sweetie” just like they used “honey” or “darling.” That didn’t mean anything, really, but it did hit a little close to home considering that Sweet was my last name. Apparently, Darius saw the connection, too, when he said, “Sherry and I kept in touch over the years, and we talked.”

“She did a lot of that.”

“She considered me a friend.”

“Probably her only one.”

“I know the two of you had a thing after Miss Althea’s party, and since the husband killed her when he found out the kid wasn’t his, the math works out that she might be yours.”

“She might be, but Sherry always liked a variety of meat in her diet.”

“Truth,” Darius said before he chuckled darkly.

“Why are you pointing this shit out to me now? You think I’ll take better care of Juni and the girl if I think she’s mine?”

“Maybe.”

“I’d take care of both of them regardless, but you’re right to think I might be a little more vigilant if the kid is mine. It’s just human nature.”

“As far as we can tell, no one knows they’ve left home yet. Juni planned her escape like a trained soldier, but if this fucker is one, too, he’ll be able to track her.”

“As long as she doesn’t use her phone or social media ...”

“I got her some burner phones to use when she talks to the cops and makes calls to her contacts in the army about her case.”

“That’s a good idea.”

“I didn’t live this long without coming up with a few.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Now.”

“Good.”

“Don’t want the likes of me staying in your castle, Sugar?”

“I’ve worked very hard to give my daughter a different life than I had growing up. That means I don’t want her to think it’s perfectly normal to live in a house where thugs and drug dealers are welcome.”

“And if I weren’t either of those?”

“Then I’d tell you to make yourself at home,” I said honestly. “Since that’s not the case, I’d like to kindly ask you to leave and take your friend with you.”

“I’ve already said my goodbyes to Juni, I just wanted to make sure you and I were on the same page before I left.”

“Which page is that?”

“People like us want to think we don’t need anybody, but sometimes we do, and it’s hard to admit it. Juni needs help. The fact that she let Althea call you should tell you just how scared she is even though she’d never say that out loud.”

“I get it.” I let out a long breath and then turned to the man before I asked, “If this guy knows Althea’s important to her ...”

“I’m on it, Sugar. Althea won’t even notice we’re watching, but someone will be until this asshole is dead.”

“And if they come across him, they’ll take care of that, right?”
Darius’ expression never changed, but he gave me a slow nod, and I knew he planned to do just that. I put my hand out to shake his before I said, “Have a safe trip home, Darius.”

“Can’t get there fast enough. Your mountain’s beautiful, but I’d rather see it in pictures than in person.”

“Not quite urban enough for you, huh?”

“Not much in this world scares me, but nature is up at the top of the list.”

“That’s all we’ve got up here, Darius.”

“And that’s why I can’t wait to leave.”

4.

“For someone who lives in a glass house, you’ve got a lot of rocks in your pocket.”

Juni

JUNI

As I slowly came awake, I tried to identify the smells and sounds around me but couldn’t place them. Flowers, wood, and dirt? I snuggled against the soft cushions at my back and gripped the hem of the blanket that was tickling my cheek right before my eyes shot open and my brain caught up with what my senses were saying.

I was not at home, I was not in my own bed, and Sweetie wasn’t anywhere near me.

I sat up and put my feet on the floor as I frantically looked around the room. Not only was Sweetie gone, but so were Darius and Simon. That made me feel a little better, knowing that she was with people she knew, even if they’d only met her a few days ago. However, that didn’t explain exactly *where* they were since Darius apparently had a fear of nature and anything having to do with the forests and wildlife.

“I’m going to get her some boots,” I heard a girl’s voice say before a man’s deep rumble answered her in agreement. “And I found that lady’s shoes by the couch and got her size, so I’ll order some for her too.”

I stood up and folded the blanket someone had covered me with before I padded in my sock feet toward the stairs in the middle of the room. I’d admired the wrought iron earlier, the design rustic and simple but beautiful at the same time. I was surprised that the stairs were metal, but they fit the design of the space, letting light come through from the front of the house to brighten up the hallway.

I looked up as I slowly ascended the stairs and realized that they didn't just take you to the second level but also the third and possibly even up into the attic. When I reached the first turn, I paused to take in even more pictures that were hung on the wall next to the landing and took a second to study them in the hopes I could get even more insight into the man Sugar had become.

He wasn't in many of the pictures I'd found so far, and when he was, I saw a somber man who rarely smiled unless he was looking at his daughter who seemed to always be happy.

"Don't slop it out while you stir it," I heard Sugar say. "Be careful. There you go. Good job."

My eyes got wide when I heard Sweetie repeat his words in her clear voice, "Good job!"

I walked up the rest of the stairs, curious about what I'd find on the second level since I hadn't explored it earlier. Before I fell asleep, I walked around the ground floor and looked into each room. I was surprised to find two offices - one much more formal and masculine than the other, a mudroom - a bathroom, a gym, a comfortable library with shelves of books, and, of course, the large living area where I'd fallen asleep. At first, I'd been surprised that each room had its own fireplace but then realized that there would be snow piled up outside during the winter months and there was a high probability that they'd lose electricity. The multiple fireplaces made sense.

I stopped on the landing of the second floor, which led to more stairs leading up or into the large room surrounded by the deck I'd noticed earlier. There were more windows than walls on this level, and as I looked around, I realized that this must be what it was like to live in a treehouse. I could see into the forest on all sides with the mountain behind the house a perfect backdrop for the cheery decor.

Sweetie was perched on the wide expanse of marble countertop on the kitchen island with a mixing bowl in front of her as she concentrated on stirring the contents under the supervision of the man who was watching her intently.

My first sight of Sugar in almost twenty years took my breath away. My heart started to race when I realized he was even better looking now than he had been then. His dark hair was still cut shorter on the sides than the top, but now he sported a scruffy beard that only added to his dark and brooding good looks. When he smiled at Sweetie, the corners of his eyes crinkled in a way that let me know that he smiled more often than the pictures had led me to believe. When

she grinned at him, he touched the end of her nose and laughed along with her before they turned their eyes back to the mixture in her bowl.

The young woman that was perched on a barstool across from them was focused on her laptop as she twirled a lock of her hair. I compared the two - Sugar and the girl I knew had to be Claire - and saw the resemblance. They had the same dark hair and olive skin. The shape of her nose and the cut of her chin matched his almost perfectly. When she smiled again, the dimple I'd come to adore appeared in her cheek, and when I looked at him, I saw his dimple that I'd loved as a girl.

“Are you finished spending all my money yet?”

Claire looked up at him from her laptop and smiled. “It’s a thankless job, but somebody’s gotta do it.”

“What are you buying now?” Sugar asked before he added sugar from a measuring cup to the bowl that Sweetie was still carefully stirring.

“I’m getting some clothes for Juni.”

“You haven’t even officially met her, Claire. How are you gonna buy her a new wardrobe? She might not like what you pick out.”

“She might not like it, but she’ll wear it,” Claire said firmly. “Snow’s coming soon, and she’s gonna want a good coat. We’ve got plenty of hats and gloves, but she needs boots, thermals, thick socks ...”

“Can we have one day ... just one ... where I don’t get a call that there’s a package waiting for me in the office?”

“You’ll get more than one when the snow comes,” Claire said sassily.

“I’ll need a damn trailer to haul all the packages home from the post office when I go to town,” Sugar grumbled.

He put his hand over Sweetie’s and helped her scrape the sides of the bowl. Sweetie watched intently, the tip of her tongue between her teeth as she concentrated on the task. I felt myself being watched and looked over to find Claire grinning before she motioned for me to come closer.

As I walked that way, she hopped off her stool and said, “Hi! I’m Claire!”

She was so cheerful that I couldn’t help but smile at her as I introduced myself, “I’m Juni Dawson. It’s nice to meet you.”

I stuck my hand out to shake hers, but she brushed it aside and threw her arms around me for a hug. I didn’t have any other choice but to return it and patted her back awkwardly until she finally pulled away. When I looked up at Sugar, I saw that he had his lips pulled in between his teeth, probably to hold back a laugh at my discomfort, and I glared at him before I said, “Hello, Sugar.”

“June Bug,” Sugar said.

His deep voice reverberated down to my toes, and Claire said, “See, Dad? I told you she’d be cold.” She reached out and patted my forearm before she said, “I’ll go grab you a hoodie.”

“I’ll be fine,” I assured her, but she took off toward the stairs anyway, so I turned my focus to Sweetie. I walked around the counter and smiled at her before I asked, “What are you cooking?”

Sweetie started chattering away as she frantically stirred the contents of the bowl, and when I glanced up at Sugar, he translated, “We’re making cookies for dessert.”

“Dessert? How long did I sleep?”

“Darius left about four hours ago.” I felt my jaw drop in shock as I looked from Sweetie to Sugar and back again.

“She’s been fine. We stayed in the house since I figured you’d freak out if you woke up and found her gone.”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to fall asleep but ...”

“No problem. I’m always exhausted after I make the trip to Texas, so I understand,” Sugar said pleasantly. “However, once we get this cookie dough in the fridge, we need to get started on the chores. I thought that might be a good time to show you around, and I’m sure the little one would like to see the animals up close.”

“Animals?”

“We’ve got a couple of milk cows, chickens, rabbits, and a few livestock guardian dogs.”

“Really?”

“And we need to check on the greenhouse while we’re at it,” he said as he took the wooden spoon from Sweetie and worked on the mixture. He gave it back to her before he stepped aside and pulled out a drawer. He grabbed a box of plastic wrap and pulled a section out before he ripped it off and covered the bowl. “There are some things we need to harvest for preservation, and I want to grab some vegetables to go with dinner.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered without thinking.

“What?”

“Darius was right. You *have* turned into Old MacDonald.”

Sugar burst out laughing and was still chuckling when his daughter came down the stairs with a hoodie over her arm. As he was putting the bowl in the fridge, Claire said, “We got your girl some warm clothes while we were in town, but since I didn’t know your size, I couldn’t get you anything. You can wear Dad’s clothes until yours are delivered.”

“Thank you,” I said as I took the hoodie from her. She was right. It was a lot colder here than in Texas, and even though I lived all over while I was in the army, I was never stationed anywhere that would be considered a cold weather climate. While I was busy rolling up the cuffs of the sweatshirt, Claire

pulled Sweetie across the bar and put one on her too. I couldn't help but smile at Sweetie's excitement when she saw the picture that was printed across the sweatshirt, and said, "You guessed right when you chose that one. She absolutely loves that character."

"Grandma told me," Claire said before she picked Sweetie up and propped her on her hip. "I'm ready when you are."

Sugar finished drying his hands before he walked over to the sliding glass door and reached up to pull something off the shelf above it. I realized it was a gun when he clipped the holster to his belt, and while I was still processing that, he opened the door and walked outside.

Claire walked ahead but stopped just outside the door to wait for me. "Make sure you pull it all the way shut, or we'll come home and find a critter inside."

"A critter?"

"I left the door open once, and we came home to a completely trashed house," Claire said dramatically. "It took weeks to get the smell out."

"The smell of what?" I whispered, horrified.

"Bear."

The look on my face made her burst out laughing, and Sweetie joined in even though she didn't know what was so funny. "There was a bear in your house?"

"Yeah, and the bastard gave us a one-star review because the porridge was too cold," Sugar chimed in from the bottom of the stairs. "Let's move it, ladies. We're losing daylight, and we've got chores to do."

As I followed Sugar down the gravel trail, I realized we were about to go into a wooded area and looked around cautiously. He noticed my hesitance and laughed before he said, "If there's a baddie out here, you're not going to see them until it's too late. If it's a bear, you'll probably smell them. A cat, not so much."

“That’s why we take one or two of the dogs with us when we go hiking,” Claire explained. “They’re gonna love Sweetie.”

“Why aren’t the dogs with us now?” I asked as I hurried to get closer to Sugar. He was the one with a gun, and I knew how to use that well enough to get at least one shot off before I was mauled by a wild animal.

Maybe.

“They work during the day and come up to relax with us after we bed the other animals down for the night,” Claire explained.

I thought that through on the short hike through the dense trees and was surprised when the path curved and I saw a gate ahead. As Sugar unlocked it, I looked past him and realized there was a large expanse of land that had been cleared of trees and was pleasantly surprised to see three cows walking toward us from the far end of the enclosure.

“I suggest you not go exploring without one of us,” Sugar said as he closed and latched the gate behind Claire.

“I don’t plan on leaving the house unless I’m forced to,” I admitted. I couldn’t help but add, “Especially now that I know we’re not alone out here.”

“City girl,” Claire teased before she bumped my arm with her shoulder. Sweetie was wiggling on her hip, so she let her down. When she took off running, Claire jogged behind her, calling out over her shoulder, “Make sure you protect her from the wildlife, Dad.”

As Sugar was walking beside me, I asked, “How long did it take you to get used to living in nature?”

“Longer than you’ll be here,” Sugar mumbled before he turned and gave me a hard look. “We need to set some ground rules before you get too comfortable.”

“Oh goodie! I love rules.”

“I seem to recall how much you enjoyed breaking them,” Sugar retorted.

“I know I’m here against your will, Sugar. I’m not all that happy about it either, but Althea was sure this would be the best place for me and Sweetie to lay low while the cops figure out what’s going on.”

“The cops aren’t gonna do shit, and you know it,” Sugar snapped. “I’ve got two friends who are PIs that might be able to help, but it’s gonna cost a pretty penny.”

“I’ve got money.”

“ I’ll give them a call and see if one’s available anytime soon. You’ll need to give them everything you’ve given the cops and then some. You can stay here while they’re working, I guess.”

“You don’t have to sound so thrilled about it, Sugar. I get it. You don’t want me here.”

“I don’t want the bratty little shit I knew years ago here, but if you’ve turned into a moderately decent person, I won’t mind,” Sugar admitted. “I can already tell that you’ve learned to control that fucking mouth of yours, and that gives me at least a little hope.”

“I see you’re still a dick. *That* hasn’t changed.”

Sugar put his fingers to his lips and whistled in three short bursts followed by a longer one before he dropped his hand and said, “You’ll be nice to my daughter, or you’ll find yourself tied to a fucking tree in the forest.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

I saw Sugar’s eyes darken. For a second, I thought it might be lust, but then I realized it was anger. “I’m not playing, Juni. I’ve made sure to give Claire a childhood that’s completely different from ours. I don’t need your punk ass bringing any negative bullshit into my house and ruining everything I’ve worked so hard to build.”

“What makes you think I would do that?”

“You showed up at my fucking house with a drug dealing pimp!” Sugar yelled before he snapped his mouth shut and inhaled deeply through his nose.

“He offered me a ride,” I said with a shrug. I didn’t need to explain shit to him, and obviously, he wasn’t going to give me a chance even if I tried.

“Stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours. That’s probably the only way we’ll both make it through this without any visible scars.”

“You still see me as that shitty little street rat, don’t you?”

“Are you?”

“You know, for someone who lives in a glass house, you’ve got a lot of rocks in your pocket.”

“I built my house from the ground up because when I got out of prison, the only thing I was sure of was that I never wanted to go back. When Claire came into my life, the need to make sure she never experienced anything like I had became my main focus.”

“That’s what I want for Sweetie.”

“Is it?”

“You don’t believe I can do that?”

“Prove me wrong, June Bug. I dare you.”

5.

“I’m trying very hard to find something nice to say right now but I’m having a difficult time.”

Sugar

SUGAR

“Have you had a good day, darlin’?” I heard Juni ask Sweetie as I walked past the bathroom door. I’d come upstairs to offer my help in setting up Sweetie’s room but heard them laughing in the bathroom with the water running. I assumed Juni was already getting the little girl ready for bed, so I went ahead and started working in her room. After I made the bed, I set up the video monitor Claire had insisted we purchase today.

Now I was eavesdropping outside the door, eager to hear how Juni treated her charge when no one else was around.

“Butter!” Sweetie’s cute little voice made me smile as I looked down at the Golden Retriever that was laying in front of the bathroom door, waiting for the girl that he’d taken as his charge the second he met her.

I knelt down and scratched his neck exactly where he liked it, smiling when he huffed at me like he’d been doing since he was just a puppy. He was usually right by my side, but since I’d had to go to town, I’d left him in the field with the other dogs. Now he was worn out and ready to sleep. However, instead of trailing behind me through the house as I worked, he’d followed Juni and Sweetie upstairs.

“And you even made a new bestie. Look at you, thriving in the wilds of the Montana forest, making friends right and left.” Juni’s voice sounded sad when she said, “Maybe you can teach me how to do that, kiddo. Making friends isn’t really my forte.” Sweetie chattered for a second before Juni interrupted her. “I love you, Sweetie.”

The yearning in Juni's voice tore at my heart, and I wondered if I might have judged her too harshly. Granted, she had shown up with the drug dealing duo, but I could almost see why she'd asked Darius for help. Who would know how to run beneath the radar better than a man raised by a notorious drug dealer who had then become one himself?

If I hadn't gone to prison, I probably would have become someone like Darius, although some might think that what I'd done might be worse than what he still did today. I didn't see it like that, though. Yes, I'd killed a man. Yes, I should have stopped beating him when he collapsed in front of me. And yes, I shouldn't have picked up that screwdriver and done what I did to end his life, but looking back, I could see how my younger self thought that was the only option at the time.

I was consumed by rage when I saw that boy hurting Althea, the only woman who had ever shown me kindness and love consistently throughout my life. Remembering her cries of pain as she begged him to leave her alone still haunted me, and they still filled me with an anger so intense that if that boy was in front of me right now I'd probably kill him all over again.

I was a different man now, but I knew that if I hadn't served that time in prison for killing him, I'd have ended up there for something else. I had no doubt about that.

And Juni was a different woman for having served her time in a different way, a much more productive and respectable way, spending years in the army. I had heard Althea mention her over the years, worried about one of her girls who was overseas fighting a battle none of us really understood and risking her life for a country that didn't appreciate her efforts nearly enough. Juni had gone into the service with experience under her belt that probably served her well in war. Self-preservation had been ingrained in her since birth because she'd never had a parent to love and nurture her like she was doing right now behind the bathroom door, singing off-key along with Sweetie who would hopefully never know the things Juni had.

Juni seemed to want the same things for Sweetie that I had always strived to give Claire - security, safety, and stability.

Sprinkle in love and affection, and you might just get a decent human being who wasn't riddled with self-doubt and an anger they just couldn't seem to control. That was my hope anyway, and not just for Claire but for Sweetie too.

I was still scratching Butter when the door in front of me suddenly opened. I was so shocked that I fell back on my ass in the middle of the hall.

"Were you spying on me?" Juni asked. She glanced at the doorknob and then looked back at me warily before she asked, "Were you trying to see something you weren't invited to see?"

Sweetie's face was shocked at the anger in Juni's voice, and when her face crumpled, I knew she was about to burst into tears, so I got up and calmly said, "You're upsetting Sweetie, Juni. I came upstairs to help you get her room together and stopped to pet Butter while I waited for the two of you to finish." Juni ran her hand up and down Sweetie's back as she held her to her chest, her gaze assessing me as she tried to calm the upset toddler. "I'm sorry I upset you, but I promise I wasn't doing anything nefarious. You can trust me."

"I'll trust you the same day you start trusting me, Sugar Bear."

My eyes narrowed at the old nickname I hadn't heard since the last time Juni and I had a verbal spat. She'd been the first one to call me Sugar all those years ago, and she hadn't done it out of affection. It came about after one of our first arguments. At the time, Juni and her sister were new fosters at Althea's, and both of them were giving her fits. I stepped in to try and diffuse the situation, and things had gotten ugly. I ended up telling the girls to shut the hell up and leave Althea alone before I went into the kitchen to console her. A few minutes later when I walked back into the living room where Juni and her sister were sitting, she sneered at me and said, "You're a sugar bear when you want to be, but the rest of the time, you're a fucking asshole."

"Nobody calls me Sugar Bear anymore, June Bug."

"You're still an asshole, though, so the name fits."

I sighed because *this* was the Juni I remembered. She was in-your-face aggressive, had not a single care for other people's feelings, and had zero respect for anyone or anything once she got it in her head that they weren't worthy.

"Can we just not snipe at each other the entire time you're here?"

"I stayed outside earlier after our first little interaction and managed to keep things civil over dinner, yet here you are lurking in the hallway ready to pick a fight with me."

I realized that Sweetie had gotten quiet, and when I leaned over to look at her face, I found her sound asleep. "Put your claws away, June Bug. This one's had a long day, and she's ready for bed."

"Yeah, she turned into dead weight about ten seconds after I started rubbing her back."

"I set up her room and ..."

"She can sleep with me," Juni rushed to say.

"That's fine, too, but Laura had the guys bring one of the cribs and get it set up for her."

"You keep cribs in storage?" Before I could answer, she asked, "For the guests, right? She's been sleeping in a playpen in my bedroom since she came to live with me, so she'd probably appreciate a regular crib."

"I set it up in Claire's old room. There's still a childproof knob on the inside of the door, so she won't be able to go roaming if she wakes up," I explained as I walked down the hall, assuming she'd follow me. I walked into the smaller room that had been used as a guest room since I moved to the attic and Claire took over the master suite. "Claire got a video monitor for you guys, and I've got it set up and ready to go."

"Thank you, Sugar," Juni mumbled as she walked past me. I watched her bend over the edge of the crib and gently lay Sweetie down before she kissed her finger and touched the little girl's nose. Once she had the blanket over her, she stood up and sighed. "When you were raising Claire, did you wonder if you were doing it right?"

“I still do, every second of every day.”

“I’m wondering that right now. I forgot to kiss her before I laid her down, and I know that’s important. Is kissing my finger good enough?”

“The important thing was how you held her when she was upset and that she was secure enough in your arms to fall asleep.”

Juni looked up at me, and I saw so many questions in her eyes that I had to resist the urge to pull her into my arms. It didn’t help that the rest of my body had been wanting to do that for completely different reasons since I saw her standing in the bathroom doorway wearing my old bathrobe with her wet hair hanging over her shoulders.

Now, after her evening bath, she looked relaxed and approachable. Even the look on her face was softer than it had been all evening. She looked like a totally different person than the woman who had arrived with an intense and distrustful look in her eyes and her hair slicked back into a bun so tight that it pulled her eyes at the edges.

Without thinking, I asked, “Want to come down and have a drink with me on the deck?”

“Why?”

“Because I want to sit and get to know the Juni that’s here now rather than snipe at the one I remember.”

“I’d like to do the same with you.”

“Good. I’ll meet you in the kitchen,” I told her as I turned around to go. “Oh, and I put a stack of clothes on your bed. They’ll be way too big for you, but I’m sure they’re warmer than what you brought.”

“Thanks, Sugar.”

“Not a problem, June Bug.”



“When you offered me a drink, I thought it was going to be something a little more potent than hot chocolate,” Juni said before she blew across the top of her mug. “Not that I’m complaining, but I took you for a whiskey on the rocks man.”

“I don’t drink.”

“Really? Are you religious or ... Sorry, that’s none of my business.”

“I was high on cocaine when I killed that guy,” I admitted. “I’d been smoking weed since I was twelve, but about six months before that happened, I started on the harder stuff and liked it so much that I didn’t want to stop. I didn’t realize at the time that I couldn’t quit without help. I found that out the hard way after I got arrested and went into a forced detox.”

“I had no idea,” Juni whispered.

“And once an addict, always an addict, so I prefer to stay far away from things that could become a problem.”

“That’s a good idea. I’m lucky that I never got started on that shit. I smoked some weed with Dari when we were kids, but I didn’t really like it. Sherry, on the other hand, never met a narcotic she didn’t love, and she was *very* fond of whiskey.”

“What was she like as a mom?”

“I don’t know,” Juni said with a shrug. “We weren’t close. I was surprised when the hospital called me because I hadn’t talked to her in forever. I’d never even met Sweetie before.”

“You were off in your own world, weren’t you?”

“I was living in El Paso when I got the call about Sherry, so I got in my car and hauled ass to Houston. Not so much for Sherry as much as it was for Althea because you know how she gets when something happens to one of her kids.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“After Sherry died, I dealt with the cops and did all the things you do when someone dies, all the while trying to figure out how I was gonna raise a little girl I’d never even met. When I called my boyfriend and told him I’d be bringing Sweetie home with me, he lost his shit and told me he wasn’t gonna be

saddled with someone else's brat and suggested I just leave her with Althea since she was the kind of person who takes in strays," Juni said bitterly.

"Did you go back to El Paso and bury him alive in the desert, or is that still on your to-do list?"

Juni burst out laughing before she explained, "I didn't kill him because the thought of never seeing him again didn't really hurt as bad as it should have. I realized that losing him wasn't much of a loss at all."

"He sounds like a dick."

"You'd know," Juni snapped. "Shit. I'm sorry. It's a habit even after all these years."

"Say something nice about me."

Juni looked at me like I'd just asked her to get naked and dance around the fire, although, looking at her right now with her hair blowing in the breeze, I thought that might be quite a lovely sight.

Juni laughed uncomfortably before she asked, "Like what?"

"It's something I practiced when Claire was young. My go-to when I was upset or in a foul mood ..." I put my hand up when Juni bit her lip as she tried not to smile. "Which, I can admit, was more often than not. Anyway, I realized that she was picking up on that. She started being snarky and didn't smile nearly as much as when she first moved in with me. At first, I thought it was all the changes she was going through and she just missed her parents, but then I figured out she was shitty when I was shitty, and I didn't like it. I wanted to see her smile and hear her happy voice, not hear her grumbling cuss words under her breath and glaring at everyone that she saw."

"You're right," Juni said softly as she stared down into her mug. "When I'm in a foul mood, Sweetie starts throwing fits and crying for no reason."

"They're like little mirror images of yourself."

"You're a good dad."

“Thank you.” I smiled at Juni and said, “See? It didn’t hurt that bad.”

“It was like chewing glass,” Juni said with a sigh of irritation. I could tell she was teasing, though. “Thank you for letting us stay with you, Sugar. I know you only did it for Althea, but I do appreciate the sacrifice you made. I know you couldn’t have been thrilled when she asked that favor of you.”

“I’d do anything for Althea, and I know you would too.”

“She was the only good thing in my life that was a constant until I met Sweetie,” Juni admitted.

“I felt the same way until I met Claire.”

“I thought you’d be different. Scratch that. I thought you’d be the same. I just knew we were going to show up here and have to live in a one-room cabin with you hurling insults and stomping around like when we were younger. Imagine my surprise when I found that you live in a treehouse fancier than any home I’ve ever been inside.”

“I suppose it is kind of like a treehouse.”

“It’s obvious that Claire loves you and she is thriving under your care.”

“That’s my main goal in life.”

“Have you ever thought about having more children?”

“Well, I’d have to have a woman around to accomplish that, and I’ve never brought a woman home with me.”

“Never?”

“My mother brought men around all the time. We’d wake up one day and there’d be a new guy, and then the shine would wear off and the screaming and yelling would start. They’d go back and forth for a while, and then she’d bring home another new guy. The cycle would just repeat over and over.”

“My mom did that too.”

“Half my life was spent trying to protect Carra from whatever scumbag happened to be camped out in our house, and the other half was spent trying to protect myself.”

“Same, except I didn’t have a big brother to protect me. I had to do it myself.” Juni studied my face as she asked, “If you had a woman in your life, *would* you want more kids?”

“I think so,” I admitted. “Claire moved in with me when she was five, so I didn’t experience the baby stage or even the stage Sweetie is in now, but I think I’d like it. A fresh start from the beginning with no baggage or expectations other than to do my very best to raise a healthy and happy kid through all the stages into a good person who can make a difference in the world.”

“Like you’re doing with Claire.”

“I’m probably just emotional because she’s already talking about colleges and dorm life and all that other shit. That absolutely terrifies me. I’ll be alone here in my treehouse, and that’s a depressing thought.”

“I think ... Before Sherry died she ... Fuck,” Juni said before she ran her hand through her hair and flipped it over her shoulder. “I came here thinking you’d be *you* and that I was never going to tell you what I’m about to tell you, but you’re *not* you. You’re *this* you, which is different and throws everything I thought ... You have great hair, Sugar.”

I burst out laughing and then bit it back and cleared my throat because it was obvious she was working through something serious, and I had an idea of what that might be.

“I swear it gets easier to say nice things, Juni. It really does.”

“You ... You’re an amazing father,” Juni blurted. “I can tell. That changes everything.”

“Because if I were a horrible person, you wouldn’t want to tell me that Sweetie is my daughter.” Juni’s mouth dropped open in shock, and I burst out laughing before I said, “I’m not just a pretty face, June Bug. I can read, write, and even do math.”

“How did you know?”

“When Claire was talking to Althea, she mentioned that Sweetie was almost three and Sherry’s biological daughter. I have no illusions that I was the only man she was with at any given time, but Althea was insistent that you and Sweetie had

to come here when there were probably plenty of other options.”

“Althea saw the two of you leave together, and apparently, she can do math too.”

“I guess if Sherry had lived, I’d have never known Sweetie was mine.”

“Her husband found out. That’s why he killed her. I think that if Sweetie had been at the house with them that night, he may have killed her too.”

“Fuck,” I whispered. “That’s horrible. I swear, I didn’t know she was married. I had no idea that ...”

“They didn’t get married until she was almost six months along, and I think that’s how she convinced him to do it. They’d been seeing each other off and on for a long time, but he didn’t want to settle down. I don’t think he saw himself spending the rest of his life with that type of woman.”

“He came from money?”

“Yeah. After his parents were killed in an accident, he got a huge settlement and started running the family business. He didn’t have stupid money, but he had enough to live comfortably. He met Sherry, and the rest is history.”

“What’s Sweetie’s real name?”

“That *is* her real name,” Juni said with a harsh laugh. “I think it was meant to be a ‘fuck you’ to her husband. Naming the baby he thought was his after the man she really belonged to.”

“I’m trying really hard to find something nice to say right now, but I’m having a very difficult time,” I ground out before I took a sip of my lukewarm cocoa.

“Sherry loved Sweetie. I mean, the kind of love a mom is supposed to have for her child, not the kind of love our mom swore she had for us. Sherry’s last thoughts were of her daughter, not herself or anything else. She wanted to make sure that Sweetie was taken care of, so she had a will made and left it in Althea’s safe. It lists me as Sweetie’s guardian, but she told me to find you before she died.”

“What does that mean to you?”

“I think it means that Sherry wanted both of us involved in Sweetie’s life. If you want a DNA test, I completely understand.”

“If something happens to you, where will Sweetie go?”

Juni shrugged before she admitted, “I haven’t really thought about it because I didn’t realize that you’d grown up and become a decent human being.”

“Right back at ya, sweetheart,” I said drolly.

“I think we should put something in place now in case something happens to me.”

“We need to talk about that too. I want to know what to expect if whoever’s looking for you finds you here. Will Claire be in danger? Will Sweetie? Or is it just you?”

Juni set her mug down beside the leg of her chair and pulled her knees up in front of her. She seemed to curl into herself as she stared into the fire, and I gave her a few minutes with her thoughts as I studied her face.

She finally looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, “I spoke up, loud and proud, and ruined a man’s life. Because of that, I think that he’ll do anything he can to ruin mine, including hurting the people who mean the most to me. I’m not positive it’s him, though. It could be someone else. I haven’t exactly tried very hard to fit in and get along, so I’ve made some enemies over the years.”

“You? No!”

“What I’m trying to say is that there are more than a few possibilities as to who might hate me enough to want me dead. But I’ve watched enough true crime to know that it could also just be some guy I passed on the street who is nuts and believes we had some sort of invisible connection.”

“Claire’s obsessed with true crime shit, so I’ve seen a few of those cases myself,” I admitted. “Do you think that’s what it is?”

“No.”

“You think it’s someone you knew in the army.”

“I do, and if that’s the case, then it’s not just your run of the mill stalker who’s just in it to sniff my panties while I force him to call me ”mommy” and lick peanut butter from between my toes.” I chuckled, and Juni smiled. “Not that doing that is a bad thing if that’s what you’re into, but I’m not.”

“Me either,” I assured her before I took another sip of cocoa.

“I’m sure it’s not my ex. He moved on before I even got all my shit out of the house. It could be the guy I dated before him, but I seriously doubt it. Why would he have started fucking with me all of a sudden after all this time?”

“I get that logic. When did it start?”

“Looking back, I can see that it started before my ex and I broke up, but it was more subtle then.”

“How so?”

“There was a delivery for me one day from a local florist. At first, I thought they were from my boyfriend, but that would have been weird because I’m not really the type of girl that’s into floral arrangements, and he’s not the kind of guy that would think to do that anyway.”

“And?”

“I realized they weren’t from him the second I opened the box. The flowers were dead and covered in red ants. They swarmed me, and I ended up in the hospital.”

“From ant bites?”

“I’ve always been allergic,” Juni said with a shrug. “I reported it to the MPs on base, and they said they’d look into it. I think they blew it off just like I did.”

“And then what happened?”

“Nothing for a while, but in hindsight, I think that was because I didn’t leave the base. The first time I did, I was involved in a hit and run crash that totaled my car and fucked me up in the process. The cops in town found the car in a parking lot a few

blocks away and realized it had been reported stolen three days before.”

“You probably didn’t connect the incidents at first, did you?”

“Not at all. I didn’t even think to report my accident to the MPs because it happened in town and seemed like a random thing.”

“I want to know everything, Juni, but you’re going to have to tell the PI, too, so there’s no sense in going through it twice. But I need to put it all on the table so we can figure out how to proceed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that if it comes down to it, I’ll put you out and keep the girls here with me to protect them.”

Juni nodded before she agreed, “That’s exactly what you should do, Sugar. That’s what I’d do if I were in your shoes.”

6.

“I swear by all that’s holy, if you write another psychology paper on me, I’ll ground you until you’re forty.”

Sugar

SUGAR

“Sweetie is your daughter?” I turned around and looked at Claire with my eyebrows raised and stared at her until she sighed. As she sat on the barstool across from me, she admitted, “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but my window was open, so I heard most of what y’all were talking about last night.”

I wasn’t worried that Claire might hear something about me she didn’t already know because I’d been honest with her about not only my family history but my criminal history too. She knew that I’d done more drugs before I was old enough to vote than most people did in their lifetime. She also knew that I killed a young man in a drug-fueled rage and didn’t have nearly as much regret about it as most people would.

I hadn’t sheltered Claire from the truth, just the world and a lot of the shitty stuff in it. She knew that there were good people out there, but she also knew there were bad people and how to handle herself around them. My daughter and I had an honest and open relationship and hadn’t found a subject yet that we couldn’t discuss. Whether it was sex, boys, attraction, drugs, drinking, crime, or any other thing that might come up in what she saw online or in her social circle, we talked about it. We even argued from different viewpoints on a lot of subjects. I welcomed that because it meant I was raising a young woman who had her own thoughts and opinions and didn’t have a problem expressing them.

But we’d also talked about her penchant for eavesdropping and how, if she wasn’t careful, she might hear something she

didn't want to know.

"I don't have a blood test that tells me with one hundred percent certainty that she is my child, but I don't have one that says she isn't either."

"Do *you* think she is?"

"The math works out, but her mother wasn't exactly ... How can I say this without being crass?"

"She wasn't mindful of the repercussions of her sexual activities or the number of partners she racked up in the process."

I burst out laughing. "That's the most eloquent way to say she was a slut that I think I've ever heard."

"I'm not slut-shaming but ..."

"Is that really a thing?"

"Yes, Dad, but I'm not going to have that debate with you right now. I want to know what's going to happen."

I tilted my head and studied Claire's expression and body language. I realized that she wasn't just being curious, she was visibly upset. "What do you think's gonna happen, sweetheart?"

"Well, if she's your daughter, then ..."

I suddenly understood why she was upset, and my heart dropped. "No. She'd be my youngest daughter. That would make you my oldest daughter."

"But I'm not really ..."

"Finish that sentence and you'll have to watch a grown man cry," I snapped. "You and I both know that I'm your uncle by blood, but if you think that means shit to me when I consider you my little girl, you're fucking wrong, Claire. Abso-fuckin'-lutely wrong."

"It doesn't matter that she has your DNA?"

"You do, too, brainiac." Claire raised her eyebrows, and I sighed before I said, "You look lovely today. That color really

suits your skin tone and brings out your eyes.”

“Thank you.” Clair sniffed and flipped her hair over her shoulder haughtily before she asked, “What happens now?”

“Well, I guess I’m gonna have to move you to the basement and start feeding you kitchen scraps or some shit. Isn’t that what happens in the movies when a situation like this comes about?”

“We don’t have a basement.”

“Then I’ll put a room under the stairs and force you to live there,” I barked.

“You better get to work,” Claire ordered with a grin. She got my reference since she and I had read those books together when she was young and binge watched the movies every Thanksgiving while we put up the Christmas tree. “You already make me do all the work around here, so I guess that’s the obvious next step.”

“That sounds like a lot of effort and not much of a return. I guess we’ll have to figure out a different solution. I’m just spitballin’ here, but I’d say we just roll with the situation and see what happens.”

“That’s what I mean. If she’s your daughter, what’s going to happen when Juni goes back to Texas?” I ran my hand over the back of my neck and leaned forward as I tried to rub out the knots. I was tense and exhausted since I had barely slept last night because that very question had been on my mind after Juni told me about Sherry’s deathbed confession. “I think I have a solution to that problem.”

“What’s that?”

“You make nice so she never wants to leave, and she stays here with Sweetie.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“I’m sure it won’t kill you to be nice for more than three consecutive days.”

“It might. Are you willing to risk it?”

I could tell she was frustrated because she thought I wasn't taking the situation as seriously as she thought I should. After a few seconds of deep breathing, she said, "Your face is handsome in an asymmetrical way that an artist would appreciate."

I nodded before I took a sip of my coffee, appreciating Claire's ability to insult me while simultaneously giving me a compliment. She had that skill down since we'd been hurling nice things at each other for years.

"Don't forget, Claire Bear, that every person we meet mentions how much you look like me."

"Sweetie looks like you too."

"Maybe the dimples, but I don't see any other resemblance."

"You know that dimples come from a genetic mutation, right?"

"No, but I'm sure you could explain it to me," I said as I rolled my eyes.

"The three of us are mutants. If you have a few more kids, we could get a jet and become a team of crime fighters that battles the forces of evil to keep the earth safe."

"I really should have put you in public school at some point," I muttered as I turned around to refill my coffee mug. "If nothing else, it may have taught you some humility."

"It's difficult to always be the smartest person in the room, but I've learned to adjust."

"Getting back on track," I said as I stirred the dollop of fresh cream I'd put in my coffee. "Does it upset you that Sweetie may be my daughter?"

"Not at all. You know I've always wanted siblings."

"If you had some that were closer in age to you, all you'd do is fight," I pointed out.

"But she's cute. I can do her hair and dress her up," Claire pointed out.

"And to do that, you'd probably need to do some more online shopping. Is that what you're saying?"

“Yes.”

“That’s extortion, kiddo.”

“I’m not only brilliant, but I’m streetwise too. Probably has something to do with my rearing, but it might also be genetic. I should look into that.”

“I swear by all that’s holy, if you write another psychology paper about me, I’m going to ground you until you’re forty.”

“You don’t like it when I’m grounded because I drive you crazy.”

“And you do it on purpose,” I said knowingly. Claire shrugged, and I narrowed my eyes at her before I tried to get the conversation back on track. “I have to talk to Juni about what’s going to happen, but if you were listening intently to last night’s conversation, you know that she’s got too much on her plate to think about how we’re going to co-parent.”

“You really don’t like her, do you?”

“I didn’t, but she’s grown up since I last knew her. We’re different people now, so the jury’s still out. She’s still got that smart mouth I remember, but then again, I might be a little better able to handle it since I’ve had you snarking at me for the last ten years.”

“She’s beautiful.”

“Beauty is only skin deep.”

“She took in her orphaned niece and is doing her best to give her a stable and loving home.”

“You’re reaching, kid.”

“She’s dedicated.”

“How do you figure?”

“She was in the army for a long time. That takes dedication. And stamina. She could probably kick your ass.” I just stared at my daughter, pretending I was bored, but in my head, I was trying to ignore all the ways Juni had changed. Yes, she was fucking gorgeous, and yes, the things she’d accomplished since I knew her back in the day showed that she was now a

responsible adult, but she could still make me want to throw her out a window with just a look. She'd proved that yesterday evening. "I've watched GI Jane enough times to know that it takes a certain something to get through boot camp."

"Jane didn't just go through boot camp, Claire. She was training to become a Navy Seal."

"You know what I'm saying. You always say that a strong woman is sexy, and obviously, she's got a strong will and body, right?"

"Are you trying to put her up for auction or something? What's this really about?"

"You've been alone for a long time, Dad. I just think you should open your mind to the possibilities here. You two already have something major in common and ..."

"And we'd kill each other in less than a week," I interrupted.

"I think you should get to know her as the woman she is now. You're different, and I'm sure she is too. She's very different from the person you warned me about before she got here."

"She's been here less than a day, Claire."

"And we've got nothing but time to see if she's a good fit for our family."

"You're trying to pimp me out so Sweetie can stay and you can play with her hair and shit, aren't you?"

Claire's eyes filled with tears, and she sniffed before she said, "I'm trying to make sure that the man who gave me everything when I had nothing left in the world does the same thing for another little girl in the same position."

"Oh, Claire Bear," I muttered as I walked around the bar. I pulled my daughter into my arms and held her tight for a second before I leaned back and tipped her chin up with one finger. There was a tear rolling down her cheek, so I brushed it away with my thumb before I said, "You're the best thing that ever happened to me, baby girl. You're not the lucky one in this situation. I am."

“I love you, Dad. I want you to promise me you’ll consider what I’ve said, okay?”

“Honey, there’s not just water under the bridge between me and Juni, there’s an entire ocean.”

“You’ve always said you’d like to buy a boat, right?”

“God, you’re seriously just ...” I pulled her back to me and kissed the top of the head before I whispered, “I’ll try, Claire Bear, but no promises, okay?”

“Okay.”

I heard footsteps on the stairs, but I didn’t let Claire go as I turned my head and watched Juni appear in the kitchen. When she saw us embracing, she stopped and said, “I’m sorry to interrupt. I’ll just ...”

“No, come on in. We were just having a talk that got a little intense,” I explained before I kissed Claire on the cheek and then stepped back to look at her. “Will you listen for Sweetie to wake up?”

“Why?” Juni asked as she glanced down at the video monitor in her hand.

“You said last night that you weren’t sure how you were going to stop yourself from going stir crazy while you’re here, and I think I have just the ticket.”

“I have a feeling this is gonna require some coffee,” Claire said warily as she looked from me to Juni and back again.

“Do you like cream and sugar, or are you one of the psychopaths that drink it black?”

“Cream, no sugar.”

“Just half psycho. That’s good to know,” I said as I poured. I turned around with her mug in one hand and the half-gallon glass jar of milk in the other and set them on the counter. I pulled open the drawer and got her a spoon before I slid everything toward her and said, “I’ll let you mix it yourself.”

Juni walked around the counter and picked up the spoon as she studied the jar in front of her. She slid it back and forth on the

bar, watching the ingredients move, before she said, “I think your milk is bad. It’s got ... stuff.”

“Stuff?” I asked.

She opened the lid and took a tentative sniff before she leaned back and said, “It doesn’t smell right. I think it’s turned.”

“To what? The dark side?” I asked. I glanced at Claire and saw that she had her hand over her mouth to hide her smile. I winked at her, and she shook her head.

Juni slid the jar back to me. “There’s definitely something wrong with it.”

“Dad. You’re being mean,” Claire admonished.

I cleared my throat to mask my chuckle before I said, “Sorry.”

“Do you have any more milk?” Juni asked.

I nodded. “Yeah, but it’s in the barn.”

“Dad!”

“Do you want me to go get it?” Juni asked.

“In a minute. Have your coffee first, and then we’ll go together.”

Claire sighed dramatically as she reached across the counter. She pulled the jar of milk toward her and said, “Let me show you our ways, city girl.”

“Your ways of what?” Juni’s lip curled as she watched Claire unscrew the lid of the jar. “Why is it in that jar? Is it powdered milk that you didn’t mix well or ...”

“This is the milk,” Claire said as she ran her hand up the side of the jar. When she got to the separated part, she said, “This is the cream.”

“Why is it like that?”

“Because it’s raw milk,” I explained as I slid the spoon across the counter toward Claire.

Claire got a spoon full of cream off the top, and when I pushed Juni’s mug over, she put it in the coffee before she asked, “Is that enough?”

Juni cringed and asked, “What does that mean? Raw?”

Even Claire, who had chided me for teasing Juni not three minutes ago, replied, “That means the cows didn’t cook it for us before they handed it over.”

“Rude, huh?” I asked.

“You got that from a cow?” Claire giggled before she pulled her lips between her teeth and nodded. Juni looked horrified as she asked, “Is that even legal? How do you get them to do that?”

“Generally, we only have to threaten them with a gun once or twice before they start handing it over without a fight,” I lied.

Claire put another spoon of cream into Juni’s coffee before she stirred it and slid it across to her. “Just try it. It may take a bit to get used to it, but once you do, you’ll never want to go back to the other stuff.”

“I just ... drink it?”

“You could snort it, but that might burn your nose.”

Juni shot me a glare as she lifted the mug to her mouth and took a sip. She took another before she said, “That’s actually really good.”

“You know, June Bug, I wasn’t really thrilled about having you here, but I think it might be a whole lot of fun.”

Juni took another sip before she asked, “What are you planning?”

“Nothing, but if you’re gonna stay, you’re gonna have to put in some work to pay your way.”

“I’ve got cash,” Juni said with a smirk.

“Nope. Sweat equity is the only form of payment we accept here.”

“What does that mean?”

I laughed before I took another sip of my coffee, then tipped the mug toward her and said, “June Bug, I’m gonna show

you something that I'm almost positive you've never seen before."

She was staring at me in confusion, and when I grinned, she asked, "That you have a brain?" I raised my eyebrows and tilted my head toward Claire. I swear I saw Juni's eye twitch before she finally ground out, "Good morning, Sugar ... *Bear*. You look ... very ... warm this morning."

"Good job, June Bug," I said, my smile even bigger because I knew she wanted to punch me in the mouth. "Claire's going to stay here with Sweetie while you help me with the morning chores."

"Chores?"

Claire smiled at me and, with an innocent expression, threatened, "If you don't record every minute you're in the barn with her this morning, I'll become a Swiftie and learn every word to every song, then serenade you until my voice gives out."

"How did you get so mean?" I asked with a frown.

"I learned it from my dad."

7.

“Are you sure she’s okay with this? I feel like I should have bought her dinner and a few drinks first.”

Juni

SUGAR

I’d been listening to Juni mutter under her breath since we walked out of the house, so I slowed my steps to let her get a little closer so I could hear what she was saying. She was talking so low that I couldn’t understand her, so I finally asked, “What was that?”

“What is wrong with you people?”

“What did I do?” I glanced over my shoulder and saw that she was hunched down into my coat with only her eyes showing over the collar. I smiled when I asked, “It’s a little brisk out, isn’t it?”

“It’s fucking freezing, Sugar!”

“It’s not even close,” I said dismissively as I reached for the gate. I let the dogs run ahead of me, and they darted across the field toward the barn, ready to start their day. “It’s barely November. We’ve still got a few weeks before the first snow when it *really* gets cold. You’re gonna shit the first time we get a snowstorm.”

“I’ve seen snow before.”

“Honey, it snowed less than a quarter of an inch *one time* in all the years I lived there.”

“It snowed in El Paso.”

“How much?”

“A couple of inches.”

“And it shut down the world, didn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“By this time next month, we’ll have had about forty to sixty inches of snow.”

“Fuck this. I’m going back to Texas,” Juni announced before she spun around and started back toward the gate. “There are some things a person shouldn’t have to tolerate, and blizzard conditions are one of ‘em.”

“Texas is dangerous, June Bug.”

“So is freezing to death!”

“Come on, Juni. Are you scared of a little snow? I didn’t realize you were such a pussy.”

Juni stopped and slowly turned around to face me, the look on her face bordering on homicidal before she asked, “What did you call me?”

“Meow.”

“You mother ...” Juni took a deep breath and squared her shoulders before she glared at me and said, “I’ve survived much worse than a little cold weather, Sugar Bear. Now, show me what chores you want me to do and then leave me the fuck alone to do ‘em in peace.”

By the time we got into the barn, Juni was shivering again. I tried really hard not to tease her too much but couldn’t resist playing with her just a little. I even got my phone out to record her efforts after I showed her how to milk Fern and managed to hold in my laughter as she muttered under her breath and insulted me, complaining about everything from the way I smelled to the stupid grin I seemed to wear ‘all the fucking time like a damn loon that’s lost his marbles.’

“Why do you keep smiling at me like that? I’m figuring it out!” Juni snapped.

“You’re doing fine.”

“Are you sure she’s okay with this? I feel like I should have bought her dinner and a few drinks first.”

I snorted and guffawed before I was finally able to compose myself. “You’re a natural. And that’s good because there’s two more to milk after her.”

“You’re as fucked up as a soup sandwich if you think I’m doing this three times every day!”

“Not three times every day, June Bug,” I assured her. “We do this every morning and every evening, and we have three cows. That makes six.”

Juni’s hands stopped moving, and she stared at me with her mouth agape until the cow shifted and slapped her in the face with the end of her tail. Juni started sputtering and leaned back so far that she fell off the milking stool. Her leg shot out and knocked over the pail of milk. She scrambled to turn it upright with a yelp.

Whoever said ‘don’t cry over spilled milk’ had obviously never sat hunched over for half an hour with their fingers cramping from the cold as they tried to milk a restless cow. Every drop counted when you had to work for it. I’d found that out early on, and now Juni was learning the same lesson.

I propped the camera up on the stanchion at an angle where I’d be able to catch the look on her face when I got to work on the other cow. She didn’t seem to notice because she was too busy cursing my name, physical appearance, and existence on the planet. I was pretty sure she’d even started throwing ancestors in there by the time I got everything set up to milk Ginger.

When I started the machine up, I glanced over my shoulder and saw Juni hunched down so she could see me underneath Fern’s belly, and when I attached the first teat cup, I heard her squeal of outrage. By the time I had the fourth one attached, she was standing next to me with murder in her eyes.

“You son of a bitch!”

“What?”

Juni’s entire body was vibrating with anger when she yelled, “I’m over there tugging that one’s boobs like I pay her by the hour, and you’ve got a goddamn machine?”

I couldn't hold it in any longer and snorted before I burst out laughing. I knew that I was taking my life into my hands, but I couldn't stop myself. The angrier she got, the harder I laughed. I was leaning against Ginger, gasping for air, when Juni let out a frustrated scream and spun around to leave.

"June Bug! Come back!" I sputtered out through my laughter. "I'm sorry."

She turned around and pointed at me before she yelled, "No, you're not!"

"You're right. I'm not sorry at all," I admitted through my laughter. "The look on your face was priceless."

"Fuck you, Sugar Bear!"

I used the back of my hand to wipe the tears off my face and sniffed a few times before I explained, "Everyone's got to learn how to milk by hand so that when we lose electricity, we can still take care of the animals."

"You could have told me that! Hold on ... what do you mean *when* we lose electricity? You act like that's a given."

"It happens fairly often. We've got solar power for almost everything, but if we're in the middle of a storm, we won't get enough light for power. There are generators for backup, of course, but those can only go so far. Sometimes we just have to make do."

"What sort of hell have I walked into?" Juni muttered. "I thought I was gonna have to do that for half the fucking day just to get enough milk to make another cup of goddamn coffee!"

"I promise it goes faster with practice, but you won't have to do it unless there's no other option. I swear."

"You swear, huh? Well, I swear that I'm gonna get you back someday, Sugar. It might not be tomorrow or even next week, but it's gonna happen."

"While you plot your revenge, let me show you how to prep the milker, and we'll get it attached to Fern before she loses her shit."

“She can fucking wait a minute because I’m not done being mad at you.”

“It’s really uncomfortable for them to go too long without milking. If you don’t get it done on a regular schedule, they can actually develop an extremely painful condition,” I explained. “Put that anger to good use while we’re mucking stalls.”

“What is mucking?”

I laughed softly before I admitted, “I haven’t had this much fun in years, June Bug.”

“I hate your ugly face.”

“It’s a good thing you’re cute when you’re angry. Your face is usually so ugly, you have to sneak up on a glass of water to get a drink.”

“You’re so ugly that when you came out, the doctor skipped your ass and slapped your mama instead!”

“When you were a kid, you were so ugly that every time you played in the sandbox, the cats tried to cover you up!”

Juni snorted and then cleared her throat to mask her laughter before she retorted, “You look like something I drew with my left hand.”

I laughed and said, “If my dog was as ugly as you, I’d shave his ass and make him walk backwards!”

Juni burst out laughing and tried to shake it off but couldn’t. She finally stammered, “Fuck you, Sugar!”

“I wouldn’t fuck you for practice,” I snapped, and we both lost it and started cackling.

Juni bent over and put her hands on her knees as she laughed, and I realized I’d never seen her look so happy before. Even when we were children, she rarely smiled, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard her laugh. It changed her entire appearance, and I found myself wanting to make her laugh over and over just so I could see her smile light up like this again.

“I’m still gonna get you back, Sugar,” Juni promised as she lifted the hem of my jacket to wipe her eyes. “I don’t know what I’m gonna do yet, but it’s going to be epic.”

“I can’t wait to see you try.”



“How long have we been out here? Isn’t there a law that says you can’t work a person more than a certain number of hours per day?”

“It hasn’t even been two hours,” I told her with a grin. “You tired, city girl?”

“I’m fucking exhausted. Boot camp wasn’t this hard. You’ve had me groping cows and shoveling shit and ... and ... all the things. You do this every morning?”

“Like clockwork,” I told her with a nod.

“You’re gonna have to carry me back to the house. I’m out of shape.”

“Bullshit. You look like you could run a marathon and then bench press a Buick.”

“I may be ugly, but you’ve got a dad bod.”

“I resemble that remark,” I retorted. “And I didn’t say you were ugly, Juni. Your body is strong and capable. I can’t even imagine how many hours of hard work and sacrifice it took to get it that way.”

“That was almost a compliment. Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m pretty sure I have a brain injury from where you smacked me with the hay fork.”

“I swear it was an accident!”

“Uh huh.”

“All I want to do is go back to the house, take *another* shower, and have a nice long nap.”

“We’re not even close to being finished for the morning.”

“The morning? There’s more?”

“Twice a day, remember?”

“What do we have to do now? When you said chores, I didn’t realize you meant I was gonna have a full-time job!”

“It’s not a full-time job, but the sooner you shut up, the sooner we can get this shit done. It’s time to take care of the chickens now.”

“What are we gonna do to them?” she asked warily.

“Egg extraction.”

“What?”

“We’ll glove up, and I’ll show you how to get the eggs out of the chickens.”

She was horrified and asked, “You’ve got to pull them out?”

I tried to keep my calm so I could let this play out for a little longer, but I couldn’t hold my serious expression and started laughing again. “You’re gonna be so much fun. I think I should go swap places with Claire, so she can play with you for a while. She’d get a kick out of it, that’s for sure.”

“Seriously. How do you get the eggs?”

“The chickens lay them.”

“On what?”

I chuckled before I asked, “Where do you think eggs come from, Juni?”

“The fucking store!”

She was still bristling, and without even thinking, I put my arm over her shoulder and pulled her to my side. “I never thought I’d say this, but I’m really enjoying our time together. You’ve really brightened up my day.”

“So glad I could be of service,” she mumbled. I was surprised she didn’t pull away but snuggled up under my arm while we walked, as if it were perfectly normal for us to be this close. I didn’t want to think about how perfectly she fit there or how

nice it was to be this close to someone other than Claire. “Show me what to do so you can leave me alone. I can’t be held accountable for my actions if I have to spend much more time with you.”

“We’re just getting started, pretty lady, so you’d better buck up.”

“I thought I didn’t like you before, Sugar, but I’m realizing now just how much worse it can get.”

“Right back at ya, June Bug.”



“Okay, now that the water is clear, you put the ball in this pan, and we get our hands cold again before we shape it. We’ll do that while the machine makes the next batch.”

“Shape it into what?” Juni asked as she stared at the lump of butter in front of her. She dropped it into the clean water and glanced over at me before she said, “I’m never going to bitch about the price of groceries again.”

“When you taste it, you’ll realize it’s worth every bit of effort. You won’t be able to even imagine how much it costs.”

“Okay, focus people!” Claire said before she leaned over and glanced into the mixing bowl closest to her. “We’re on a schedule here, and I’ve got a list of things we need to get done.”

Juni slowly turned and gave me a blank look before she said, “I wonder how she got so bossy.”

With a straight face, I said, “I have absolutely no idea.”

“It’s barely even light outside, and we’re on task number 311.”

“Once we get these weighed out and in the forms, we’ll have breakfast and then I’ll have to log on for my first classes of the day,” Claire said before she turned around and assessed the supplies she’d spread out on the bar. “I’ve got three new recipes I want to try, but the majority of this is going to be

plain. I'm going to measure out what I need and get it ready while the mixers work, so you can have another cup of coffee or something."

"I'm good."

"She's trying to politely say that you need to get out of her way," I translated with a grin. "Come sit down. This has been Claire's job for years now, and she's got a pretty streamlined system."

"Haven't you people ever heard of Parkay?" Juni asked grumpily as she walked around the counter.

"What's that?" Claire asked distractedly before she picked up her notecards and started to sort through them. "It's like golf, right?"

"I'm talking about butter." When Claire glanced up at her in confusion, she said, "Never mind. Obviously, y'all don't have that on this planet." Once Juni had topped off her mug of coffee, she sat on the stool beside me and asked, "How often do you have to do this?"

"Through the summer, we actually do this a few times a week, but it's going to taper off now that the grass is dying, and then it will almost completely stop once the snow falls and the cows are on hay."

"On hay ... I know what hay is, so we're good there but on it?"

"They make more cream when they eat only grass. In the winter, they eat hay and make less cream, so we have less opportunity to make butter. We stock the freezer with fresh butter through the summer so we have it in the winter."

"And this is her job?"

"It didn't start that way, but she sort of took over after a while. Now I just get in her way," I admitted.

"Garlic parmesan, garlic and shallots, rosemary and thyme ..."

Claire muttered as she set her recipe cards in front of different bowls and then moved on to another task.

"She's like this when she cooks too."

“She cooks?”

“Every other night. If you’re here for a while, we’ll add you to the rotation.”

“Do you have a microwave?” Juni asked with a laugh. “I make a kick-ass frozen dinner.”

“We have one, but we don’t have any of those in the freezer.”

“You cook, like, real food every night?”

“Breakfast, lunch, and dinner,” I replied with a nod. “Once a week, we go up to the restaurant to eat.”

“How often do you go to town?”

“I go to in-person school on Tuesdays and Thursdays when the weather’s good,” Claire said distractedly as she measured herbs for her recipe. “All the rest is done online.”

Suddenly, Juni reached for the video monitor and then hopped off her stool. “The little princess is awake.”

“I’ll get started on breakfast,” I said as Juni headed for the stairs. “Dress her in warm clothes, that can get dirty. We’re going to the greenhouse as soon as we’re finished eating.”

“To do what?”

“I told you, June Bug, you’re gonna have to earn your keep.”

“When do you people sleep?”

“When the work gets done,” I retorted.

“It’s not even eight in the morning, and I need a nap,” Juni groaned as she stomped up the stairs. “I thought the army was rough, but it’s got nothing on you people.”

I smiled as I watched Juni disappear and then picked up my coffee and caught Claire watching me. “I like her, Dad. Can she stay?”

“We’ll see.”

8.

**“There’s just something calming about having your hands
in the soil.”**

Sugar

JUNI

I watched Sweetie run ahead with Sugar’s dog and wondered how in the hell the child could even move right now. Sugar hadn’t been kidding when he said he was going to make breakfast. Normally, Sweetie and I would have some Pop-Tarts and yogurt, but not today. Not in Harry Homesteader’s house. Oh no. This house had never even seen a Pop-Tart. And worse yet, when I asked if he had any, Claire tilted her head in confusion and asked me what that was.

When I told her they were pastries with yummy goodness inside, she said that Sugar made those for her all the time, which confused me since he said they didn’t have any in the pantry. Confusion turned to shock when Claire explained that he made them from scratch on special occasions.

What kind of psycho makes Pop-Tarts? And how does a teenager not even know what they are? Better yet, what kind of teenager knows how to make butter? Up until an hour ago, I thought butter came out of a tub. Now that I’d had the real thing, I knew I’d never be able to go back. It was that delicious.

As a matter of fact, breakfast was the most delicious meal I’d ever eaten. It wasn’t anything fancy or creative, just a thick slice of ham and some fluffy scrambled eggs with toast. When Sugar put the plate in front of me, I was grateful for his effort but wasn’t really wowed until I took the first bite. The eggs were amazing. Much better than my efforts at scrambled eggs, but I guess that wasn’t saying much. However, when I took a bite of the warm bread slathered with the butter we’d just

made, I almost had an orgasm right there at the damn table. I was still trying to get over the heaven that was the buttered toast when Claire slid a jar my way and said, “Try the jelly. I just made it last week.”

What sort of alternate universe had I entered where teenagers made flavored butter and homemade jelly that put Smuckers to shame?

Also, why did Sugar suddenly look so fucking hot? The man had been the bane of my existence since I was a child even though Althea was right. I did have a secret crush on him when I was a girl, but that was overshadowed by him being a total dick the majority of the time, even back then.

As if he knew I was thinking about him, Sugar stopped and waited for me to catch up.

“I think you’re going to enjoy this next chore.”

“Does it include groping a poor defenseless animal or stealing their almost-children?” I asked.

Sugar chuckled and said, “Nothing like that. The next part is fun, and I think it might be good for you. It helps me.”

“What are we doing?”

“Come on,” he said as he took my hand. “Let me show you my sanctuary.”

I didn’t pull my hand away and didn’t really want to analyze why. Instead, I admitted, “I think that if I had to choose a place to be my sanctuary here, it would be the deck outside of my bedroom. When I woke up this morning and looked outside, I felt ...”

My sentence was left unfinished as I searched for the words to describe the emotion the view had caused. I knew Sugar understood when he said, “Peace. That’s what I feel.”

Without thinking, I asked, “Is that what peace feels like? I’ve never felt that way before.”

“Wait until you see what’s next. I think you’re gonna feel the same way about the view.”

“Where are we going?”

“The greenhouse.”

“What’s in there?”

“Green things.” I gave him a bored look, and he smiled. “It’s my peace. It’s also how we feed our guests and ourselves.”

“You grow your own food?”

“Almost all of it,” he explained. “We have to buy staples like flour and sugar, and there are some things we just don’t have the time or space to grow, but the rest is from us. We can’t grow corn, wheat, or most fruits. We’ve got a few fruit trees, but they barely produce enough for me and Claire, so Tyson orders from an organic farm once a month and picks some stuff up in town when he can.”

“Who is Tyson?”

“He’s the chef. You’ll meet him soon, I’m sure.”

“What do you do with all this stuff? There are only two of you.”

“Well, you’ve seen that we eat the eggs and drink the milk. They use all this stuff in the restaurant too.”

“Holy shit. Is this what you do for a living?”

“I’ve got the best job in the world. It lets me live out here where I don’t have to see or speak to anyone for days at a time unless I absolutely want to.”

“That sounds like heaven.”

“It is.”

“I’d like to have a life like that someday.”

Suddenly, Sugar stopped and used my hand that he was still holding to make me turn to face him. “I’m gonna say something that I want you to consider without making any snarky comments or snap decisions, okay? Mull it over for a while. Think it through. Weigh your options and get back to me later.”

“What?”

“You could live here with Sweetie. I’m not saying in my house, but I could arrange for you to have a cabin of your own, and when you’re ready, I’ll build a house for you near mine. That would give you a peaceful place to land and would offer me the opportunity to be in Sweetie’s life full-time.” I felt my entire body tense at the yearning I felt for what Sugar was offering. A home and peace. I’d never had either and always wished for both. I could feel my pulse racing, and no words came out when I tried to talk. I didn’t move a muscle other than to blink a few times. Sugar finally said, “Don’t make it weird and blurt out something you might regret. Think about it.”

I was finally able to nod and say, “I will.”

“Okay then.” Sugar suddenly started walking again and dragged me behind him. “Now, get your lazy ass to work, woman. Out here dawdling around wasting good oxygen like the world revolves around you.”

I was glad that he’d started back with the good-natured ribbing and was happy to jump right in with a response. “Old MacDonald, if you don’t get off my ass, you and I are gonna end up boxing in the yard.”

“June Bug, if I were on your ass, the last thing you’d be thinking about is boxing.”

We caught up with Sweetie, and Sugar let go of my hand before he reached down and swung her up onto his shoulders. Sweetie squealed happily, and I slowed down to watch them walking and chatting about everything and nothing as Sugar held her ankles and she mussed his hair with her little hands.

Sugar had thrown me for a loop with his offer to let me live on his land. I had instantly dismissed the idea since that meant I wouldn’t own anything and would be at his mercy, but the second I’d seen his interaction with Sweetie, I knew it was something that I’d have to dig into and explore. I knew that women raised their children alone all too often, but I wasn’t sure I was that kind of woman.

I had no idea what in the hell I was doing, but it was obvious that Sugar did. There were framed pictures all over the house

of Claire as she grew up happy and healthy. I didn't have much from my childhood, but I'd somehow held onto a handful of pictures that had been taken over the years. They're mostly school photos, but I have some candid shots too.

I didn't look at them often because it hurt to see the sadness in that girl's eyes. It was the same sadness I saw in my own eyes now, a feeling that I hadn't been able to shake even though I'd escaped the life I'd been born into and worked tirelessly to become a better person than the woman who gave birth to me.

I wanted Sweetie to have those smiling pictures to look back on, not the ones like I had that evoked so many sad emotions. I had a feeling that happiness would be a lot easier to come by if Sugar and Claire were part of her life. Even though it had to have been quite a shock to think that Sweetie belonged to Sugar, he hadn't reacted at all like I thought he would, or, to be completely honest, like most men would when confronted with a child born out of a one-night stand. He hadn't argued the matter, hedged and stammered trying to evade his responsibility, or even asked for scientific confirmation that she was his biological child.

That alone floored me.

The Sugar I remembered was sullen and antagonistic. He'd argue about absolutely anything even if he knew he was wrong, and he did it with such a condescending attitude that almost anyone that had ever crossed him wanted to scream in frustration. I wasn't much better back then, if at all, but I'd changed. Apparently, Sugar had too.

"Good grief, June Bug. Could you walk any slower? We're never gonna get done with our chores at this rate."

Oh, look. I was wrong. Sugar *was* still an asshole.

"Are you paying me by the hour?"

"Free room and board comes with stipulations. Isn't that right, Sweetie?"

"Yes!" Sweetie agreed. The little traitor.

"Are we there yet?"

“Almost,” Sugar said cheerfully. “Are you tired? Poor baby had to work this morning.”

“Do you have a shovel at the house?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Just wondering. I might need to borrow it later,” I said with an obviously fake smile.

“Think you’re gonna bury me in the woods, huh? I doubt you’d be able to find your way back home.”

“I’ve had survival training. I could figure it out. I swear, traipsing all over the damn mountains, and if we ...” I stopped mid-sentence when we rounded a curve in the trail. “Holy shit, Sugar! What is that?”

“That’s a greenhouse, June Bug. I built it into the mountain and used solar and geothermal heating to regulate the temperature inside so I can grow year-round.”

“Are you some type of scientist or something?”

“Not at all, but I am practical, and during the winter, there’s not much to do around here besides ski and sit by the fire and think.”

“I don’t ski.”

“Yet.” I just stared at him, and Sugar smiled. “Then I guess you’ll have a lot of time to sit by the fire and think.”

“I can do that,” I mused. I studied the building notched into the side of the mountain and knew that I couldn’t even fathom the amount of work and time it had taken to create it. That showed a dedication the old Sugar would have never had. Finally, I said, “It’s a jungle in there.”

“It is, and we’re about to tame part of it.” Sugar held onto Sweetie’s ankle with one hand and put his other out toward me before he said, “Let me show you my happy place, June Bug. I have a feeling you’re gonna like it here.”

I wasn’t sure what it was about Sugar, but it felt like he was somehow soothing a part of me that had been uncertain and resentful for more years than I could count. I’d come into the

situation with the idea that I'd have to tolerate him until this fiasco with my stalker was over, but he was so much different than the boy I remembered. I was beginning to realize just how wrong I'd been.

When he took my hand in his for the second time today, I realized just how much I liked having my hand tucked into his warm, calloused grip. I had never been the type who would hold hands or show much affection to the men I was dating. Part of me felt like I should yank my hand away. I knew that was the part of me that was protective, though. The side of me that had learned from a very young age not to trust anyone with my heart or my body. But there was another part of me that craved this type of physical touch. Of course, I showed affection to Althea with hugs and cheek kisses, and now I did the same with Sweetie, but this physical touch was different to me. It seemed intimate somehow, having that link between us.

I didn't want to analyze why I liked it or just how much, so instead, I just let it be and enjoyed the warmth of his hand and the brilliance of his smile as we walked together with a chattering little girl who would forever link us. I felt that feeling again, the one I couldn't name before.

Peace.



SUGAR

As much as I didn't want to, I let Juni's hand go so I could work the keypad and unlock the doors. When I pushed it open, I motioned for her to go in ahead of me.

As usual, the warmth of the greenhouse hit me like a wave, and I saw when it did the same to Juni. She stopped and took a deep breath and then looked at me in wonder before she asked, "What is that smell?"

"Dirt and food."

"Why do I like it?" Juni asked in awe as she walked farther inside.

I shut the door, making sure it was sealed before I checked the monitors on the wall beside it. Once I was sure that everything was working properly and the temperature and humidity levels were within the correct range, I lifted Sweetie off my shoulders and set her down in front of me. She smiled at me as I unzipped her coat, and the second I took it off, she darted away, chasing Butter who loved spending time in the warmth of the greenhouse.

I shrugged off my own coat and hung it on the hook next to the digital panels before I pulled a clipboard off a nail.

“You’re gonna want to take off a few layers because it gets toasty working in here.”

“Are those tomatoes?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I watched as Juni pulled off my too-large coat and then the hoodie beneath it, leaving her in one of my long-sleeved Harley shirts that I’d loaned her. Once she was down to one layer of clothing, she walked back toward me, and I motioned to the hooks on the wall. “We need to do some maintenance, take care of some harvesting, plant some starts, and then get some more seeds in for the next rotation.”

Juni walked up to the first planter, touched the leaf of the nearest zucchini plant, and then quickly pulled her hand back.

“It’s not going to bite you.”

“I don’t want to hurt it.” She turned back to me and asked, “Will Sweetie be okay here?”

“She’ll be fine. There’s nothing she can get into that will hurt her, and Butter will watch out for her, I’m sure.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“It’s been a few days since I worked here, so I guess we should start with the harvest and check the plants as we move through. You can start up here, and I’ll work my way up from the back.”

“Start what?”

“Harvesting. You can take care of the zucchini and then ...”

“What do they look like?”

“You’ve never seen a zucchini?”

“Not in the wild,” Juni said as took in the wild greenery that trailed up almost to the ceiling. I was close enough to hear her whisper, “This place is insane.”

“You really don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?”

“I’ve never even owned so much as a cactus, Sugar. My food comes from the grocery store.”

“I had never grown anything before I went to prison, but I was assigned to the farm crew and learned everything I could from an inmate who was a farmer before he went inside.”

“You learned how to garden in prison? Really?”

“I did. I think it saved my life.” I couldn’t believe I’d just said that out loud since I’d never admitted it to anyone before.

“How?”

“There’s just something so calming about having your hands in the soil. I may be having the shittiest day, but I will come out here to work for a while and it will make me a different person by the time I’m done.”

“It’s like therapy, but you don’t have to talk.”

“Exactly.”

“And your therapist feeds you.”

“Well, you have to take care of her first, and she feeds you in return. Kind of like how things are with the people you love.”

“That was almost poetic.” She looked impressed, not condescending. I realized that was exactly the case when she said, “I thought I’d never be able to care for anything, even a plant, until I got Sweetie and didn’t have a choice.”

“I’ve got plenty of plants for you to work with, and if you want to eat while you’re staying here, you don’t have much choice but to start learning.”

“Let’s get to it then,” Juni said with an excited grin. “I’m ready.”

Once again, I saw a side of Juni I'd never imagined existed, and I liked it. I realized that I could easily get used to seeing her smile, even though the rest of the time, she made me want to drop her off a tall building. I had a feeling that the longer she stayed here with us, the easier it would become to like her. At least, I hoped that was true since I'd already asked her to stay.

9.

“Give me some grace, man. I’m new to this shit.”

Juni

JUNI

Since we arrived yesterday, I’d begun to see Sugar in a different light. I never imagined that he would turn out to be a man I could tolerate, let alone respect, but the more I got to know him, the more my opinion of him changed. Now, watching him gather up the supplies we’d need to work in the garden, I saw a man who had found a place that he not only fit in but thrived.

It said a lot about the man, considering where he’d come from. His situation had been much like mine and usually meant the people like us would continue the cycle of poverty, addiction, and abuse. But Sugar had taken a hard left and was raising Claire in a way that was so far removed from how his life had been, just like I wanted to raise Sweetie.

And he wanted to be part of that life with Sweetie. So much so that he’d offered us a place to live and a home to call our own.

That was something I’d never had. I’d lived in either the barracks or base housing, a blank canvas where I could create a comfortable space for myself, my entire adult life thus far, but that was temporary. It didn’t belong to me, just like I didn’t belong to myself. I was the property of the United States government for twelve years just like Sugar had been the property of the prison system.

I couldn’t pick up and go wherever I wanted on my own schedule because my time and future belonged to the army, just like Sugar’s time and future hinged on the decisions made by the powers that ruled the prison where he was housed. I held no illusions that the army and prison were the same at all,

but they did have similar characteristics when you drilled down to the heart of the matter. You were told where to go, when to sleep, and what to do until your time was up, and then you were spit out into the world and left to your own devices after years of being a captive.

I wasn't afraid to admit that I wasn't good with choices. I hadn't had any for my first eighteen years. I didn't even know how to search for ways out because I was too busy trying to survive. Between short stints living at Althea's, the only place I'd ever experienced a real home and family, I was thrust into a world of uncertainty with my mom and whatever scumbag she was madly in love with at the time.

On a whim, I'd started my own business. I kept it secret from *everyone*, not because I was ashamed but because it was the first time I'd ever had something that belonged only to me. It was my secret hideaway where I could be someone else who was living their best life and moving toward a future that most could only dream of.

Sugar had found that future. I was beginning to realize just how hard he had to work to maintain it, but it was his all the same. It gave him purpose, just like raising Claire had done. Just like raising Sweetie was doing for me.

When Sugar mentioned that he'd like for us to stay here with him, I felt something break open in my chest that I wasn't sure I was ready to analyze yet. It was something I'd never felt before ... hope. I wasn't sure I could handle it because the thought of it being snatched away terrified me.

A peaceful life with a permanent home that was all mine was within my grasp, I just had to reach out and take it. Of course, it would come with strings attached, living near Sugar and dealing with him every day, but that didn't seem as horrible as I would have thought just a few days ago. Honestly, it didn't seem like much of a deterrent at all. Instead, it seemed comfortable. Settling. Peaceful.

I wasn't quite sure how to process all of the emotions coursing through me, so I brushed them aside and tried to focus on

Sugar and what he was saying, but I was too late to catch more than the last few words of his instructions.

“If you’re gonna help, then you’ll need to listen or you’re gonna fuck something up,” Sugar snapped.

“You talk so much that all I hear is wa wa wa-wa-wa wa after a while,” I retorted snidely. I sighed heavily and let my head fall forward before I said, “Rewind and let me try again. I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention. I was thinking about what you said earlier and got distracted.”

Sugar studied my face for a minute before his lips slowly curled into a smile. “You were really just mesmerized by my sparkling personality. It’s okay. It happens to everyone I encounter.”

“What does? Blindness? Aneurysms? The urge to jump in front of a bus? Loss of the will to live?”

“If you were half as sweet as you are snarky, you might actually be a pleasant individual.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Sugar chuckled. “Neither would I. Come on over here, June Bug. I’ll let you work beside me for a while until you get the hang of things, but even after that, if you have any questions, all you have to do is holler.”

“Has anyone ever gotten lost in here?” I looked around at the plants of all sizes, some of them just bushes and others that were attached to strings, hanging from the ceiling. “The plants ate them, didn’t they?”

“Well, I had to bury them first, but bullshit’s good fertilizer, so it helps the plants grow.”

“Is there any way for you to show me how to do all of this without talking?”

“I’d love it if you stopped,” Sugar retorted.

Sugar laughed when I rolled my eyes, but then got distracted when Sweetie ran up with a handful of dirt and handed it to him like it was a priceless treasure.

“She’s already got the gist of it. Get your hands dirty and your soul clean.”

“That’s what we’re doing?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do for years, but I’m not sure it’s working.”

“You’re better.”

“Better? I’m damn good, June Bug.”

“I meant your soul, dumbass.” Sweetie looked at me and furrowed her brows. I winced as I said, “You have a beautiful garden, Sugar. I’m sure your soul isn’t as filthy as you think.”

“That was a compliment?”

“Give me some grace, man. I’m new to this shit.”

Sugar started laughing and said, “My soul isn’t nearly as filthy as my mind, but I’ll take the compliment.”

I ignored his reference to a filthy mind because mine was swirling around in the gutter the more I was around him. He’d turned into a very handsome man, and when I tried to insult him about having a dad bod, that wasn’t specifically true. Yes, he was thicker around the waist than he had been as a teenager, but who wasn’t? He was solid and sturdy with muscular arms and thighs like tree trunks that led up to a ... What the hell was wrong with me that had me thinking about Sugar’s ass? Apparently, the altitude and all this nature was rotting my brain.

Sugar wasn’t handsome. He was an asshole through and through. I needed to remember that so I’d be ready when he snapped and started acting like it.

I shook off my thoughts and listened intently to Sugar’s directions. I was amazed at the amount of food that piled up in the wagon he pulled along as we walked down the rows of the greenhouse. It was interesting to watch him study the plants, and when I asked what he was doing, he didn’t give me a smartass answer. He explained that he was looking for pests, disease, and other things that might affect the health of the plant.

I had to admit that it was amazing and something I'd never given much thought to before. By the time we got to the tomato vines, I was overwhelmed with the amount of things Sugar had taught me as if they weren't any big deal when, in reality, they had probably taken him ages to learn.

"Do you like tomatoes?"

"I love 'em," I admitted as I leaned my head back to look to the top of the vine. "I had no idea they'd grow like that."

"These are indeterminate heirloom tomatoes," Sugar said loud enough for me to hear over the fan system that had kicked on overhead. "They'll grow until they don't have room anymore, so I rigged a pulley system that lets me lower them so that part of the vines that have finished production can coil on the ground and become roots and let the top keep moving up to produce more fruit." I watched as Sugar moved leaves and vines and was shocked when his hand came out holding a tomato that was at least the size of a softball. As he handed it to me, he said, "This one's ready."

I took it from him and turned to put it in the wagon, but he reached out and put his hand on my arm. "Try it."

"You want me to eat it?"

"Yeah."

"With what?"

"Your mouth."

"No shit, Sherlock, but it hasn't been washed, and I don't have a knife to slice it."

Sugar grabbed the tomato from my hand. He took a bite out of it like one would an apple and then wiped his mouth with the cuff of his sleeve as he chewed. He handed it back to me and raised his eyebrows. I looked down and shrugged before I lifted it to my mouth and took a bite.

I couldn't help but moan as my eyes closed when the flavor burst over my tongue. It was the best tomato I'd ever tasted and unlike any I'd ever had before. It was warm and juicy, and the flavor was so intense that I knew I'd never taste

something like this from the store. When I opened my eyes to take another bite, Sugar was watching me with a strange look on his face, so I swiped my sleeve across my mouth and asked, “Did I make a mess?”

“Not yet, June Bug, but I have a feeling that’s what’s gonna happen if I don’t watch out.” He shook his head as he said, “I’m gonna go see what Sweetie’s into. I’ll be right back.”

I watched him go and pretended not to notice how good he looked doing it while I finished my tomato.



SUGAR

I had to get away. I’d never run from anything in my life, but the sight of Juni with that look of satisfaction on her face did something to me I wasn’t expecting. When she moaned - over the taste of a tomato of all things - I felt something no sane man should feel for a ball-busting woman like her. She’d eat me alive with a smile on her face, and I didn’t have time for that kind of bullshit in my life.

I was going to be connected with her for the rest of my life because of Sweetie, and that was something else I hadn’t had time to process yet. I was suddenly a father again, and this time was just as shocking as the last - when I’d suddenly become my niece’s guardian. Out of the blue, I’d gone from a single ex-con to a parent trying to scrape by and figure out what the hell I was doing while being watched by an innocent little girl with her heart in her hands whose life had just been torn to shreds. Claire taught me how to be a father and a better person, and now, Sweetie has appeared. Even though I didn’t have a DNA test that proved she was my child, I could tell by looking at her that she was a Sweet. There was no doubt in my mind.

So, I was father to a hormonal teenager who could go from normal human to demonic rage monster in the blink of an eye as well as father to a toddler who was so cute and sweet that I

could feel cavities forming every time I looked at her. I knew she would someday become that same teenage demon spawn, though.

I could almost hear Fate laughing her ass off as she rubbed her hands together in glee, knowing that she'd thrown another curveball my way.

And not just any curveball because that would be too easy, right? Of course it would. I now had a toddler who came with a life-size pain in my ass. Until yesterday when I watched how she interacted with Sweetie and Claire, I had nothing but disdain for Juni Dawson. At that point, she became tolerable. I could handle that, especially since we were going to be in each other's lives for the duration. That was a lot better than the absolute loathing I felt for her before she arrived.

What was throwing me for a loop was that about two minutes ago, she transformed from a pain in my ass to an object of a lust so powerful, it nearly brought me to my knees.

Juni had always been a quiet beauty. Not an in-your-face stunner like her sister Sherry. When we were kids, Juni had tried her best to be different from Sherry in every way imaginable. You could count on Sherry to use her looks and charm to get what she wanted, and you could count on Juni to be up in your shit until you finally gave in just to get her to shut the hell up. I had always secretly respected her for that even though it drove me up the wall every time we had to interact.

Years ago, Althea told me that Juni gave me hell because she had a crush and wanted attention, which was strange because when I knew her, she was just a girl. When I went to prison, she wasn't even thirteen yet. Since I was almost eighteen, that was a significant difference. I still considered her a child. A bratty, mouthy, pain-in-my-ass child.

Juni was all grown up now and had changed into a stunningly beautiful woman. She still had a quick wit and smart mouth, but for some reason, I kind of liked it. It didn't piss me off like it used to. Instead, it made me laugh, and I found myself

looking forward to talking to her because our banter amused me and kept me on my toes.

Her bright red hair had toned down to a dark auburn. It was still red but not that fiery shade it had been when she was younger. She still had those freckles across her nose, but they weren't cute anymore. I'd never considered freckles sexy until I saw them on Juni. I felt the same way about her hair. I was a connoisseur of blonde women. Thick, thin, smart, dumb, it didn't matter. I had always liked blondes.

All of a sudden, red was my favorite color, and freckles were interesting.

Maybe when she *accidentally* hit me with the handle of the hay fork this morning, it had knocked something loose in my head, and I was starting to hallucinate. That was the only explanation I could come up with for why I suddenly found Juni Dawson sexy and interesting or why the sounds of pleasure she made when she was eating that fucking tomato made my dick hard enough to pound nails.

It had to be a head injury. There was no other explanation.

10.

“At any moment the polar bears are going to rise up and fight the abominable snowmen in a territorial gang war.”

Ajax

SUGAR

“Thanks for getting back to me,” I told my friend after we exchanged the usual phone pleasantries. “I know you’re still recovering, but I was hoping you would have someone you could recommend.”

“Hammer called, and between the two of us, I think we can figure out who might be bothering your girlfriend but ...”

“She’s not my goddamn girlfriend,” I snapped. I let my head fall forward and took a deep breath before I said, “Sorry about that, but she’s not my girlfriend.”

Ajax, an old friend that I’d met in prison and then reconnected with at Pop’s compound, laughed before he said, “I can feel your frustration coming through the phone lines, brother. You better make her your girlfriend before she finds someone else to help her stay warm during one of those blizzards you guys insist are normal.”

“I warned you before you came to visit last time that we might get snow.”

“Snow means a light dusting of ‘oh, look how pretty it is when the sun hits it in the morning.’ When I was there, I saw ‘at any moment, the polar bears are going to rise up and fight the abominable snowmen in a territorial gang war.’”

“You’re such a drama queen.” Butter got up from his spot near the hearth and moseyed over to me, and I reached out and scratched behind his ears.

“Listen here, any amount of snow that’s higher than my dick is long is excessive.”

“If that’s how you measure things, then God forbid you ever build a house. Only ones that might be able to live in it are cockroaches and grasshoppers,” I teased.

“Keep talking shit, little man,” Ajax warned good naturedly. Of course, at six foot one, I wasn’t exactly little, but since Ajax was as big as a house, he might think of me that way. “Anyway, I’ll be there in a week or so to talk to your girlfriend and find a good starting point to track down whoever it is that’s fucking with her.”

“You’re coming to visit?”

“Do you have a place for me to stay?”

“I’ve always got room for you, my friend. When do you think you’ll be here?”

“I’ve got something going on here, but it’s about to wrap up. Give me a week. Maybe ten days.”

Since I didn’t live in Tenillo where the Time Served MC had been created and the president of our group resided, I was considered a nomad. I was still affiliated with our club, but I didn’t have a ‘home,’ so to speak. However, if anyone could really be called a nomad, it would be Ajax, so I wasn’t shocked that he was willing to travel hundreds of miles on a whim. I doubted he stayed in any town longer than it took to finish whatever job he happened to be working. On occasion, I’d wondered if he might be running from something - the law or an enemy. I wasn’t sure which, but considering our histories, those two could be the same thing.

“She’ll be here.” I smiled when I heard Sweetie’s excited squeal and then her footsteps running down the hall. “Did Hammer tell you about the little girl?”

“Your daughter?”

“Yeah,” I said with a laugh. “I’m pretty certain she’s mine.”

“You gonna test that theory?”

“I don’t see a point in it. She looks like me ...”

“Poor kid,” Ajax interrupted.

“Piss off. Anyway, even if she isn’t, she lost both her parents and needs a man in her life to protect her until she’s old enough to take care of herself.”

“Your little army brat can probably take care of that herself, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure she can,” I said remembering what I’d seen this morning when I walked into the gym I had set up. Claire and I had always risen well before dawn so we could get the animals taken care of before we started our day, but I never imagined that Juni would do the same. But when I walked into the home gym I’d created on the bottom level of the house for my workouts, there she was in all her glory.

Thank God she was on the treadmill with her back to me, or she’d have easily seen just how affected I was by her presence. She was running faster than I’d ever tried to, every muscle in her body stretching and flexing with each stride. All I could think about was wrapping that braid of hers around my hand to hold her in place while I fucked her from behind. Hell, that was hours ago, and my dick was still hard. I couldn’t even take a deep breath, let alone try to work out, so I just turned around and went back upstairs to my room. My cold shower had chilled me to the bone, but it hadn’t done a fucking thing for my libido.

Juni wasn’t heavy, but she wasn’t thin either. Solid was the only word I could think of to describe her shape. Of course, I thought that before I saw the strength in her body in tight workout clothes. Now I saw her in a completely different light.

“Yoo-hoo? Sugar?”

I snapped back to reality and asked a little too sharply, “What?”

“Floating a little close to the edge there, buddy? Frustration is good for the soul. Makes the end result even sweeter.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“I’m trying to map out a plan, and you’re no help because all the blood left your big brain and pooled in your little brain

while you were daydreaming about your houseguest,” Ajax teased. When I didn’t respond, he said, “Tell me I’m wrong.”

“She’s not like I remember.”

“When was the last time you saw her?”

“She was just a kid.”

“She’s not a kid now, though, so what’s the problem?”

“When you meet her, you’ll see. She’s got a mouth that ...”

Ajax waited a few seconds after I went quiet, lost in my thoughts, before he asked, “Can’t quit thinking about that mouth, huh?”

I ignored his question and said, “She’s nothing like I imagined she’d be.”

“People change. You’re nothing like the cocky shit I met in prison. I didn’t have high hopes for what kind of man you’d become once you got out, but look at you now. You’re a productive member of society, a good father, and one helluva good friend. If you can rebuild yourself from the ground up, don’t you believe she can do the same?”

“She already has.”

“Then wipe the slate clean. Toss away the expectations you had and realize the potential within the woman she’s become.”

“That’s easier said than done.”

“The easiest tasks produce the least rewards,” Ajax said sagely. “If you don’t have to work for something, you’ll never fully appreciate it. You’ve worked hard to become the man you are today, and I’m sure she’s worked equally hard to get her shit together and be the woman in front of you now.”

“Do you charge a one-time fee for your counseling services, or am I supposed to pay by the hour?”

“First session is free,” Ajax joked.

“It’s just physical attraction. I still can’t stand her.”

“Lying to yourself is never the best option, my friend. She sounds like a very interesting woman that I’d like to get to

know when I visit. Maybe fate didn't put her in your path for you ..."

I didn't hear the rest of what he said because I was too busy dealing with the blind rage that consumed me at the thought. That confused me almost as much as my attraction to Juni. I blew it off and said, "Could be, but I'm not sure I'd wish a woman like her on my worst enemy."

"I guess we'll see."

Suddenly, I wasn't looking forward to seeing my old friend nearly as much as I had been ten minutes ago. I wasn't ready to analyze that either.



JUNI

"Time to turn around, girlfriend," I called out to Sweetie when I realized how far from the house we'd gotten. So far, she loved traipsing through the trees and inspecting all sorts of things in her new environment. On this morning's walk, she'd discovered pine cones in all their beauty. Then she tried to take three dozen of them home since each one she picked up was even more "pretty pretty" than the last. Now, on our afternoon walk, she'd decided that rocks were her new favorite thing. That was why I had at least three pounds of them weighing down the front of my hoodie.

When Sweetie stopped to pick up another one, I smiled at her reaction. With her eyes wide in awe, she held it out toward me and whispered, "Pretty pretty!"

"You can't take 'em all home, Sweetie," I chided, but I let her slip it into my hoodie when I stopped in front of her. "Let's go back."

"Wanna play!" Sweetie shouted before she took off running.

"Don't run off!" I yelled as I broke into a jog. For someone with such short legs, she could move awfully fast, and her short stature gave her an advantage in this environment

because she didn't have to dodge leaves and branches as she booked it farther and farther away from me. She had managed to get pretty far off, so I yelled, "Sweetie! Stop right now!"

I heard the delight in her little voice when she said, "Pretty kitty!"

"Oh shit!" I huffed as I ducked beneath a low-hanging branch and then skidded to a halt behind my niece. Sweetie did her best to cluck her tongue like she'd heard Sugar do when he was calling his animals closer and started to lean forward with her hand extended as I whisper chanted, "No no no no no no!"

I yanked Sweetie off her feet before I spun around to sprint away. The thought of smelling like a skunk was enough motivation for me to kick our return to the house into high gear. It wasn't easy with a squirming toddler, but during my training, I'd completed obstacle courses with a pack on my back that was twice as heavy as her. Of course, that pack hadn't been actively trying to get away so she could pet her new "kitty" friend. Sweetie was stubborn, bullheaded, and highly motivated for escape, which made it hard for me to concentrate on the path in front of me.

I didn't see the tree root until she and I were sailing through the air. I had just enough time to turn our bodies so that she was clutched to my chest as I landed on my back. I hit the ground with a loud thump that knocked the air out of my lungs and sent a shooting pain across my side. Sweetie took advantage of this and, in a split second, was out of my arms and sprinting over the uneven ground ... luckily, in a different direction than the skunk we'd just left behind.

"No more nature," I groaned as I rolled over and got on my hands and knees. I stood and winced at the pain in my back before I rushed toward the sound of breaking branches and crunching leaves. I realized that if Sweetie thought she was in trouble, she'd probably run even harder since that was what I'd do in that situation, so I tempered my voice and yelled, "Sweetie, come back, honey!"

I stopped to listen for her, hoping she hadn't gotten too far away, and then slowly walked toward her voice. I prayed she

was talking about a rock when I heard her say, “Pretty pretty!” When I saw what she was trying to pet this time, my heart caught in my throat. I snatched her up, and she let out a scream as she started fighting me.

“Stop it!” I barked, channeling my inner drill sergeant. She understood that tone and instantly stilled.

I wasn’t sure if I should run away or pretend I was a statue, but when I saw the animal transform right in front of my eyes, I didn’t have a choice. Flight had just won the battle with fight, and my feet were moving before I even realized we were in motion. I lost my footing and slid quite a distance before I was fighting the squirming little girl in my arms again. She wanted to run, and I had to give her credit for trying, but I’d about had enough of her shit and definitely enough of nature’s surprises. I held on tight as I got back to my feet.

I heard rustling behind me and took off again, worried that there was a bear behind us who thought he’d just found his afternoon snack. I had my hand out in front of me to block the tree branches but felt one slap my cheek right before a starburst of pain shot through my left eye. I was still reeling from that, one arm clutching Sweetie as the other covered my wounded eye, when I saw a break in the trees ahead.

I realized just how far Sweetie and I had ventured when we came out of the forest and I saw our distance from the house. I made a vow right then and there that I’d *never* take this little girl on another walk. We’d probably be safer if she ran into traffic than we’d been traipsing through Sugar’s back yard. A little slice of nature’s heaven, my ass. I hadn’t experienced an adrenaline-fueled sprint like this since my time overseas fighting insurgents near a village with a name I couldn’t even pronounce. This place was chock full of enemy combatants, but instead of men with guns, it was animals that had their own arsenal of weapons.

And yet, here I was, right in the thick of another war I didn’t want to be involved in, armed only with a pocket full of rocks and a rabid toddler.

Once we were close to the porch, I let Sweetie put her feet on the ground. She was pissed that I'd stopped her from exploring, and I was equally as pissed at myself for letting her get away from me, so it was a battle of wills to get her up the stairs, but luckily, I won. I wanted to believe that had something to do with my calm demeanor and newly-acquired parenting skills, but deep down, I knew it was because I had the hood of her jacket clutched tightly in my hand so she couldn't escape again.

Once we were inside, I made her stop beside me as I kicked off my running shoes. As soon as I got the new hiking boots off of her feet, I took her hand to accompany her upstairs to find Claire or Sugar so I could ask them to watch her while I took a second to compose myself. Sugar appeared in the doorway of his office, and I could tell by the look on his face that I looked even worse than I had imagined.

"What the fuck happened?" Sugar asked as he rushed toward us. He stared at me in horror for a second before he said, "Put your shoes back on, June Bug. We're going to town."

I swiped at the tears on my cheek, wondering how I could get my eye to stop watering, before I said, "I just need to clean up and rinse my eye ..."

"No. I'm taking you to the doctor." He pulled his phone out as he yelled for Claire.

As Sugar made a call, Claire's office door opened, and she stuck her head out. "I'm on a zoom chat with ... What the hell happened to your face?"

"Is it that bad?" I asked as I swiped my cheek again. I happened to glance down at my hand and saw blood. "Oh shit!"

"It's that bad," Claire said as she picked up Sweetie and turned so that her body was between us. "Can you see me?"

"Yes," I said warily.

"Watch Sweetie. We'll be back," Sugar said as he took my arm and walked us toward the stairs.

"Let me know ... something," Claire muttered.

“Y’all are freaking me out.”

“Honestly, June Bug, and I’m not saying this to be shitty, but your face is freaking *us* out.”

“Are you going to see Dr. Bray or ...”

“I’m just going to take her to the emergency room,” Sugar called over his shoulder. “Love you. Call Laura and tell her you and Sweetie will be coming to the lodge for dinner. Take the Gator.”

“Yes, sir.”

Sugar held my arm as we walked down the steps. My knee jerk reaction was to try and take my arm out of his, but I didn’t do that. Instead, I let him hold my bicep and walk beside me, wondering how such a gruff man could be so tender and caring too. He led me to the truck, and once he opened the passenger door, he started to help me inside but suddenly pulled my arm to stop me from climbing into the cab.

“What happened to your back?”

“I fell a few times and even slid on that last one. I know I’m dirty, but I’ll ...”

“You’re bleeding, Juni.” I felt Sugar lift the hem of my sweatshirt before he whispered, “Holy shit.”

“Is it bad? I don’t want to ruin your seats,” I said worriedly.

“Fuck my seats,” Sugar snapped. “Shit. Give me a second. Don’t move. Don’t get in. Just don’t ... Just ... Shit.”

Sugar jogged back up the stairs and into the house, and while he was gone, I took stock of my aches and pains. My eye was still burning, and it hurt to blink, but I couldn’t seem to stop. I could feel tears streaming down my cheeks but didn’t want to brush them away because I wasn’t sure I’d be able to handle it if my fingers came away bloody again. It wasn’t that I was afraid of blood ... I was terrified of what exactly might be bleeding and had a horrible image in my head that was worthy of a horror movie. The pain in my side was more of a dull ache than anything, so I wasn’t too worried about that. I was really just concerned about my eye and face at this point.

Sugar and Claire's reaction told me that I looked horrifying. I avoided my reflection in the side mirror of the truck and looked at my feet instead.

Sugar came running back with a stack of towels in hand. He handed me a wet washcloth and ordered me to close my eye and hold it over my face before he lifted my shirt and gently pressed a towel against my side and then pulled it down again. Once he helped me up into the truck, he jogged around the front and got behind the wheel without a word.

Sugar put the truck in gear and said, "Lean your head back and close your eyes, June Bug. I'm trying to remember what to do for an eye injury, and all I can come up with is that you need to keep both eyes closed. If you have one open and move it around, the other one moves too."

"That sounds reasonable."

"I'm so sorry," Sugar said hurriedly.

"For what?"

"I didn't realize how bumpy this fucking road is until now. I've gotta look into that."

"I'm fine. I didn't even notice."

"Are you okay? I think you might be in shock."

"I don't think I am."

"I know that shit's gotta hurt."

"It wasn't too bad at first, but I think the adrenaline helped. It's getting worse, though. It's so bad that I can't think about anything else," I admitted.

"What can I do?"

"Talk to me. Tell me a story."

"Uh ... uh," Sugar stammered.

"Tell me about that vest I saw hanging on the hook in your office."

"That's what I wear when I'm riding."

"Motorcycle?"

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Will you take me for a ride?”

“Sure. I can do that.”

“I bet you get that all the time, huh? Women asking if you’ll give them a ride on your motorcycle?”

“Why do you say that?”

“I would just imagine that a handsome bad boy like you gets all sorts of propositions.”

“Handsome? Well, June Bug, I have to say, you’re not so bad yourself.”

“Even right now?”

“You admittedly looked better before your hike, but ... you’re beautiful.”

“I’d tease you about thinking that if it didn’t feel like someone was stabbing me in the eye with a hot poker.”

“Okay, I’ll tell you a story to take your mind off the pain.”

“Please,” I whimpered.

“Back in Texas, there’s a town called Tenillo. That’s where I went after my release. A man we all call Pop has a program there for ex-cons to help them find their way in the world ...”

11.

**“If I gave you a penny for every one of your brain cells
you’d end up owing me money.”**

Juni

SUGAR

“How is Juni?” Claire asked as she settled onto her usual barstool while we drank our morning coffee and planned our day. “What time did y’all get home?”

“It was close to three this morning,” I said as I slid her favorite mug across the bar to her. I had already prepared it just the way she liked it, with three spoons of fresh cream and two of brown sugar. “What’s your schedule like today? Can you watch Sweetie?”

“Less than a month as a big sister, and I’m already a permanent babysitter,” Claire said with an exaggerated eye roll. She smiled and said, “I’ve got some studying to do and a reading assignment, but I can hang out with her while I do that. You’re gonna need a nap.”

“I haven’t even been to bed yet, so I’m going to need more than that. I got Juni settled and went out to do the chores, so that’s already taken care of.”

“Have you eaten lately?”

“I had leftovers earlier, but I’ve got baked oatmeal in the oven for your breakfast.”

“Thank you. I think I’ll take Sweetie to harvest some green beans, and I’ll get them in the canner while she’s eating.”

“Have I told you lately how awesome you are?”

“It’s been a day or so,” Claire teased with a grin. “Feel free to continue. You know how much I love to hear you ramble on about my greatness.”

“You are, Claire Bear. You’re strong, independent, self-sufficient, driven, focused. All the things a parent hopes their child will be.”

“That’s sweet, Dad. Thank you.”

“I know I’m hard on you at times, but I hope you understand that I just want you to be prepared for the world out there. I may not be around someday, and I want you to be able to take care of yourself.”

“You’re gonna live forever because you’re too mean to die,” Claire said with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I’ll admit that my education has been ... unique, but I’ll never be hungry because I can hunt, fish, grow, and preserve my own food. I’ll never be lonely because you’ve surrounded us with people I’m proud to call family, and I’ll never be broke because dumb rich people will always want to throw wads of money my way so they can experience a rustic cabin life experience.”

I laughed when she used air quotes and repeated one of the descriptions we had on our website. “I know. I don’t get it either.”

Claire shrugged. “Rustic, my ass. They’ve got housekeeping and a chef. That’s not even glamping that’s ... a hotel stay.”

I smiled at her disgusted tone but knew she was right. I had raised her to be able to defend herself in any situation, whether that was a kidnapping or an apocalypse. And she could fend for herself in either situation, too, since we’d done more than our fair share of camping in all kinds of weather. I wanted to prepare Claire for the real world but insulate her from it at the same time. I also wanted to make sure that she could be self-reliant and would never go hungry, even in an extreme situation. She’d taken that even farther as she got involved in FFA at school and started learning new skills online.

Her interest in self-sustainability was even influencing her college choices. My sweet little girl who had thrown a fit when I forced her to study her multiplication tables wanted to get a civil engineering degree with a focus on irrigation engineering principals. I read somewhere that it was a measure of success in parenting when the child they raised

reached for the stars because they were certain they were within their grasp. If that was the case, then I'd rocked that shit because my Claire had the knowledge and drive to get a pocketful.

"I love you, Claire Bear."

"Love you, too, Dad," Claire said before she took a sip of her coffee. "Go to bed. Sweetie and I will be fine."

"I had Juni go to sleep in my room to make sure Sweetie didn't wake her up, so I guess I'll go nap in my office."

"That won't work. Sweetie and I will have to be downstairs for a while because all of my study materials are in my office."

"Shit. I didn't even think of that." I walked around the bar and pulled Claire close before I kissed the top of her head. "Juni's gonna have to share the covers because I'm too tired to function right now. I probably wouldn't get any decent sleep in my office anyway."

Since Claire had everything covered for the day, I went upstairs and checked in on Sweetie who was still asleep in her crib. In the light of early dawn, I glanced around the room and smiled at the sight of her toys spread around. Claire and I had bought things for Sweetie to play with before she even arrived, but in the three weeks that she'd been here, her collection had grown - not just because of my daughter's online shopping habits, but also because of the gifts given to her from our employees who were more like family to us. They'd all gotten to know her pretty well by now and had fallen under her spell just like we had.

Of course, they all met Juni too. It made me happy to watch their interactions and see the light in her eyes when she realized that there was a group of people with no expectations of her. People who didn't know anything about her past or where she'd come from and were more than willing to accept her at face value. My employees all had plenty of skeletons in their closet, so they weren't critical at all when it came to meeting new people. They welcomed Juni with open arms.

At our weekly employee lunch a few weeks ago, she'd told them all about milking the cow for the first time and tried to get them on her side about how horrible it was for me to play that joke on her. She didn't get much sympathy, but she did get a lot of laughter and good-natured ribbing about her "city girl" ideas. Juni had snapped back in that sarcastic way she had, but it had been for more laughs rather than out of irritation. Since then, they'd taken to teasing her every time they saw her and asking her what new adventures their favorite city girl had experienced since they'd last talked.

Over the past few weeks, I'd come to know a Juni that I never would have imagined could exist. She was smart and funny, eager to learn new things, and willing to admit when she was out of her element. We'd spent countless hours taking care of the animals and working the green house. I had enjoyed watching her excitement as the seeds she planted just a day or two after her arrival sprouted and turned into plants. I couldn't help but smile when she rushed back to the grow room to check their progress every day, her joy at growing something from seed refreshing since she was primarily curt and sarcastic.

As crazy as it was, I even found that sexy and looked forward to our verbal sparring, most of which took place while we cooked. Just a few days after she got here, she'd made it her mission to learn how to cook and jumped at the opportunity to help me and Claire in the kitchen, not just with meal prep but with canning and preserving too.

I had to admit that after a few days of having Juni here with us, I found myself wishing that she'd never leave. Of course, I'd offered to build her a cabin so she could stay close, but that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted her in my house, next to me all the time, and even found myself missing her when she was locked in her room "working" while Sweetie was asleep or spending time with Claire and I. I looked forward to watching her come down the stairs every morning and then fight the urge to snap at me and Claire before she had her first few sips of coffee.

Everything about her was different than I could ever have imagined, from her sexy voice to her relaxed expression when she watched the sunrise with a mug of coffee in her hand. Even while she was doing the most mundane chores, I couldn't keep my eyes off of her. I found myself paying more attention to Juni than my surroundings or the tasks at hand. I was generally a very focused man and had been accused of having tunnel vision more than once in my life. It seemed that my tunnel vision was currently focused on Juni, and what a sight it was. She never failed to surprise me in all the best ways.

She'd done that last night while we waited at the ER and then had an even longer wait when she got back to a room for treatment. It had shocked me that she never once cried about the pain, even when the nurses were cleaning the wound on her back. When I mentioned that she was quite a trooper but I promised I wouldn't make fun of her if she let go, she shrugged off my comment and said something that really resonated.

“Pain is relative, Sugar. Compared to some of the things I've been through in my life, those wounds on my back are just scratches. They hurt and burn, but I've had worse. My eye hurts, but I can see out of it, and that's better than some injuries I've had where it was swollen shut. I'll heal quicker than I did a lot of times before when I was hurt by my mom or one of her boyfriends because this time I'm seeing a doctor who is going to take care of me instead of me trying to take care of myself.”

I could only imagine how Claire would have reacted if she had the same injuries and realized that Juni was right. Claire had never survived a beating and had to doctor her own wounds because she'd never been in that situation. I prayed to God she never would. Juni, on the other hand, had lived through an abusive childhood and learned to compartmentalize pain in a way that probably wasn't healthy, but it worked for her. That was what mattered.

However, it made me think about how I could help her heal, and it shocked me that I was even considering that. I'd held

myself back from everyone in my life except Claire with a 'live and let live' mentality. Of course, Sweetie was an innocent little girl, and I'd do everything in my power to help her like I would any child, probably even more so since I was almost positive she was my daughter. But with Juni, I wouldn't have thought I'd be so vested in making her comfortable and helping her feel better.

When I saw the pain on her face last night at the ER and watched her entire body tense in agony as they assessed her wound, something inside me changed. Without thinking, I made her one of those people I cared enough about to want to help. She was shocked when I took her hand and even more stunned when I moved my chair so that I could sit at the head of the bed and talk to her while the nurses worked. I didn't see a single tear, but I saw the relief on her face when she grasped my hand. That new light I'd seen Juni in seemed to get brighter and brighter until there was nothing left in my vision.

And I was about to crawl into bed beside her. I could go sleep in Claire's room, or even Juni's room for that matter, but I ignored those options and continued up the stairs until I was in the attic. As I stripped down to my underwear, I studied her sleeping face, ignoring the eye patch she'd been ordered to wear, and wondered why I was about to torture myself like this.

I knew why. Because I wanted to see if her body fit against mine like I'd imagined. I wanted to find out what it was like to wake up next to her. For once in my life, I was willing to dream about what might be. I could imagine myself waking up to her every day for the rest of my life.

It only made sense to be together. I could use Sweetie as an excuse, or I could buck up and admit the truth to myself if no one else. Juni was probably the only woman I'd ever met who could understand what I'd been through in my life and not judge me for the decisions I'd made and things I'd done. And she was someone I didn't have to hide my true self from - my doubts, fears, and insecurities - most of which I'd carried with me since childhood.

I wanted to believe that I could do the same for Juni. Now I just had to convince her of that.



JUNI

When the mattress beneath me rumbled, my eyes snapped open and I took in my surroundings.

Situational awareness was something I'd learned from early childhood, and it was reinforced during my time in the army. It terrified me that right now, I had absolutely no idea where I was or why it felt like there was a body beneath me. A very warm body with a sprinkling of chest hair and smooth skin that smelled like brown sugar and coconut.

"If I could run half as fast as your thoughts are racing, I'd have a truckload of gold medals," Sugar mumbled, his voice raspier than usual from sleep. "Relax, June Bug. Claire's taking care of Sweetie so we can get some rest."

"How did I get here?"

"Here as in my bed or on top of me?"

"Both."

"That shot they gave you must have been a doozy."

"I've got a low tolerance for anything stronger than Tylenol."

"Good to know."

"How did I get *here*?" When he didn't answer quickly enough, I said, "I'm not a snuggler, Sugar."

"Could have fooled me, but then again, I didn't peg you for a starfish either, but you sure did a great imitation of one before you got comfortable using me as a body pillow."

"It's the drugs."

"Think so?"

"Has to be."

“Then why are you still on top of me?”

That was a good question. Why hadn't I jumped away the second I realized where I was? Why was I still here now?

“Don't overthink it, June Bug. Just let it roll.”

“I'm generally not a let it roll kind of woman, Sugar.”

“Try it. You might like it.”

I didn't know about that, but I did know that I was warm and comfortable and wild horses couldn't pull me away. However, Mother Nature was a different story. If I didn't get up and go to the bathroom, we were both about to get *a lot* warmer. When I started to roll off of him, Sugar put his hand on my lower back and insisted, “Stay, Juni.”

“Woof woof,” I mumbled as I rolled over and put my feet on the floor. “I'm not one of your dogs, Sugar. Is there a bathroom up here?”

“Around that corner.”

I walked around the corner and called out, “Is there a bathroom with a *door* up here?”

“Nope.”

“Were you born in a barn?”

“Parking lot of the Tumbleweed Motel,” he answered. “You?”

“I've got you beat. Drug dealer's bathtub.” I didn't hear his response because I had already turned on the sink to cover the sounds I might make. I gingerly sat on the toilet and assessed my aches and pains as I relieved myself. I had a pounding headache, and it felt like there was sand in my left eye. The tape holding the eye patch on my face was starting to peel, and when I touched my cheek to press it down, I couldn't help but flinch at the pain. Once I was finished, I got up and washed my hands as I assessed my reflection in the mirror above the sink. I could be an advertisement for the Just Say No campaign because it looked like I was coming down from a three-week bender. My left eye was bruised and swollen, and my right eye didn't look much better. There were scratches all over my left cheek and down my neck, and when I lifted my

arm to touch my face, there was a sharp pain in my lower back across my hip. I started pulling out drawers until I found a spare toothbrush and then took care of my breath, which probably smelled as bad as I looked. Finally, I walked back into the bedroom and asked, “Did you forget to build a door, or do you just not know how to attach one?”

“Not a fan of doors or anything that restricts my movement.”

“Makes sense,” I told him as I looked around in search of my shoes. I was still wearing the sweats I’d put on yesterday before I went on the hike with Sweetie, and I really needed a shower. “I’ve got a few quirks of my own.”

“Your shoes are downstairs, but there’s a pile of clean clothes for you on the dresser if you want to shower. When you get out, I can redress your stitches for you.”

“Okay,” I said, not sure if it was completely safe to shower in such close proximity to Sugar. It wasn’t that I worried he’d attack me or something, but looking at him in bed, shirtless with the sheets ruffled at his waist, his safety was more of an issue. I had an almost overpowering urge to crawl back into bed and resume the position I’d woken up in but naked this time.

“You keep looking at me like that, and we won’t be leaving this bedroom for the rest of the day ... and it won’t be because we’re sleeping.”

I realized I’d been staring at his chest, and my eyes shot up to meet his. Without thinking, I said, “I’m trying very hard to think of a reason that’s not a good idea, but my mind’s so far down in the gutter that rational thought can’t find it.”

“I have a proposition for you, June Bug. Wanna hear it?”

“Sure,” I choked out as I watched the muscles of his stomach flex as he sat up.

“Me and you.”

“That’s your proposition?”

“Together. Not just hanging out and co-parenting, but together together.” I felt my eyebrows shoot up in shock, and he

grinned. “In all the ways.”

“When I got here a few weeks ago, you didn’t even like me.”

“You weren’t a fan of me either, but look at how well we’ve been getting along. And I think that if we find some common ground, we might like each other even more.”

“By having sex.” It wasn’t a question. It was a live and in-color movie playing out in my head. I wanted more than anything to be the star.

“That and sleeping in the same bed at night.”

Without thinking, I raised one eyebrow and felt the tape on my cheek pull before I winced and schooled my features. But I couldn’t stop my mind from racing at Sugar’s idea. I’d been watching him since we got here. At first, it was because I was wary, but as I got more comfortable around him, I realized that I really liked the guy. Of course, he’d had his asshole moments over the past few weeks, and we’d gone toe to toe several times, but when everything was said and done, we made peace. I had to admit that more often than not, our arguments turned into laughter. That still shocked me, but I’d come to look forward to our little spats.

I was trying very hard to think rationally about Sugar’s suggestion. I wanted more than anything to dive right in, but I was a careful woman who had learned to look at a situation from all angles.

“What if we figure out we’re not compatible at all?”

“I don’t think that’s gonna be a problem.”

“It will be if I have to draw you a map so you can find my hot buttons and then get frustrated when you ignore it.”

Sugar burst out laughing and said, “I can follow directions, but I’m also a fan of exploration, especially since I have a good handle on my target.”

“Exploration? You act like my body is a new trail you’re about to scout.”

“Oh, there will be a trail, but I’ll navigate it with my hands and mouth,” Sugar assured me as he ran his hands through the

sides of his hair and then stretched his arms above his head with a loud yawn. My mouth watered and my skin got hot as I watched the muscles in his biceps flex. I wanted nothing more than to move my hands over the planes of his chest right before I licked my way down his ... He interrupted my thoughts when he said, "Looks like you might want to do the same thing."

"It's a complication."

"When you moved in with me, I thought *that* was a complication, but over the last few weeks, I've realized that it was the best kind. I think this will be too."

"You're just horny."

"Fuck yes, I am," Sugar easily admitted. "Every second you're near and I can't touch you is a torture I'm not sure I'll be able to handle much longer. I want to put my hands on you, June Bug, and if you'd asked me six months ago how I'd do that, I'd have said to choke you until you shut your smart mouth, but now every time you get sassy with me, I want to kiss you until you're too breathless to speak."

"Oh."

"You see me in a different light too. I can tell."

"Most of the time, I'd rather see you in my headlights as I'm accelerating towards you," I mumbled without thinking. When Sugar laughed, his abs rippled and the sound sent a shiver down my spine that turned into a tingle of warmth down below that I knew wasn't going to go away until I got some time alone in my bedroom with my favorite toys. I'd been doing that too often lately, giving myself an orgasm as I imagined Sugar's hands on me and his cock deep inside. I couldn't think about that right now, though. I needed to be rational and level-headed more than ever because the decision I made today was going to affect not just my future but Sweetie's too. "What happens if our relationship doesn't work out?"

"I'll build you a cabin close to mine, and we live apart but together in peace and harmony as we raise Sweetie together."

“Oh.”

“Do you want it in writing? I’m happy to do that if that will give you some reassurance that I’ll keep my word.”

“No. I trust you.” I let out a sharp laugh before I admitted, “That’s not something I ever imagined myself saying.”

“And I never imagined myself wanting to fuck you senseless, but it’s been happening about fifty times a day for the last few weeks.”

“It has?”

“If I’d have known that the way to get you to stop running your mouth was to start talking about what I want to do with your body, we’d have started fucking the day you arrived.”

“From what I’ve gathered during this bizarre conversation, you like my smart mouth.”

“I’d like it better if it was stuffed full of my cock.”

“Okay.” I couldn’t form a coherent sentence because I could imagine that, but he’d be so busy devouring my pussy that he wouldn’t be able to talk either.

“You’re thinking about that, aren’t you?” When I nodded, he smiled and said, “That bodes well for my future.”

“You’d have to reciprocate.”

“Honey, if you’ve got a cock under there, that negates everything we just discussed.”

I burst out laughing and shook my head. “I don’t.”

“Then the offer stands. Let’s explore whatever this is that we’re both feeling and see if it’s something we can nurture into a life of our dreams.”

“That was almost poetic, Sugar Bear.”

“Are you going to think about it?”

“I’m done thinking.”

“I figured it wouldn’t take long since there are only a few brain cells up there for you to rub together.”

“If I gave you a penny for every one of your brain cells, you’d end up owing me money.”

“Crawl up here and show me what else that smart mouth can do, June Bug.”

“I’m not doing anything before I have a shower, and believe me, this mouth isn’t going anywhere near your little dick until you have one too.”

Sugar’s slow grin was probably the sexiest thing I’d ever seen, but I managed to keep my sarcastic tone and didn’t do exactly what he’d ordered. “I’m going to take a shower and think about it, but my initial answer would be yes. I agree we should explore this idea even if for no other reason than because the batteries in my vibrator are fading fast, and I’ll have to wait on my Amazon delivery before I can have another decent orgasm.”

“I’ll give you better than decent.”

I looked him up and down and forced myself to curl my lip in disgust when all I really wanted to do was beg him to prove it. Instead, I said, “You might try.”

“Go take a shower, June Bug, and I’ll get right on that.”

12.

**“Just let us have this moment without your smart mouth
ruining it.”**

Sugar

JUNI

I walked back into Sugar’s bathroom, making sure to move casually so he didn’t know just how his words had affected me. And boy, had they affected me. So much so that the effort it took to turn and walk away had almost physically pained me. All I wanted to do was crawl into bed with him and see what it felt like to have his sexy lips on mine while that muscular body covered me and thrust ...

I let out a slow, calming breath as I walked to the shower. All thoughts of the promise I’d seen in Sugar’s eyes faded when I realized exactly what I was in for. The bathroom was built in the center of the back wall of Sugar’s bedroom, which left a sitting area and small office space on either side. I realized now that the bathroom was much larger than I’d originally thought.

Granted, there wasn’t a door, but the way it was arranged would give a person privacy in a different way. The sink and vanity were separated from the toilet with a half wall, but beyond that, there was a floor-to-ceiling wall where a sliver of natural light beckoned from one side.

I walked around that wall and found myself in a huge shower that had another half wall on the other side, letting in the natural light from outside. I walked across the tiled space, shocked that it was larger than most people’s walk-in closets, and then gasped when I looked to see what was on the other side of the half wall. There was a sunken tub almost big enough for a swim. Even more impressive was the wall of windows that looked out onto the mountain. It would feel like

you were sitting in the middle of the forest while soaked in that spectacular bathtub. I couldn't wait to try it.

If I didn't have stitches in my back, I'd be doing that very thing, but I'd have to wait. Instead, I walked across the tile floor of the shower and tried to figure out how to turn on the water. There was a panel on the wall that lit up when I touched it. I couldn't get over the array of choices, from temperature to water pressure. Before I pushed any buttons, I stripped out of my clothes and tossed them out into the bathroom beneath the towel rack I'd noticed.

I adjusted the temperature to what I thought would be hot and steamy and then looked to the ceiling as I touched the button to turn on the water. The huge disc I'd noticed on the ceiling came to life, and I nearly squealed with pleasure when I saw that my shower was going to be like standing in the rain. I'd been impressed with Sugar's house since I arrived, but this development took that to an entirely different level.

I didn't even care that my back was covered in bandages or that there was still one on my eye as I walked into the deluge and sighed as the warm water coursed over my body, almost instantly relieving my many aches and pains. I had been standing there for quite some time, losing myself in the feel of the water as I tipped my head back, so I jumped when I felt something touch my shoulder, and my eyes shot open to find Sugar standing there.

"I couldn't wait," he said as he stepped under the spray.

Sugar touched my cheek, and I felt the patch the nurse had put there fall away when he tugged on it gently. I had just a second to study his face before his hand wrapped around the back of my neck and pulled me closer. He looked at me for just a second before he slowly touched his lips to mine. I stood in wonder at how such a large man could have such a soft touch.

Our kiss was electrifying. I felt it all the way down to my toes. His mouth devoured mine in the best way, and I groaned when the hand he'd fisted in the hair at my nape tipped my head so our kiss could go deeper. My hands wrapped around

his neck so I could pull him closer, and I gasped when he picked me up. Without thinking, I wrapped my legs around his waist and was shocked when I felt his cock against my clit.

“Fuck, you feel good,” Sugar moaned before he trailed kisses along my jaw to my ear. “I came in here with a plan, but you fucked it up.”

“How?” I murmured as I let my head fall back so I could hear his sexy voice better as he nipped at my earlobe.

“I was going to clean you up and then eat your pussy, but now, I have to fuck you instead.”

“You act like that’s going to be a sacrifice or something,” I snapped as I lifted my head up to glare at him.

“Not a sacrifice as much as a need, June Bug,” Sugar said as his hands moved down to cup my ass. I quickly realized that the look on his face wasn’t anger, it was frustration. “I don’t have a fucking condom but ...”

“Are you clean?” I asked bluntly.

“Yeah.” I tilted my head in question, and he laughed softly. “I’ve never fucked a woman bare, June Bug, even if there *is* a kid downstairs who might be mine.”

“I have an IUD,” I said as I moved my hips and rubbed the head of his cock against my clit. “And if what you were saying earlier is true, you’re talking about making this a permanent thing anyway.”

“I am.”

“Then fuck me like you mean it, Sugar, and when you come, I want you to do it deep inside me so I can feel every single twitch of your cock while I come around you.”

“That fucking mouth of yours is gonna be the death of me, June Bug,” Sugar muttered before he turned us so that the spray was hitting his back. He sat me down on the half wall, ran his hand up my side, and lifted my arm above my head. I felt the back of my hand touch something cold and looked up to find a bar there. “I planned the bathroom like this for a

reason. I hoped that someday I'd find a woman that would share my home and want to fuck in the shower just like I'm about to fuck you."

Sugar took a step back, leaving me perched on the wall in front of him. His eyes roamed over my body as he took his cock in hand. I sucked my breath in sharply when he leaned forward and pulled my nipple into his mouth. I moaned in pleasure before I asked, "I'm your test subject?"

Sugar let my nipple go and used his free hand to cup my other breast. He flicked my nipple with his tongue a few times before he answered, "Yes, you are." He let my breast go but kept sucking, and I gasped when I felt something cold touch my stomach. I looked down to find Sugar placing a bottle on the shelf near my hip as the soap he'd just squirted onto me made its way down my abdomen.

Sugar watched its progression for a second before he rubbed it back and forth across my stomach and then nudged my legs further apart. He leaned to the side, and the edge of the spray doused my clit, the warm water tapping against it in an almost perfect rhythm that made me shudder. "You like that?"

"Yes," I whispered as I gripped the bar above my head and leaned back a fraction so I could tilt my hips toward the spray. "That feels amazing."

The hand that was rubbing my abdomen slipped lower and covered my mound before the heel of Sugar's hand pressed against my clit. I moaned, and he moved it back and forth a few times before he cupped my pussy in his large hand. I realized what he was doing now and leaned forward so I could watch as he cleaned me, making sure to press against my clit often enough to leave me breathless. I gasped when he ran a finger between my ass cheeks and pressed a fingertip into my ass for a second before he swirled it around and did it again.

He kept washing me, his eyes studying my pussy as if he were trying to commit it to memory before he asked, "You shave?"

"Laser," I moaned.

“I like it,” Sugar whispered as he ran his finger up the back of my thigh. He did it down the other side, and I wanted to beg him to stop playing with me, but at the same time, I didn’t want him to ever stop.

He leaned to the side so the spray could hit me again, and I watched as the bubbles he’d created disappeared. He ran his hands over me again a few times, and the friction I felt without the slippery bubbles was even better than it had been with them there. “Don’t stop, Sugar.”

“What do you want, Juni?”

“I said don’t stop!” I snapped.

“Stop what? You want me to play with you some more, use my fingers to make you come, or something else?” I was breathless now but gasped in pleasure when he pushed a finger inside me at the same time the pad of his thumb pressed against my clit. He slowly pulled it out and then pushed it back in before he ordered, “Tell me what you want.”

“I want you to ...” Words failed me as he added a second finger, and I drew my breath in sharply when I felt one press against my ass.

“Do you want everything or just this little bit?”

“Everything?” I asked.

He pulled his fingers out again, and this time when he pushed them in, his pinky breached my ass and pushed in a fraction.

“Is that a question?” Sugar asked as he did it again and again. His rhythm had me moaning. I could barely focus on his voice, let alone try to answer.

All I could do was whimper before I begged, “Please, Sugar. More. I need more.”

“More of what, Juni?”

“Don’t fuck with me, Sugar. Make me come.”

“How?”

“I don’t know what you’re asking because it’s a simple fucking request,” I snapped as I squirmed against his hand.

“I’m asking you to trust me,” Sugar murmured against my nipple as he pressed his fingers even deeper. He held them there as his thumb flicked my clit. “I’m asking you to give in and let me do all the things to you that I’ve been dreaming about for weeks now, Juni. Let me in.”

“What does that mean?”

“Trust me, Juni. Can you do that?” Sugar sucked my nipple for a few seconds before he stood up straighter and covered my mouth with his. I writhed against his hand wanting more. I wanted him deeper, I wanted him to move, I wanted ... everything. “You’re a strong woman, and I’ll let you have your way in the bedroom sometimes, but this is my space, June Bug. I want you to give in and let me take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself,” I snarled.

“Just let me,” Sugar whispered before he nipped at my ear. “I’ll show you how good it will feel to let go.”

He pulled his fingers out a fraction and pressed up as if he were trying to pull me closer to him. The spot he was rubbing deep inside me shot electricity through my body as he pressed his free hand beneath my belly button. It felt so good that it was almost painful, but in the best way. He kept at it as he nipped at my lips, and just when I thought it was almost too much, he pressed his lips against mine and did it even harder.

I screamed as I had the most intense orgasm I’d ever felt in my life. It went on and on as he played by body like a maestro directing the sweetest symphony. I realized what he’d meant when he said I had to let go. I had let go of my body, sanity, and every bit of control I’d worked so hard to keep in check.

“That’s my girl,” Sugar murmured against my lips as his hand slowed. He pulled his fingers away, and I started to protest, but then I felt him swirl the head of his cock around my clit. I looked into his eyes as he slowly pushed into me and saw just how much control it took for him to restrain himself.

“That was me letting go, Sugar,” I whispered as I gripped the bar above me tightly. “Now it’s your turn.”

I watched the change come over him, from restraint to hunger, and knew I was in for the ride of my life. He thrust hard before he pulled back and then snapped his hips to do it again and again. The angle was just right, and with his hands roving all over my body as his cock worked his magic, I was coming again before long and watching him come apart as he did the same. With a long, tortured groan, he held still as his cock twitched deep inside me. The last of my orgasm faded, and we were both left breathless trying to figure out what had just happened.

“Don’t say anything,” Sugar ordered before he gave me a lingering kiss. “Just let us have this moment without your smart mouth ruining it.”

I smiled, knowing he was just trying to bait me. What we’d had wasn’t just a quick fuck. It hadn’t been just sex. What we’d just done had been life-altering. I knew I’d never be the same or see him the same again. From the look in his eyes, I could tell he was feeling the same way.

“Can I say one thing?”

“If you must,” he grumbled. I gave him a wicked smile before I pushed at his shoulder. “What?”

“My turn.”



SUGAR

“I guess I should tell you before we go any further that patience isn’t my strong suit,” I warned Juni.

She laughed softly. I loved how the corners of her eyes crinkled when she smiled and said, “Then I commend you for holding off for three weeks when all I wanted to do was throw you on the ground and ride you off into the sunset.”

“Once I realized you were all bark and no bite ...”

“Oh, I bite,” Juni argued.

I grinned at her when I said, “Only in the best ways.”

“I think you might have some marks from my teeth,” Juni said with a wince as she ran her hand over my collarbone. “Sorry about that.”

“You’ve got one on your left ass cheek, so I’d call us even.”

“That was fun,” Juni admitted as her hand trailed over my chest under the sheet before she asked, “Did I wear you out, old man?”

“When I mentioned patience, I was talking about why you’re here.”

“Because I’m running from a psycho.”

“Details, please.”

“You know how to use that word in a sentence?” When I narrowed my eyes at her, she sighed. “Obviously, you of all people know that I can be difficult to get along with sometimes.” When I snorted, she pinched my chest with a growl and continued. “I was one of three women on my team, and we were all close. Well, I was closer to the men than the women, I guess, but we were always together. I thought of the guys like family. Like brothers.”

“In close quarters like that, you’ve got a choice to make - either get along or kill each other.”

“Exactly, and we got along with pretty minimal drama. We all wanted to come home and missed air conditioning and warm showers,” Juni said. “Of all things, I missed soft grass. How fucked up is that? Some of the guys missed their mom or their wife’s cooking, whatever. I missed grass.”

“Well, I’ve got plenty of that around here. More trees than anything, but there’s some really nice spots you might like.”

“I think I’ve tangoed with nature enough for a while, although I might enjoy a little time spent relaxing on the grass somewhere.”

“There’s a whole field ...”

Juni rolled her eyes and interrupted, “Grass that doesn’t have cow shit on it.”

“I’m sure I’ve got some of that around somewhere,” I assured her with a grin. “If not, I’ll plant some for you next summer.”

“That’s sweet,” Juni murmured. “Are you expecting me to be here next summer?”

“I hope so.”

Juni looked uncertain before she said, “I try to never wish for anything because it just fucks you up when things don’t go your way, but I hope I’m still here then too.”

“Let’s make it happen. You promise not to kill me, and I promise not to kill you, and we start from there.”

“Maybe instead of killing each other, we can just fuck it out.”

“Honey, if I fuck you every time I consider burying you in a field somewhere, I’ll wear my dick out.”

“You could try,” Juni assured me with a grin.

“Continue with your story. How did you piss off a psycho?”

“Four psychos. I think. I’m sure there are more than just four, but those are the ones who *really* want me dead.”

“Why?”

“Another woman got assigned to our unit, and she was different. She was more ... outgoing. Not in a bad way, but she was bubbly and cheerful.”

“And you didn’t kill her?”

“She drove me nuts, but she was a breath of fresh air. You couldn’t help but get along with her because she was so fucking nice. At first, I thought it was all for show, but then I realized that when she said nice things, she actually meant them.”

“Some people do.”

“Anyway, the guys really liked her, and at first, I thought that they liked her the same way they liked me. Just one of the guys. But like I said, she was more outgoing, and they took it the wrong way and started flirting with her. She realized what was happening and shut them down. She had a boyfriend at

home waiting for her and seemed to be very loyal. She talked about him all the time and couldn't wait to get home to him. The other guys in our unit were cool with that and treated her like a sister, but there were four who didn't like that she had rejected them."

I could see where this was going, or at least, I thought I could, but I didn't interrupt Juni's story. She had a far-off look in her eye, and her entire body was tense. I pulled her closer to my chest and ran my hand over her back, careful to avoid her stitches.

"They were assholes to her, and for some reason, that just made her try harder to befriend them. I tried to tell her to give it up, but she couldn't get past the fact that they didn't like her. One night, I was patrolling the south side of the camp with one of the married guys. She wasn't on duty and should have been in her rack. The other four were working the south and west perimeters, which included the corner where we slept." Juni closed her eyes tightly before she let it all out in a rush. "The next morning, I heard the guys laughing and cutting up, but I didn't realize they were talking about her. They raped her, Sugar. It was horrible. I saw the bruises they inflicted on her body when I walked into the shower room and ... and, I don't know what they said to keep her quiet, but she wasn't going to tell. I just couldn't let her go through that alone. I tried to talk to her, but she shut down. She needed help in the worst way - more than I could offer - so, I went to our sergeant and told him what happened. He told me that if she needed help, she'd have to ask for it. I knew that would never happen. I could hear her crying at night when she thought everyone was asleep, so I tried again. Our sergeant still wouldn't do anything, so I went above his head. I went to the master sergeant and told him what had happened, and I told him that I'd reported it but nothing had been done. He was pissed. Really, really pissed. He set things in motion with a quickness. When she realized that I'd told him, she was mad, but eventually, she realized it was the right thing to do because they would likely do it to someone else if they weren't reprimanded. She gave in and made a report, and everything snowballed from there."

“Did your superiors take care of her?”

“They sent her back to base for medical support and counseling. We were all separated into different units, and those assholes were arrested. I testified about what I’d seen in the shower and what I’d heard them saying about her before ... and after. They got charged and dishonorably discharged. That happened my second year in, so it was about thirteen years ago, I guess.”

“And you think they’re out?”

“I know at least two of them are. Maybe even all four.”

“And they’re coming after you.”

“They’ve already killed two others that testified against them. I guess it’s my turn.”

13.

“I’m not into torture. Much.”

Sugar

SUGAR

“What does Juni do when she’s alone in her room?” Claire asked as she walked down the stairs and into the kitchen.

“What she does in the privacy of her own bedroom is her business, don’t you think?”

“She’s reading a book out loud, Dad. That’s weird.”

“Did you listen at the door?”

“Yes,” Claire said without an ounce of shame in her voice.

“Mind your own business, young woman. Eavesdropping might get you more information than you want.”

“Why are you and Juni pretending that you sleep in different rooms?” I turned to stare at my daughter, not quite sure how to respond. She rolled her eyes and chided me. “I’m not a child, Dad.”

“You’re still *my* child, and what I do in *my* bedroom is also none of your business.”

“Are you in love with her?”

“I’ve told you before not to confuse sex with love, Claire Bear. It’s best when they work in tandem, but that’s not always the case.”

“Is she going to stay?”

“I hope so.”

“Will she stay if the two of you stop ... doing whatever it is that you think I’m too young to know about but am not so I know exactly what you’re doing after all.”

“That was quite a mouthful.”

“Well, will she?”

“Juni is a grown woman who makes her own decisions. I’d like for her to stay, whether it’s in her own place nearby or this one.”

“Then you better up your game, Dad. You have been tiptoeing around me and Sweetie like we can’t see how you look at each other. She’s almost three, and she even gets the vibe.”

I decided to deflect and redirect. “Did you already buy a gift for Sweetie’s birthday?”

“Maybe. One or two.”

“Did I already buy her a gift?” Claire slowly nodded, and I squinted at her before I asked, “One or two?”

“Sure.”

“I’m going to look into throwing a party for her at the lodge. Want to get with Laura about decorations and talk to Tyson about decorating a cake?”

“The party is Tuesday afternoon at two o’clock. We’ve only got a few guests that are staying through the week, and Tyson can make all of Sweetie’s favorites for a late lunch.”

“Did you think about running that information by me or Juni?”

“Nope. Didn’t even cross my mind,” Claire admitted. When I gave her a pointed look, she reminded me, “You said that it’s good to take initiative and get shit done because you can’t rely on anyone else to do it for you.”

“Juni is technically Sweetie’s mom. She might want to have a hand in her party.”

“When I asked her Sweetie’s birth date, she had to go look at the papers in her room to find it.”

“Oh.”

“She asked me if three-year-olds need an actual party since they don’t even know which day of the week it is.”

“Technically, she’s not wrong.” When Claire looked appalled, I explained, “Where Juni and I come from, birthday parties are just something the kids in our class talked about. We might

have been invited but probably not, and even if we were, we couldn't afford a gift and never had a ride to get there."

"You always throw a party for me and make sure I have a special day."

"And we'll do the same for Sweetie."

"I think we should do that for Juni too. Maybe it will make up for not having special birthdays as a kid."

I knew that birthday parties were the least of Juni's worries growing up, but I liked that my daughter had such a good life that she thought missing out on them was tragic. "Find out her birthday, and I'll take her out for a nice dinner."

"And when you come back, we'll have a surprise party for her. Do you think she'll like that?"

Juni would hate that, but I could tell it would mean a lot to Claire, so I lied and said, "She'll love it."

"If she's going to live here and you are going to continue to pretend you're not sleeping together, you should probably suss out things like her birthday, favorite color, what kind of flowers she likes. You know ... things that people who are dating should know about each other."

I watched Claire flounce out of my office. Dating? Is that really what Juni and I were doing? That seemed so ... not us but necessary, I guess, if we were going to progress.

We spent our days together since we lived in the same house, and we hadn't spent a night apart since we woke up together after her fall more than a week ago. Juni would wait until Claire and Sweetie were settled in bed and then sneak up to my room and spend the night with me. She went back to her own room once she heard Claire and I talking in the kitchen in the mornings. I wasn't sure why she and I were trying to hide our ... whatever this was.

Relationship? I wasn't really sure, but the thought made me shudder, although not as much as it would have a month or even two weeks ago.

Juni and I had carefully avoided any physical contact during the day, but apparently, it was obvious that something was going on between us since Claire had picked up on it. It was almost a relief that it wasn't a secret anymore. At least I could casually touch her now instead of making myself crazy with yearning all day.

As if she'd sensed me thinking about her, Juni appeared in the doorway of my office and smiled. "Are you ready for me to take on cooking dinner by myself?"

"You're gonna cook?" I asked as I studied her face. I let my gaze trail down her body and thanked the good Lord above for the invention of yoga pants. Maybe it was the devil I should be thanking since the sight of Juni wearing them could tempt a saint. "Come here, June Bug."

Juni pushed away from the doorframe and walked across my office, but when she started to sit down in the chair next to my desk, I reached out and took her hand to pull her closer. "Here."

"What are you doing?" Juni asked suspiciously.

"Sit on my lap."

Juni glanced toward the doorway and then back at me in question. I tugged on her arm. "Come on."

"Do I just sit ...?" She looked down at my lap as if considering her options, and I laughed as I turned my chair and pulled her between my knees. She took the initiative and sat herself on my leg and wrapped her arms around my neck. She looked into my eyes and asked, "What are we doing, Sugar?"

"I'm saying hello to you." I put my hand on the back of her neck and pulled her in for a kiss. She was hesitant for a second, but then she kissed me back.

My grip on her neck didn't let her go too far when she tried to pull away, so she touched her forehead to mine. "Hello."

I lifted my other hand and started messing with the bun at the back of her neck, and she winced when I accidentally pulled her hair. "Take this out."

“Why?”

“Because I love your hair.”

“You do?”

“I do. I’ve only ever seen it down when it’s spread out on my pillow. Believe me, that’s quite a sight, but I want to see it now.”

“I haven’t worn my hair loose in years,” Juni said quietly as she started pulling out pins. Once she was holding at least six of them in her mouth, she unwound the long coil of twisted hair and let it fall over her shoulder. I took the pins from her mouth and tossed them toward the trash can while Juni looked at me in shock. “Why did you throw those away? How am I going to put it back up now?”

“Leave it down.”

“It’s not practical.”

“It’s beautiful. Like you.”

“Did you bump your head?”

I laughed and asked, “Do you not know how to take a compliment?”

“Yeah. With a grain of salt.”

Juni started to get up, but I stopped her. “Sit here with me for a minute.”

“The kids might see.”

“So. Why are we keeping this a secret?”

“This?”

“Us.”

“There’s an us?”

I shrugged one shoulder and then admitted, “I’d like for there to be.”

Juni studied my face for a minute before she whispered, “So would I.”

“Then let it happen, June Bug. What’s stopping you?”

“Good sense and self-preservation?”

Arguing with Juni was like fighting with a brick wall, so I changed the subject. “What are you making for dinner?”

“I’m not sure I’m completely ready to go solo, but I have some ideas.”

“Okay. Want me to come keep you company?”

“Sure, but just so you know, I’m gonna cheat.”

“There’s no frozen lasagna in our freezer, baby.”

Juni seemed startled at the endearment but rolled with it before she said, “I’m going to put together a meal from the things you have in the jars. I think ... well, I hope it’s going to be delicious.”

“Use what you got. That’s what it’s there for.”

“I thought you were prepping for the apocalypse or something.”

“It will work for that too.”

“Will you make biscuits?”

“I’ll teach *you* how to make biscuits, and we can make some extra to put in the freezer for next time.”

“Who knows? With just a few more lessons, I could be the next Gordon Ramsay.”

“You’ve got the temperament for it.” I ran my hands through her long hair. “Your hair is just gorgeous, June Bug.”

“Thank you.”

“Why do you always wear it slicked back in a bun?”

“Twelve years of habit. I kept it long because it’s easier to style, but it was only allowed to be down to my shoulder blades when I was in uniform. I haven’t trimmed it since I got out, though.”

“I like it.”

“You’re not the one that has to take care of it,” Juni said with a laugh.

“I’d still think you were beautiful even if you shaved it off.”

“Really? You did bump your head.”

“Hush. Your stitches can come out today. Do you want to go this afternoon to have them removed or ...”

“You do it,” Juni interrupted. “You’ve been taking care of them all this time, so you’ll know if they’re ready or not.” She looked thoughtful for a second before she said, “Unless that makes you queasy.”

“Not at all,” I assured her.

“If I go back to the doctor, they’re going to want my information again. I’m already worried about someone finding me here after having to give it to them at the hospital.”

“I never even considered that. I was too worried that your eyeball was going to fall out.”

Juni laughed and said, “I was too. But back to the subject at hand. I would just rather you take them out if you’re okay with it.”

“I thought that once they were out, you and I might enjoy a nice, long bath.”

Juni’s eyes lit up as she nodded. “I’ve been dying to get in that tub since the second I saw it.”

“Let’s do that tonight. I’ll let you soak while I rub your feet, and then I’ll rub your everything else.”

“Wake up!” Sweetie yelled just before she appeared in the doorway. “Hi!”

“Hi, Sweetie Pie. How’s my girl?”

Sweetie ran across the room and skidded to a halt next to my chair. She looked at Juni with disdain before she huffed, “My spot.”

“There’s room for you up here too,” I assured her.

Sweetie narrowed her eyes and shot another glare at Juni before she hesitantly agreed, “Okay.”

“I can just get up,” Juni said but I put my arm around her waist and shook my head.

“She’ll get used to seeing us together like this,” I assured her. “She’ll come to understand that I can love both of you at the same time.”

Juni’s eyes grew wide, but I didn’t have time for her to sputter about it since Sweetie had crawled up between us and made sure we both understood exactly where her place was in our relationship: front and center, right in the middle of our hearts. Exactly where she belonged.



JUNI

Sugar had kept me off-balance since I walked into his office, and it didn’t seem like he was about to stop anytime soon. For the past few weeks, we’d avoided any physical interaction while the kids were awake or nearby, but he was suddenly up in my physical space no matter who was watching.

And it wasn’t just the physical space that was an issue. He’d taken up quite a bit of real estate in my head too.

When he was near me I couldn’t seem to focus on anything else. When he walked past me, I found myself trying to get a whiff of his unique scent. When Sugar was talking to me, I couldn’t help but study him ... so much so that I was sure I could map out every crease, wrinkle, and freckle on his face. I’d always thought Sugar was beyond handsome. His hair wasn’t just brown but a mixture of everything from dark honey to black. I knew that had more to do with time spent outdoors than anything else. His eyes were a beautiful dark brown that changed with his moods, getting darker with passion and lighter when he was laughing and happy. And those dimples. I could swim in those dimples. I could stare at his face for hours waiting for them to appear. It was difficult not to smile every time I saw them.

I wasn't sure what had made me turn into a sap. I had tried to blame it on the close quarters we shared or head trauma from my tumble down the side of the mountain. But I knew it wasn't either of those things. Sugar had gotten past my defenses and planted himself deeply within me in more ways than one.

The sex was addictive. That was a given. If it was possible to overdose on pleasure, I'd be doing it right now. Every night was better than the last and different than the ones before. Sometimes, he was soft and gentle with lots of nibbling kisses and caresses while other times, he was rough and commanding, bending me to his will physically and mentally as he gave me more pleasure than I ever thought possible outside of romance novels or softcore porn.

Last night had been the most intense so far, and I wanted more. I craved it. He had put my body into positions that I hadn't known were even possible and had kept me right on the edge between pleasure and pain for hours as he drew orgasm after orgasm from me until I begged him to let me rest. And he had for a while, but then he started in again, only this time it was the soft and sweet Sugar who played my body like a finely-tuned instrument while he whispered all the right things until we were both sated and breathless.

And now he was doing it again while we were fully clothed and standing in the kitchen with the kids out on the deck watching a video on Claire's laptop.

"Like this, June Bug," Sugar said as he stepped up behind me and slid his hands down my arms. He rested his chin on my shoulder as he molded his body to my back, all the while expecting me to pay attention to his instructions as he showed me how to roll out the dough we'd made. After a few seconds, he was satisfied with how I was using the rolling pin and nipped at my earlobe before he whispered, "That's my girl."

I almost orgasmed standing there at the counter. I knew Sugar realized what he was doing to me when he laughed softly and pressed his cock against my ass.

"What are you doing, Sugar?"

“I’m just helping you, June Bug,” he murmured close to my ear. “What does it seem like I’m doing?”

“Torture,” I whispered.

“Oh no. I’m not into torture. Much. Unless you count what I did to you last night as torture, and if you do, that means I’m *really* into it.” Sugar nipped at my earlobe again before he said, “Seemed like you were, too, if I recall.”

“Little bit,” I conceded before I took a deep breath in through my nose and slowly blew it out through my mouth.

“Who knew my little June Bug would love being spanked so much?” Sugar whispered as he reached around me and put the rolling pin aside before he folded the dough like he’d shown me earlier. Once it was set the way he wanted it, he guided my hands back to the rolling pin and started again. “And on your pussy, no less. Did you like that a lot, June Bug?”

“You know I did,” I hissed.

“Want me to do that again tonight?” When I didn’t answer, he laughed softly and said, “Because I want to do that again, but this time I want my cock planted deep in your ass while I spank your clit.”

It took everything I had not to moan. I swallowed hard before I took another deep breath.

“Can I put those clamps on your pretty nipples again too?” I bit my lip as my nipples got even harder than they had been just seconds ago. I couldn’t speak, so I nodded and felt Sugar’s body shake with silent laughter. “And that ass, baby. You want me to fuck you there?”

“Uh huh,” I whimpered.

“Hard or soft?”

“Um ... Uh ...” I stammered.

“I’ll fuck your pussy first and make sure you come really hard before I work my way into your ass a little bit at a time until I’m deep inside. You want that, baby?” I nodded, and Sugar pressed his hips against me so that I was trapped between him and the counter. “I’ll take you slow while you’re on your

knees in front of me and then lift you up so that we're pressed together like we are now so I can reach around and play with your clit. Sound good?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to spank your clit while I fuck you, June Bug?" When I nodded, he bit my earlobe and whispered, "Say please, Juni." I shook my head, and he whispered, "You'll say please before I fuck you. And you'll beg me not to stop, won't you?" He took his hand off mine and let it trail down my hip, the counter in front of us blocking his hand from view in case the kids happened to look our way. He pressed one finger against my leggings and touched my clit as he growled in my ear, and that was all it took. I came so hard that I saw stars and could taste blood in my mouth from where I'd had to bite my lip to hold in my scream of pleasure. Just when I thought it was over and Sugar would pull away, he'd start moving his finger again and whisper, "Again, June Bug."

"I can't." My whisper was more like a moan, and I grimaced when Sugar laughed softly. "Please, Sugar. Oh God. I won't be able to stop myself from screaming."

"I'll help you," Sugar assured me as he kept at it, his finger pressing right through my thin leggings as he used his other hand to fold the dough in front of us. He had just picked up the rolling pin to put it in place when another orgasm hit, and I gasped. His finger didn't stop moving, though. If anything, he put more pressure on my clit as he strummed it back and forth, and I felt a scream bubbling up inside me as I let go again. Sugar seemed to sense that I was losing control and turned my face to his. He covered my mouth with his in a fiery kiss that would have left me breathless if I had any air left in my lungs. Finally, his finger stopped, and he gently patted my clit as I kissed him back, letting him know without words exactly what he'd done to me. When he pulled his lips away from mine, he smiled, and I saw that dimple I couldn't resist again before he purred, "Good girl, June Bug."

I had to lean against the counter in front of me for support when Sugar finally let go of me. I was still trying to catch my breath as he finished washing his hands and walked around the

counter to sit across from me. The smile on his face was smug, but I couldn't fault him for that. He'd just given me two orgasms with nothing but his voice and a finger.

I could get used to this touchy feely closeness if that was what it entailed. I could even become addicted.

14.

“Do all of you have nicknames or did your parents just hate you?”

Juni

JUNI

“This is really good, Juni,” Claire said as she reached for the serving spoon to dish up more of the dinner I’d made. “I would never have thought to put these together like this.”

“I was scouring the internet trying to find something ... *anything* ... that I might be able to cook and found this. It’s sort of cheating because all I did was open the jars you and your dad had already made.”

“It’s still cooking. Would you call it cheating if you’d bought the cans from the store and made this?” Claire asked. When she saw my hesitation, she smiled and said, “Once you start helping us preserve food, you’ll be able to say you had a hand from start to finish, seed to table.”

“You’re a great hype woman,” I said sincerely. “Can I hire you to stand outside my bedroom door and tell me I’m beautiful every morning?”

“That’s Dad’s job now, but if you want to throw money at me for spitting the truth, I’m game.”

“And she’s also an entrepreneur,” Sugar teased.

“More, please,” Sweetie said from her booster seat that Sugar had fastened to the barstool a few days after we arrived.

As I dished up another serving for her, I thought about all the changes Sugar and Claire had made to accommodate us, and, once again, was amazed at their thoughtfulness. Sweetie had a designated spot at the bar as well as a designated chair at the table, even though we rarely sat there to eat. She had a shelf of books and toys in the great room on this level of the house,

a little tent in the corner where she played house and liked to nap occasionally, and a full toy kitchen with pots, pans, and plastic food to go with her miniature grocery cart. Downstairs in the living room near Sugar's office, she had a dollhouse and even an indoor slide with a swing. And, of course, her bedroom upstairs was filled with stuffed animals, dolls, and more books that one of us was always willing to read to her.

There were other toys scattered over the multi-level deck outside too. On the ground level, she had a scooter that Sugar had added bigger tires to and souped up so she could drive over pinecones and uneven ground, a bucket of chalk, and at least half a dozen baskets she could carry on hikes to help her collect her "pretty pretty" treasures. There were even more things for her on the second level of the house that she played with while we were in the kitchen or relaxing in front of the fire, and I'd just heard Sugar and Claire discussing outdoor play equipment earlier this afternoon.

Sweetie had been welcomed into their little family unit without question as had I.

Since I hadn't brought appropriate clothes for the weather, Claire had taken it upon herself to order me things. There was a package on the counter for me to open nearly every day. When I tried to insist that I'd pay Sugar for the money he'd spent, he waved my offer away with a flick of his hand and said, "Claire likes to shop, and you need clothes. It's a win-win for everybody."

I'd been raised to understand that nothing in this world came for free. There were always expectations ... but not here. In Sugar's house, no one would even accept my money to help pay the bills. The day I arrived, Sugar mentioned that I had to help take care of the animals and the garden if I was going to live in this house, but that was the last time he'd said anything like that. Of course, I'd been eager to help once I learned how, but he hadn't chided me once for waking up later than he and Claire and missing the morning chores outside.

I had tried very hard to keep up with them for the first week or so, and it left me absolutely exhausted. I learned to go to bed a little earlier so I could wake up when they did and made time

for a short nap after lunch since there was more work to be done after dinner. I jumped in to help every chance I got, and rather than make fun of me for my lack of knowledge and experience, Sugar and Claire worked me into their routine and educated me. They even had Sweetie feeding chickens and gathering eggs almost every morning after breakfast.

Sugar had created a space in the greenhouse for Sweetie to play while we worked, and when she wasn't playing, he was patient and kind as he answered her endless questions as he taught her how to tend and harvest the plants.

She'd blossomed in this house and already outgrown the clothes and shoes I'd brought with us. We'd already begun to change physically due to our new diet of fresh food and the exercise we were getting working with the animals and plants. Our hair was noticeably shinier, our skin had a healthy color from the sun we got while outside doing chores or playing, and we slept better at night. That might have to do with all the energy it took to keep up with Sugar and Claire, but I thought it also had to do with the safety and security we felt being part of this home and family.

"Yummy, Mama," Sweetie said before she smacked her lips and took another bite of the dinner I'd made. "More, please!"

"Did she just call me ...?" I asked in shock. Sugar and Claire were quiet as their eyes went back and forth between us. "She did, didn't she?"

Sugar's slow nod came with a smile as he asked, "What does *that* feel like?"

"Shocking and awesome and terrifying," I whispered.

"What's his name, Sweetie Pie?" Claire asked as she pointed to Sugar.

"Dad," Sweetie answered with a smile before she pointed at Claire and said, "Claire Bear."

The look on Sugar's face mirrored my own, and I watched as his eyes filled with tears.

Claire sensed that Sugar and I were too emotional to speak, so she jumped in. "That's right. Mom, Dad, and Claire Bear.

I'm your sister. Can you say 'best big sister on the planet?'"

Sweetie tried, and Claire kept coaching her until she finally succeeded and then gave Claire a high five. By then, I'd managed to choke back the emotion that hearing someone call me "mom" brought on, and Sugar had been able to pull himself together too. As I dabbed at the corner of my eyes with my napkin, I suddenly heard the sound of motorcycle pipes outside. It didn't seem to faze Sugar or Claire. If anything, they seemed to get excited.

"Who's here?" Claire asked as she hopped off the stool and rushed toward the side door. "You didn't tell me we were having company!"

"We are? You are?" I asked.

"We are," Sugar said with a smile. "I told you Ajax was coming, but I'm not sure who he brought with him."

"Maybe that Hammer guy I talked to?"

"No way. He won't come anywhere near Montana when there is even a slight chance of snow."

"But those men rode their motorcycles?"

"I've got good friends and great brothers. They're not all sane, but they're still awesome," Sugar said as he walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out another jar of the juice he and Claire had canned for Sweetie. He popped the lid and slid it across the table to her, and she grinned at him before she took a sip.

"Yum yum yum. Thank you, Dad!"

"You're welcome, Sweetie Pie."

"Dad!" Claire called out from the doorway.

Sugar spun around, alarmed at the tone of Claire's voice, and rushed to the door. I was just getting out of my chair when I heard him order, "Take Sweetie upstairs and stay there until I tell you that it's safe to come down."

"Yes, sir," Claire said as she hurried into the kitchen. She picked up Sweetie and put her on her hip before she reached

for her juice and looked at me with fear in her eyes. “If you get stuck, call me. I might be able to help. I’ve been studying.”

“Studying what?”

“Wound care,” Claire said, her calm voice belying the urgency she showed as she took the stairs two at a time with Sweetie on her hip.

“What the fuck?” I whispered as I turned to go outside. I didn’t have time to even get around the bar before Sugar appeared with a man dressed in camo, his arm over Sugar’s shoulders as he supported him while he tried to walk.

“A house full of goddamn windows,” I heard another man grumble as he limped into the house. He was also wearing head-to-toe camo along with the third and fourth men who walked in after him.

“The windows are bulletproof.” I turned and looked at Sugar in shock, and he shrugged. “Some hunters don’t pay attention to boundaries, and I didn’t want Claire to get hit with a stray shot.”

“Is that what happened to him?” I asked as I motioned to the injured man. I rushed across the kitchen, yanked open a drawer, and pulled out a stack of towels. I then turned on the sink as I squirted antibacterial soap on my hands. “Sugar, get his clothes off so I can see the wound. You!” I said as I pointed at the other injured man. “Sit down before you fall down.” I pointed at the other men and said, “Clear off the bar so we can lay that other one down if we need to.”

I pulled a bottle of cleaner out from under the sink along with a box of gloves that I’d seen Sugar use when he was chopping peppers. I hurried around the bar and grabbed three rolls of paper towels before I pulled the trash can out and set it next to the bar.

“Sugar, do you have a first aid kit?”

“Chewie! Bring me the big tan bag that’s in the entryway closet,” Sugar ordered before he ripped the man’s shirt from collar to hem. I winced when I saw the bullet wound in his

side and watched as Sugar leaned around him and said, “You’ve got an exit wound.”

“Oh goodie,” the injured man mumbled. “I’ve always wanted one of those.”

The man that Sugar had called Chewie set a huge bag on a barstool, and it made a loud thump. “Guess you really are prepared for the apocalypse.”

“I’m a Boy Scout. What can I say?” Sugar replied as he stood in front of his injured friend. He glanced over his shoulder at me and said, “The whiny one is Oz, and Ajax is the one with the limp.” He pointed to the other two. “The hairy one is Chewie, and the quiet one over there is Dub.”

“Do all of you have nicknames, or did your parents just hate you?” I muttered as I sorted through the bag in front of me.

“Well, *June Bug*, I’m pretty sure that more than one of us were hatched, so that leaves the nickname option wide open,” Ajax drawled.

“My name is Juni,” I said with a pointed look.

“Mine is Ajax,” he replied with a grin.

“Are you just obsessively clean or what?”

“Something like that,” Ajax said as the other men laughed.

I looked up at the man Sugar said was named Chewie and asked, “Star Wars fan?” He replied with a perfect imitation of the movie character, and I smiled. “I guess that’s a yes.”

“I’ll go up where the kids are and watch the perimeter,” Dub said as he walked toward the stairs.

Chewie walked the same way and said, “I’ll take downstairs.”

“Why are we guarding the house?” I asked. I looked at Sugar and asked, “Did the *hunters* who accidentally shot your friends follow them here?”

“They followed you here,” Ajax said with a grimace as he sat down on a stool. “We followed *them* here.”

“Oh shit,” I whispered. “Them? There’s more than one? Who is it?”

“June Bug,” Sugar said as he walked around the bar and put his hands on my shoulders. “Control your breathing and focus. Sweetie and Claire are safe upstairs, and we’ve got things to do down here.”

“Okay. Yeah. Okay,” I said as I nodded and took a deep breath. I shrugged off Sugar’s hold and turned toward Oz. “Can you hop up and sit on the bar so I can get a good look at your wound?”

“I’ll get right on that,” Oz said as he put his hand on his side and stood up. He wavered for a second and then slumped face forward onto the bar.

Sugar and Ajax both jumped to hold him there, and I took one last swipe at the bar with a clean paper towel before I said, “Lay him up here, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Are you a doctor?” Ajax asked.

“No, but I’ve got field knowledge, so I can at least get him taken care of until we can get him to a hospital.”

“No hospital,” Ajax said as he shook his head. “You’re gonna have to do.”



SUGAR

“What happened, and what are the guys doing here?”

“Hammer and I tracked down the four men that are after your girl. We kept eyes on them to see if they were even the ones fucking with her, and everything was calm until about two days after I talked to you. They suddenly packed their shit and took off for Montana.”

“All four?” I asked as I stared out the window into the dark forest around the house. I looked back over my shoulder and watched as Juni helped Claire pack Oz’s wound, a little

disturbed at how excited the task had made my daughter when she appeared on the stairs to let us know Sweetie was sleeping in her crib. “There are four trained soldiers out there watching my house?”

“Not anymore. At best there’s two, but they’re both injured and won’t last long, I’m sure.”

“How did you ... What the fuck, Ajax?”

“I called some of the guys who were close by and had experience outdoors. I had them camp out around your place to watch for movement. The men flew into Glacier and got outfitted for hunting before me and Dub followed them to Whitefish. The boys were waiting for them in the forest, but things went a little ... sideways.”

“Sideways? Oz has a bullet wound in his side, and your leg is bleeding. I assume you’ve got the same thing.”

“Oz’s guardian angel must have been on a smoke break,” Ajax muttered.

“Y’all got two of them?”

“Yeah. We dragged them closer to the river to make sure the wildlife could do their thing.”

“And the other two?”

“Fish found two blood trails. They’re together, and they both have some new accessories. Apparently, he and Chewie have taken up bow hunting since they left Texas, and they’ve gotten pretty damn good at it.”

“The other two are out in the forest with arrows sticking out of their body?” I laughed softly. “The wolves are gonna *love* that.”

“If the wolves don’t kill them, the arrows the boys shot will.”

“There’s no guarantee they got a kill shot if the men are still able to move around the forest.”

“They’re able to *now*, but within about twenty-four hours, the infection will set in and they won’t be going anywhere but the fucking morgue.”

I smiled when I realized what my friends had done. “They slimed the arrows?”

Ajax nodded and smiled back at me. “Prison teaches a man all sorts of things, doesn’t it?”

“How will we know they’re taken care of?”

“Hammer’s going to watch the hospital records. That’s most likely how they found out where your girl was hiding.”

“Oh shit. I never even considered that, but there was no way I could have taken care of her eye like they did. Stitches, yeah, but eyeballs aren’t something you fuck around with.”

“She still looks like she went three rounds with a heavyweight,” Ajax said as he watched Claire and Juni work. “Pretty girl, though.”

“Beautiful.”

“I guess I missed my shot, huh?”

“I took your advice, and now I’m working hard every day to convince her that she never has to leave.”

“No. Convince her that you want her to stay, not that staying is an option.”

“What’s the difference?”

“She’ll always have a home here, right? But let her know that she’s your home and you want to be hers. Location doesn’t matter. It’s who you’re with that counts.”

“Who sounds poetic now?” I asked sarcastically.

“The man who can’t seem to find his home.”

I didn’t have a chance to ask Ajax what he meant because Juni walked over toward us as she dried her hands with a dish towel.

“Claire got his wound packed, and he’s going to sleep in my room. I’m ready to look at you now,” Juni said as she stopped near us. She looked up at me and gave me an uncomfortable smile before she said, “While I take care of him, can you tell me what’s going on?”

I put my arm around her shoulder and pulled her closer to me before I kissed her on the temple and said, “There were four and now there are two. One of my brothers from the club is outside watching the house and ...”

“No. There are three outside watching the house. Four of us inside, although Oz is down for the count, so I guess that makes three plus you.”

“There are three outside? Fish and who else?” I asked.

“Lurk and Sully,” Ajax said with a toothy smile. “Fun stuff, huh?”

“Lurk? Sully? Who names you people?”

I shrugged at her question and said, “Doesn’t really matter, but the three men outside can probably rival any of your soldier friends when it comes to survival. As far as I know, Sully hasn’t left his mountain since he went home from Texas, and Lurk just ... Well, let’s just say he’s barely housetrained.”

“Not even barely,” Ajax corrected me. “He was raised by moonshiners in the Appalachian mountains, so he’s rough around the edges.”

Juni raised her eyebrows and asked, “And Sully?”

“Different mountain ranges. Same edges.”

“What about this Fish guy?”

“He’s an Eagle Scout,” Ajax told her.

“And?”

“He learned how to be one with nature from a very young age,” I told her with a grin.

“Different mountains?” Juni asked sarcastically.

“No. He’s more of a water-based criminal,” Ajax answered. “He likes to fish more than he likes to hunt, but he’s damn good at both. That’s why I hired him.”

“You did?”

Ajax nodded. “Chewie too. Things got too domestic for them in Tenillo, so when their parole was over, they decided to go

back home. Fish is in Florida now, and Chewie's back in Oregon. Now I've got a trusted associate on each coast so I can roam around the middle of the country doing good deeds and helping little old ladies through crosswalks."

"That's what you do? I thought you were a cleaner," Juni said sarcastically.

"I am, sweetheart. Been doing it for years, and I'm damn good at my job."

15.

“If either of you got a brain-eating amoeba it would starve to death.”

Juni

JUNI

“I’m going to have to cut your pants off,” I told the man on the bar in front of me.

“Aww. These are my formal camo pants. Now I won’t have anything to match my favorite vest.”

“Wow. I thought *I* was good at sarcasm,” I muttered as I picked up the scissors Claire had just washed after helping me treat the other guy. Oz, I thought his name was, but I could be wrong. The last hour or so had been quite an information dump, and I had too many terrible scenarios flying through my mind to concentrate on remembering everyone’s name. As I started cutting around the wound I was about to treat, I said, “So, tell me what a cleaner does, Mr. Ajax, because I’m pretty sure you’re not talking about baseboards and bathrooms.”

“I clean up messes, take out the trash, sweep up when everyone leaves.”

“What kind of messes and trash?”

“The kind people make.”

“And the trash?”

“Lots of people are trash, sweetheart.”

“Don’t I know it,” I whispered. I glanced at his face and asked, “Which category do I fall in?”

“Family.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“But I know Sugar - maybe not quite as well as you since we weren’t exactly cuddle buddies when we roomed together.”

“You roomed together? What’s that mean?”

“We shared a cell, honey. There are only a few ways to get closer to a man than that, and neither of us swing that way.”

“You were in prison too?”

Ajax lifted his head and stared at me, but before he could answer, Claire burst out laughing and said, “Everybody but me and you have been to prison, Juni.”

“All of the men helping Sugar are ex-cons?”

“And everyone that works for my dad,” Claire said with a grin. “You didn’t know that?”

“Oh no! You’re surrounded by criminals! Whatever will you do?” Ajax asked sarcastically. The look on his face pissed me off, and he hissed in a breath when I pushed a little harder than I should have as I probed the edge of his wound. “Now now, June Bug. Don’t get petty.”

“Quit being a dick, and I won’t have to be,” I snapped. “I can’t figure out what this is.”

“What do you mean?” Claire climbed onto the stool across from me and perched on her knees so she could see Ajax’s wound. “What is that?”

“There was something in his pocket that deflected the bullet. It looks like there’s a burn where it heated up and then another where the bullet grazed his thigh along with a lot of shrapnel.”

“If that had gone through, it could have hit the femoral artery,” Claire said seriously. “You’re lucky.”

“My guardian angel saved me.”

“Well, maybe, but my guess is that whatever was in your pocket played a major part too.”

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable with Claire Bear being here,” Ajax said as he adjusted the towel I’d laid over his crotch. “Run along, kiddo, before you see something both of us regret.”

“You wore a Speedo in the pool last summer,” Claire said with a look of disgust. “I’m not seeing anything I haven’t already.” She shuddered. “It was horrible, Juni. Hor-ri-ble.”

“You wore a Speedo?” I asked in shock.

“I lost a bet,” Ajax mumbled.

“Right along with your dignity, obviously,” I said as I squirted saline on the wound to soak the material so it wouldn’t pull at the burn when I took it off.

“Have we met before, Juni?” Ajax asked as he bent his arm up and put his head on his hand so he could see me more easily. “I swear there’s something familiar about you, but I can’t quite place it.”

“I’m sure that I’d remember meeting you, Ajax. You’ve got a ... unique facial structure.”

“She called you ugly,” Claire sputtered.

“I’m just saying that if he laid on the beach not even the tide would take him,” I said sassily. Ajax gasped and Claire laughed even harder. It was a complete lie because the man was absolutely gorgeous, but I couldn’t help myself and kept going. “I mean look at him. He looks like a before picture.” Claire kept laughing, and I heard Sugar snort from somewhere behind me. I was on a roll. Ajax was so shocked that he wasn’t paying attention to what I was doing even though I knew it had to hurt. “Ajax, your face is probably what it looks like when someone steps on a goldfish.”

“What the fuck did I ever do to you?”

“You were born on a highway, weren’t you?”

“What? No! Why?” Ajax sputtered.

“Because that’s where most accidents happen.”

“Holy shit,” Sugar wheezed as he dropped onto the stool beside Claire. “It’s fucking awesome to hear that shit aimed at someone else.”

“Is there something wrong with her eyesight? I’m a damn good lookin’ man!” Ajax argued.

“Wow,” I said as I stood up straight and worked the kink out of my neck that had developed while I hunched over the bar to work on Ajax’s wound. “You’re almost as conceited as you are stupid, if that’s even possible.”

“What. The. Fuck.”

“I mean, come on,” I said before I bent over again and got back to work. “Just listening to you makes me want to run the hundred-yard dash into a brick wall that’s only forty yards away.”

“Bitch,” Ajax hissed, and I wasn’t sure if it was because of my insults or because I’d just lifted one side of the material that was burned into his wound.

When he flinched, I realized that it was probably the pain making him curse at me, so I kept going. “I guess if I really wanted to kill myself, I could jump from your ego down to your IQ. That would definitely do it.”

“Why am I here again?” Ajax asked no one in particular.

“Obviously, for our amusement,” I heard a man say from the stairs. When I looked up, I found Dub standing on the landing leading upstairs and Chewie watching between the slats of the stairs leading down.

Chewie was wiping the tears of laughter off his face when he said, “Don’t stop on our account. Keep going! You’re on a roll.”

I pulled another millimeter of the fabric from the burn and felt Ajax tense as I said, “The biggest problem with his face is that we have to look at it.”

I doused the fabric with more saline and was finally able to pull it off the wound. I had to swallow a few times to keep from gagging when I realized what the next step was going to be in this process. There were little fragments of metal embedded around the burn, probably from whatever the bullet had hit that burned the fabric of his pants and pocket into his skin. I was going to have to dig them out. I wasn’t sure which would hurt worse: cleaning the wound or making a dozen tiny

cuts and digging the metal fragments out before I cleaned them too.

“Fuck,” Ajax spat. He lifted his head and nodded at me before he said, “Keep ‘em coming, smartass.”

“Are you okay?” I asked softly.

“I’m fine. Just fucking fine. When I get finished relaxing here, I’m gonna take you out into the forest and hand you over to whoever it is that’s fucking waiting. He’s got all my deepest sympathy right now.”

“I don’t know what your problem is, but I bet it’s hard to pronounce.”

“With you around, that’s the only thing that’s hard.” Sugar slapped Ajax on the shoulder, and he winced. “Shit. Sorry, Claire.”

“No! Don’t mind me! I’m gonna make some popcorn.”

“I’m not sure why you think this is entertainment, Claire. It’s not like Mr. Clean here is a worthy opponent. If he were any dumber, we’d have to water him twice a week.” Sugar choked and started coughing, and I heard Chewie snort from the stairwell. I had only managed to get two pieces of the shrapnel out of Ajax, and they weren’t nearly the largest or the deepest, so I settled in for the long haul. “You guys don’t take him out in public, do you? If so, you better watch him closely. He’d probably drown in a pool table.”

“I hate everything about you right now,” Ajax mumbled. His actions belied his words when he reached up and squeezed my shoulder gently. “You’re a total ball buster. I’m glad Sugar got to you first, or I might have been blinded by that fucking godawful hair and fallen into your trap.”

“You’re probably such an easy mark that I wouldn’t have had to use the hair to get you to fall for me. You’re so dumb that when you saw an advertisement for a sale on color televisions, you went in and asked for a green one.” Ajax burst out laughing, and I managed to pull out three more pieces before he calmed down. In my best imitation of a man’s voice, I said, “Hello, my name is Ajax, and my favorite color is plaid.”

“That’s where I know you from!” Ajax shouted. “I knew there was something familiar about you.”

“You remember me? I wasn’t sure you would since almost everyone that visits the gorilla habitat at the zoo waves and says hello.”

“Say something in Sugar’s voice,” Ajax ordered.

I cleared my throat and in my best impression of the man said, “Hi, my name is Sugar, and my resting heart rate is higher than my IQ.”

“Hey!” Sugar shouted. “Don’t start on me, June Bug! I’m just sitting here.”

“What? It’s not like you’re any better than him. If either of you got a brain-eating amoeba, it would starve to death.”

“That’s hilarious,” Claire giggled.

I sprayed the area with saline again and studied it closely to make sure I hadn’t missed anything before I stood up straight and put my fists in my lower back to stretch. “Okay, I’ve fixed all the little boo boos on the princess. Now I need you to be honest with me. What the fuck is going on?”

“We’re trying to come up with a plan to keep you and the girls safe.”

“What is it?”

“We’ll set up some men to guard the house and ...”

“That’s it?”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Landmines.”

Ajax and I burst out laughing before he finally got himself together and said, “There’s not even a hospital around here. Where are they gonna go if they step on one?”

“Everywhere.”

I heard laughter behind us and realized that some of the guys were listening to our conversation. Once I was able to catch

my breath, I asked, “What exactly do you want to know, June Bug?”

“Which ones are dead, which ones are still out there trying to kill me, and where can I find a gun?”



SUGAR

“Are you still not talking to me?” Juni glared at me before she yanked my shirt over her head. When she tossed it, I caught it just before it could hit me in the face. “I don’t know why you think you need a gun, June Bug.”

“Because I’m not a weak little woman who needs a big strong man to protect her.”

“I never said you were.”

“Then give me my goddamn gun so I feel like I can protect myself!” Juni shouted.

“I’m not going to let you walk outside alone and set a trap for those fuckers, Juni. I’m just not.”

“And how are you going to stop me?” Juni snapped.

I saw red at the thought of her putting herself in danger *on purpose* with the idea that she needed to sacrifice her own safety to protect *my* family. “I’ll tie your ass to the fucking bed and leave you there until we find them and get rid of the problem.”

“We? You’re going out into the forest with a group of ex-cons to take down at least two highly trained soldiers? Do you not see how that could be a problem?”

“A few of my brothers have lots of experience in the mountains and traipsing around in the trees. They’ll be fine.”

“And you? What experience do you have, Sugar? You grew up in a crack house in Houston fucking Texas and then spent years locked up in a concrete jungle full of wild animals, and not the kind that chase you through the forest. Yet somehow,

you think you're a match for two men who have trained extensively to fight in any situation in any environment with the single-minded focus of killing their enemy, which is you, by the way, since you're attached to me."

"I'm not a fucking idiot, Juni."

"You are absolutely right. And if we were in Houston back in our old neighborhood where you know the pitfalls, traps, and have to rely on your knowledge of how to handle yourself in a fight, I wouldn't be worried at all. Hell, I'd pat you on your ass as you walked past me out the door. But we're not in the city. The people you're after aren't thug drug dealers and pimps who want your fucking money, Sugar. They're trained in evasion, hand-to-hand combat, weapons, and a whole other list of shit that you've got no fucking clue how to navigate."

"I can't lose you, Juni. I can't." I blew out a breath and laughed at myself, wondering how I could go out into the goddamn forest and fight two grown ass men but couldn't even look at the woman in front of me and tell her how I was feeling. "Fuck it."

"What?" Juni snapped.

"I'm so in love with you, I can't fucking see straight. I can't think about anything *but* you. The thought of living without you for a day fucking hurts me right here," I said as I slapped my chest. "And there's no goddamn way I'd survive much longer than a day without you because you take my heart with you wherever you go. I love you. Do you hear me? I fucking love you, and I can't lose you. I won't. Not because of some motherfucker out there with a grudge, and damn sure not because I let you walk out of this house with the idea in mind that you're doing it to protect me and our children. Because you know what? They're *our* children, Juni. Mine and yours. We're all they've fucking got. You're all I want in life. You. Our family. Us. That's all I want and something that I never even dreamed I could have. But now I do, and I'm not gonna lose it, even if you're so fucking mad at me you never speak to me again. I won't lose you, Juni. I can't."

"You love me?"

“With all my fucking heart. Dammit.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re you. I can’t fucking believe it either, considering a month ago, every word out of your fucking mouth irritated the shit out of me. I wanted to shake you until your teeth rattled every time you ... I love you. I can’t explain it. It just is what it is. And you know what? You love me, too, whether you’re willing to admit it or not.”

“You think so?” Juni asked quietly.

“I know so. You try so hard not to show it, but I see it there when you look at me. I feel it at night when you’re sleeping and can’t get close enough to me. When you disappear to your bedroom and do whatever the fuck it is you do in there for hours at a time, you miss me. I know you do because the second you come out, you look for me. When you find me, the smile on your face is enough to light up the fucking world. And that’s what it does, Juni. It lights up my fucking world every time I see it.”

“You’re very eloquent, Sugar Bear.” I glared at her, and she smiled before she ran her thumb beneath her eyes to wipe her tears away. “I think you’ve said it all.”

“Then tell me,” I ordered her.

“Give me a gun, and I’ll do more than tell you.”

“I pour my goddamn heart out to you, and we’re back to that?”

“Prove that you love me and trust me to consider our family and do what’s best. I can’t protect *our* children against armed intruders with my bare hands. It’s not that I don’t trust you to take care of us, Sugar. I just want you to acknowledge that I’m not some simpering idiot that’s going to faint dead away when you need me. That’s not me.”

“I know it’s not.”

“I’m gonna stand by you to face anything that comes our way, and when I need to, I’ll stand with my back pressed against yours while we protect each other because that’s how shit

works, Sugar. But I can't do that if I'm not armed with fucking information and my *goddamn gun!*"

I stomped across the room and opened the armoire that I used as an entertainment center and squatted in front of it to punch in the code to the safe. A few weeks ago, we'd had the local news on in the background while we cooked dinner and Sweetie had been playing upstairs by herself. When the news anchor came on with a story about a toddler who had found his father's handgun and accidentally shot one of his siblings, we both stopped in our tracks. Luckily, the child had survived but had a long road of recovery.

In that instant, Juni and I realized that we had a lot of work to do before Sweetie was really safe in my house. I'd already installed safety locks on all the outer doors, and we'd even moved the harmful cleaning supplies out from under the sinks. But we'd never considered the weapons that I had stashed all over the house, some of which were within easy reach of a curious little girl who rightfully believed that the world was her playground.

She'd asked me to store her gun in my bedroom safe, and we discussed teaching Sweetie gun safety and respect for any kind of weapon starting immediately.

Once I had the safe open, I pulled out her pistol and box of ammunition. I shut the door and armed the safe again before I stood and held the gun out in front of me. Juni walked over and took it without a word. She flipped it open and checked the cylinders before loading it from the box of ammo on the dresser. Once she had it ready to use, she set it down gently beside the box of ammunition and then turned to face me.

"I love you, Sugar. More than I ever hated you. And I'll keep loving you even though I might still hate you sometimes. I want what we've found to last forever even though there are times that you make me so fucking crazy, I want to stab you in the neck with the nearest sharp object. Even though that thought has crossed my mind at least a dozen times, I love you anyway."

16.

“Does this hurt?”

Juni

JUNI

I laid there for the longest time, thoughts of what might happen tomorrow racing through my mind, images I didn't even want to consider at the forefront. Sugar injured on the side of the mountain. Sugar bleeding on the ground beneath a tall tree with one of the men that I'd trained with, that I'd trusted, that I'd helped put in prison, standing over him with a gun in hand.

I listened to his even breathing beside me and snuggled closer to him without thinking, remembering what he'd said earlier about how that was one way I showed how much I loved him. And I did. With all my heart. More than I'd ever loved anyone.

I was filled with so much restless energy and mindless worry that there was no way I'd ever be able to sleep, so I rolled over to get out of bed, thinking that now would be as good a time as any to try one of those recipes I'd been studying. There was a houseful of men who would either appreciate my efforts or pretend they did and choke their way through them. Either way, they'd have food in their bellies, and I'd have something to do to occupy my hands and mind before I went absolutely stir-crazy waiting for the next shoe to drop.

“Where are you going, baby?” Sugar mumbled as he reached for me.

“I've gotta pee,” I lied. “Go back to sleep, Sugar Bear.”

I leaned over, kissed his lips softly, and watched him drift back to sleep. I studied his face for the longest time, memorizing

every line of it to memory like I'd done a million times since I'd arrived in Montana.

When I was sure he was fast asleep, I got out of bed and went into the bathroom. Since I'd been sleeping in Sugar's room, I'd found myself sitting in the empty bathtub and watching the moon above the trees on nights when I couldn't sleep. I always waited until he was down for the count before I got out of bed and sat in the tub to ponder the changes in my life and what the day ahead might bring.

Now I wasn't just thinking about what tomorrow might bring, I was dreading it. I was terrified that something would happen to Sugar when he went with the guys to hunt for the men who had come to make me pay for what they thought was my fault. I was sure that in their warped minds, they thought I was the reason they'd gone to prison and lost their careers along with any respect they had garnered during their service in the army.

It wasn't my fault, and I knew it. I wasn't ashamed of turning in soldiers that had protected my back over and over because they weren't worthy of the title. They weren't honorable. They weren't noble. They weren't self-sacrificing. They were monsters who traumatized a woman who only tried to bring joy and smiles to the people around her. They'd snuffed out the bright light that she'd brought to our world by their actions, and I thought that prison was too easy a punishment for them. They needed to pay for what they'd done with blood, and I was worried that they'd shed Sugar's before it was their turn to pay.

I sighed as I looked out over the forest behind the house and leaned forward suddenly when something near the top of the mountain caught my eye. I watched it for a few seconds until I was positive that I wasn't seeing a mirage or trick of the moonlight.

There was a fire on the mountain. It was small and purposely so. Somehow, I knew in my heart that the men who were looking for me were sitting around that fire, planning their next wave of attacks. I couldn't let that happen.

I jumped up and stood in the tub as I watched the fire and then scanned the horizon for any sort of landmark. It was directly behind the greenhouse, not quite at the top of the ridge, in the middle of a copse of trees that I knew I'd be able to recognize from the ground. I spotted a large boulder and committed the shape to memory as I made my plan of attack, just like I'd bet the men around that campfire were doing right now.

The first step was to prepare for a hike and then a fight, hopefully hand-to-hand, but if necessary, I'd use my pistol. I tiptoed into the bedroom and picked up my pistol and box of ammunition before I made my way across the room to the dresser where I had stored my clothes. I knew exactly where to find my army-issued knife and its leg strap. Once I had that in hand, I slowly crept down the stairs. When I got to the landing, I stopped to listen for any movement in the house but didn't hear anything. I knew that one of Sugar's men was on this floor, awake and watching in case someone scaled the side of the house and tried to come in through any of the bedrooms' balconies, but I didn't see anyone around right now.

I darted across the hall into Claire's bedroom and then turned around to shut the door, making sure to turn the knob so it didn't click when I pushed it closed. Using only her nightlight to see, I made my way across her room to the bathroom and then slowly closed that door behind me. I'd been in her bathroom before and knew it was attached to her closet.

Her closet was filled with clothes, including her hunting gear that she wore when she went out with Sugar. She'd just ordered some new camo, and even though she was a little bit smaller than me, I'd be able to make do, especially since the boots she bought were just a little too big for her and only half a size smaller than I had ordered for myself. I was sitting on the floor pulling on Claire's boots when the bathroom door suddenly opened.

It wasn't Sugar staring down at me like I'd feared - it was Claire, and she had the same obstinate look on her face that I'd seen on his just an hour or two ago.

“What are you doing?” Claire asked with narrowed eyes as she watched me slowly come up off the floor to stand in front of her.

“I’m going hunting.”

“You can’t go out there and find them, Juni.”

“Why not?” I asked. I tilted my head and studied her face for a second before I said, “Because you think I can’t, or because you don’t want to believe I can?”

“Because I don’t want something to happen to you. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to my Dad, and I don’t want to lose you.”

I walked past Claire and started opening the drawers in her vanity, knowing without a doubt that she had makeup that would suit my needs for tonight. I found a few things that I thought would work and then picked up her brush and attacked my hair, which was a tangled mess after the angry make-up sex Sugar and I had after our fight.

I didn’t even have to think of what I was doing since I had done it at least a million times before, so I watched Claire’s reaction as I pulled my hair back into a serviceable bun that my drill sergeant would definitely have approved of if he’d been here to inspect me. Once that was finished, I started on the makeup, using Claire’s bronzer and dark shades of eyeshadow to camouflage my face, even going as far as to use her mascara to paint streaks across my cheeks.

“I may not be able to build a house or grow food, but I can be a soldier, Claire. For twelve years, I trained for things just like this. I know that if I don’t go take care of the problem, your dad is going to want to. I can’t let him because I know that the men out there have had the same training as I have and then some. Your dad’s been through a lot, but nothing like war.”

“So you’re going to hunt them?”

“I am.”

“And when you find them?”

I shrugged one shoulder before I said, “And you’re going to pretend that we never had this conversation, right?”

“I don’t know ...”

“If anyone figures out that you saw me leave, just lie and say I tied you up and put you in the closet so you couldn’t sound the alarm.” Claire gave me a pointed look and I shrugged. “Well, it would get you out of hot water if your dad finds out.”

“Like I wouldn’t know how to escape,” Claire said with a snort.

“Are you going to rat me out or are you going to stick close to Sweetie for me until I come home?”

“I’d do that anyway.”

“Okay then. Go back to bed, Claire. I’ll be home soon.”

“Promise?”

I thought of all the times that adults had promised me one thing or another - I’ll never hit you again, I’ll never drink like that again, I won’t let anyone hurt you. I would never make a promise I wasn’t sure I could keep, so I said, “I promise to try my hardest to come back in one piece.”

“What if that’s not good enough?”

“Sweetheart, that’s all I’ve got. I’d walk through fire to get back here and be part of your family. Just know that, and let it be enough, okay?”

“Go kick ass, June Bug.” Claire threw her arms around me and hugged me tight before she whispered, “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Claire Bear.”

I walked over to the sliding glass door that led out to Claire’s balcony and looked over my shoulder to find her silhouetted by her nightlight as tears streamed down her face. “I’ll see you in the morning, sweetheart.”

“I’ll make breakfast.”

“Blueberry pancakes?”

“Definitely.”

I slipped out the door, crouched low so I could blend in with the shadows of the railing until I was at the corner where I could shimmy down the drainpipe. I'd inspected the one by my bedroom when I moved in, just in case I ever needed to escape, and was impressed with Sugar's thorough approach to construction. The drain pipes were attached to the exterior of the house with long screws and washers rather than just braces and nails like most people would use. I put my faith in Sugar's craftsmanship as I went over the rail and found my footing so I could slide down.

Once I was on the ground, I crouched low again, hiding behind the supplies Sugar had delivered to build Sweetie's play equipment as I waited for another cloud to pass in front of the moon. As soon as my window of opportunity arrived, I sprinted toward the forest, running on the balls of my feet to make as little noise as possible. Once I was in the cover of the trees, I got my bearings and started up the mountain toward the small fire I'd spotted earlier while I sat by the window listening to Sugar's even breathing as he slept nearby.

I could be wrong about the fire. It might be a stray hunter, but I sincerely doubted it. A hunter would make a larger fire for warmth and safety, not a small one that was perhaps for boiling water to disinfect a wound. If what Sugar had said was true, whichever men had been shot by his friend's arrows were now feeling the effects of what amounted to poison on the tips. He hadn't told me specifics, only that it was a trick Fish had learned the hard way in prison. After he fell asleep, I'd looked up how to poison a knife without chemicals and added the words "in prison" to my search. It came up immediately, and as disgusting as it sounded, I had to admit that it was brilliant. By now, the men who had that poison running through their veins were already suffering. Their wounds would be inflamed, swollen, and very sore with infection that would quickly spread to their bloodstream as the flesh went necrotic from the germs and microorganisms that had been introduced to their bodies.

I was careful to regulate my breathing so I could listen to the sounds around me and had to stop twice to hide when I heard something out of place. The first instance proved to be a deer

and her fawn, and the second was a porcupine. I smiled at the memory of Sugar's reaction that night at the ER when I told him about how close Sweetie had come to being a victim of a fart squirrel and then his good buddy, the stab rabbit. Of course, when he'd laughed, I had to continue my story because I loved to hear that sound. I'd woven a tale about how the animals were planning an uprising and had sent the porcupines as the scout troops before the upcoming invasion.

The higher up the mountain I climbed, the colder it became until I could see my breath in the moonlight through the trees. I could smell the campfire now but hadn't been able to spot any flames yet. However, I knew to tread carefully in case they'd set traps or had one of the men standing sentry. I would have done both if I had been in their shoes, but then again, I wasn't sure how badly they were injured, so I couldn't be positive that they'd follow their training.

I stepped carefully on the soft forest floor, the pine needles and mossy grass beneath my feet making my trek easier than it would be farther down the mountain where the trees thinned. When I finally got close enough to spot the campfire, I stopped moving, standing as still as possible as I assessed my surroundings. I kept my eyes on the two men who were near the fire as I wondered if there might be someone else with them who they had assigned to be a lookout.

I was sure I'd heard Ajax say that there were only two left, but he could be wrong. Maybe someone else from our unit had joined them and Sugar's friends hadn't spotted him. Or maybe they'd hired a guide. I knew there were mercenaries available for hire, ex-military men and women who found a way to use their specialized training in the real world. There were probably even guides who might look the other way for the right amount of money. I had to be sure that the two guys around the campfire, men I recognized from the courtroom where I'd seen them last, weren't aware that I was watching them nor was I being watched.

After at least ten minutes, I still hadn't sensed any other signs of life. I crept closer and found the darkest part of the shadows in the middle of a stand of trees. I watched the man

on the left for a few minutes, keeping the second man in my peripheral so he couldn't get the drop on me. Finally, I realized that the man I was watching wasn't breathing, or if he was, it was so shallow that he was close to death, so I looked at the one on the right.

I could tell that he was breathing, but it was labored. That was likely due to the arrow sticking out of his chest. The urge to laugh out loud was almost overwhelming, but I tamped it down as I made my way closer to the fire. The human shish kabob didn't even realize I was near until I was standing less than three feet from him. When he looked up and saw my face, his eyes got wide. He started to speak, but I put my finger in front of my mouth to shush him as I slowly shook my head.

Because I knew his reflexes were slow and he wouldn't be expecting it, I surged forward and gripped the arrow in my left hand as I put the knife I'd pulled out to his neck.

"Who else is here with you?"

"I think Jones and Taylor are dead. Gomez has been quiet for a long time. I think he's gone too." It was hard for Riley to speak, not just because of the arrow in his chest but also because of the pressure I was putting on his neck with the blade of my knife. "Need help."

"Damn right, you do. They probably offered that in prison, but I guess you missed that class."

"Call for help."

"What was I thinking? Of course," I said with a wide smile. "Let me ... Well, shit. I guess I forgot my phone."

"Fuck you," Riley whispered.

I wiggled the arrow in my hand as I asked, "Does this hurt?"

"Lungs."

"Are you even sorry for what you did to her?"

"Yes."

“But you were probably going to do the same thing to me before you killed me, right?”

“You ruined our lives.”

“No, asshole. When you ruined *her* life, you ruined your own, too, not that it matters. You’re a piece of shit who doesn’t deserve to live.”

“Go to hell.”

“I’ll see you there,” I said right before I yanked the arrow from his chest. He tried to scream, but the only sound that came out was a deep gurgle as his lungs filled with blood. I knew he would be dead within seconds, so I turned my attention to the man a few feet away.

I had mistakenly thought he was dead. His eyes were open, and he was watching me warily.

“Your turn, Gomez,” I said as I sat back on my heels and twirled the bloody arrow I’d pulled from Riley between my fingers like a child’s baton. “How do you want it?”

“Kill me,” Gomez begged.

“From the looks of you, I think someone already beat me to it,” I said conversationally. “I don’t think you have very much time left.”

“Yeah,” Gomez agreed, his shallow breaths labored. “What did they hit me with?”

“Same thing you’re full of.”

“What?”

“I had to look this up because my ... well, I’m gonna call him my boyfriend since he’s not within earshot ... wouldn’t tell me what kind of poison they put on the arrows that they shot you with. All he’d say was that they learned about it in prison.”

“Poison?”

“They shot you with an arrow covered in shit, Gomez. Actual shit. I don’t know whose shit they used, but obviously, when you embed a sharp object into a person’s flesh and release all those foul things into one’s bloodstream, things start

happening pretty quickly.” I studied him but didn’t see any blood, so I asked, “Where’d he hit you?”

Gomez raised his arm, and I saw a broken arrow sticking out of his side above his hip.

“Ew. Kidney shot. I’d say that’s a pretty important organ, wouldn’t you?” I asked cheerfully. I studied his face, the sheen of sweat on his brow glistening in the firelight. Even from this distance, I could see that his skin was pale and his cheeks were flushed bright red. “I guess the fever has already set in?”

Gomez nodded before he begged, “Please, just kill me, Dawson.”

I took a deep breath of the mountain air and slowly shook my head. “I’ve got some time before I have to go back, so I think I’ll just let all that *shit* stew around in your body until you kick it on your own.”

“Please.”

“It’s funny to hear you beg. I bet she begged you to stop, didn’t she?” Gomez nodded reluctantly, and I whispered, “Didn’t work for her, and it’s not gonna work for you.”

I kept my eye on Gomez as I searched Riley’s pockets. I pulled out his wallet and a printed sheet of paper, stuffing them into the pocket of my cargo pants before I checked for more identifying information. I checked his mouth and saw that he had a bridge installed. I made short work of cutting it out and removing the metal that might help identify his body. I checked him over for jewelry and yanked a thin chain off his neck before I shoved it into my pocket along with his teeth.

Once I finished, I stared at Gomez for a few seconds and listened to his labored breathing. There were more than ten seconds between each inhale, so I knew he would be gone soon. I approached him and sat on my haunches, waiting patiently to hear that final rattle that would announce his death.

I rolled Gomez over and cut the arrow from his side before I looked for other wounds like I’d done with Riley. Finding

none, I cleared his pockets and took his jewelry before I rolled him onto his back, checked his mouth, and then made a cut from his sternum to his pelvis, wincing at the smell of the intestines that bubbled out of the wound.

I gathered up their packs before I scanned the area with a critical eye. Once I was sure I'd taken everything that might identify them, I went through their rucksacks and pulled out all the food I could find and tossed it near their bodies in the hopes that it might attract even more insects and wildlife who would scatter their remains, and any clues about their death, around the forest. I used their bottled water to put out the fire and reduce the amount of weight I'd need to carry back down the mountain and then stood and let out a relieved breath.

I'd killed two birds with one stone tonight - actually, three, if you were counting the bodies individually. I'd gotten rid of the last threat to me and the family I was eager to build while I'd made sure that Sugar wouldn't get hurt trying to protect us. These men had been just as deadly as Sugar, but in a completely different way. Sugar relied on emotion and brute strength, but me and the dead men a few feet away relied on training, which was something Sugar didn't have.

I drank from the water bottle I'd confiscated as I looked up at the sky. I still had plenty of time to get back before Sugar woke up for chores. Hopefully, I'd be able to hide the evidence of my adventure and get cleaned up before he even realized I'd been gone.

The trip down the mountain went much quicker since I didn't need stealth on my side. I was back at the house in less than half the time it had taken me to go up. Instead of going directly home, I went to the greenhouse where I started a fire in the antique pot belly stove that Sugar always lit for heat while we were working on cold mornings. Once the fire was going, I started feeding it the papers and documents I'd removed from Riley and Gomez, making sure that they burned completely and left no trace. I cut the backpacks apart and set aside the plastic clips, zippers, and buckles so I could dispose of them over time, probably on different trips into town. I'd

do the same thing with the arrows, their jewelry, and the dental implants.

As I waited for all of the evidence to be incinerated, I stripped off Claire's clothes and used the sink to clean up. I scrubbed the makeup off my face and washed all of my exposed skin to make sure there wasn't any blood spatter before I opened the pack I'd taken from Claire's closet and pulled out clean clothes and a pair of her running shoes to wear back into the house. As I fed my clothes into the fire, I took down my hair and vowed that I'd never wear it to military reg again.

Before I got with Sugar, that style had been a habit ingrained during my time in the service, but over the last month or so, I'd relaxed and started to enjoy having it down, especially when Sugar ran his fingers through it at night while we were in bed. Tonight, as I put it up, it felt like I was donning armor.

I didn't need to do that anymore or use the skills that had been drilled into me - although, I would if it came down to it, just like I'd done tonight.

I had a new life. A new mission. One I had never even dared to dream of because I never thought it would be attainable.

I had finally found someone who loved me. All of me. Even my shitty attitude and smart mouth. The poor guy. Obviously, he wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, but he was awfully good in bed, and that made up for his bad taste in women.

I'd never tell him that, of course.

17.

“You’re about as useful as a pinkie toe.”

Juni

SUGAR

When I woke up and reached for Juni, all I found were cold sheets and an empty pillow. My eyes shot open in fear, somehow knowing in my gut that she was gone. I wasn’t quite sure how since there were men covering all the exits, but if anyone could figure out how to escape against all odds, it was that woman.

My panic almost instantly disappeared when I heard her husky laugh drift up the stairs followed closely by the voices of Claire and a man who I thought might be Dub. I got up and took a shower before I dressed and went downstairs to get my good morning kiss and start my day.

I walked into the kitchen to find not just Dub, Claire, and Juni, but Chewie and Ajax too.

“Good morning, beautiful people,” I said as I walked toward Juni. “Ajax, Dub, Chewie ... good morning to you too.”

“Fuck off,” Chewie mumbled before he took a sip of coffee.

“Morning asshole,” Dub said before he flipped me off. “Just so you know, I’m one of the beautiful people. You’re just old and blind and can’t see it from a distance.”

“And since I can’t stand the smell of you, I’m not willing to get close enough to try,” I retorted before I dropped a kiss on Claire’s temple and then pulled Juni into my arms. I smiled at her before I said, “Hey, June Bug. Missed you when I woke up this morning.”

“I couldn’t sleep and didn’t want to bother you, so I came downstairs,” Juni replied before she gave me a soft kiss. “Good morning to you, too, by the way.”

“I’m making pancakes,” Claire said before she yawned loudly.

“You’re up a little earlier than usual, Claire Bear. Is everything okay?”

“Everything is perfect, Dad. I’ll probably have to take a nap later, if that’s okay.”

“I’ve got no big plans. Do what you need to do.” I glanced at the bowl of fresh strawberries next to the stove and asked, “Where did you get those?”

“I went to the greenhouse and picked them earlier,” Juni said as she pulled out of my arms. “I thought sweet cream and strawberries on our pancakes sounded yummy.”

I looked at the dogs who were still laying on their beds that were scattered around the room before I asked, “You went by yourself?”

“It was still really dark outside, so I was sure I’d be fine,” Juni said dismissively. She handed me the mug of coffee she’d just poured and said, “I was telling the guys about the first morning I was here, and you served me coffee with sour milk.”

“Did you take the dogs with you?” I asked.

“No,” Juni answered before she turned back toward the men and picked up the knife so she could continue slicing the fruit. “How many pancakes do you think we should make?”

“I’ll take at least a dozen,” Chewie replied. “Make everyone else one or two.”

Ajax tilted his head toward the door and gave me a pointed look, so I said, “If we’ve got a little time to spare before they’re ready, I think I’ll take these fine gentlemen to the barn and put them to work.”

“You have to get a video of Ajax with the dogs,” Claire suggested before she nudged Juni with her elbow and said, “You should see what a wuss he is when the dogs get too close to him.”

“They’re too close to me right now,” Ajax grumbled as he stood up and glared at Rocky, the dog closest to him. “When

they were eating earlier, I was sure they were going to miss the bowl and take my foot.”

“They’ve got very discerning tastes, Ajax. They’d never want to eat anything that smells that bad,” Juni retorted. She and Claire started laughing, and Ajax shot them both a dirty look. “Come on, big guy. At least I’m not talking about your intellect anymore.”

“My intellect?”

“It means ...” Claire started to explain but stopped with a giggle when Ajax growled at her.

“I know what it means.”

“I’m not sure how since the last two brain cells you’ve got are fighting to the death,” Juni retorted.

“And you want to keep this woman around?” Ajax asked with a confused expression. “I don’t get it.”

“Come on, guys. Let’s get out of here before the girls make Ajax cry.”

“I guess I’ll stay here with them,” Oz suggested. He seemed confused, and I realized that I had been about to leave the girls here alone.

Ajax goaded him. “Oh, come on, Oz. They won’t be able to talk shit about us if you stay.”

I gave Ajax a questioning look, and he raised his eyebrows and nodded toward the door. Oz saw his signal and got up from the bar, a little gingerly since he was probably very sore. I wasn’t sure he should be taking the trek out to the barn just yet, but Ajax seemed insistent, so he slowly made his way toward us. As an afterthought, he called over his shoulder to Juni and Claire and said, “Save me the best berries because I’m the most injured, okay?”

“Of course,” Claire assured him. “We’ll give you Ajax’s share.”

“I get no fucking respect,” Ajax grumbled before he followed Oz into the mudroom and then out through the door that Chewie had left open.

I made a tsk sound and the dogs all jumped up from their beds and rushed out the door. I heard Ajax let out a yelp and laughed along with Claire at his reaction. It always amazed us that such a big man could be so afraid of our dogs, and we took every opportunity to give him shit about it.

“Y’all stay inside, okay?” I asked before I reached down and petted Butter’s head. “I’ll leave Butter here. Do you have your pistol?”

“It’s in the cabinet,” Juni assured me. “We’ll have breakfast waiting as soon as you finish the chores.”

“So domesticated,” I teased before I gave her another kiss. Before I walked away, I murmured, “Love you.”

“What’s not to love?”

Once we were outside with the door closed behind us, I asked Ajax, “And why do you think it’s okay to leave the girls alone in the house? Did you find those guys?”

“I guess. I got a message from Fish that said we should meet him and the guys in the barn.”

“They wouldn’t have all come down the mountain unless they’ve already taken care of the problem,” Chewie assured me.

“You’re right,” Ajax agreed.

“I wonder what the best way to take care of the bodies would be.”

“I’m sure they’ve already got it in hand,” Oz said.

We walked in silence for a minute, and just after I closed the gate behind the guys, Ajax said, “Sounded like one helluva fight last night. That Juni is a pistol, isn’t she?”

“Heard that, huh?”

“Canada heard that,” Dub muttered.

“I know you’re not one for being penned in - and I get why - but I feel like I should suggest that you install a bedroom door,” Chewie said carefully.

I heard someone clear their throat and looked to my left where my friends were walking beside me grinning like loons. I just shook my head, a little disturbed that they'd heard everything that happened last night. I prayed that Claire had been sleeping so she hadn't heard it too.

"I'll do that ..."

"I'll help you before I leave," Dub assured me. "If you don't mind me borrowing your truck, I'll go pick one up in town."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yep," three of them said at the same time.

"Well, shit," I muttered. "Don't say anything to Juni."

"Of course not," Ajax assured me.

"She's pretty fucking awesome, man. You won the lottery there," Oz told me with a serious expression. "Don't fuck it up, Sugar."

"I'll make sure each of you get an invitation to the wedding."

"It's like that, huh?"

"It will be."

I was surprised when the barn door slid open and the cows appeared. I could tell by their udders that they'd already been milked and was shocked to see Lurk carrying a basket. Obviously, the guys had taken care of the morning chores while they waited, and from the looks of them, they'd made use of the small shower too.

The dogs ran off to guard their charges while I stopped in front of Lurk and reached for the basket. There were at least a dozen eggs in it and three gallon jars of milk.

"Thanks for the help, my friend."

"Reminded me of home," Lurk said with a sad look.

"So, what news do you have for me? Do I need to bring out the shovels?"

Fish snorted. "Nope. My guess is that by this time tomorrow, there won't be much left to bury."

Sully pointed over my head, and we all turned around to look. There were at least a dozen vultures circling near the top of the mountain, occasionally swooping down. One might surmise they were taking turns picking at the carcass of a dead animal. Or even a couple of dead men.

“Well, that’s a pleasant surprise,” Ajax said cheerfully.

“How did you find them?”

Sully laughed softly before he said, “We tracked Juni to their campsite.”

“You what?” I snapped as I turned and stared at my friend.

“Heard her in the trees,” Lurk explained. “At first, I thought it was a deer, but then I heard her again a little further off. Never saw her, though. She’s that good.”

“And she found them? How the fuck did she get out of the house without any of us knowing?”

“I followed her home and watched her work her way up the drainpipe onto one of the balconies and then go inside,” Fish explained. “She cleaned up in the greenhouse first. Started a fire there, probably so she could burn evidence, and then buried this bag in the corner of one of your garden beds.”

I took the cloth bag Fish handed me and looked inside. I looked down in shock for a second before I asked, “Are those teeth?”

“Yep,” Lurk said with a slow nod. A smile slowly lit up his normally stony expression before he said, “She’s nothing if not thorough.”

“Holy shit,” Ajax whispered as he peered into the bag.

“The arrow tips are in there too. She yanked one of them out of that guy’s chest. That’s what killed him. She let the other one die slowly and then cut the tip out of his side,” Fish explained. “Then she gutted both men so the animals could smell them and tossed all their food rations around so the wildlife would be doubly tempted.”

“I think I just fell in love,” Oz said dreamily.

“Are you sure you two are set?” Lurk asked. He glanced at Oz before he threatened, “I’ll fight you for her.”

“Fuck both of y’all. She’s mine.”

“Does she have a sister?” Sully asked.

“She did, but Sugar got to *her* first too,” Ajax joked. “That’s where the kid came from.”

“I swear. Sugar could fall in a bucket of shit and come out smelling like a rose,” Lurk grumbled. “Asshole.”

“She had to have gone through Claire’s room,” Oz said. “I know she didn’t come through the one where I was sleeping.”

“And I was camped out on the couch in the nursery, so she didn’t get in or out that way.”

“I was back and forth between floors all night and never heard her,” Chewie assured me.

Dub agreed, “Not a peep.”

“She’s stealthy,” Lurk said. “Efficient too.”

“Are you sure things are going to work out between you two because if not ...”

I glared at Fish before I growled, “Fuck off.”

“Claire was in on it. They came downstairs and started working in the kitchen almost an hour before you woke up,” Dub explained.

“That explains why Claire was yawning,” I muttered. “She was up all night waiting for Juni to come back.”

“That would be my guess,” Ajax agreed.

“What the fuck do I do with this information?” I asked no one in particular.

“Throw a party?” Fish asked sarcastically.

“Give me the bag,” Lurk ordered as he held out his hand. “We’ll split up the contents and drop pieces here and there on our trip home. Spread the joy across the nation, so to speak.”

“She took their teeth?” Ajax asked again, apparently more shocked about that than the fact that she’d killed and gutted two men.

“Just their bridges and identifying dental work.”

Ajax looked at me and then the men around us before he said, “Holy shit. I just can’t get over that.”

“She was careful when she gutted them too. Opened them wide up without so much as nicking a bone, knowing that the animals would take care of the edges so the tool couldn’t be identified,” Fish explained. “That’s pretty impressive, if you ask me.”

“Anything else you need us to take care of?” Sully asked. “Not that we’ve done much of anything.”

I smiled at my friends before I said, “Let’s have some breakfast, and then you can relax for a while before you get on the road.”

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” Lurk said with a frown.

“Stay as long as you want, brother. All of you know you’re welcome anytime, and I’ll forever be in your debt.”

“No debt. No payback either,” Sully said firmly.

“But I *will* take some breakfast,” Fish said as he rubbed his flat stomach. “I’m starving.”

“Think there’ll be bacon?” Lurk asked.

“I’ll make sure of it.”



When Juni started to stir, I set my book on the nightstand and turned so I could face her. After a few seconds, her eyes fluttered open and she smiled at me before she asked, “Have I been asleep for long?”

“Just a few hours.”

“I should get up so I can go to bed on time tonight.”

“Probably.”

“Where’s Sweetie?”

“She’s taking a nap out on the deck with the guys,” I told her. “She’s got quite a following. I’m pretty sure we’ll be getting more than a few packages in with her name on them. Apparently, she doesn’t have nearly enough toys and also needs her own iPad.”

“Oh really?”

“And a pony.”

“What?”

“Yep. I guess Dub’s got horses. He already earmarked a filly for Claire, but now, he’s got one in mind for Sweetie too.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Can we get some goats?”

“Some?”

“Well, there has to be more than one so it doesn’t get lonely. There should probably be more than three just in case they don’t always get along.”

“You’ve thought this out, huh?”

“And I want some of those little furry cows.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re little furry cows, Sugar,” Juni said, as if that were enough of an explanation.

“Will we need more than three of those too?”

“Probably.”

“When you got here, you said I was Old MacDonald. What does that make you?”

“I don’t know.”

“How about Mrs. Old MacDonald?” Juni’s eyes got wide, and she blinked a few times before I explained, “That was a

proposal, June Bug.”

“Well, it wasn’t a very good one.”

I burst out laughing before I sobered and said, “What do you think happened to the last two men who were chasing you?”

“They died, obviously.”

“But how? The guys said they didn’t do anything after that initial encounter when Fish hit them with the arrows.”

“I’m sure an animal got them.”

“What kind of animal, June Bug?”

“A deadly one.”

“You know, that nursery rhyme talks about all of Old MacDonald’s animals, but it never says what he’d do to protect them.”

“Right,” Juni conceded, rolling right along with my change of subject. I knew she understood where I was going when she said, “Or what Mrs. Old MacDonald would do to protect them.”

“Is that a yes?” Juni slowly nodded, and I asked, “How much does Claire know?”

Juni stared at me, and I could almost hear the wheels turning before she finally admitted, “Only that I left the house in her new hunting gear and came back wearing some of her sweats and a hoodie.”

“No blood?”

“I cleaned up in the greenhouse.”

“And burned the evidence.”

“What I could, yes. The rest is ...”

“Being divided up among my club brothers so they can scatter pieces from here to wherever they end up next.”

“Oh.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“No,” Juni said honestly. “There was a problem, and I took care of it. I brought it here, so I made it go away. I refused to have it interfere with the life I want to have with you and the kids.”

“About that,” I said softly as I moved my face closer so that we were sharing the same pillow, our foreheads nearly touching as I ran my hand up and down her side.

“The kids?”

“Our kids.”

“What about them?”

“How would you feel about making a few more?”

Juni was quiet for some time and then sighed and frowned before she asked, “Is that a deal breaker?”

“Not at all.”

“What about a compromise?”

“I’m open to suggestions.”

“We have two. Soon so that they’ll be close in age to Sweetie.”

“Where’s the compromise?”

“Montana doesn’t have an Althea.”

“You’re right. I’m sure it has a few good families who care about their fosters as much as she does, though.”

“I want there to be one more.”

“I don’t know if that’s possible, June Bug. With my record ...”

“You’re a changed man, Sugar. A father.” Juni grinned. “A husband. And if anyone knows how to deal with troubled kids, it would be us, right?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s my compromise. Two babies within the next few years, and then however many we can help over the next ten or twenty years.”

“Only twenty?” I asked. “That puts us in our fifties.”

“Then we retire, buy a tricked out RV, and roam the country visiting the children who let us help them so we can make sure they’re settled and sure in the lives they chose.”

“What will we do with our own kids while we’re traveling?”

“Somebody’s gotta stay here and take care of the animals,” Juni said with a big smile. “Especially my goats and furry cows.”

“How much longer do you think we have before Sweetie wakes up?”

“An hour or so.”

“I think we should celebrate my newfound freedom and our engagement in the best way.”

“And what way is that?”

“With you buried so deep inside me that we’re not sure where I end and you begin.”

“I like that idea, but I have one suggestion to add.”

“I’m game for whatever you’ve got in mind.”

“How would you feel about letting me gag you?”

“Not good.”

“Okay. How about I fuck you from behind, and you shove your face into the pillow every time you get the urge to scream?”

“You don’t like hearing how much I love what you do to me?”

“I do love it, but it makes the guests we’ve got downstairs a little uncomfortable.”

Juni’s eyes got wide, and she whispered, “Shit!”

“Dub’s gonna install a bedroom door for us tomorrow.”

“Maybe we should wait until he’s finished before we ...”

“Like hell,” I said as I pulled Juni closer and then rolled to my back, taking her with me so that she was sitting upright with her knees beside my hips. She used one hand to push up from

my chest, but I held her tightly. “I’ve got you in my arms, and I’m never letting you go.”

“Never?”

“Not a chance.”



JUNI

“You’ll come back for the wedding?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Ajax assured me with a smile.

“Maybe by the time he drags me down the aisle, you’ll have a woman of your own you can bring as a guest.”

“I don’t know.”

“You could bring the man of your dreams, if you’d rather.” Ajax gave me a bored look, and I laughed. “If you could describe the perfect woman, what would she look like?”

“I don’t know what she looks like, I just know that she’s the one for me.”

“If you haven’t met her yet ...”

“I haven’t met her in person, but I know her. And she knows me better than almost anyone.”

“Then where is she?”

“Last I heard, she was planning her wedding,” Ajax said sadly.

“How long ago was that?”

“It’s been years.”

“I’m not wishing ill on anyone, but maybe you should check and see if that wedding stuck.”

“I wouldn’t even know how to find her.”

“Isn’t that sort of what you do?”

Ajax chuckled. “Yeah. It is.”

“Then find her. Go visit her. See if she’s happy with the life she’s living.”

“And if she isn’t?”

“Spend the rest of your life making sure that she is.”

“I never took you for a romantic, Juni.”

“I wasn’t until about a month ago, but now I’m seeing hearts and flowers all over the damn place.”

“Think that will affect your work?”

“My work?” I asked, slowly turning so I could face him. The light from the fire pit danced across his face, and I saw he was grinning mischievously.

“I follow your account on Amazon and have listened to almost everything you’ve put out.”

“You’re kidding. Even romance novels?”

“Yep. Even romance novels. I have to admit, I am more fond of the action adventure genre, but I’ll dabble in the romance section when the sex scenes are read by someone with a voice like yours.”

“You know who should narrate audiobooks?”

“Who?”

“Dub. That man’s got a voice that could melt a woman’s panties right off.”

“He’s actually looking for work. His family has had some money problems, and he’d probably do just about anything to bail them out.”

“I’ll talk to him in the morning.” We were quiet for a few minutes until I finally asked, “So, are you going to hunt down the woman of your dreams?”

“I think I will.”

“Good. What will you say to her when you find her?”

“That she’s been my guardian angel for more years than I’d like to count.”

“If you’ve never met her, then how did that happen?”

“I’ve kept her with me all this time. Well, up until the other night when you took the little piece of her I’d been carrying around.”

“Was that the metal that stopped the bullet?”

“Yeah. It was a gift from her. She sent it to me after I got out of prison and wrote her a letter telling her I was going to prospect for the club.”

“Then you should find her and have her buy you another one. The first one was definitely lucky. Maybe the second one will bring you even more luck.”

“We’ll see.”

“You’ll have to keep me updated.”

“I’ll swing by now and then to let you know my progress.”

“Or you could call,” I said with a shrug. “Some people do that instead of showing up unannounced.”

“I’m not ‘some people.’”

“Isn’t that the truth?”

“Your input might be useful on occasion, too, not just with her but with some of the things I do for my job.”

“I’m a fountain of knowledge that is known to give excellent advice. What can I say?”

“I’m pretty useful if you need someone to talk to.”

“You’re about as useful as a pinky toe.”

Ajax threw his head back and let out a sincere gut laugh before he smiled at me again. “I like you, June Bug. You remind me of me.”

“Well, if this conversation wasn’t already enough to make me jump into traffic, that notion may have sealed the deal.”

“There will be no jumping into traffic,” Sugar said as he reached his hand out to pull me up. I stood, wondering where he wanted me to go and was taken by surprise when he sat down

and pulled me onto his lap. “Now, if you want to play with traffic, my suggestion is to push Ajax into it, not yourself.”

“I get no fucking respect from you people.”

“You’ll get less for showing up unannounced,” I warned him.

“My city girl has come to love the quiet country life.”

“For the most part, but then again, you’re still talking, so ...”

I squealed when Sugar pinched my hip. “But seriously, Ajax, you’re welcome here any time. So are the other guys.”

“There are more where we came from.”

“That’s fine too.” I waved toward the front of the house where the cabins were settled further down the mountain. “We’ve got plenty of space for everybody, so feel free to come back and stay a while.”

“I like the sound of that,” Sugar said before he pulled me closer and tilted his head up for a kiss.

When he pulled his mouth from mine, I asked, “What sound do you like?”

“You called this ‘our place.’ I like that you feel at home.”

“Anywhere you are will be my home, Sugar,” I said quietly as I stared into his eyes.

“And on that note, I’m gonna go inside and puke before I take my ass to bed. I’ve got a long trip ahead of me.”

“Where are you going?”

“To find my guardian angel,” Ajax said with a grin before he winked at me. “Looks like you’ve already found yours.”

Sugar smiled at his friend before he looked at me and said, “Yes, I have, and I’m never letting her go.”

EPILOGUE

“One thing I’ve learned about marriage is that you’ve gotta keep the fights clean and the nights dirty.”

Preacher

SUGAR

“Did you really just have a drug-dealing pimp walk you down the aisle to me?”

“Do you really have a line of ex-cons standing up with you by the altar?”

“Seriously, June Bug?”

“You know Althea hates to fly and somebody had to drive her up here.”

“You make me crazy.”

“You make me homicidal,” Juni retorted.

I heard a man snicker behind me and then cough, and I suddenly remembered where we were and exactly what we were doing.

“Are you going to marry me or kill me?”

“Yes to the first, and I’d like to leave the answer to that second question open for future debate.”

“Right back at you, smartass.”

Juni looked at the man officiating and smiled before she announced in a regal voice, “You may proceed.”

“It’s about damn time,” Preacher, one of my Time Served MC brothers who had come up from Texas to perform our ceremony, said with an exasperated look. He reached out and put his hand between us, forcing us apart several inches as he glared at us. “One thing I’ve learned about marriage is that

you've gotta keep the fights clean and the nights dirty. Looks like you've got at least half of that going for you already."

"Will you get on with it?"

Preacher glared at me before he snapped, "If you'd shut the fuck up, I sure would."

I heard a woman clear her throat and glanced out into the audience. It was made up of friends who were more like family that had come from all over the country to witness my marriage to Juni. Blue, Preacher's old lady, was glaring at him, and I winked at her. She rolled her eyes and then waved her hand to encourage Preacher to proceed.

He was smiling when he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, bikers, and whatnot, we're gathered here today to witness the marriage of two people who are important to all of us. Albert and Juni have ..."

"Your name is Albert?" Juni asked in shock. "Seriously?"

"How did you not know this?" Preacher asked.

"Just get on with it," I growled.

"Albert?! I don't know if I can be married to someone named Albert."

"Remember when I said that sometimes I just want to shake you until your teeth rattle?"

"Yeah."

"I'm feeling that way right now."

Preacher cleared his throat to stop everyone's laughter and said, "Let's start this shit over, and try to be fucking quiet until it's your turn to talk."

"She's not very good at that."

"Obviously," Preacher drawled before he raised his eyebrows and stared at Juni.

Juni smiled at him before she turned back to me. "Love you, Sugar Bear."

"Love you, too, June Bug."

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.ceebowermanbooks.com.

COMING SOON

Lucky: Rojo Kings, Book 1 - COMING FEBRUARY 15th, 2024!

Lucky Marks and Rain Forrester grew up side by side. Born on the same day to mothers who were the best of friends and fathers who were like brothers, there was never a time that Lucky and Rain weren't together. Until they weren't.

Lucky has it all - life on the road with some of his best friends, performing for screaming fans in some of the largest venues and seeing the world from a rock star's perspective. But too much time on the road has made them all yearn for home and the people they've missed. There is one person that Lucky has missed most of all - his best friend, Rain.

Even rock stars need a break now and then, and Lucky is glad to be headed back to Rojo to stay for a while. He can reconnect with his family, work on the new album before the next tour, and relax for a bit in the town he still calls home.

Rain had everything she thought she wanted - a place of her own in the big city, a position in a large company with room to grow, and a man who was nothing like any of the men she'd grown up with. Achieving her dreams was rewarding, but she missed her hometown, working with the people she loved, and her best friend, Lucky. When it's time to take the reins in a family business where she doesn't have to worry about climbing the corporate ladder or watching her back professionally, she jumps at the chance to go home again.

Life can be unpredictable, presenting undeniable opportunities that take people away from home and strategic decisions that keep them at a distance. That's the way the cookie had crumbled for Lucky and Rain so far. Forces out of their control made them lose touch, and finding one another will be just as fated.

Come with Cee Bowerman to Rojo once again, and join the family as they watch destiny bring two people who were always meant to be together back to each other.

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 fifteen. 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 sixty 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.