



Travis



CHRISTMAS IN
HUTTONVILLE

SANDY APPELYARD

Travis

Christmas in Huttonville

Sandy Appleyard

Appleyard Enterprises

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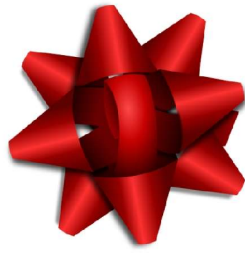
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Chapter 1

Travis

“**I**’ll flip you for who gets to tell her.” Kurt says, as we stand over the box of Christmas bells that Laura ordered weeks ago. The box showed up while we were out exercising the horses, so nobody saw the mangled package. Inside, the bells are banged up, some tarnished, and there is some sort of soap or slippery substance covering them.

“Well, the good news is that we’ve got seven weeks left until Christmas. What’s say we send the box back and order new ones. She’ll just think they never arrived.” I suggest.

“Trav, you’re a devil, but I’ll take it.” Kurt comments, slapping me on the back.

“Let Grayson know, that way he can head her off, if she goes snooping on the company account.”

“Will do. She’s busy with little Grant today, anyway. Gymboree or something.” Kurt adds with a shrug.

We both see Will’s truck pull up. As I carry the box outside, both me and Kurt walk towards him. “Howdy.” I say. “Whatcha got there?” I ask, seeing him pull a box out of his flatbed.

“I dunno. Christmas decorations Laura asked me to bring over.”

Kurt and I exchange a look. “Well, Christ, it’s still seven weeks away. Just how much Christmas crap is she buying, anyway?” Kurt says.

“I heard there’s supposed to be some wedding here just before Christmas. Laura wants to prepare for it.”

“Let me take a look.” I say, setting the box I’m holding down, and taking Will’s from him. When I open it, I look at Kurt. “I’ll be damned. It’s more goddamn bells.”

Kurt’s brows knit together. “How many of those things does she need?” he chuckles.

Grayson pulls up and gets out of his truck. He’s got his white office coat on, with his identification tag pinned to the upper breast pocket. It says ‘Grayson Thomas, M.D.’. “What, does nobody work around here, anymore?” he jokes, walking up to give his brother Kurt, and his brother-in-law Will, a

handshake. “It’s no wonder Laura had me come check on all of you during my lunch.” he teases.

“My sister doesn’t need to check on me.” Will scoffs. “I was doing her a favor.”

Grayson waves. “I’m just kidding around. Came home for lunch to see my wife and son. Where’s Laura and Grant?”

“Gone to some dang Gymboree or something.” I explain. “It was last minute.”

Grayson checks his phone. “Ah, shoot. Battery’s dead. I betcha she tried to let me know and I missed it.” he walks towards the ranch. “Any food in the house?”

“Yeah, Lois is in there, preparing something.” Kurt says.

“I’ve gotta head back.” Will says. “I was just dropping off this box, before it gets mixed up with all the Christmas crap we’ll be putting out soon.”

“Okay, brother. I’ll see ya later.” Grayson says.

“I’m gonna go get this thing sent back.” I comment. “Just going to the post office. Be back soon.”

“What’s the rush?” Grayson asks.

“Ah, the bells Laura ordered are no good. I don’t want her to see them. She’ll go postal.”

“Don’t sweat it, buddy. I’ll take them back when I head back to the office.”

“Sure?”

Grayson nods. “Yeah. Come on back in. Take a load off.”

I nod, following him into the house, as Will takes off in his truck, back to his office. He owns a car parts company just outside of Huttonville, close to Dallas. He and his girlfriend, Presley, run it together. Grayson's a doctor, running a medical practice in town, along with Laura's other brother, Clint. Kurt is Grayson's brother. Grayson and Kurt came from El Paso, where their family owns another ranch. Kurt came out here to replace Grayson as the lead ranch hand when Grayson opened his medical practice. Laura and Grayson are married with an infant son, Grant.

"Yeah, shoot, I'm starved." Kurt states, following us inside.

Setting the box on the floor in the kitchen, I grab a plate of food, and join the boys at the table. "So, what's on the agenda for you for Christmas, man?" Kurt asks me.

I stare at my sandwich, not really wanting to answer the question. "Not sure. I might go home to my folks, but they haven't mentioned anything yet."

"Do they know about you and Becky?" Grayson asks, in a 'level with me' tone.

Can't help but sigh. "No. That's part of the reason why I don't want to go back home for Christmas."

Kurt interjects. "Not the greatest way to celebrate the holidays. Telling your folks that you and your wife split."

I look at him. "Exactly." I take a bite of food, chew and swallow. "Besides, we're just separated."

Kurt pats me on the back. “Yeah, who knows what’ll happen, right?”

“You guys still talk?” Grayson asks, as he plugs his phone into the charger.

“I don’t want to talk about it, if it’s all the same to you.”

Kurt gives his brother a look. “Yeah, Grayson. I wouldn’t want to talk about my ex, either.”

“Forgive me.” Grayson says fairly. “I’m fresh out of talking about anything else. Had this one patient this morning, I swear to God she thought it was a therapy session.”

“And yet you’re asking Travis here about his love life.” Kurt points out.

“It’s women.” I say, half joking, half changing the subject. “All they ever want to talk about is babies. That’s how come me and Becky broke up, see. We couldn’t have any, no matter what we tried.”

“Don’t lose hope, man.” Kurt interjects. “My Lisa told me that’s how come her and her ex fiancé broke up, because she couldn’t have kids. Then she met me, and I knocked her up right quick.”

My gaze darts to him. “So, you’re saying it’s my fault.” My voice is flat, insinuating.

“No, man, I’m just saying that she thought she couldn’t have kids, and it turns out that she could.”

“Well, that’s just great.” My tone is condescending, facetious. “I suppose we’ll never know now.”

“Don’t say that, man.” Grayson says. “She may come around. It’s not been that long.”

“How long has it been?” Kurt says.

“Look, I said that I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Sorry, man.” Kurt says.

“Fuck, we tried everything.” I continue, going off on a tirade. “Hormones, IVF, everything. She had me on a goddamn sex schedule and everything. Doctors couldn’t find a dang thing wrong with either one of us, neither. Had to...jerk myself off into one of them cups...only to find out there ain’t nothing wrong with my sperm.”

Kurt and Grayson exchange a look. “Look, maybe some time apart is what you need, man.” Grayson says. “Maybe y’all just put too much emphasis on making babies. Y’all forgot about being a couple.”

“Easy for you to say. At least you guys both got pregnant without trying.” I point out, pissed off. “Becky and I tried for five years, man. Ain’t nothing fun about that. Sex is supposed to be something y’all look forward to. Well, dammit, I dreaded it.” Except for one glorious time, but I leave that part out.

“Maybe it’s not meant to be.” Grayson says.

“Look, I’ve been over and over this a million times, man.” I state. “Becky and I went to counselling, the whole nine yards. She got the seven-year itch and jumped ship is all. I’m not sure

if anyone recovers from that. But she's happier without me from what I can see."

"Have you seen her much?" Kurt asks.

"No, but I've heard." I half lie.

"You want me to fix you up?" Kurt asks.

I give him a look. "What, are you insane? I'm not ready to go off with some other woman."

"Not even for a roll in the hay, man?" Grayson says.

I scoff. "I don't think so. I've never...oh, shit, never mind."

We hear the front door open, and little Grant screaming. "Uh oh." Grayson chuckles, running to his wife's aid.

"What happened?" he asks. "I thought you were at Gymboree."

"We were." Laura says, unimpressed. "But Grant had a different plan."

Grayson lifts his baby son out of the carrier. "What's the matter, little guy?"

Grant looks at his daddy and smiles wide, and then he proceeds to let out the loudest, biggest fart I've ever heard. Grayson looks at Laura, almost bashfully. Her arms are crossed over her chest. Her toes might as well be tapping on the floor.

"I...uh...I suppose that's all that was wrong, Laura." Grayson says, apologetically.

“Well, thank you.” she barks. “I suppose it’s good to know that my husband’s a doctor and he can figure out everything that’s wrong with our son.”

Grayson sits Grant on his arm, and the baby perches up high, as though proud of himself. But Laura, God love her, she can’t stay mad when her baby is so happy, and her husband is so happy to see them both. It makes me ache. “Alright, fine. So Gymboree isn’t as fun as daddy.” She looks over in the corner. “Is that my package?”

Oh, shit. “Err...” I hesitate.

“What’s the problem?” Laura asks, pulling the diaper bag onto her shoulder. The tone that she uses says not to mess with her. It’s her usual tone. Laura’s a tough girl. Before Grayson and Kurt came around, Laura ran this ranch just with her brothers, and before that, with her late first husband. I’ve been working here for about two years. My house, the one I left to Becky, is a ten minute drive from here. Since the separation, Laura invited me to live on the ranch, and I obliged, for lack of a place to go, more than anything.

The last thing I wanted was for Becky to hate me, and we were headed down that road. That’s why we parted ways before things got ugly. We’d been through enough, what with trying to have a baby, and with her start-up business, it was more than we could handle, I suppose. That’s how come we fell apart. Laura and her family have been very kind to me. The job pays well, and it’s more of a steppingstone since I’m working towards my master’s degree in engineering.

Schooling, for me, has been a part-time endeavor for many years. That's also something that added to the pressure.

When Becky and I got married, she knew that I was working towards something. Just like she was. What was once the glue that held us together ended up in the end becoming the nail in the casket. But I'm almost there. Just one more semester and I graduate. It's just too bad that our marriage couldn't hold up long enough to see it through. Laura's glare is divided between me and Kurt, and somehow, I wish Will was still here, too. Laura's the only woman that scares the shit out of me. "They showed up like that." I blurt.

Kurt, sheepishly hands the box to Laura, as she puts the diaper bag on the table and expectantly holds her hand out.

"I swear, Laura, we opened the box, and that's what they looked like. I don't know what the hell is all over them, neither, but I've got half a mind to say that the box got opened in transit and mixed with a box of dish detergent or laundry detergent." Kurt rambles off.

Laura looks through the box, lifting her brows, sighing, as baby Grant coos in Grayson's arms. "I suppose I knew this would happen. That's why I had Will bring me his decorations."

"There's still lots of time, love." Grayson states.

"Well, yes, for the wedding." Laura counters. "But they want to do engagement pictures here next week."

“Engagement pictures? Isn’t it a little late for that? Aren’t they getting married right before Christmas?”

Grayson coughs in his hand, stifling his remark. “Shotgun wedding.”

Laura slaps him without looking at him, making baby Grant laugh out loud.

“Oh, you think that’s funny when daddy gets hit by mama, do you?” Grayson says to his son.

Laura kisses her son’s cheek and takes him from Grayson. “He needs to be nursed.” She says to Grayson, and then she addresses me and Kurt. “I’ll deal with this. That company ought to be ashamed.”

“Why do these people want to theme their wedding for Christmas, anyway, love?” Grayson inquires with a half-disgusted sneer.

“Probably to hide the giant, pregnant belly.” Kurt snorts.

Laura elbows him in the ribs with her free arm.

“They are just...like that. They like Christmas and they love the look of the ranch, so it’s perfect to them.”

“Is she pregnant, doll?” Grayson asks, trying to keep a straight face.

“No, she’s not, for your information. So, you can all stop acting like children.”

“Sorry, Laura.” We all say under our breaths, in unison.

“Alright. I’ll feed Grant and put him down for a nap, and then I can deal with this.” Laura states. “Grayson, I think Lois has some lunch prepared in the kitchen.”

Grayson nods and obediently heads for the kitchen, while Kurt and I head back to work. “Phew. Sidestepped that landmine.” Kurt comments.

“Yeah. I figured she’d blame us for that one.”

“Well, the kid softens her up some, see. Lisa’s like that with little Quentin, too. Just like Laura, my Lisa’s a real spitfire, but when little Quentin starts hollerin’ or laughing, she’s right there and all bets are off. No exceptions.”

“I’ll bet. That’s how come me and Becky wanted to have a baby so bad.”

“I get it. Lisa and I got in there, just like Laura, before it was too late.”

I don’t want to comment any further. We start working again, around the pasture, and then mucking the stalls, doing the usual thing. Grayson goes back to the office, and we can hear Laura screaming at someone on the phone from outside. “Bet that place with the Christmas bells is getting an ear full.” Kurt says.

We help some of the other hands with the horses, getting them cleaned and back into the stable, and then we call it a day. I’m the only ranch hand that lives on site. So, I’ve got the quarters all to myself, which is sometimes a good thing, and sometimes a bad thing. It gets lonely sometimes, but Laura

and Grayson invite me inside often. In fact, depending on what's going on, I only come back here to sleep. But tonight, there's nothing going on, so it's real quiet. It's fine, since I've got a bunch of homework to do for school, and a forthcoming test to boot, so the time doesn't stretch on like some nights, when my head is swimming with thoughts of Becky.

I'm not gonna lie. I miss her all the time. I'll never love anyone the way that I love her. And I'd rather kill myself than hear that she's moved on to someone else. The love that I have for that woman can never be matched. When she asked me to leave it broke my heart in two, but I'd still take her back in my next breath. The knock at the door is what forces my mind back to reality, and off my wife. Part of me always hopes that some day I'll see her face on the other side of the door, but every day that that doesn't happen, I lose a little more hope.

Turns out it's Grayson. He's got a piece of pie on a plate. "Laura thought y'all might be hungry."

"Sure. I could eat."

"Saw your light on out here. Figured you were studying."

"I was." I say, taking the pie from him.

"It's crazy, this couple having their wedding here." Grayson starts.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. This girl's got a wedding planner and everything. They've got more money than they know what to do with, I suppose. From Dallas, see. Not locals."

I smile. “You’re local.”

“Yeah, but this is Laura’s ranch, not mine.”

I tease him. “Technically, it’s half yours now, my friend.”

He snorts. “I suppose you’re right about that.” He picks up one of my textbooks off the coffee table. “Listen, I just want to give you a heads up, see. Because Laura’s worried that you’ll think she’s got something up her sleeve.”

I lift a brow. “What do you mean?”

“Y’all know that my wife likes to match make, see.”

I lift a hand. “Grayson, I already told you, I’m not interested in anyone else.”

“I know that, Travis.” He smiles.

I don’t want to hear any of this. “Look, there’s still hope, man. There’s something I didn’t tell you.”

“That’s not what I’m getting at, Travis.” He does a double take. “What is it that you didn’t tell me?”

It’s something I haven’t told anyone. I promised Becky. If she found out I told someone, she’d never forgive me, and what little shred of hope I have will be for naught. “I...” I hesitate. Weighing my odds. I don’t want word getting around town that Laura’s fixing me up, because that would be another nail in the casket for me and Becky.

“Travis, dude, y’all have nothing to worry about. Laura’s just worried because there’s something that y’all don’t know about this couple and their wedding planner.”

I look at him. My face is blank. Oh, God, it can't be. He sees the look of horror on my face and knows that I know what he's getting at. "Laura's not trying anything. That's all she wants you to know. She just found out today."

Now it's worse. "Oh, shit, Grayson. You've got to be kidding me." I plead.

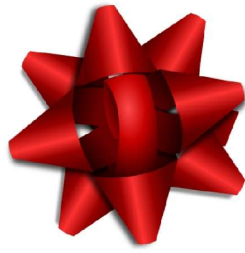
"I'm sorry, man. She didn't know. I didn't know. Nobody knew. I thought you at least told Becky."

"Well...err...that's what I was getting at, Grayson." I lick my lips. "What I didn't tell you...is that Becky and I...well...we, sort of..." I trail off. "God, she made me promise not to tell."

"And y'all haven't spoken since." Grayson guesses.

I stare at the floor. The cat's out of the bag now.

...and so is the night with my wife that I'll never forget.



Chapter 2

Becky - Two weeks ago

“**G**od, it’s like Santa Claus puked in here.” Sara, my sister, comments.

“Macey said she wanted it Christmas themed.” I shrug, with an evil, ‘told you so’ grin on my face.

She gives me a look. “She could have said she wanted real human blood and bones and you would have done it for her.”

Macey, my one and only niece, loves it when I decorate for any occasion. And, since she was old enough to ask, I’ve always made her birthday parties unique. That’s my present to her. That, and talking my folks into taking her for the night, that way she at least gets spoiled again. Ron and Sara have

been on this irritating kick, where they don't want their only child growing up spoiled, so they don't allow candy, junk food, or more than one gift per guest. It's utterly ridiculous, and ironic, considering that once Macey goes to my folks' place, Ron breaks out the inappropriate adult games and beverages, and turns the Romper Room based party into something that makes the dogs circle the neighborhood and the cops complain that we're disrupting the peace.

I sigh but don't respond, as I twirl garland around the banister, while the diffuser plugged into the nearby socket, fills the room with a cinnamon scent. Mistletoe is hung over every door, and I've taken special care to decorate Macey's room with everything from stockings to cascading sized boxes decorated to be real presents. If Macaulay Culkin were here, saving the house from Christmas vagrants, he'd be impressed. Even the dog is wearing a fake reindeer antler collar. I've covered all the bases.

"And I suppose mama and daddy are stealing her away for a night of debauchery, too?" she adds, almost snidely.

"Make sure Ron keeps the music down this year." I warn, teasingly.

"Aw, shut up." She waves, her tone telling me that she's defeated.

I smile, satisfied. The house looks like something out of a magazine. I have really outdone myself this time. It cost a bundle, but it's so worth it. "When is everyone getting here?"

“Should be here soon.” She answers, looking at her wristwatch. “I told Ron to bring Macey home from the park at four o’clock. I can’t believe you pulled this off in such a short time.”

I shrug. “It wasn’t that short.” Ron took Macey to work with him, since his boss is crazy about her, and then they went for lunch, and to the park. So, I’ve had since nine o’clock this morning to do the task. “I’m just about done.”

“Good, because I think I just heard a car pull up.” Sara says, running to the door. “Okay, a bunch of cars just pulled up.” She confirms.

“Excellent.” I say, getting up off my knees, as I finish with the garland. The next fifteen minutes it’s a flurry of people arriving, me taking gifts and food, greeting people, both family and friends, and just as I’m tucking something into the fridge, Sara appears in the kitchen, with a concerned expression on her face. “What’s wrong?”

A hand goes to her waist. “Okay, just FYI, it wasn’t my idea.”

My face falls. “What did you do.” My voice is low, expectant.

Sara lifts her hands. “I didn’t do anything. It was Ron. You know how he can’t say no to Macey.”

“Spill it.” I say, voice flat.

She sighs. “Travis is here.”

My jaw drops. “What?”

“God, Becky, he’s her favorite uncle. We couldn’t not invite him!”

“So, you knew about this!” I spit. “And you didn’t tell me until it’s too late to leave!”

“Come on, Beck. You know you’re not going to leave and abandon your favorite person in the whole world.”

“Watch me.” I say, going for strong conviction, but failing. She’s right. I can’t leave Macey. She’d be heartbroken.

“Fine. But you’ll regret it.” She says, grabbing two shot glasses out of the cupboard. “You want one? I need one.”

“Why do you need one?” I ask, snidely. “Your ex-husband didn’t just walk in.”

“Becky, he’s not your ex-husband. Quit being dramatic.”

“I’m not being dramatic, Sara! We’re separated! I can’t...I can’t see him!”

She rounds on me. “Why not! He didn’t do anything other than fail to impregnate you! I don’t see why you have to crucify him for that! Did he cheat? No! Did he steal? Is he a deadbeat? No! He could have done a lot worse, Becky, and you know it!”

“So much for my supportive sister.” I say, tossing back a shot glass full of whatever concoction she has in the bottle next to the refrigerator.

She proceeds to toss one back, too. “I am being supportive. I think you’re throwing away a perfectly good marriage, and for

what? Because you can't have kids."

My jaw drops as I scoff my irritated response. "That's a fine thing to say, considering you got pregnant from sharing the same goddamn soap!" Ron and Sara got pregnant by accident. They had no intention of having children, seeing as Ron is a lawyer in a very prestigious law firm, and Sara is a realtor for one of the top realty companies in Dallas. Neither of them has enough time to conceive a child, let alone raise one. Sara once told me that Macey was the product of a two-minute morning interlude after the couple had gone without seeing each other for nearly a month, after Ron made partner and Sara had been away at a conference.

"Oh, stuff it, Becky." She mutters, tossing back another shot.

"Take it easy on that! I don't feel like mopping up your puke off the goddamn stockings!"

"That's my last one." She murmurs, setting the glass in the sink. "Come on and face the music with me."

"Fine." I relent, self-righteously, after squaring my shoulders. "Let's go. I can handle this."

"Of course, you can. The man still loves you to death, Becky."

"Not helping." I say, putting a hand in the air.

"I wasn't trying to help." She says under her breath, opening the kitchen door, before I can respond. I elbow her in the back as we walk out, and I see Travis sitting on the couch. He looks over and sees me. He gives me a perfunctory nod hello and I

relax. He's not getting up to come and talk to me, and make it all awkward, thank God.

“Okay, everyone! Macey and Ron are on their way in!” My mama shouts, her butt the only thing that is visible from behind the curtain, where she's sticking her nose out the window, watching for her one and only grandchild. “Everyone hide!”

Sara hunkers down beside the arm of the couch with me, and I see Travis get off the couch and hide behind the coffee table. We all look like garden gnomes, bent like hunchbacks. When Ron enters the house with Macey in hand, we all jump up and yell surprise. Her face lights up brighter than the goddamn Christmas tree lit with about a thousand lights in the center of the living room. Her little hands go to her cheeks as she looks around, taking in the scenery. “Auntie Becky! Oh my gosh!” she gushes.

Suddenly, Travis starts clapping, smiling at me with pride. The whole room starts clapping along, too, and I smile sheepishly. Macey runs to me, and I bend down to her level to give her a hug. “Thank you so much, Auntie Becky! It looks so beautiful!”

“Oh, you're very welcome, darlin'.” I gush, hugging her tight. I pick her up, even though she's nearly half my weight, and squeeze her, before setting her back down, so she can go look at all the decorations. After doing rounds with her, Travis approaches me.

“You've done a lovely job.”

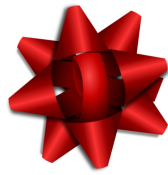
“Thanks.” I smile, but I don’t look directly at him. It’s taken me a while to figure out why I can’t look at him. My therapist tells me I’m ashamed, and it’s something that I have to work through on my own. Nobody knows I go to therapy, not even Sara. Not even my mama. It’s something I’ve kept to myself, because I’ve had a lot to work through since the separation. Even before the separation. In fact, that’s one of the reasons why I asked Travis to move out. I couldn’t work through and get right down into the nitty-gritty with him looking at me every day.

I’m ashamed of myself. Not because I’m the one that ended our marriage, but because I’m the one that caused all the resentment in it. I hated myself for not getting pregnant. I never hated Travis for not giving me a baby, because I know that it’s me. It has to be. His sperm is fine, so that’s all that it can be. I couldn’t look at him anymore, knowing that I failed him. That man loves kids probably more than I do, and it just got too hard. I can’t conceive. It’s taken me a long time with my therapist to be able to say that, but it’s easier to do when I don’t have a hopeful husband to look at when I say it.

Travis sees that he’s making me uncomfortable, so he lets me off the hook, bless him. “It’s...nice to see you, darlin’.” He says warmly.

I can’t reciprocate the sentiment. I feel it in my heart, but I can’t. And I hate myself for it. As Travis walks away, Sara approaches. “You need another second in the kitchen?”

I look at her and nod. “Yeah.”



“Okay, who took the last slice of Hawaiian?” Ron calls out. The music is blaring, the younger kids are gone to mama and daddy’s, and I think Ron and Sara’s entire neighborhood is in this house. Thankfully, the house is huge, and it can handle a large crowd. At least this time we won’t have to worry about complaints, since everyone living in a two-block radius, is under this roof. The gift table has been converted into a drinks table, since the wet bar isn’t finished being built yet, and Sara brought out the bar fridge from the basement.

“I believe it was me.” Travis admits. “Y’all want me to order more?”

“No, that’s okay, buddy.” Ron says. “More is on the way.”

I’m seeing two of my ex-husband, and I’m thinking it’s time to cut myself off, since both of them are starting to look good. Travis has this sexy way about him, that he’s not even aware of. He’s well built from working on a farm all his life, and he’s smart...God is he smart. He’s almost got his master’s degree in engineering. With big blue eyes, soft brown hair, perfect teeth and an ass that looks like two scoops of butter pecan ice cream, he is the whole package. I fell in love with him the second that I saw him, and I was hooked.

We met through mutual friends in high school. He’s the only man I’ve ever loved. Once we met, we were inseparable. We

were both our firsts. We went to prom together and everything. We decided not to get married for a while, but not for not wanting to, we just had better things to spend our money on. Neither of us come from rich families, and neither of us ever did have enough money to brag about. So, we wanted to travel and do more fun things, and then settle down and get married and have kids later.

Only trouble is the kids part never came, which was so hard, since everything we ever did together since the beginning of us, was successful. It was our first failure. It was our last failure. Well, second-last, if you count our marriage. And that's a tough thing to get through, but it's coming. My sister and her husband are huge entertainers, given that Sara is a realtor and Ron schmoozes with his coworkers more than anyone I know. They have the money for it, and they sure like to show it. At least every couple of months they throw a party. Any excuse to have one, but that's their thing, and I'm okay with that.

Most of them I'm invited to, but this is the only one as of late, where Travis was invited to come, too. But he loves Macey so much, and I get it that they didn't want to break either one of their hearts. The child has a room in my house we're so close, and Travis and I had her over all the time when we were together. I know that Travis is still crazy about me, and I'll always love him, too, but some things you just can't get over in a marriage. And I didn't want to end up hating him, or worse, him hating me, so I ended it. I think after some time, we can be friends again, but for now, distance is good. I try to

ignore the warm glances or the way his eyes come to me whenever I speak, no matter where I am in the room. It hurts me that he still loves me so much. I don't know why, but it does.

“God, I need another drink.” I mutter to Sara, who is sitting beside me, no better off than me.

“You know where it is.” She says, eyes glassy, popping another chip covered with taco dip into her mouth. “Oh, but can you please get the big boxes out of Macey's room? Before you're so hammered you can't walk?”

“Why?”

“Because that's your room tonight. Everyone else is sleeping in all the bigger rooms. Since they're all couples and all.” She hints, jibing me for being separated.

“Classy. Thanks.” I sneer. Macey's bedroom is the only one with a single bed in it. The house has six bedrooms, and two more makeshift ones in the basement, so guests are well accommodated. “I'm glad your neighbors, that live walking distance away, will be looked after.”

“Well, walking will be the problem, once we're done with them.” Ron comments, overhearing.

A couple of neighbors cheer drunkenly, and then someone cranks up the music so loud, I have no choice but to leave the room, since I can't hear Sara drivel on. With the plan to grab another drink once I'm done in Macey's room, I head upstairs. Her bedroom is so nice, I quickly forget about feeling resentful

about sleeping here tonight. The stuffed animals that I won for her at the carnival this summer sit on her bed, and I pick them up, remembering the fun that we had.

“You need a hand?” I hear at the door, and I look up to see that Travis has followed me.

“No, I’m fine, thanks.” I say, again, without looking at him.

“Becky, you can look at me, you know.” He says warmly. “I don’t bite.”

I look at him. “I know you don’t, and that’s half the problem.”

He smiles and comes to sit next to me, after closing the door, so we can talk peacefully, without having to speak over the music. “What, do you want me to yell at you?” he chuckles.

“Not really.” I say honestly. But I do. I feel like he never got angry at me. Sure, we were both frustrated, but never angry, and that’s why I ended it, before the yelling started.

“I didn’t think so.” He smiles at me, searching my eyes. I want to get out of here, but my inhibitions seem to be muffled with the alcohol coursing through my veins. It’s been a few months since I’ve sat so close to him. It feels foreign but at the same time familiar. It’s an odd sensation. Even odder with us both being intoxicated. “So, how have you been?”

“Good.” I lie. I keep myself busy with work. Sara makes sure I’m not lonely, but without Travis in the house, it’s noticeable. “You?”

“I’m...surviving.” He says, almost teasingly. “School’s been crazy.”

“Yeah? Your grades are still good?”

He nods. “Yeah. I love it. I’ve got a lead on a job when I’m finished, too.”

“Wow. That’s great. Where?”

He tells me about the water purification plant where he’s always wanted to work. Travis is a closet environmentalist. He’s always been a lover of nature, hence working at a ranch while he earns his degree, and working for something dealing with environmental issues would be right up his alley. “Gosh, I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks. I see business is going well for you.”

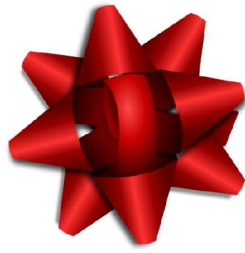
“I can’t complain. Although I’ll admit that this week, Macey is my best client.”

He chuckles warmly at that. “Too bad third graders can’t give out referrals.”

I smile at that. Travis always has a way of making me smile, no matter how miserable things are. “Are you working at this plant now, or is this just something coming down the pipeline?”

“No, Laura’s got a contact over there. She put me in touch with him, and one of the senior execs is retiring right about the time that I graduate, so I’ve met with them and they’re going to help me with my thesis. If all goes well, I may have a spot when the senior guy is out the door.”

Watching him talk, I let myself get lost in his eyes. Although there are four of them, they all look beautiful. Travis's eyes turn bluer when he speaks to me. It's been that way since the beginning of us. When he stops talking, his eyes search mine and I watch his Adam's Apple rise and lower. "I miss you, Becky." He says, and with the softness in his voice, and the alcohol relaxing me, I let what happens next...happen.



Chapter 3

Travis

I recognize the look. It's been a while since I've seen it, but I recognize it all the same. She didn't have it in her eyes for ages. It was lost when we started realizing that having a baby wasn't going to be so easy. But that fire is alive in there tonight. I set aside the fact that we're both very drunk, and I test the waters, letting myself lean in, to see if she'll do the same. Or if she'll pull back and run. Her lips touch mine softly, but I let her make the second pass, fearing that I'll break the spell by coming on too strong.

Suddenly her fingers are in my hair and I'm pulling her into my lap, as we kiss, like we haven't kissed in a long time. I lift her, holding her close to me, while I turn the little Disney

Princess themed bolt lock on the door. It feels so goddamn good to have her in my arms again. I've missed her so badly it's made me ache every time I think about her. Lips softer than I remember, sweeter, too, I kiss my wife like I've wanted to kiss her since we split up. I don't think about what this means. I don't think about if she wants me back, or if this is just a temporary relapse, or a lapse in judgement. I just make love to my wife the way we made love before all the bad stuff happened.

The little cry in her throat tells me that she's just as needy as I am. "It's okay, love." I whisper between kisses. And it's like I give her permission to proceed, because her tongue finds mine, and my cock wakes up, as my hands travel up her shirt, while I find my way to the bed. Stripping my shirt off, I hover over her, so hungry for her, I feel like I'm suddenly sober. With fumbling hands, she undoes my fly, and tears down my pants, as I wriggle out of them, and make quick work of pulling her shirt over her head. We both get her pants down, and don't think twice as we join together, skin-to-skin, wrapping our arms and legs around each other, like we haven't seen each other in decades.

And for the first time in as long as I can remember, we don't get into the perfect baby-making position, and she isn't murmuring, 'God, let this time be the one' in my ear. My lips are on hers, my hands are under her, holding her, drinking her in, as I enter her, letting out a strong moan of relief as I connect with my wife the way I've wanted to for so long. A soft gasp comes from her, too, as I start moving, stretching her,

feeling all of her. My kisses move to her neck and then to her breasts as her back arches, taking it in, letting herself go, enjoying sex for what it is.

Our bodies slap lightly together, as the single bed squeaks from under us, barely audible over our choppy breathing and soft moaning and music blaring from downstairs. I lock eyes with her for a moment, and mouth, "I love you, baby." I wait for her to say it back, but I don't focus on the fact that she doesn't. It feels so goddamn good and I know that she's feeling it, too, because she's already tightening, in that delicious snowball effect, where all the sensations start to build up. And as her body starts to quicken, I pump her harder, kissing her breasts, giving her everything that I've got and more, as we climax together, letting go of all the sexual tension between us.

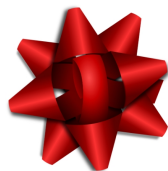
The explosion is so intense, I see stars from behind my eye sockets, as my lids lock together and the veins bulge from my neck. Becky's cries are epic, and something I haven't heard since Christ was a goddamn cowboy, and it occurs to me that this is the best sex we've had since before we were married. It was so fixed, so mechanical, when we were trying to conceive. We tried not trying for a while, too, but nothing compares to this. And as I lay on her, while our chests heave in unison, I try not to think about what's coming next.

My lips keep touching her shoulder, up and down, as I kiss her tenderly, trying to get as much of her as I can. Her skin is so beautiful and soft, and I've missed it so much, it hurts to think about it. I say nothing, not wanting to ruin the moment,

and I just hold her tight, hoping like hell that this is the end of the end. But something tells me that it's not. As I lift my head from her shoulder, I lean on my elbow, just looking at her. "I missed you so much." I whisper.

She just swallows, and I've said too much. I pull myself out of her and lie next to her, as we squish together on the single bed. My hand takes hers, and I interlace my fingers with hers, stroking the inside of her palm softly. And then I think, well, fuck it, I'm going all or nothing here, so I wrap my arms around her, and she lays on her side, so I can spoon her. And that's one thing that we always did after making love, and if that's all I get, I'll take it. I hear her breathing turn shallow and know that she's asleep, so I'm careful not to move. I lay awake for a while, holding my wife, praying like hell that tomorrow will be a new beginning for us.

...but I guess I didn't pray hard enough.



I wake up to her feverishly putting her clothes on, covering herself when she sees my eyes open. "What's the matter? You sick?" I ask, voice husky from sleep.

"No." she says flatly.

"Where are you going, baby? Come back to bed." I get up, one eye still closed, feeling my head pound and regret set in.

“No, Travis.” She says pointedly. “I am not coming back to bed, and you should leave.”

“Why? I was invited to come to this party, too, you know.”

“Well, if my sister sees us in bed together...I just...I don’t want her getting any ideas.”

“Becky, we’re married. It’s okay to make love.”

She gives me a look, sliding her arm into her bra strap. “We’re separated, and what happened last night was nothing but just a drunken mistake, and I’m sorry I let it happen.”

“What was so wrong about it, Becky? That we were drunk?” I grab my underwear off the floor and slide my feet into them.

“Everything was wrong about it, Travis. We were stupid to let it happen.”

“Why? It wasn’t stupid, baby. It was the best sex we’ve had in ages.”

“Stop calling me baby.” She tuts. “And it was a mistake, Travis.”

I sigh heavily. “I still don’t get why it was a mistake, Becky.”

Her legs go into her pants. “Because, Travis, I’m working through some things. I can’t take a step back. This is not acceptable. I should never have had that first drink. It all went downhill from there.”

“I don’t see the federal case here. You had some fun with family and friends, had a few drinks, we made love, we didn’t

slaughter any puppies or hold up a bank, Becky. We had some fun.”

She huffs. “Travis, you don’t understand. I’m...” she stuffs her hands in her hair. “God, I can’t believe I’m telling you this.”

I lift a hand, after sliding one leg through my pantleg. “Becky, if you don’t want to tell me, you don’t have to. I respect that.”

Before she loses her nerve, she blurts. “I’m in therapy. But don’t...tell anyone. God, not even Sara or my mama know.”

“Well, why’d y’all tell me then?” I ask, knowing full well that it’s only something that’ll bite me in the ass later.

“Because I need you to know why this was a mistake. I’m working through some things and having sex with my ex-husband completely negates the work I’ve done.”

My skin crawls when she calls me her ex-husband. I am not. I still call her my wife. The sentiment stings. “Becky, making love to someone you love is no sin, in my book.” I can’t look at her. If she doesn’t love me anymore, I think I’ll die right here on the fucking muppet plush carpet.

She ignores my statement. “Travis, so help me God, if you tell anyone about this. And let me be clear, I mean about us having sex last night, and about me being in therapy. So, help me God, I’ll never forgive you.”

After doing up my pants, I lift a defensive hand. “Becky, I’ve never betrayed you and I never will, so quit sweating over

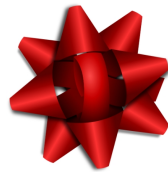
this. The only person you've got to worry about here is your sister or your mama. Or Ron, for that matter. If y'all don't think you're ready to get back together, then fine."

She looks at me and swallows. The finality in her eyes is disarming. "Travis, it's over. I don't know what part of that isn't clear to you. It was over when it was over and that's it."

The Christmas tree lit in Macey's room is a mockery to me. Even though we're weeks away from Christmas, it still feels like with the festive mood being present, now should be a time for miracles and good will, not heartbreak and disappointment. "Becky, you know, it doesn't matter that we're not together right now, because I'm still your husband, and I still love you with every beat of my goddamn heart. You need to work through some stuff, that's fine. You want to take time out of our marriage to heal from all the bullshit about baby-making, you go on ahead and do that, but I am only yours. Call me a fool, call me a sap, I don't care. You and I have been together since high school, and there's nothing that we can't see through."

She mulls that over for a moment. "Travis, I can't go back. That's why this was such a mistake. What I meant by working on things is that I'm working on moving on. Taking the next step. I asked you to move out because it's over, not because I wanted to take a break. I did it because I don't want us to hate each other. You're right that we've known each other since high school, and I don't ever want to lose you, but if that means that we can't be together anymore, then I think it's worth it."

The muscles in my jaw are working. This is all just her working through the bullshit, I tell myself. It's not over. She still loves me or we wouldn't be standing here now. We'd be tearing each other apart. Or is this just denial, like how I denied that we couldn't have children. It's hard to tell the difference when the woman I love is standing here, telling me that we're over, and that all the years that we loved each other are for naught. I have to get away from her before she sucks me in, and we both lose hope. I grab my shirt and pull it over my head. "I love you, Becky." I tell her, kissing her on the cheek, unlatching the princess lock, before walking out.



Laura's got boxes in the living room labeled 'Christmas decorations', as I enter the main house, needing an Advil or something stronger, to cure my hangover. "Hey, Travis. Did you have fun at the birthday party last night?" Laura asks.

"Too much fun. Have you got some Aspirin or Advil or something?"

She smiles. "Sure. I'll get it for you." She walks towards the kitchen, and I follow her. "Wasn't this a child's party?"

I rake a hand through my hair. "Yeah, but it turns adult once the kids leave. It got a little out of hand, but that's typical of my sister-in-law."

"Was Becky there?"

I nod, tossing back the tablet that she hands me, drinking it down with a glass of water. “Yeah.”

“How did that go?”

“I thought it went well, but, evidently I was wrong.” I scoff, not going into further detail. I promised Becky I wouldn’t tell, and I intend to keep that promise.

“Oh, sorry to hear that.” She says, sensing my hesitation. “Grayson and the men are outside. I’m just going to get some paperwork done. If you’re hungry, there’s food in the fridge.”

“Thanks.” I say, drinking the rest of the water. And my mind goes back to last night as I look at Chip, Laura’s dog, laying on the floor, looking at me like he knows exactly what I’m thinking. “Yeah, easy for you to say, you just lift your leg and eat out of the dish. Y’all don’t have to worry about lady troubles, do ya?” I say to him, kneeling down to his level. He rolls over onto his back, so I can rub his belly. “That’s what’s great about dogs, huh, Chip. Y’all keep it simple. No games. No rules. Just roll over onto your back and it’s done.”

“Rough night?” Lisa says, coming from the living room.

Sheepishly, I rise. I had no idea she was there. “Sorry. I didn’t hear you in there.”

“It’s okay.” She waves. “I was just doing some banking on my phone for Kurt. The wifi connection’s better in the living room.”

“Oh.” I smile, wanting to head out the door, or to the nearest hole, and I wonder how much of my conversation with Chip

that she heard.

“If I didn’t know you any better, I’d say you were hung over.” She smirks, grabbing a bottle of water out of the fridge.

“I am. I had a party at my sister-in-law’s house last night. Got a little out of hand.”

I know that Lisa knows Becky, since they’re both in the same circles, for business, so Lisa is aware of the breakup, and who knows what else, depending on what the word is around town. She looks at me speculatively, as I bend back down to pet Chip, feeling my innate manners take over, disallowing me to leave, knowing that Lisa’s got more to say. “Becky ever keep things from you, Travis?”

“Like what?” I ask, looking at her, my attention all hers now.

“Well, when Harlan and I were together, I had a medical problem that I kept secret. Mind you, my doctor didn’t say much about it, either, to be fair. But what it boils down to is I kept it from the man I loved, because I was scared of him knowing.”

I think about it for a second. “I mean, we went to all the doctor’s appointments together. I never missed one. If there was something she was keeping from me, it would have been awful hard for her.”

She gives me a soft, sweet smile. “God, she doesn’t deserve you, Travis.”

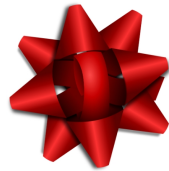
I inhale deeply. I know that she means well, but all the same, anything you say about my wife that isn’t nice, I’m not

pleased about it. “She’s just going through a tough time.”

“Yeah.” Lisa says, reading right through me. “You just keep loving her and it’ll happen for you.”

“Thanks.” I purse my lips together into a smile, just as I hear little Quentin crying from his little bed in the living room.

“That’s for me.” she says, as she walks away, winking at me warmly.



Grayson walks in the door, while we’re all inside, eating lunch. Laura’s over at Lisa’s, helping her with some work thing. The look on Grayson’s face says that he’s up to something. “Whatcha got there, bro?” Kurt asks, and then he takes a bite out of his sandwich.

He’s got his phone in his hand, looking at it, smiling. “My Laura, dang it if she ain’t the hardest woman to buy for, and I found something perfect for her for Christmas.”

Kurt rolls his eyes and speaks with a scoff. “You trying to get me in trouble, man? Christmas is still weeks away, and I haven’t got a clue what to get Lisa this year.”

“Sorry, man.” Grayson chuckles.

I walk over to Grayson, looking at his phone. “That what it looks like?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like.” He nods, impressed.

On his screen is a picture of a baby dwarf pony. “I’m gonna get her two of them. Brother and sister. She’ll love them. They’re just born now, but the owner says that they’ll be ready just in time for Christmas.”

“What are we talking about here?” Kurt asks, irritated.

“Ponies. Little ones.” Grayson explains. “Laura’s always talking about getting more animals in the stable here. Kids’ll love ‘em when they come around for horse riding lessons. It’ll help make the little ones less anxious around the bigger horses.”

“I think that’s a great idea, Grayson.” I say. “She’ll love it.”

“Thanks, man.”

“Great.” Kurt mutters. “How am I going to top that?”

Grayson gives him a look. “Since when is it a competition?”

“Oh, believe me, it is.” I agree. “My brother-in-law, Ron, and I, one of us was always in shit for upstaging the other.”

Kurt looks at Grayson. “He’s right, you know. Last year, you got Laura that portrait of Grant? I still haven’t heard the last of that one.”

“So, get Lisa a portrait of Quentin.” Grayson shrugs.

“Dude, pay attention.” Kurt informs. “I got her that for her birthday.”

Another shrug. “I don’t see the problem.”

“Kurt,” I say. “Take Lisa on a trip. A cruise. Something romantic. I did that for Becky one year for Christmas, and man, I’m telling you, she didn’t complain about any of the gifts I got her for a whole year.”

“Man, we don’t have that kind of time.” Kurt whines. “And what about Quentin? Laura can’t watch him for that long.”

Grayson looks over at his brother. “Dude, if y’all really want to whisk her away, we can worry about the kid.”

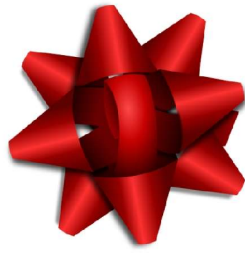
Kurt, mulling it over, bobs his head. “Fair enough, man.”

Blane, who is sitting next to Kurt, points at Farley, one of the other ranch hands. “Alright, next order of business. Who wants to talk about the hickey in this room?”

My eyes widen. God, I’ll fucking die if anyone knows, and I’ll die more if Becky finds out I squealed. And in this case, I’ll have no choice but to tell the truth, because, what am I going to do? Lie? Then word will go around town that I had some tryst with a harlet or something. All eyes are on Blane, but he’s not giving anything away.

“Who’s got a hickey, partner?” Kurt asks, looking at Blane. Instead of tucking my hand under my neck like I’m about to do instinctively, I catch myself, and make it look like I’m trying to inspect Blane. Kurt does the same, and then he looks at Farley, and just as my heart starts to beat a bit faster, my phone rings, saving me from further humiliation.

...and I leave the room before anyone sees it.



Chapter 4

Becky - A Week Ago

Feverishly making sure that I look presentable, I get myself ready to meet up with my potential new clients. They're filthy rich from what I hear, and both crunched for time, so that's where I come in. Sara calls me, right when I'm heading out the door. "Not a good time. What's up?" I ask, out of breath.

"Oh, I was just making sure that you don't mind checking in on Macey while I do the open house later this afternoon."

"Yeah, it's fine. I'm just about to meet with some clients, and then I'll go over to mama and daddy's house."

"Thanks."

I've been dodging her calls since Macey's birthday party, which hasn't been difficult, considering we're both crazy busy, and I managed to fake a terrible hangover that morning, plus, I kicked Travis out so fast, nobody noticed that he left. And everyone was too drunk to notice that we'd left the scene to go upstairs. But something tells me that Sara noticed, and she's just not saying anything, for lack of time. God strike me dead when she's done with this open house, since that's all she's been preparing for this past week and hasn't had time to grill me on the subject. But it's coming.

“Okay. Lunch tomorrow?”

There it is.

“Sure. Your place or mine?”

“How about yours? Mine still looks like Santa puked in it.”

“Do you want me to take the stuff down?”

She scoffs. “Are you kidding me? Macey will kill me if I take it all down just eight weeks before Christmas. Hell, my neighbor put her tree up at midnight on Halloween night.”

“Maybe next year she'll want a Halloween theme.”

Sara's voice is flat. I can picture her lifting a defensive hand.

“Don't get her started.”

“Okay, seriously, gotta go.”

“I'll see you tomorrow.”

I drive to the client's house and immediately I know that I've got a tall order to fill here. The house is in the only pocket

inside town where people earning six or seven figures live. It's immaculate. Perfectly manicured lawn. Columns running from the bottom floor to the top floor. If I didn't know any better, I'd think it was the goddamn White House. I'm greeted by a tiny touch screen panel at the front gate, and I lift a brow, wondering what in the hell I'm getting myself into. One of my other clients recommended me to this affluent couple, and as much as I'm tickled to take on such a job, I'm also a little nervous.

I suddenly feel like the second that I'm finished with this meeting, I'm getting on a call to the assistant that I interviewed yesterday, because I'll need his help for this one. Liam greets me at the door, dressed surprisingly casual for the fancy house that he lives in. Jogging pants and a t-shirt is all he's wearing, and his fiancé, Hanna, is just inside, wearing yoga pants and a t-shirt, and I suddenly find myself relaxing.

"Thanks for coming by our place." Liam says. He's got a healthy handshake and a great smile. Confident, clean, good-natured.

"Yes, we appreciate the visit. I was going to suggest a restaurant, but I figure that this is much more casual." Hanna says, by way of introduction.

"Oh, not at all. I don't mind. This is a beautiful home."

"Thanks. We just bought it. Early wedding present from both of our parents." Liam explains.

"Very nice. My gift was my wedding dress." I comment.
"Not that I didn't appreciate that."

Hanna smiles. “True. No dress, no wedding.”

“Exactly.” Liam offers for me to sit at the dining room table, where they’re sitting. There is a plate of cut up vegetables and a decanter of water. They offer me something to drink and I oblige, and we get down to business. “So, you want to get married during Christmas?”

“Two weeks before, actually.” Liam corrects.

“Do you have any location in mind?”

They exchange a look. “We would love to do it at Kelsey Ranch. We’ve already asked the owner, Laura, if she would do it.” Liam says.

Hanna interjects. “She’s only ever held family weddings there, but she’s more than happy to.”

I try to stop my face from falling. I had a feeling something like this would happen. Kelsey Ranch is where my ex-husband, Travis, works. It seems like this arrangement isn’t going to be as easy as I thought. I almost consider calling it off, telling them that I’m booked, but I grow a pair, square my shoulders, and remember that I’m an adult, and that this is my business. This isn’t a soap opera. This isn’t high school. This is also the biggest account that I’ve ever had, and I’m not going to squander it for personal reasons. “Okay. I can confirm that with her if you like.”

“We saw some of the pictures of the jobs you’ve done on your website. We’re very impressed.” Hanna states.

“Yes, I actually do both event planning and interior design. I’m one of those type A personalities, so my ex-husband always says.”

“We both are, too.” Liam confirms. “That’s why neither of us have time to plan a wedding, but both of our folks want a big one, so they’re footing the bill for a planner, and that’s where you come in.”

I nod. “Well, I’m happy to help. Do you have a number for guests yet?”

“Around two hundred?” Hanna answers. “We both come from large families, and, of course, mama and daddy want lots of business associates attending, too.”

“And Kelsey Ranch can accommodate for that many guests?”

“Laura said that they have birthday parties there all the time and invite the whole dang town, so that won’t be a problem. They have lots of land. Have you been?” Liam asks me, but I change the subject. I’ve been many times since Travis has been working there, and I know them well. I’m sure they all think very highly of me since I threw Travis out. Needless to say, I haven’t gone there since. Whether Travis has even told any of them is beyond me, however, I’m sure word has spread around this small town. Travis isn’t the type to gossip. He’s always been real respectful of our personal matters. Nobody knew that we were trying so hard to start a family, and we went to a fertility clinic in Dallas, so I’m sure that nobody in town was the wiser.

“Excellent.” I nod. “I have a list of things that I’ll need from you in terms of budgets, color preferences, and other things. But if you don’t have any of that set in stone yet, we can work on that together. I have a ton of information on my website to help you through.”

“Yes, we’ve actually gone through some of the worksheets on your site.” Hanna says. “It’s great that you have those tools there. Helpful, even for people that aren’t going to be your clients.”

“Yes, my sister’s been telling me for a while that I should take it down, but I insist on leaving it up there. Not everybody can afford my services, and it’s a way to help, that doesn’t cost me a dime.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, and it’s one of the reasons why we chose you, above other planners.” Liam admits. “We believe in giving back, too.”

I look around the house, and wonder what their idea of giving back is, but I don’t focus on it. This house, as mentioned, was a gift, so for all I know, they could camp out at a soup kitchen every Saturday morning. “Good. Why don’t we get started with the short contract that I’ve done up for you.”

“Sure.” Hanna says, and I see a small gush of a smile.

“You excited?” I ask, mirroring her smile.

“So much! And I know that the whole town thinks that this is a shotgun wedding, but it’s not. I just always wanted to get

married around Christmas time, and if we wait until next Christmas, well, my Meemaw most likely won't be here to see it."

Liam puts his arm around his fiancé. "Hanna's Meemaw only has so much time left. She's very close with Hanna, and it would break both of their hearts if she didn't make it to the wedding."

"I see." I smile. "Well, choosing Kelsey Ranch is a great option. Especially if they're available. That would be my number one concern with it being such a swift event."

"I've even got a dress already." Hanna adds. "I just need to get it fitted, and since Liam proposed, it's already been cleaned. It was Meemaw's dress. I'm just having a few alterations done, since the lace on the arms, over the years, is a little unsightly."

"Well, that's incredibly handy, since the dress can sometimes be the most stressful purchase before a wedding. Are you renting suits?"

Liam interjects. "No, with my line of work, I've got tuxedos and suits galore. Hanna and I have already decided to just use coordinating boutonniere colors."

"Then that's another time saver for sure." I nod. We go through a few other items, before I get them to sign the contract. We brainstorm a few more ideas, and I put them in my phone, making myself a list of things I'll need to do in short order.

“The only thing we’re struggling with is a photographer.” Hanna states.

“I can make some calls.” I suggest. “In fact, my new assistant may have a connection there. I’ll keep you in the loop.”

“And, we’d like to do our engagement photos at the ranch, as soon as possible, if that’s not going to be too much trouble.” Liam adds. “We want to include a photo in the wedding invitations. If we have to do it ourselves, that’s fine, too, we just want that, if we can.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out.” I nod. “I’ll let you know.”

With a sigh, I say. “Well, if I can get back and start working on things, that would be great.”

“Perfect.” Hanna gushes. “I’ll e-transfer you the deposit right now.”

“Sounds great.”

I shake both their hands, and Hanna is so excited, she actually gives me a hug. “I’ve heard great things about you, Becky. I can’t wait to see what you can do for us.”

“Aw, thanks. I really hope that I can make your day as special as possible.”

“We have every confidence in you.” Liam adds.

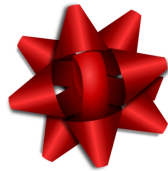
“Thanks. That means a lot.” I grin. “Call me any time with questions. Doesn’t matter what time it is. And I’ll get back to

you with some other things tomorrow, once I've got stuff firmed up."

"Sounds great."

I leave their home feeling somewhat more confident.

...but my confidence wanes hours later, when I find out something shocking, that could affect the relationship I have with my new clients.



I see Sara's car pull up in the driveway and I brace myself. My sister is not one to let things get swept under the rug, so to speak, but she does know how to prioritize, which buys me time. If it weren't for her very chaotic job, I would have been put through the third degree at least twice since Macey's party, but thankfully she puts her career ahead of her meddling. I see her make her way up the walkway, and I get ready for my exit strategy.

Once the door opens, I hit her with. "Hey, I've only got about a half an hour, okay?"

She nods. "Sure, I'm the same." Phew! "How'd the new client work out?"

"Good. Fantastic, actually."

"But?"

I look at her, raising a brow, as I grab the two premade sandwiches I fixed earlier, out of the fridge. “But what?”

“I know you, Becky. Heard the hesitation.”

I purse my lips as I place the plate in front of her. “I hate it that you can read me like a book, you know that, right?”

She shrugs. “It’s a gift.”

It truly is. I can’t read her at all, most of the time.

“So, what’s the catch?” she asks, taking a bite out of her sandwich.

“They want the wedding to be at Kelsey Ranch.” I admit, and then take a bite out of my sandwich, bracing myself.

Sara sighs. “Oh, man. That’s a real kicker, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“Especially when he’s living there now.”

My eyes widen. “What?”

“Oh, shit.” She mutters. “I...I thought you knew that he was living there.”

“No!” I shriek.

“Well, where else would he be living?”

“With his folks! With his brothers or his sister! I don’t know! But not there!”

“What’s the difference? I mean, he works there, so, why is it such a big deal if he lives there, too?”

My fists go into my hair. “Because at least he wouldn’t be there all the time! Now, I’m bound to see him!”

“So? You managed to handle seeing him at Macey’s birthday. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

I bite my lip, thinking that this is her segue into me and Travis’s little tryst. If she knows about it, now will be the time that she mentions it.

“He’s a big boy, Becky. He’s not going to shit where you eat, or where he eats, for that matter. Give him a little credit.”

My face sours. “You always sucked up to him.”

“He’s my favorite brother-in-law, Becky. He and I have always had a special bond, you know that. And I hate to see him hurt so bad.”

“Twenty bucks says that if I needed a kidney, and Travis needed a kidney, and you had the matching one...you’d have a tough time making up your mind.” I add, irritated.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” She waves.

“Tell me it isn’t true!” I shout.

She huffs. “Why are you being such a big baby, huh? God, he’s a grown man, and he’d never hurt you, Becky!”

“Oh, so, I’m sure you patted his little behind when he left your house after Macey’s birthday!”

“Why the hell would I do that?!” she shouts. “I didn’t even see him leave!”

“Bullshit!” I rise from the table, so angry. “You probably paid him fifty bucks to follow me up to Macey’s room, so he could give it to me!”

Now it’s her turn to widen her eyes in shock. “What??!!” she gasps. “You two...oh my God! You fooled around with Travis?!”

“Puullease! Like you don’t know!”

“How should I know!”

“You knew about him living at Kelsey Ranch!”

She throws her arms in the air. “So what! I sure as hell didn’t know about you two fucking on my daughter’s bed!”

“What’s the matter with that?! You and Ron used to fuck on mama and daddy’s bed when we were in high school!”

“That was different!” her face is beet red. “We were teenagers!”

“Oh, believe me! It was just like high school when Travis and I did it!” I shout, self-righteously. And then I take a step back. I have just effectively dug my own hole. And Sara knows it. She folds her arms across her chest, taps her toe on the floor, and purses her lips together in a condescending sneer.

“But I take it you just used him for sex, huh. Seeing as you aren’t back together with him.”

“No!” I deny adamantly.

“Oh, so, you’re going to say that he used you for sex?” She accuses.

“No!” I whine loudly. “Of course not! We were both drunk! It was a total mistake, and it’ll never happen again!”

“Oh, you are such a....” she trails off, trying to think of an appropriate word to both point out that me and my ex-husband had inappropriate relations in her daughter’s bed, and that I’m a two-faced, manipulative whore, that should be punished for what she inflicted on both her ex and her daughter’s innocent bedroom. At least, that’s what I would be doing if I were her.

“What...what am I!” I taunt.

Her chest heaves. Her nostrils flare. Her lips purse. “All I can say is...poor Travis!”

I hesitate, thinking of an equally hurtful retort. “Why? He seemed to enjoy himself!”

Sara growls. “I can’t believe you did that to him, Becky! You know how sex messes with men’s minds! He probably thinks that you’re back together.” She looks at me, and I’m about to say something bitchy back. “Oh, but, no. I bet you just crushed him again, didn’t you!”

“I didn’t crush him, Sara! He wanted it, too! I would have crushed him if I didn’t give in!” Which is a lie, but I’m going for bold here.

“So, it was mercy sex!” she bellows. We’re both yelling at every turn, as though we’re on opposite sides of the street, meanwhile, we’re spitting distance from each other.

“No, it wasn’t mercy sex! It was drunken sex!”

“So much better!” She hisses.

“I don’t know why you care so much! It’s not like I cheated on him...with him! I gave him what he wanted! We enjoyed ourselves, and that was it! Done!”

She sighs, resigned. The look she gives me is a combination of disappointment, frustration, and hurt. I take a breath, wondering why I’m having to justify myself, but then I remember how hard Sara took it when I decided to leave Travis. She’s right. Sara and Travis are kindred spirits. It’s sweet but sometimes a battle because she takes things so personally when it comes to him. They’ve known and loved each other for as long as Travis and I have. In fact, if I’m honest, I think Sara had a crush on Travis at one point. She wants so badly for us to reconcile. It’s devastating to her that we parted ways.

“Look, he knows that it was just for one night, Sara. I let him down easy, okay? I wouldn’t want to hurt him any more than I already have, and I sure didn’t mean to, to begin with. Separating from Travis was something that I did out of love, for him and for myself. He’s too good of a person to go through painful fights with. I didn’t want us to start tearing each other apart, you know?”

Sara is silent for a beat, before going to sit in the kitchen. She stuffs her sandwich in her mouth, as if now using it for comfort food, rather than just for lunch time sustenance. “You were so good together, Becky. That’s the hard part. It would be

different if you were fighting like cats and dogs, and then I'd want you to put him out of his misery." She looks at me. "But you two hardly fought. You were a team. What you went through together was way more than Ron and I have ever been through, and shit, we scream at each other way worse than what you and I just did now."

I scoff. "You think I don't know that? And that's what I didn't want to happen to me and Travis."

Silence as we eat our sandwiches. Sara breaks the silence after she eats the last of it. "So, you didn't feel an inkling to get back with him after that?"

I shake my head. "No. I think we're making good progress being apart."

Her brows knit together. "How can you say that?" her voice is a pained hiss. "He's fucking miserable without you, Becky. Do you not see how he looks at you? It's crushing." Her voice cracks. I didn't realize how painful this would be for her.

My hand rests on top of hers. "Sara, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. It just happened. It wasn't malicious. And Travis knows that."

"Yeah, but I bet you sure threw him for a loop, Becky." A tear falls down her cheek. "How do you know you didn't fuck with his head? Do you even know if he's okay? I mean, shit, did you not even call him since? That's worse than being dumped after a one-night stand."

“No, I haven’t called him, Sara. Only because I don’t want to make it worse.” I rise and go kneel in front of her. “Think about it. We have amazing, surprise sex, spend the night together, and then I let him down easy, only to call him after the fact, and talk? Shit, Sara, that would be fucking with his head.”

She wipes the tears from her eyes with the heel of her hand. “I suppose you’re right.” A sniff. “God, I guess I just miss you and him so much. I miss our Saturday nights together as a family, and when he and Ron used to hang out, and then you and I did, too. I miss all that, Becky. We were always so good together, us five.”

And there it is. Sometimes you never know how much you impact someone else’s life with your own. The guilt bubbles up inside me and I hug her tight. “I’m sorry, Sara. I never meant to hurt you. I never meant to hurt anyone. It’s just what I had to do so I wouldn’t hate myself or hate Travis, and then I’d really hate myself.”

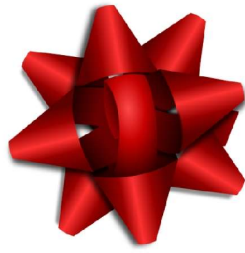
“God, he’s such a great guy.” She sniffs. “I know that this is going to sound twisted and wrong, but I hate the thought of him being with someone that isn’t you.”

When she says that, I feel my heart stop for a beat. There’s something else that I need to talk to my therapist about. It never occurred to me that if Travis isn’t with me, then he may very well end up with someone else. It’s fair. He’s a young man. A human being with needs, just like me. And while I’ll

never be with anyone else after him, I never considered that he might.

...suddenly I'm crying in my sister's arms.

...and then we cry together.



Chapter 5

Travis - Present Day

I hang my head in shame. “I lost my head, I guess.” I say, in answer to Grayson’s questioning glance.

“Ain’t nothing wrong with what y’all did, Travis. She’s your wife and you love her. If she didn’t want it to happen, it wouldn’t have. Don’t beat yourself up, man.” He pats me on the back. “I don’t know how I’d pull through if I was going through what you are, and that’s the truth.”

“Thanks. All the same, it’s going to make for one hell of a thing if she’s working here.”

“It shouldn’t be too much trouble, Travis. They’re doing the engagement photos here, and then just the wedding. She may

be here a little but, believe me, Laura'll keep y'all busy enough. This is the first wedding here outside of family, and she'll want everything perfect. Laura doesn't mess around with anything." He insists. "Hell, she'll have every square inch of this place done up for this shindig, and she goes all out for Christmas as it is."

"She did tear a strip out of that company that delivered the bum Christmas bells." I chuckle.

"That's right. I'm telling you, this couple, they're about to have the best damn wedding they ever planned on having, if my wife has anything to do with it. Laura'll run herself ragged making sure everything is just perfect."

"Well, that goes double, if they've got Becky on the task. She's a perfectionist, too. Probably why she couldn't handle it when things didn't go according to plan with our marriage."

"We're all different, I suppose. Laura never knew what according to plan was. The life she's led she only knew how to roll with the punches."

"I guess that's why Laura would never give up on your marriage, if she had been in Becky's place." I surmise.

Grayson walks towards the window in the small kitchenette. "Travis, everything in life happens for a reason, man. I strongly believe that. What y'all are going through here is a steppingstone. It'll come to pass, and what's on the other side of it will be better than what you had to begin with, and what that is is anyone's guess, man, but you've got to have faith.

Faith in yourself, faith in God, and faith that there's something waiting for you on the other side.”

This topic is making me uncomfortable. I feel like I'm a project, suddenly, so I change the subject. “That how y'all got through being an alcoholic?”

He turns around suddenly. “It's how I got through losing my first wife, man.”

Oh, shit. “I hadn't heard. I'm sorry, man. Did she...did she throw you out, too?”

He swallows and then walks back towards the window, contemplatively. “She was shot. Died before the ambulance could reach her.”

My gaze darts to him. I'm in total disbelief. “You're fucking kidding me.”

He shakes his head, but he doesn't look at me.

“Well, I figured when Farley told me you didn't drink anymore because y'all used to be a drunk, that it was because your wife threw you out. I had no clue, man.” I pause, shaking my head. “God, I'd rather die than lose Becky permanently.”

“I told you, man. Something's always on the other side. While I loved Kelly with everything I had, if it's possible, I love Laura more. Much, much more. And the love is so different.”

“Are you saying that there's someone else out there for me, Grayson, because the thought of that just about makes me want to slit my own goddamn wrists.”

“That’s how I felt, too, man. But over time, it goes away. And then if y’all meet someone that’s better suited, everything falls into place.”

“Nobody’s better for me than Becky, man. Nobody.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Now look at me.”

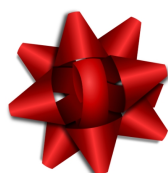
“I don’t know, Grayson. Maybe it’s just too soon to be thinking like that is all.”

He walks back towards me. “That’s true, man. Kelly’d been gone several years, and I’d been to the drunk tank and back, before Laura came into the picture.”

“All I need is time then, is what you’re saying.”

One of the tractors drives by, carrying a huge Christmas tree in the back. Grayson and I watch it mosey on down the pasture. Grayson looks at me and smiles. “That or a goddamn Christmas miracle.”

We both chuckle.



“Okay, you bring that one over here further.” Laura instructs, as we assemble the Christmas trees around the pasture, which will be lit with small lights. We’ve got a large tree, a medium size tree, and a smaller one, and she wants them placed in graduated heights, stacked specifically to make the larger one

the highlight, but the smaller ones still somewhat of a focal point.

“Yes, ma’am.” I say politely, as Farley gets the anchors ready. Kurt’s over in the stable, with the other hands, as we prepare to decorate that area as well.

“You boys feeling festive yet?” Laura chuckles, watching us struggle to move the enormous trees.

“This place is going to look like Rockefeller Center.” I comment, just as I see Becky’s car pull up. Laura gives me an apologetic look and I give her a perfunctory smile. God love her. She so wants to keep the peace. I’ll see to it that that happens.

“Hi, Becky.” Laura says. I give my wife a polite nod, but otherwise keep my head down, focusing on the task at hand.

“I hear you’ve been called to duty.” Becky says.

“That’s right. I hope this isn’t going to be overwhelming for you.”

“No, not at all. It’s not my first rodeo. You should see what I did to my sister’s place for my niece’s birthday a few weeks ago.”

I lift my hand. “I can attest. She did a phenomenal job.”

“Your niece wanted a Christmas themed birthday party? That’s unusual.” Laura comments.

“It’s a tradition for me to decorate for Macey’s parties. Since she could speak, she’s been asking.”

“Well, as you can see, we’ve gone ahead and started.” Laura gestures to the trees.

“Thank you so much for doing that. I’ve never ordered a tree that large.”

“We didn’t order it, darlin’.” I interject kindly. “It’s from Laura’s land out back.”

Becky smiles at Laura.

“I’ve always wanted to cut down those bigger trees and plant newer ones.” Laura states. “So, this is perfect.”

“I have decorations in storage that I can bring out when they want to do the engagement photos. I’ll get a date from my photographer today or tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.” Laura nods.

“Is there any date that works better for you, Laura?” Becky asks.

“No, we’re flexible here.” She changes tack. “Do you want to set up different vignettes around the ranch, so your photographer can give them a lot of image choices?”

“That would be ideal, yes.”

Laura smiles. “Perfect. I’ve got some of the boys setting up the stable. We’ll leave a little clean, loose hay on the floor, give it a nice effect.”

I watch Becky become in love with the ideas that Laura is giving her. Her passion for her job is endearing. It mixes well with Laura’s love for this ranch, and her undying quest to give

all that she can when she can give it. But Becky's gaze keeps coming back to me. She's afraid. She's wondering if I've broken my promise to her and if I'll embarrass her somehow. I have no intention to. My brothers think I should take her to the cleaners, but I wouldn't dream of it.

I try to think of some way to convey that to her. But without pulling her off to the side, making her nervous, I don't see how that's possible. She must have had a conniption when she found out that this wedding would be held here. And she definitely flipped out when she found out that I'm living here. Lord knows why I didn't tell her. I knew she'd find out some way. I just didn't want her to feel guilty I suppose. But let's be real here; I'm not fooling anybody if I try to pretend that I can afford a home of my own. Not until my schooling is done and paid for.

My brothers told me that I should've kicked her out and taken the house, since she's the one who wanted to separate, but I couldn't do that to her. Not after she made the place look so goddamn beautiful. I'd a messed that up before she could blink. It would break her heart. I don't dare tell my brothers that I'm still helping to pay for it. Much of our finances are the same from when I was living with her. Call me crazy or a fool, but I don't think that I'm ready to sever ties with her, not in that way. I remember the time we opened the joint bank account together, when we both had part-time jobs at the end of high school. We were so excited, even though there wasn't more than five dollars in that account for years. It was the account that we used to get married, and to travel, and then,

later, to buy the house. I've never used another one, and I don't want to start now.

Sure, I cash my paycheques and keep the money on me, leaving what she needs to pay for my share of the house and the finances, and sure, it looks a little shallow that Becky's never asked me if I need any of it for living expenses. I suppose she knows that I'm doing okay, otherwise, I would have told her. She probably figured that I'd moved in with one of my brothers or with my folks, but I've only told my two brothers that live in Dallas. And I haven't told my folks. I'm still coming to grips with it myself, and part of me is still in denial. Actually, based on my conversation with Grayson earlier, I'd say that a lot of me is in denial.

But I keep her in my eye as I work with Farley and Kurt, setting the trees just right, inside the pasture. When something occurs to me. "Sorry to interrupt." I say, taking a step towards Laura and Becky. "But, I think it matters what time of day that the pictures are going to be done in, right? I mean, if it's nighttime, then it makes sense to have lots of lights, but otherwise, it's probably better to have more vibrant decorations than lights, right?"

Laura lifts a finger. "Yes, you have a very good point there."

Becky nods. "Yes, thank you. I'll have to talk it over with the couple and with the photographer and see what time of day they prefer."

"Well, what time of day is the wedding going to take place at?" I ask.

“We haven’t ironed that out yet, but I’m guessing it’ll be during the day.” Becky answers, and it occurs to me that there has never really been any tension between us, and this time is no different. I start to get why she wanted to break up, instead of going down that ugly hole that most couples go down.

“Do y’all want any of the horses involved?” I ask both Becky and Laura.

They look at each other. Laura is the first to answer. “Well, sure, we can. If they want.”

Becky nods. “I’ll discuss that with them. I have no idea if either of them knows how to even mount a horse.”

“We offer lessons here.” I venture. “Just a thought.”

Laura’s phone rings from inside her pocket. She checks the display and excuses herself. For the first time since our night together at Macey’s party, we’re alone, save for the horses behind us, and the guys walking around out back, out of earshot. She gives me a nervous look. “Becky, it’s cool, okay? I haven’t said anything, and I don’t plan to.” I half lie. But I can trust Grayson. He’d never breathe a word, not even to Laura, unless it was a matter of life or death.

“Thank you.”

“You know I’m not like that, okay.”

She nods.

“So, what’s this couple like? Did you get a decent deal with them?”

Another nod, but this time she actually looks at me. “How come you didn’t tell me you were living here?”

I shrug. “I figured you’d know. I didn’t know how you’d feel about it.”

“I thought you’d moved in with one of your brothers.”

I shake my head no. “Only two of them know.” I don’t tell her which two. “And I haven’t even told my folks yet.”

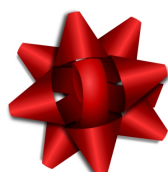
The look she gives me is unsettling. “Why not, Travis? God, how do you think they’re going to feel if they find out by accident?” she practically hisses.

“I’m willing to take that chance.” I say flatly. “I don’t want to break their hearts, Becky.”

“But keeping them from it isn’t going to break their hearts?” An exasperated sigh. “God, Travis. It’s over. I don’t know why you wouldn’t tell them...unless you...unless you feel like there’s a chance we might get back together.”

I look at her as though she’s figured it out, and I’ve been caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

She knows that I know. Her face is like stone. “Travis.” A pause for emphasis, and her voice turns cold. “Don’t wait until I tell them.”



I see my brother Buck's truck parked outside his business, and I wait until the last customer walks out, before I head inside. "Howdy."

He lifts his head up from the desk, folding a leather vest. The smell of leather and hide fills my nostrils, reminding me that I need to get a new pair of boots soon. "Hey," he chuckles. "I was just about to call you and ask if I can come by later."

"Oh yeah? What's up?"

He lifts up a pair of boots. "I wanted to drop these off. Those old things of yours look like they've been through a war, man. It's an insult."

I laugh. "Great minds think alike, man, that's all I'm saying."

Taking the boots from him, I nod in thanks, and remove my old ones. He unceremoniously tosses them into the garbage bin next to the register. They smell so new I can't help but inhale deeply. "God, I love that smell. Takes me right back to Meepaw's place, doesn't it?"

Buck smiles. "Yep. That's half the reason why I run this place. That, and daddy couldn't stand the sight of it, himself."

"Daddy wasn't cut out to do this. He's a numbers guy." Daddy has been Buck's accountant since he opened his doors for business.

"How's it going, living over at the ranch? Y'all ready to pack it up and camp out on my couch?"

I wave. "Na, they're good to me."

“Yeah? Not asking loads of questions?”

“Grayson comes over to make sure I haven’t slit my wrists yet, but, other than that, no.”

He leans on the counter, where a stack of leather gloves sits, waiting to be put on the shelf. This is a small store, and Buck only has two employees, both are students. He runs the place during the day, and they come in after hours. The hides and leathers come to him raw, and he cuts them, treats them, and does all the fancy stuff to them to make them ready for sale. Laura’s even ordered a few things from him in the past, and he partners with another local company in town that makes saddles and other horse equipment.

“Mama’s been talking about Thanksgiving and Christmas.” Buck’s tone is warning. “I suppose y’all ain’t told mama and daddy yet, huh.”

I shake my head, looking at the polished linoleum floor. “No. Not yet. Becky’s just given me fair warning today, as a matter of fact.”

“You can’t ask her to lie, brother. It ain’t right. Besides, mama and daddy can handle it, if y’all break it to them gently.”

“I know.” I grunt softly, clasping my hands together.

“But if you tell them, it makes it real.” he says, catching on.

“Something like that.”

Truth be told, if I had my way about it, I’d have only told Buck about it. Laura found out because I kept showing up to

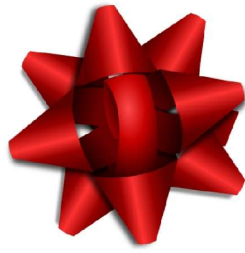
work real early and staying real late. She's not stupid. And if Buck had offered me a place to stay any sooner, she wouldn't have known anything. "And with Christmas coming, it's going to make it all that much more difficult."

Buck gives me a 'level with me' look. "Best just break it to them, man. Even though they don't live here in Huttonville, Dallas is a hop-skip-jump away, and they'll find out somehow. Also, if mama calls Becky, you're sunk."

Mama didn't often call Becky. So, that I'm not worried about. We were closer with Becky's folks, if I'm being honest. And only because of Sara and her clan, too. None of my siblings are married or have kids. I'm the only one married, and I think I've mentioned many times now, that we were working on having kids. I'm still pretty close with Ron, too. I've met up with him here and there, but he's careful not to bring up Becky. Sara and I, well, she's the best sister-in-law a guy could ask for, and that's the truth. I'm sure to this day she's still going up to bat for me with Becky.

And just as I'm getting up the gumption to agree to break it to my folks...

...my daddy walks in the door.



Chapter 6

Becky

He shows up with a briefcase in hand and a face that says ‘don’t fuck with me’, and I admit that he looks a little intense to be my assistant, but I’m short on help and time, with a tall order to fill, so there’s not much room for being choosy. Greg knocks on the door and I’m standing on the other side of it, but I give myself a moment to pull myself together, before answering. God help me. I thank the lord that I’m recently single, and very career-driven, on account of how gorgeous this man is.

“It’s nice to see you again.” I say, giving him a healthy handshake. He’s about five years younger than me if I were to guess. I check for a wedding band but I don’t see one, and I

pray to God that he's gay, otherwise I'm in big trouble. Sara'll take one look at him and crucify me. And if I know my sister well enough she'll be popping by in between open houses, just to spy on me, on account of me not being able to keep hiring my first employee a secret.

“Likewise.” He nods. He's got a hard look about him, not soft and sexy like Travis, but there's no denying that he's as handsome as the day is long. He has a degree in art history, which has netted him nothing but side jobs since graduation. This job is a second job, to help pad his finances so that he can continue with his own art. The planning part is from when he worked in an art gallery, and he was involved in a major undertaking there that included a display in Europe. Hence the cutthroat attitude that I'm getting from him.

All this from a short interview, mostly done over the phone, but I did meet Greg briefly a couple of days ago, right before I met with Liam and Hanna, which further solidified the fact that Greg is it. That, and nobody else, other than someone who was clearly just applying for everything, with no related background at all, applied for the position. “So, what's in the briefcase?” I ask, breaking the ice.

“Ideas. Past projects, things like that.” He answers, making himself at home on my kitchen table. I like it that he's a go-getter. Sometimes you have to skip some of the niceties when you're under the hammer, and I think he gets that.

“I met with Liam and Hanna, as I told you about.” I state, as he pulls files, full of swatches, scratched notes, paint chips,

and other samples, out of his leather case.

“I’d like to meet with them, too, if that’s okay.”

“Well, sure. I have a meeting with them tomorrow. You can join me.”

“Excellent.” He says, showing me a sketch of a wedding, with a birdseye view of the altar. “Check this out. It’s not Christmas-themed, but it’s close.”

I take a look at the sketch. It’s impressive. “Well done. Is this from a previous project, or is this some brainstorming for Liam and Hanna’s wedding?”

He waves. “Oh, no, this is from a thing I did in the gallery. We had weddings there, too.”

“You did?”

He nods. “Oh, yeah. I told you about that. I’m sure of it.”

“Hm. Well, either way, it looks pretty good.” I say, trying to recall him mentioning the wedding. Usually my memory is impeccable, but it’s possible that I’m just overwhelmed, and I brush it off.

“Can we go check out the ranch?”

“Um, sure. I already mentioned to Laura that I’d be bringing you by shortly.”

“Let’s go. My car or yours?” he asks, and I see something behind those big eyes of his. Can’t figure out what it is just yet.

“Mine.” I nod.

I fill him in on some of the minor details as we make the short drive to Kelsey Ranch. I pray to God that Travis doesn't see us, but sure enough, he's right in the pasture as we pull up. He gives me a perfunctory nod hello, but I notice that his gaze stays fixed on Greg. Uh oh. I purposely walk over and introduce them, so that Travis's claws retract. He's never been a jealous man, but I suppose after us separating so recently, he may have some reservations about an extremely handsome, young man, making nice with his ex-wife, no matter just exactly how 'ex' I am to him.

Laura sees us chatting from the house and comes out. "Ah, this must be Greg." She says warmly.

"Yes, ma'am." He says, shaking her proffered hand.

"Welcome to Kelsey Ranch. Have you been here before?"

"No, ma'am."

"Do you like horses?"

"I do."

"Have you ever ridden one before?"

"Yes, a few times, but it's been a while."

Travis turns to me and boldly asks if he can have a word with me.

"I'll show Greg around." Laura offers, and if I didn't know her better, I'd think that she wants Travis and I to talk alone.

Reluctantly, I follow him into the stable, out of earshot. "What's this guy's deal?"

“Travis, it’s business. Now isn’t the time to be jealous.”

“I’m not jealous.” He says, with an edge in his tone. “I just want to know who this punk is who’s hanging around with my wife.”

I purse my lips together. “Travis, I’m your ex-wife, for starters, and secondly, I never saw you getting bent out of shape like this before, when I had several other male clients.”

“Yeah, well, they were all getting married. What’s this guy’s deal? Is he married? Gay? What’s his problem?”

“I have no idea, and it’s none of my business. Just like it isn’t your business, either.”

“Becky, you don’t know this guy from Adam, man. You’re too trusting. Where does he even come from? I’ve never seen him before in town.”

“That’s because he’s not from here.”

“Shocker. He doesn’t look small town to me.” he says, giving Greg a sideways glance.

“He’s from Dallas, and he’s been all over. He’s been to Europe, too. Worked in an art gallery there. He’s just here to help me with this huge wedding I’m about to undertake, and he also has a photographer connection that will come in very handy on such short notice.”

“What, your usual photographer isn’t available?”

“No, Travis. They want engagement pictures, too, and the wedding is only weeks away.”

“So, this photographer can’t be all that good, if they’re that readily available.”

I place a hand on my waist. “Travis, are you going to give me a hard time?”

“No.” he hesitates. “This guy just...he gives me a bad vibe.”

“Well, your vibe is skewed on account of us not being together anymore.”

He looks at me, almost wounded, and I feel badly for rubbing his nose in it. Clearly, I’m taking this breakup a lot better than he is, and I’m not sure if that makes me feel better or worse.

“Just be careful, Becky.” he warns, and the way he looks at me, I almost feel bad for coming down on him so hard. He stares at the floor, and then he changes the subject. “My folks know.”

I’m at a loss for words. “I’m sorry, Travis. I know how hard that must have been for you.”

“Do you?” he asks. “I’m not sure that your folks took it as hard.”

“How do you know that?”

“I don’t know that. But based on how easy it must have been for you to tell them, that’s what I’m gathering.”

“Don’t you think that’s a little insensitive? I mean, it’s no different for my folks than it is for yours.”

He's silent for a beat, pondering that thought. "Well, I watched my daddy's face turn pale when I told him. And then he made me drive over and tell my mama in person, because he was afraid that she'd have a stroke."

My face sobers. "How is she? How did she take it?"

He looks at the ground again. "She cried. I cried. Dad cried. Buck cried, too, man. It was fucking heartbreaking."

"I'm...God, I'm so sorry, Travis."

"And now my mama has no idea how to get through Christmas. Y'all know how excited she gets around the holidays. I don't know how I'm ever going to get her past this."

"I don't honestly know what to say, Travis."

He slides the back of his thumb down his lip, and then he changes the subject again. "What's this guy's name? Greg?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I just...I want to check him out, that's all. Make sure he's legit."

"His name is Greg Tubman. And by 'legit', what do you mean?"

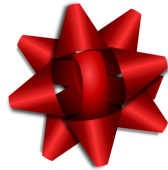
He sidesteps his answer. "I just get a bad vibe from him, like I said."

I hear laughter coming from the barn, and then Kurt and Farley come out, with Greg in their wake.

"I should go."

“Yeah.” he nods. He lifts his head, and I swear to God he wants to tell me he loves me, as he always did before we parted, with a kiss, too. But he stops himself. “I’ll see you later.”

“Yeah.”



Travis

“Can’t say I have.” Grayson answers to my question. “Don’t know any Tubman in these parts. Did you ask Laura? She’d know better than me on account of her living here all her life.”

“No. Not yet.” I respond. “I didn’t want to bother her anymore. She was on the phone, ordering more Christmas decorations and such.”

“See if y’all can ask the Sheriff.” Kurt suggests. “I’m sure if you bring him a coffee or something, he’ll look and see if the guy’s got a record.”

“Y’all think he’s got a record?” Grayson checks. “Or are you just worried that he’ll put the moves on Becky?”

He’s careful when he says this, and I respect him for it. “Both. I’d just like to know what his deal is. If he’s just looking for work, that’s one thing, but a twenty-something guy all decked out like that, looking like he belongs on Wall Street? I got the feeling he’s looking for some prey.”

Lisa walks in with little Quentin. She gives Kurt a quick peck on the lips before kindly busting in on the conversation. We bring her up to speed. “I could ask around, too.” she offers. “My circle’s pretty robust.” “Y’all don’t suppose a guy in his mid-twenties, assuming he’s single and straight, would have anything unchristian on his mind, do ya?” Lisa teases.

“That’s my fear.” I admit. “I told Becky that I was getting a bad vibe from him, but she just thinks I’m jealous.”

“Are you?” Lisa asks honestly.

“No.” I shake my head. “I just can’t figure him out. And I betcha he’s going to laugh in my face the next time he sees me, assuming Becky tells him our story.”

“You think she will?” Kurt asks.

“Probably. It seems to me like she’s not much for holding back, since she’s told everyone she knows already.”

“I don’t take Becky as the gossiping type, though, Travis.” Lisa says.

“And she would know.” Kurt taunts with a good-natured cackle.

She gives him a warning look, but her eyes are dancing. “I’ll see what I can dig up about this guy. In the meantime, she’ll be around here a lot, from what I understand, right?”

I nod.

“Then we can all keep an eye on him.” Grayson adds.

Laura walks into the kitchen from her office. “Keep an eye on who?”

“Greg.” Grayson answers. “Becky’s new assistant.”

“How you find him, Laura?” I ask, knowing that Laura can usually sense, better than anyone, when someone is no good.

Her answer is tentative. “He is a little...odd. I, personally, wouldn’t have hired him. Just on account of his spotty resume. But, then again, most of my positions involve working with expensive and highly specialized, dangerous equipment, and some of my workers live on site.”

“So, did you get a bad vibe from him?” I check.

“Like I said, he’s a little odd, and I worry when a man with that tight of an ass doesn’t have a reason for it.”

Grayson snorts a laugh. “That’s my girl. Tell it like it is.”

“Good thing Grayson here doesn’t have a tight ass.” Kurt says, and then Lisa gives him a look, as if to say, ‘that’s what you think’. “Oh, I stand corrected.” he scoffs, chuckling.

Lisa pats me on the back. “We’ll check this guy out. Make sure he’s not up to something, or was up to something.”

“Thanks.”

“Believe me, if he is, Becky’ll be able to sniff him out, too.” Laura says. “That business is her baby, and if I know her well enough, I’d say she’d rather die than see anything happen to it.”

Grayson hugs his wife. “Kinda like you, huh, sugar.” He kisses her head.

“Well, I was born into this ranch, Grayson. Becky there, she built that business from the ground up, so she’s got a lot more at stake.”

“Plus, Becky doesn’t come from rich stock, right, Travis?” Kurt adds.

“No, neither of us does, as a matter of fact.”

Laura interjects. “Well, then, all the more reason for her to have good business sense, Travis.”

“Well, if she’s got such good business sense, why’s she hiring some yahoo with a resume longer than his goddamn... eyelashes.” I venture, going for PG, rather than saying what I really want to say.

“Hawk, my brother, his wife, Luellen, she’s a photographer see, so Becky’s not wrong saying that this dude’s got connections in that department.” Grayson states. “Some photographers are booked up a year in advance or more. They’re lucky they could get us on such short notice, since venue bookings are even worse. Man, didn’t you go through this when you got married?”

I frown. “We had a small wedding. Small budget, too. We were both flat broke and getting married wasn’t a huge priority, so we never experienced that at all, actually.”

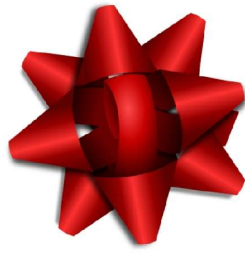
“Well, you’re lucky.” Laura states. “I imagine that’s how come Becky hired Greg is all. She’s in a pinch. This wedding

is huge with a huge budget to go with it. For all you know, she may ditch the guy the second they say, 'I do'."

Those words make my stomach clench. I know that Laura means the couple that hired Becky to get them married, but the similarity, making it sound like when Becky and this yahoo say 'I do', makes my skin crawl. "God, I hope so. I don't like him one bit. The sooner he's out of her life, the better."

Farley says something next that makes me want to punch him right in the face. "Hey, Travis? Just whatcha gonna do when some other yahoo starts banging Becky, huh? Are you gonna have every one of them strip searched, man?" he laughs, looking at the other guys, who are torn, between responding in kind, and getting my fist between their teeth. Smartly, they don't respond.

I look at Farley. My voice is cold, like stone, matching the look in my eyes. "Any man that comes between me and Becky is going to have to answer to me, and that's a fact." I pause for emphasis. "And you ever use the word 'bang' in the same sentence with my wife's name again, you'll see the business end of my knuckles upside of your face. That's a fact, too."



Chapter 7

Becky

We're finishing some plan details before the meeting with Liam and Hanna, when Greg looks at me and tips his chin upward. "If you don't mind me asking, who is the guy at the ranch that pulled you aside? He your brother?" The look on his face says that he knows full well that Travis isn't my brother, but I'm not sure if he's just playing dumb or being respectful.

"He's my ex-husband." I make it clear. "I don't like to talk about it, if it's all the same to you."

He lifts a hand. "No, not at all. I just wasn't sure what was going on there. I've got half a dozen sisters, so I'll have to ask

you to pardon me, as I'm more in touch with my female side than most."

"That's fair." I say, unclenching slightly. "Is that how you got involved with design?"

"I guess that's fair to say, yeah. Although I'd never admit to it under oath." he sighs. "So, your ex-husband sure has daggers in his eyes for me."

"Don't feel alone. He's got daggers in his eyes for me, too."

He raises his brows. "I really don't think so. Not from what I saw."

"It's still fresh. It's going to take some time." I explain.

"You can tell him I'm gay if that helps." He says, and I'm not sure if he's joking or not. He doesn't look at me when he says it though. So, I don't know how to take it.

But suddenly I feel bold. "Are you?"

His eyes flash for a moment, but he snorts. "No. I get that a lot though. Can't figure out why."

'Because you're beautiful', is what I want to say by way of explanation, but I bite my tongue. The last thing I need is for him to think that I have a crush on him.

"It's probably because I have so many sisters. Also, I'm into design and in touch with my feminine side. It's probably why I can't get laid to save my life, if you don't mind me saying so." He shares, boldly, and I wonder if he's this candid with everybody he meets for the second time.

“Hm.” Is all I say.

“Sorry. I don’t have much of a filter. It comes in handy during crunch time, but it’s not so great if you haven’t gotten to know me well enough yet.”

“Well, don’t put the filter on for my sake. I just want to do the best we can for this wedding.”

He looks behind me, seeing the boxes of decorations, ribbon, gift wrap and various other holiday accoutrements. “You don’t say.” He grins.

“I ordered various sized boxes, too.” I add, changing the subject. “I’d have taken the ones I already have from my niece’s bedroom, but I didn’t want to break her heart.”

“Oh, you did her room? What was the occasion? Friday?” he jokes.

“No. It was her birthday a few weeks ago. I always do that for her.”

“Oh yeah? How many nieces and nephews do you have?”

“Just Macey.”

“Well, you’re one up on me, then. I don’t have any yet. My sisters are so damn picky when it comes to men. I suppose I raised the bar a little for them. Not that I’m trying to sound conceited, but when you have a brother as perfect as me, it’s kind of hard to find a guy worth his salt.”

“No, I get it. I mean, I got off easy. When Travis and I met, he was it. But I saw so many other girls suffer through nasty

relationships.”

“High school sweethearts? That’s unheard of nowadays.” He says casually, but I get the feeling he’s digging for more information. I’m not giving in. I don’t comment and he takes the hint. “So, what sort of wedding is Liam and Hanna looking for?” he asks, smartly changing the subject.

“Well, more casual than what the guest count calls for, unfortunately. They’re loaded but it’s their parent’s money. It seems to me like they’re having a big wedding to please their folks.”

“At least she won’t be a Bridezilla then.” He comments. “Not that I’ve ever been graced with the presence from one, but I’ve heard enough horror stories.”

“I’ve seen my share. The best thing to do is to let them air their frustrations and then you can make headway. Kind of like getting an angry call when you’re in customer service.”

“Customer Service one-oh-one.” He concurs.

I check my watch. “Shoot. We should get going.”

“Sounds good. And don’t argue with me; we’re taking my car this time.”

“Okay.”

We pull up to the gate and are granted entry. Greg looks around, impressed. “Wow, this is a sweet pad. I wish I had rich parents, too.”

“I think we all do.” I chuckle. “Although my sister caught the money bug when she met my brother-in-law. The two of them make more money than six of me.”

“No kidding? What do they do?”

“She’s a realtor for the elite, and he’s a lawyer.”

“Cha-ching!” he sings. “So, I guess she’s the one that supplied the bread for your start-up.”

“No, actually.” I correct. “Travis and I put off getting married so we could both save for what we wanted.”

“And what did he want?”

I look at him. “He’s graduating shortly. He’s been working on his master’s degree in engineering.”

His eyes bulge. “Wow. Can I ask...who dumped who?” If not for his puppy-dog eyes that are dancing, I’d be telling him to shove it, but I don’t. Instead, I shove him playfully.

“Come on, nosey. Let’s go inside.”

Liam and Hanna are dressed nicer this time, and I detect a charge in the air when the three of them are introduced, but I don’t say anything. Greg puts on the charm, complimenting what I have in store, and we go through some of the plans that we’ve come up with, along with the items that I had prior to Greg’s arrival. Hanna has some wedding favors that are holiday themed that she shows me, and I tell her that I’m meeting with the photographer tomorrow. “Do you want a daytime or nighttime wedding, just so we can capitalize on the lighting.” I ask.

“Oh, daytime for sure.” She waves. “Can you ask if the photographer can stay late though, just so that we can get some great shots at night, too?”

“Most definitely.” I nod. “I was at the ranch earlier, and Laura’s really getting the place ready for your engagement shoot. Do you want to go for silly, like with elf costumes, or Santa hats, or just have traditional photos, but with the holiday backdrop?”

“I think we’ll do both, and decide from there, if that’s okay?”

“Sure.” I pause. “Oh, and Laura wanted me to ask if you two would like the horses involved in the ceremony or the pictures?”

“Well, is that even possible? I mean, I’ll be in a white gown, with a red satin cloak, lined with fur, like Santa.”

“Anything is possible.” I answer. “Laura has a very docile horse that’s been in several of the weddings that have been there. It’s your preference at this point.”

“I don’t know.” She says, indecisively, biting her bottom lip. Then she calls over to Liam. “Do you want the horses in the wedding or the pictures?”

“That is totally your call.” He chuckles. “I’m sure, with my luck, I’ll end up falling off one, or one’ll shit on me. I’ve never had great luck with them myself, but I’ll leave that up to you.”

Hanna smiles, laughing. “Okay, nix the horses.”

“Fair enough.” I smile. “Are you sure y’all want to get married at a ranch, Liam?”

“I’m sure. If it keeps me in the good graces of my folks and Hanna’s folks.”

“That’s a good answer.” Greg agrees emphatically. Then they both walk over to see the favors. “These are great.” He comments, checking out the Christmas snow globes with the year and ‘Liam and Hanna’, with an insert for a photo of the couple. “Where did you get these?”

Hanna blushes. “My mama picked them up for us special. Lord knows how she got them put together so fast, but she did it.”

“It’s amazing what people will do for the right price.” Greg comments good-naturedly, and I cringe, wondering if Liam or Hanna will take offence, but they don’t seem to, so I let the breath out that I realize I’ve been holding. And just as we start up a conversation about wedding food, my phone rings. It’s Sara.

“Do y’all mind if I take this? It’s my sister. It won’t be a minute.”

“No, go ahead.” Hanna says, showing Greg something in the kitchen.

I walk towards the long, imposing hallway, and answer the phone. “Sara, I’m with a client. What’s up.”

“Oh. Well...how come your car is in the driveway then?”

“We took Greg’s car.”

“Who’s Greg?”

“He’s my assistant? The one I told you about?”

“Oh...is that why Travis left me a voice message. It was all jarbled, and it sounded like he was asking about a wig, but I guess he was saying ‘Greg’.” She laughs.

“Why in the hell is he calling you about him?” I ask myself.

“I have no idea. That’s why I was coming over...to sort it out.”

“Well, can you come by later? I figured you’d be busy at work.’

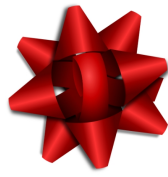
“My showing cancelled. Deal fell through. I’ve got another one tonight, but that’s after supper. Why don’t you come by and have dinner with us?”

“Okay. I’ll see you then.”

“See you.”

We run through several more key points and leave with a robust to-do list, before bidding them adieu, with a promise to meet again within the next day or two. Greg turns the key in the ignition and is suddenly quiet. He says nothing on the way back to my place, and then he says it all. “I’m not sure if I can keep this job, Becky.”

When I find out why, I’m absolutely shocked.



Travis

If Lisa doesn't know who this Greg guy is, then I don't know who will. The only person other than Lisa who stands a chance at helping me out, is my sister-in-law, Sara. I try calling her, but she doesn't answer, so I wait. After a few hours, I decide to do the next best thing, and I show up at her house. Ron's car isn't there, no shocker, and I know that Macey will still be in school. "Hey, Travis." Sara greets, with the usual warm smile on her face.

"I tried calling you, but I left a message."

"I must have missed it. I had a flurry of calls come in just a while ago. The answering service is down today, so my cell phone's been going haywire. Come on in. What's going on?"

I look inside and see that all the Christmas stuff is still everywhere. "You decided to leave it all up, huh."

"Oh, yeah." she snuffles a laugh. "Macey won't ever get sick of it. She'd have me leave it up all year round if she had her way about it."

She gives me a hug and we sit down on the couch. "You're not tied up or anything?"

"Not for a half an hour or so, unless my phone starts up." she shrugs. "What's going on? How are you doing?"

I cut right to the chase. “Did you hear about Becky’s new assistant? Some Greg guy?”

“She didn’t go into specifics, but she did mention that she’d hired someone. Why? It’s a guy?” she looks amused but shocked.

“Yeah. His name is Greg Tubman. Lisa’s never heard of him, so I thought maybe you might have some info on him.”

“Well, darlin’, I wish I did. Like I said, Becky didn’t tell me anything about him. Why?”

“The guy’s bad news. I got the willies the second that I saw him.”

She tilts her head. “Is it possible that it’s just because he was with Becky?”

“No, it’s not that, Sara. You know that I’m not like that.”

“I know.” she says fairly. “But this is the first time you’re seeing her with a strange guy, Travis.”

“Still. It’s not like that, Sara. I’m serious.”

“Fair enough. What would you like me to do?”

“Can you look him up? I know your social media is crazy. Maybe someone you know, knows him?”

“I can try, but I’ll have to go incognito to do it.”

“Do you mind?” I ask carefully.

“No, not at all. If this spells trouble for Becky, then I’m here to help.”

“That’s what I figured.”

She places a hand on my knee. “But you do know that if Becky had any instinct that he’s trouble, she wouldn’t have hired him.”

“I know that, but she’s in a pinch, and Laura said that his resume is all over the place. The guy looks like he’s from that goddamn Matrix movie. He doesn’t belong. The way the guy acts and dresses, being an assistant to anyone, other than the President of the bloody United States, would be a huge step down for him.”

“He’s Rico Suave, is he?” she giggles.

“He’s more than that. I don’t like him. Not one bit.”

“Can’t say I blame you, Travis. I mean, even I don’t like him, and I haven’t met him yet. I don’t want Becky with anyone else except you, no more than you do.”

“I know that. Thanks.” I kiss her cheek. “Man, I’m telling you, I’ll never have a better sister-in-law.”

She smiles. “Travis, sister-in-law or not, you’re my best friend. I’ll always love you, no matter what’s happened with you and Becky.” Her expression slips a notch. “I’m not sure if y’all want to talk about this, but Becky told me about what happened with you two at Macey’s birthday party.”

I feel my cheeks heat. This is kind of embarrassing, but I soldier on. “I’m sorry. I know it was inappropriate to do in your kid’s bedroom.”

Her eyes bulge. Her neck cranes. “Travis, that’s not what I mean. Hell, you and Becky can have sex right here on my sofa if it does you any good. What I mean is, how are you holding up after that? I’m surprised you didn’t tell me about it.”

“That’s because Becky made me promise not to tell a soul. I’m surprised she told you.”

“It came out in the heat of the moment. We had a fight. She cried. I cried. It was a mess. But, nonetheless, I know what happened.”

“She says it was a mistake. She was angry at me, I think, for letting it happen. Now she’s even more angry at me for giving her grief over this Greg person.”

“I don’t know why she didn’t tell me more about him. I’m meeting up with her later for dinner, maybe she’ll fill me in.”

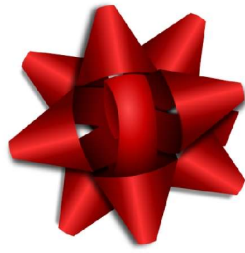
“Make sure you find out what you can before then, Sara. Maybe head her off before he gets too involved with her. If he’s after her money, he’s a fool. If he’s after her business, he’s even more of a fool. She’s like a mama tiger when it comes to her company. I just hope that she sees through those baby blues before he takes her for all she has.”

“I’m sure Becky can smell trouble, Travis. But, bless you for worrying about her.”

I look at her. “I love her, man.” I say with more conviction than I mean to. “It doesn’t matter if we’re together or not. Anyone tries to get in her path, they’re going to have to go through me first.”

“Me, too, darlin’.”

...and we soon learn that Becky will need both of us to get her through the next while.



Chapter 8

Becky

Greg's key is still in the ignition. His knuckles are white. His face is set. With a gaze like stone, he stares at his steering wheel. "What's the problem?" I ask. "Did you not like Liam and Hanna?"

A long sigh, a smack on his steering wheel, and he bites his lip, before speaking. "It was about three years ago. I was taking a night school course to make up for one that I flunked. My car broke down in the middle of an intersection and I had to push it over, with some guy's help. He was in the car with this girl, and, I don't know, she looked at me, I looked at her, and something clicked. It was her brother that was in the car

with her, and I had to leave my car by the side of the road. It wasn't fit for more than the scrap yard, anyway."

He licks his lips, taking a slight pause. "They drove me back to their folks' house, because her brother had to meet someone right away, and then she was about to offer me a lift back home, and it happened."

"What happened?"

"The best sex I ever had my entire life, that's what."

My eyes widen. "Oh."

"Yeah, 'oh'." He scoffs. "And I'm guessing that she was seeing Liam at the time, based on the look she gave me when I saw her today."

"But...you didn't think to question 'Hanna who?'"

"Never put two and two together, I suppose. It's sort of a common name, isn't it?"

I shrug. "I guess so."

"Anyway, I don't know if she was unfaithful to him with me, or what the story is, but I get the feeling that my being there is going to put a wrench in this whole situation."

"Greg, I think maybe you're reading too much into this. You said it was three years ago, right?"

"Yeah." He nods.

"Well, maybe it isn't a big deal anymore. And if it is, I'm sure that Hanna will call me and say so."

“And then I’m out of a job.” He laughs without a trace of mirth.

“I didn’t say that. Maybe we can talk this through.”

“Not if she hasn’t told Liam about me, we can’t. It’s liable to ruin the whole fucking wedding. She’ll pull out, or she’ll withdraw the contract that she has with you, on account of me.”

“Greg, I doubt that she’ll call the wedding off. They have a lot riding on this. Their folks have shelled out a very hefty sum to pay for this event, and there’s a lot of pressure on them to go through with it. Shoot, Hanna’s already got her dress and everything. Laura’s ranch is booked. It’s too late to call it off.”

“You’ve obviously never watched ‘The Wedding Singer’ then.”

I think about it for a second. That’s one of my favorite movies. And I get what he’s saying, that Hanna could pull a ‘Wedding Singer’ and easily pull out the day of, when all the guests are seated, and her groom is standing at the altar, the way that it happened in the movie. “Okay, I see your point. And...not to sound selfish, but by then, our job is done, Greg.”

He sits behind the wheel, tapping his fingers across it, chewing his lip nervously.

“Besides, from the sounds of it, you barely know Hanna, right? You don’t know anything about her. She may have told Liam, and he just doesn’t remember.”

He gives me a look. “Doubtful.”

“Okay, but it’s a possibility.” I clear my throat. “How about we just wait it out, and see if Hanna says anything, okay? Let’s not freak out yet.”

“Would you pull out and call off the wedding, if you were in Liam’s shoes?”

“What, you think Liam’s going to be the one to call it off?”

He guffaws. “Well, yeah. Especially if he finds out down the road, like, seconds before the wedding, that the whole time an old lover was helping to plan his wedding! Or worse, that she cheated on him with said planner!”

“Okay,” I pat his arm. “Breathe, Greg. I think we’re getting a little ahead of ourselves here.”

I can see his chest heaving. I know that he realizes the levity of the situation, and I do, too, but I still think that we’re making a mountain out of a molehill, until we know what the situation is. “How about I call up Hanna and talk to her privately? Find out where her head is, hm?”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea, either.” he says. “What if Liam is right there? Did you not see how tight they are? I don’t know how you can make it so he doesn’t know what you’re calling about.”

“I can handle that part, Greg, trust me. I have a sister, remember.”

“Yeah, and I’ve got them, too. They’re nose-ey as hell, no offence.”

I give him a disapproving look. “Well, what do you suggest? Pay her a visit? Or, maybe, you want to call?” I’m being facetious. The mere idea is preposterous.

It’s like he’s not listening. “Besides, I know she remembers me. I mean, you can’t forget what happened then.”

“I noticed a change in her behavior that I hadn’t seen before. I thought maybe she just...err...noticed how...attractive you are.” I say carefully, only wanting to illustrate my point, not make him think that I have a crush on him or something.

For the first time, ever, he appears sheepish. “Na, this was more. I haven’t seen Hanna since that day. And I wasn’t kidding when I said it was the best I ever had.”

“To date, even?”

He nods. “Hard to believe, but, yeah.”

I think back to what Travis and I had, that night at Macey’s party, and beyond. He was always very thorough, always. Even throughout the time that we were trying to get pregnant, when we had to have relations so often, he made sure that he took care of me, and I took care of him, too. But I pull myself out of that reverie quickly, remembering that that night was a mistake, and it should never have happened. “Do you regret it?”

“What, sleeping with Hanna? God, no. I mean, if she was with Liam, how was I to know?”

“Did she tell you her name, or did you have to dig around to find out?”

“No, she told me.” he says, pulling out of the driveway, before they see us sitting here, and wonder if something is wrong. “Actually, her brother did the introductions.”

“And you never saw either of them ever again?”

He shakes his head no. “No. Never. I never did anything like that before.”

“And you never initiated contact with her? How come you didn’t ask for her number?”

He shrugs. “She didn’t ask for mine, either. I was stupid back then. I let my ego rule the roost, so to speak. I figured if she wasn’t going to ask me for my number, then I wasn’t going to ask her for hers, if that makes any sense.”

“You figured you got what you wanted.”

“Yeah. And likewise, for her. And now that I look back on it, I think that maybe I was worried that my performance wasn’t up to her standards, and I was too embarrassed. I just wouldn’t admit it back then.”

“Did you ever look her up? Even on social media or anything?”

“Well, no. I only knew her first name, and I figured, like I said, that maybe she didn’t enjoy herself as much as I did. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why she didn’t say anything today, either. Maybe she’s embarrassed.”

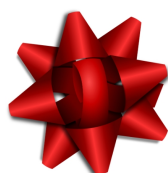
“I’ll talk to her. Clear the air.”

“I’m not sure, like I said.”

“I’ll tell you what, then.” I reason. “I’ll talk to her privately, and if she brings it up, then we’ll go from there. See what happens. Maybe she’ll hope that you’ve forgotten about her, and nobody ever brings it up.”

He hesitates, but after a beat, nods. “Okay.”

But something in the pit of my stomach starts to churn.



When I reach home, I sit down and think of one of the zillions of reasons why I’d be calling Hanna, but I have to figure out a way to ensure that Liam isn’t around, in order to accomplish the task at hand. Then I bite the bullet and just call her. Fortunately, Liam went out with friends when I do, so I have her all to myself. And I figure that the best way to gauge how she feels about Greg, is to ask her if she’s comfortable with him calling her for a few things.

I hear the hesitation in her voice. “If you’re not, that’s fine. I can just have him tell me when you need to be called.”

Then she back pedals. “No, it’s okay. It’s fine.” she overcompensates, raising a red flag.

“Is there something wrong?”

She sighs. “Can you meet me somewhere?”

“Sure.”

She names a coffee shop close to her house. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

I wonder if I should give Greg a heads up, but I think better of it, after all, I don’t even know what she wants to tell me yet. When I arrive, she’s sitting at a table in the back, looking every bit as worried as I figured she would. “Hey.” I say as I sit adjacent to her. “What’s going on?”

Her face is forlorn. Her eyes fixed on her fingers. I almost feel bad for her. Being stuck in a sticky situation, with her wedding weeks away, and so much pressure she probably feels like she’s going to explode. “I don’t have anyone else to talk to about this.”

“Okay.” I say, hesitantly. This wouldn’t be a first time I switched from wedding planner to therapist. You’d be surprised how many brides are ready to break. I was lucky. Travis and I waited to get married. We saw the world first. Getting married wasn’t the challenge. Having babies was. “I’m all ears.”

“Oh, God.” she breathes. “I feel like such a selfish bitch for saying this.”

“Go ahead, Hanna. You’ll feel better to get it off your chest. Trust me.”

“And I can’t tell anyone. Literally. It’s a huge secret and I’ve been sworn not to tell anyone.”

I’m readying myself for the big letdown. She’s completely in love with Greg and wants him to father her children. She

didn't realize how much she was still in love with him until she saw him today. Mentally, I smack myself in the face, forcing myself out of the proverbial panic attack that I feel coming on. "Well, your secret is safe with me, I promise. I've been doing this for a long time, and believe me, there have been many marital secrets I've kept."

Hanna seems to unfurl slightly, but before speaking, she looks over both shoulders. "I thought my sister was just putting on weight. We went to fittings, and I thought she was just eating a lot."

I put two and two together. It doesn't take a genius to figure it out. "She's pregnant."

She nods. "Yes. But that's not the worst part."

"Go on."

"You don't understand my sister. She's about as narcissistic as you can get. If she's sworn me to secrecy about her being pregnant, then that means that she's going to wait until we're all congregated together at my wedding, and that's when she's going to announce it."

I keep thinking to myself that Hanna is forgetting a minor detail. That an ex-lover will be at her wedding, too, and helping to plan it, but I get myself to focus. "Okay." I prompt.

"And she's not married. And the guy she's with is a total dirtbag. She left a decent guy that adored her, and was with her for years, and didn't tell anybody about the dirtbag. Oh, and

then she announced her new relationship, and the fact that she dumped the good guy, oh, guess what, at my birthday party.”

My eyes widen.

“Yeah.” she scoffs. “This isn’t her first rodeo.”

It’s worse than I thought.

“She’s going to ruin my wedding, Becky. I just know it. But I can’t tell Liam, because he already hates her, and also because Cher threatened me not to tell anyone, especially Liam. My folks are going to have a fucking stroke.”

“And when did this all happen?”

“I knew she was pregnant at the fitting. She told me via text this afternoon. Tasteful, I know.” she sneers.

“She told you in a text?” I hiss.

She nods emphatically, knitting her brows. “Yeah. I told you. She’s a piece of work.”

“Sounds like.” I guffaw. “Gosh, my sister’s about as nice as they come.”

“Yeah, well, consider yourself lucky then. Cher is horrible. But my mama and daddy coddle her like she’s a golden nugget.”

“Was she married to this other guy?”

“Yeah.” she snorts repugnantly. “In a way, I’m glad that she ditched him. He can do so much better than her. Cher has never worked a day in her life. It’s always been about mama and daddy’s money. Sure, she’s done stupid mail-order or

online shit, just to have something to brag about, but she never sought an education or anything solid, because she knew that someone else's wallet would support her.”

“Classy.”

“Exactly.” She rakes a hand through her hair. “Oh...God... what do I do?” she gently bangs her forehead on the table. “I’m screwed. If Liam finds out, he’ll kick her out of the wedding party. Then my mama and daddy will disown me. And then I’ll be the black sheep of the family, with a wedding bill that trumps my annual salary.”

“Well, I’m sure that it’s not going to cost that much, Hanna.” I comfort, talking to her like she’s a toddler, who’s just fallen off her bike. “How about you talk to your sister and ask if she can refrain from mentioning anything until after the wedding?”

She lifts her head. “Believe me, she’ll deny that she ever thought of it, but I know better. It’ll just add fuel to the fire.”

“Well, why don’t you have a party or something, and ask her to do it then. Back her into a corner. Don’t give her the opportunity to ruin the big day.”

“She’ll balk at that. No, Cher’s out for blood. Jealousy to her is like sugar to a Kindergartener. And she’s been jealous of me since I graduated college.”

“But she got married first, right?”

“Yeah, a long time ago. That was her big day, but then that’s all she had. She planned to get knocked up right before my

wedding. I'd be willing to bet. And that's why it's perfect for her to announce it then. Not only will it upstage me, since this is the first grandchild, but it'll also ruin the wedding, killing two birds with one stone."

"Does she really hate you that much?"

Hanna gives me a look that tells me there's no question. "She's hated me since birth. I was always more successful than her. Mama and daddy were always proud of me. She hated that."

"This is like the worst case of sibling rivalry I've ever heard of."

"You're telling me. And if it were up to Liam, he'd tell her to hit the road. He can't stand her and her attention-seeking attitude, and her dramatic, over-the-top stories, that don't have a shred of truth to them. Not to mention her new boyfriend is a total loser. He's as loud and obnoxious as she is. They make a perfect pair."

I level with her. "Let me ask you this. Do you actually want your sister at your wedding? Because it sounds like she's a toxic person to me. If I were you, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with her."

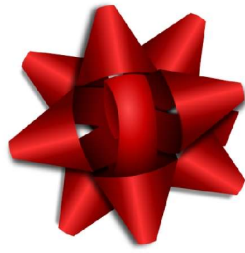
"Well, see, that's the problem. She's my Matron of Honor. I was hers and, God forbid she's not mine. So, she has to be there. Also, like I said, my folks would disown me."

"How about threatening to demote her out of the wedding party if she acts up?"

“I’m trapped, Becky. There’s no two ways about it. It’s either I bite my tongue and risk having her ruin it all, or say something and be shunned from the family.”

For some reason, I feel like joking around, just to lighten the mood a little. “What about a fake pregnancy?”

...and for a fleeting moment, I think she takes me seriously.



Chapter 9

Travis

My nerves are shot as I worry about what's going to go down tonight at Sara's house. And after talking myself out of it a dozen times, I call her, when I feel like it's late enough that they've at least had dinner. Surprising me, Ron picks up her phone.

"Hey, buddy, what are you doing answering Sara's phone?" I chuckle.

"Ah, she left it on the counter and I saw that it was you, so she told me to answer it for her."

"Ah. Is Becky still there?"

"Err...yeah. Do you want to talk to her?"

“No, no, I wanted to talk to Sara, actually.”

“She’s in the loo. That’s why she screamed from the toilet for me to pick it up.” He hesitates, sounding like he’s swallowing something. “Hey, why don’t you pop over? I’m having some buddies over for a card game while Sara and Becky hen peck out in the living room.”

“Sure. I’ll be right over.” I grab my keys and head out. The ranch is quiet. Just the horses are outside grazing. I salute Grayson as he pulls in and I tell him where I’m heading. He’s just coming in from the clinic, and he looks dog tired. “Take it easy.”

“Oh, I will .” He smiles as we pass each other and I get into my truck. As I pull up to Ron and Sara’s house, Ron is outside on the phone. He’s just finishing a call and hangs up by the time I’m out of the truck. “Hey, man.”

“Hey.” He chuckles, patting my back. “Glad you could make it. Someone else bailed.”

“Gee, Ron. You’re not as popular these days, are you.” I joke.

“Come on in.” He snuffles. “Y’all want a beer?”

“Sure. Just one though.”

“Yeah. Same here. I’ve got a deposition in the morning. Gotta be in top shape.”

“You mean to tell me you can manage just one beer with all the other guys?”

He just grins, letting me into the house before him. “The girls are in the living room. I think Sara’s on a call.”

“I’ll go peek my head in there.” I murmur. He gives me a look.

“And there’s the real reason why you paid me a visit.”

I ignore him and walk into the living room. Sara is at the patio doors in the back of the room, and Becky is sitting on the couch, scrolling on her phone. “Hey.” I say, almost in a whisper.

She looks up. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

“Ron invited me over to play cards with his buddies. Thought I’d peek my head in and say hello.”

“Oh.” She says. I can tell that she has something on her mind, but I don’t know if she’s had a chance to talk it out with Sara yet. That being said, I’m not sure if she’s going to tell me first. But since Sara’s on the phone I take my chances.

“How’s it going with Greg?” I ask plainly. Becky knows that I’m not about playing mind games. I’m straight up.

Sara finishes the call and I think I’m sunk, but thankfully, Sara is in both of our courts. Sometimes I wonder who she loves more and I’m so blessed because of that. I look at Becky to see if she’ll answer my question.

“Sorry about that.” Sara says. Then she addresses me. “We haven’t even had a chance to talk yet.” She says this for both of our benefits. I wait for Becky to give me a dismissive look, indicating that I’m not welcome to be present for this

conversation, but it doesn't come. I wonder if I should be gentlemanly about it and excuse myself, but something tells me that Sara has already let her in on the fact that I'm terribly concerned.

"So, what's the story on Greg?" Sara continues.

With a sigh, Becky answers. "It turns out it's not Greg I need to worry about. It's Hanna."

My instincts tell me to grab her hand but I stop myself. "What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, a whole lot of shit went down with both Greg and Hanna today, but I'm more worried about her. Evidently she thinks that her sister is going to sabotage the wedding."

"How?" Sara asks through furrowed brows.

Becky goes on with a convoluted story about Hanna's selfish, twisted sister, who sounds every bit as sick as a sister could get.

"But did you find out anything about Greg?" I ask carefully, not wanting to downgrade her worry.

"Oh, that." She smiles, exasperated. "Besides the fact that he and Hanna had a thing once upon a time?"

Sara's jaw drops. "Are you serious?"

Becky nods. "Oh yeah. It just keeps getting better."

I'm getting frustrated. Something about Greg makes my skin crawl and the girls are getting off on high school shit. I decide it's a waste of time to stick around for any longer, and that I'll

have to utilize my own resources in this case. “Okay. I’m gonna go and give you two ladies some privacy.”

“Okay.” Sara smiles.

I purse my lips warmly at Becky and she does the same. A piece of me warms inside. No matter what we’ve been through, to me, a smile from her is a reward. “I’ll see you.”

Ron is in the kitchen, assembling chip bowls on the table. “You ready?” He asks me.

“No, man. I’m sorry but I’ve got to go take care of something.”

He looks at me like he knew it all along. “Sure, man. You finish early come on back. We’ll probably still be here.”

“Thanks, man.”

I hop into my truck and head to the sheriff’s office. There’s a girl in there that flirts with me when I see her for her riding lessons. I know it’s manipulative but it’s also shrewd. I need to know about this guy and I’ve got to pull out all the stops. I know she’s working tonight, because when she was in earlier, she made a point of telling me that if I wanted to stop by, that she would be there. When I enter the small building, you can hear a pin drop, but it looks sort of like Sara’s house, in that Christmas decorations are strewn about the place.

There’s garland taped to the ridge of the counter, and I see that Evelyn is on the phone, but her eyes light up when she sees me. A finger in the air indicates that she’ll be a minute, and I nod, walking away a little, to give her privacy. There’s

garland taped to the dingy drop ceiling, making the place look like it's been decorated with stuff from five-year-old Dollarama crap. If I listen closely, I can hear Christmas music playing softly overhead. When I hear her hang up, I turn back around. "Hi, Evelyn. I hope I'm not bothering you."

Her face turns pink. "No, not at all, Travis. Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Don't mention it."

"What can I do for you?" Evelyn is sweet. Very pretty, too. With long, natural eyelashes, reddish blonde hair, and green eyes. And I know that she's no slouch, either. Good at riding, too.

"I was wondering if you could tell me if someone has a criminal record."

A look of concern with a hint of intrigue crosses her face. "Who were you looking at? Surely, nobody at the ranch."

I lift a hand. "No, nothing like that. It's someone my wife... err...my ex...err...Becky...hired." I stammer. It's the first time talking about her as my ex, and it's unnerving. I suddenly feel sick.

"I heard about that, Travis. I'm so sorry." she says, apologetically.

"Thanks. I guess everyone in town knows now."

She grimaces, as if regretful, but she isn't denying it, either. Smartly, she changes the subject. "So, what's his name?"

“Um, Greg Tubman. Can you look him up?”

Evelyn thinks it over for a moment. “Tubman. I think I’d remember a name like that.”

“Yeah, me, too. He’s not from here. That’s what worries me.”

Her gaze moves to her computer. “I’m not supposed to do this, but as long as nobody comes through that door, it’s okay.”

“Your secret is safe with me. And thanks.”

She gives me a wink. I almost want to take her out to dinner in thanks, but I feel like that would give her the wrong impression. “You decorate this place?” I ask, filling the void, while she does keystrokes.

“Yeah. I almost would rather bring better stuff from home. This is the worst decorating job I’ve ever seen. And they made me decorate early on a dare. Now I get to look at this crap until Christmas.”

“The sheriff doesn’t have a budget for that?”

She gives me an ‘are you kidding me?’ look. “Sure.”

I snort a laugh. She does, too. Then she does a few more keystrokes and shakes her head. “Nope. Nothing. He’s clean.”

“Are you serious?” I’m flabbergasted.

“Yep. Nothing. Nada.” she responds, turning the computer around. “Clean as a whistle.”

I’m almost regretful. I don’t want Becky working with someone like that, but still, the vibe I got from him says that

he's trouble. Maybe Sara's right. Maybe it's just because he's the first guy around my now ex-wife. "Man. That's... surprising."

"You seem disappointed." she observes.

I ponder that comment for a moment. "I don't know. I guess...I...I guess my radar is off."

"Well, he is kind of cute, but he's not you." she says, throwing me off further. I cringe inwardly. The look on her face says that she's definitely flirting, and I'm not sure what to say to stop it. "Say, Travis. Do you like homemade chili?"

I know where this is going, but since she did me a favor, I answer. "I do, yes."

"Well, what's say y'all let me cook you up a nice batch, and you can come on over to my place and eat it with me?"

I scratch my chin, staring at the floor, thinking about how I can let her down easy. "I'm not...I'm not sure that I'm ready to be dating yet, Evelyn." I look up at her. "You're smart and beautiful, and if I wasn't in the predicament that I'm in, I'd be all over that...you know...you...me...chili. But I'm just not in that place yet."

The desired effect happens. She smiles kindly. "God, Travis, you are just the sweetest thing. I mean it. I really hope that you find happiness somewhere. And whenever you're ready, just give me a call. There will always be a hot pot of chili waiting."

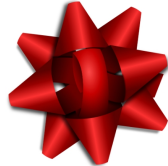
"That's real sweet, Evelyn. But don't wait for me, sugar. I don't know what's happening from one day to the next. Y'all

deserve better than that.”

Another warm smile.

“Thanks for the favor.”

“Anytime.”



Kurt's sitting on the front porch when I get back to the ranch. He's got a wad of Christmas lights in his lap. “Hey, buddy. What's up?”

“Nothing, really. Just getting back.”

“Out gallivanting?”

“Na, just checking out the but-much that's working for Becky.”

He smiles. “I was earlier, too, man. Lisa had me on the case while the baby had a meltdown.”

I'm shocked. “You're serious? What did you find out?”

“Well, not much. He's never been married. He flirts with one of the waitresses up the street at that coffee shop. His taste in clothes trumps that Oscar de la Renta dude, and he has no problem running up his credit card bills to prove it.”

“But he's not swindling money or involved in organized crime?” I ask, almost facetiously.

“No, man. Sorry.” he shakes his head. “I know you were kind of hoping it would be that way, but you know that Becky’s just hired him for help. She’s not going to try to get into his pants or let him get into hers. She’s better than that, man.”

“I know. I just...I don’t know. I get a bad vibe from him.”

He manages to free a strand of lights and sets them on the porch. “Maybe it’s a bad vibe from something else. You know, like, a sixth sense or something. I know a lot of people that get those.”

“Yeah? And what happened?” I ask, sitting on the step, untangling one end of what he’s working on.

“Nothing serious, just...hunches, I guess. That were right.”

“So, what you’re saying, is that maybe it isn’t to do with Greg, but maybe something bad is going to happen to Becky?”

“Maybe. Or to someone else. Maybe to you.”

“Thanks, man.” I say, this time sarcastically.

“Sorry.” he chuckles. “I know that doesn’t help much. But you can rest assured that Greg’s clean. Even though Laura’s got her doubts about him, you know that the bar is set high for her.”

“Yeah. I was surprised when she hired me.”

“Well, why wouldn’t she? You’re a good guy, a student and all, looking after a wife.”

I give him a look, as my stomach churns, thinking how Becky's not my wife anymore. But then, I think to myself, fuck it, she'll always be my wife. No matter what happens.

“You ever think you'd turn your back on Lisa if she ever showed you the door?”

“Hard to say, man. She tried to show me the door once before, when we first started out, but that was because she was scared.”

“What was she scared of?”

“Harlan, the guy she was engaged to before we met, he was a real scum of the earth, see, and she knew that she loved me even more, so she was afraid that I was going to turn out to be a real asshole, too. She pushed me away.”

“And did you go away, man?”

“Not really. My gut was telling me that something was up. And that's my point.”

“That I should stick around?”

“Well, I don't know about that, Travis. I'm not going to tell you how to live your life, but what I am saying is that y'all shouldn't take gut instincts at face value. Sometimes the lord works in strange ways, as they say. Not everything is what it seems.”

We loosen another strand of lights and set it aside. “How many of these goddamn things is Laura hanging?”

“About a billion. She’s got them in boxes all over the damn place. I just found these in the barn behind the feed bags. Boxes and boxes of them. She told me she used to hang them all over when Quentin was alive. He was a sucker for Christmas shit, and then when he died, she didn’t want to bring them out anymore.”

“So now the buggers have been resurrected.”

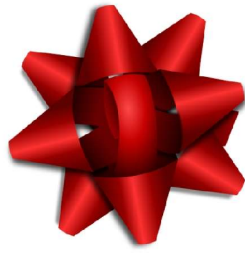
“She’s real excited about this wedding. It’s the first time she’s hosted one that wasn’t family.”

“Y’all think I could borrow a few? Think she’d mind?”

“I suppose not. Why?”

“I think the sheriff’s office could use a few.”

Kurt lifts a brow but I don’t respond.



Chapter 10

Becky

The second Travis leaves the room, Sara looks at me, face blank, eyes set, and says flatly. “Tell me everything.”

My hands go in my hair as I rest my head on my lap. “Oh....God....it’s such a mess, Sara.”

“What...what’s a mess? Tell me.” She’s half dying for dirt, the other half wanting desperately to help me, like the fantastic sister she is. “Is Greg a dirtbag, just like Travis thought?”

A sigh, as I lift my head off my hands. “No, it’s not him, it’s...Hanna. This is the biggest goddamn deal I’ve ever had and now I know why. It could not get more complicated.”

She gives me a look. “This does not sound like my rock solid sister, Beck. I have seen you tread through the toughest situations like a pro. What, pray tell, is so horrible about this?”

“For starters, Hanna’s sister, who is a total narcissistic bitch by the way, is pregnant, and Hanna’s flipped out about it, because she thinks that this Cher girl is going to use the wedding as a sound stage to announce her pregnancy. Second, it turns out that ol’ Greg and Hanna have a history.”

Sara’s eyes widen at that. “Oh, wow. That I didn’t see coming.”

“Exactly.” I nod. “But that doesn’t seem to be the real problem, as far as Hanna’s concerned. It’s Greg who is panicking over that. Hanna’s blowing a gasket over her sister, though.”

Sara shrugs. “She could be just getting cold feet. Chances are her sister’s not going to be so bold.”

“That’s what I thought, but evidently, Cher’s pulled this kind of shit before.”

“But this is her sister’s wedding.”

My voice is tentative. “I don’t know, Sara, from what she’s telling me, her sister is a real cold-hearted bitch.”

Sara gives me her ‘hold my beer’ face. “Give me her name. I’ll take care of it.”

“What do you mean?” I ask, somewhat impressed. Sara is the real ‘don’t fuck with me’ girl. That’s why she’s so successful at everything she does. That’s why I love her.

That's why I can't figure out why I can't be more like her and think of the brilliant things that she's come up with in the past, when the going gets tough.

"I know almost every narcissistic asshole in this town. I've had at least half of them as clients. I know how to deal with trash like that. What did you say her name was...Cher?"

"Yeah, but I don't know her last name. She's married, so I don't think she has Hanna's surname."

"What's Hanna's surname?"

"Wilson."

Sara frowns, nodding, entering something into her phone. "I'll figure it out."

I smile, chuckling softly. "You are something else."

She ignores me, wanting to get down to business. "What else have you got? You said Hanna's not worried about a historical tryst between her and Greg?"

"She didn't say anything." I pause. "How are you going to figure out Cher's last name?"

Sara purses her brows together. "Social media. Ever heard of it. Don't you creep on people's accounts before you make business deals?" she tuts. "Amateur."

I snort a laugh. "Well, pardon me, Sherlock Holmes."

She waves, unimpressed. "Put a gag order on Greg in the meantime. Don't let him freak out over this. Until we figure out if his dick was memorable, it isn't going to be a problem.

The bigger issue is putting a gag order on this Cher chick. Tell Hanna not to sweat it, though. Oh, and Travis smells a rat with Greg.”

“Shocker.”

“Oh, come on, Becky, give him a break. He’s just looking out for you.”

“Yeah, I know. I just wish he didn’t think it was his job still.”

She gives me a look. “In his mind, it’ll always be his job. It could be worse. At least he’s not being subtle about it. At least he’s doing it with class.”

“Fine.” I huff. “I’ll give him a break. He just better not embarrass me.”

Sara acts like I’m being a child. “When has he ever embarrassed you, Becky? The guy’s a saint.”

I purse my lips into an unimpressed grimace. “You’re just saying that because you love him.”

“And so do you.”

“Look, do we want to add to my problems here?” I’m exasperated.

“Okay, okay. Calm down. I’m just saying that it could be worse. I have a client who is selling her house because she and her husband separated, and it’s literally a war between them. At least Travis gave you the house and he’s being peaceful about it. Not a drop of resentment or animosity in that man’s body to speak of.”

“You’re not making this any easier on me.”

“Well, I’m just telling you that you ought to be thankful, that’s all. I’m not trying to rub it in your face or anything.”

“Could’ve fooled me.”

She sighs. “Becky, I’ll never let you think that leaving him was a good idea, so you might as well stop trying. He’s a good man.”

I decide that I’ve had enough. I feel brave...or pissed off... what’s the difference? “So, are you saying that if I bring another man into this house that isn’t Travis, that you’re going to hate him and make him feel like he’s an intruder?”

Annoying me, Sara doesn’t even flinch. “Please. We’re more likely to get struck by lightning twice in the same day than you are of bringing another man into your life. You’ve only ever been with Travis.”

She’s really getting under my skin. I try to rattle her feathers. “Greg is pretty hot.”

Her face scrunches. “He’s your assistant. You’d never shit where you eat, so give it up, Becky. I know you too well.”

I rise in a huff. “Fine. I’ve gotta go.”

“Aw, come on. Don’t leave me here with a house full of men and a deck of cards.”

“Look, I’m not in the mood anymore. I need to go home and take a bath. Relax before bed.” I say. I am feeling tired. The extra drama today has gotten to me. Normally, I’m fuelled by

the rat race, but since taking on Liam and Hanna's wedding, it's a different story.

"You want me to come and hang out for a while? Give you a pedicure or something?" That sounds heavenly. Travis used to rub my feet after I soaked them before a pedicure, and I miss that, but Sara has pissed me off and I'm not willing to let her in tonight.

"No, I just want to head home. Hey, where's Macey?"

"At mama and daddy's tonight. They took her to a movie."

"Okay. I'll see you later."

"Sure?"

I nod. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Okay. I'll let you know what happens with that bitch Cher."

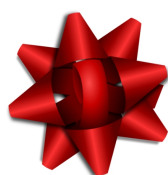
Another nod. "Thanks."

She rises to see me out the door. She looks my face over. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just tired."

"You look it. Go home and get some sleep. You worry too much."

I go for coy. "Yeah, and I have a meddling sister to prove it."



Greg shows up at my place with his briefcase, two coffees, and a smile. He looks ready to work, and not at all forlorn, like he did yesterday. “Wow, what a difference a day makes.” I comment.

“Yeah. I decided, well, fuck it.” He nods, frowning. “It is what it is.”

“I’m glad to hear it. Because she either doesn’t remember you or she thinks you don’t remember her.”

He sets his briefcase down on my kitchen table, and hands me a coffee, that I decline. I’ve already got some tea on the counter. “Thanks, anyway.”

“What happened with Hanna?”

I try to break it to him gently, worrying that I may wound his ego, since he seemed pretty broken up about their affair, and the fact that in his mind they had great sex when they were together. “She was actually concerned about her sister. She’s just found out that she’s pregnant, and evidently not being nice about it. I don’t think she’s worried about something that happened between you three years ago, Greg. It’s safe to say that you’re off the hook.”

“Really?” he’s shocked but markedly relieved.

I nod. “Yeah. So, I think we’re in the clear with this issue, for now, anyway.”

“You mean she didn’t even say anything about me?”

I shake my head. “Not a word. I thought she was going to puke over her sister, though.”

“You think she forgot?” he asks, almost in awe.

“Maybe. But I think that her mind is elsewhere, if I’m being honest.”

He nods dismissively. “Okay, well, that’s that.”

I pick up on the fact that he’s slightly deflated. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” He nods, but he’s not looking at me, he’s focusing on opening his briefcase. “I just...it’s stupid.”

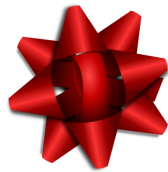
“What’s going on? Are you upset because she didn’t say anything? I thought that you were afraid she would?”

“I...I was.” He stammers. “I guess...I guess I’m still not convinced that this isn’t going to blow up in my face somehow.”

“Well, don’t put the cart before the horse, Greg. Everything is going to be okay, you’ll see.” I feel like I’m convincing both of us here.

He sighs, pulling out a sheaf of paper with pencil markings on it. It looks like more drawings of plans. “Yeah.” He nods unconvincingly.

I soon learn that he wasn’t far off the mark.



Hanna

Liam is sitting on the living room floor, in a veritable sea of wedding stuff, helping me organize. “Isn’t this why we hired that girl?” he asks.

“Yes, but, we can’t give her all this to do, Liam. She’s a planner. She’s not here to do little shit like this. Besides, we’re on a tight deadline, and there isn’t time.”

“Then we need to delegate, Hanna. This is ridiculous. I don’t know why we’re rushing so hard on this shit, anyway. We can do a Christmas themed wedding anytime. We don’t need to actually get married at Christmas time.”

This is the first time he’s ever refuted anything to do with the wedding. Liam is usually a very amicable person. Level-headed and calm, and even though his tone is neutral, his words speak volumes. “Are you having second thoughts?”

“Not about marrying you, babe, just about rushing. I mean, even if you were pregnant, we wouldn’t be rushing. And you’re stressed to shit, babe. This isn’t good for you.”

“Do you like Becky?” I check. “Because you seemed fine with everything until she came into the picture.”

“Yeah, she’s fine, hon. I just think that us sitting in an ocean of wedding shit at ten o’clock at night, when we could be doing a dozen other things, is ridiculous.”

“But we’re just organizing things. We’re not actually doing anything. If you’re tired, I can finish up.”

“I’m not leaving you with this, Hanna. It’s our wedding, not just yours. Besides, we’ll get it done faster with both of us at

it.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to scare you away with too much wedding crap. Do you think we’ve done too much?”

He tilts his head, giving me a knowing look. “I think our folks have done too much. We should never have agreed to all this. If it weren’t for them paying for the wedding, we wouldn’t be in this predicament. Just thank God that we refused to have a shower or a Stag and Doe.”

“Are you saying that we should tell them that we’ll pay for it? So that we have a say in all this?”

“I’m saying that we should tell them to get their asses over here and help us with this shit. Your mama bought the damn wedding favors, and mine bought these dang things to put at the place settings.” Liam comments with a playful scoff, pulling me into his lap, as we both sit on the floor, amongst all the crap. I’d kidnap him and marry in goddamn Alaska if that’s what he wanted. He’s the sweetest, kindest man I’ve ever met, and I’m so lucky to be marrying him. “So, what’s on the agenda for tomorrow? Are we meeting with the photographer?”

I nod. “Yeah. Becky says that he may be able to squeeze us in for engagement pictures on Saturday in between weddings.”

Liam rubs his nose on mine. “Maybe we should just get married on Saturday, without all the hoopla, and piss everyone off.”

“Then I wouldn’t have to worry about Cher fucking me over at least.” I blurt, and I regret the words the second they come out of my mouth. My hand goes over my mouth, and I gasp, eyes widened.

He rolls his eyes. “What’s Cher up to now?”

“Oh...God...Liam. I’m not supposed to tell.”

“Well, it’s too late now, babe. Out with it.”

“Please...please promise that you won’t freak out.”

It’s sad. He’s so used to Cher being such a bitch, it doesn’t faze him. “I promise.”

“She’s pregnant.”

He smirks. “Great. Well, the good part of having our wedding in three weeks’ time is that she won’t spontaneously go into labor during the ceremony. She’d have a Pitocin drip on her if she knew she’d get attention at the altar shitting out a kid.”

I snort a laugh. It’s really not funny, but Liam knows what I go through with my sister. “Oh...God...you’re right.”

“I know I’m right.” He scoffs, chuckling. “So, what are you worried about. That she’ll wear a fucking sign over her dress?”

I laugh out loud. He so gets it. “I could so see her doing that.”

“Na, she’ll wear a sandwich board.” He adds, enjoying the joke.

I slap him playfully. “Or something equally attention-grabbing, to pull the spotlight off me, which she hates.”

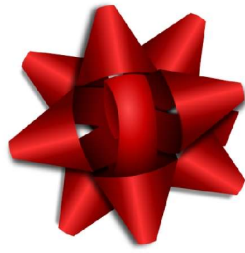
“Babe, the only person you need to worry about grabbing the attention of is me, and I’ll have my eyes on you every second. You’re my princess, Hanna, and I don’t care if your sister shows up in a fucking ugly Christmas leotard, with a giant hat that says, ‘I’m knocked up’. As long as I get to marry you, I personally don’t give a shit. This whole circus is for our folks. The real ‘you and me’ stuff is going to come on our honeymoon. And I guarantee you Cher won’t even know where we’re going, so fuck her.”

I smile, looking at my beloved. He is so the man for me. Only Liam can put a light-hearted spin on Cher and our wedding. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He kisses my lips. “What’s say we leave all this shit for tonight?” he kisses me a little less chastely, getting the point across. “You game for that? We can get up early and call our folks. Tell them to come pick all this up. They’ve got keys.”

“Okay.” I nod, feeling my toes tingle.

I can’t wait to marry him. My only hope is that he doesn’t find out my secret first...



Chapter 11

Becky

Greg is over talking to his buddy, Chris, the photographer, as he prepares Liam and Hanna for their first engagement photograph. It's Saturday in the early afternoon, and Laura has been kind enough to block off her riding lessons for an hour, so that Chris can get the shots in. It looks like Hanna is rather settled, and not unhinged, like I thought she'd be. Either Sara took care of her sister, Cher, like she said she would, or Hanna dealt with it herself. But I expected her to be frazzled and fraught today, and she's as cool as a cucumber.

There's a definite avoidance between Hanna and Greg, but I think I'm the only one that notices it, thankfully. Travis is off

to the side, at the ready, in case Chris needs to make any adjustments. Kurt and Grayson are here, too, and Laura keeps bringing us refreshments from inside the ranch house. It's always such a lovely, welcoming place to be, and it looks incredible all decked out with Christmas decorations. Becky and Liam are wearing fluffy sweaters and red pants, and they look great in front of the ginormous Christmas tree.

Laura has shown me the altar, and we're going to have Lisa decorate it with Christmassy things for the wedding. It's going to be absolutely beautiful. I can see it now. Just as Travis walks over to me, I hear my phone ringing. It's Sara. I pick it up, watching the smile on Travis's face, as he approaches me. It doesn't matter how far apart we are, relationship-wise, that smile will always touch my heart, even though I'll never tell him so again. I've noticed that he never smiles like that at anyone else.

"What did you do?" I hiss, chuckling.

"What do you mean?" she asks, feigning shock.

"Why is Hanna so...calm? I thought her sister was about to ruin everything?"

"I told you I'd take care of it, and I did."

"Well, what did you do?"

"Ah...a magician never reveals his tricks."

"Spill."

Travis is overhearing, and I know that he wants to kiss me. I can tell by his face. He always used to kiss me when I was on

the phone, even just to say hello.

“Let’s just say that bribery never gets old.”

“Bribery? Aren’t they stinking rich?”

“I didn’t bribe her with money.”

I’m intrigued. “How did you bribe her?”

“Well, it turns out that she and her new lover are looking for a house. And she is completely flipped out over this one house, but it’s not for sale...yet. I just happen to know the owner, and I know that he’s going to be selling it in a couple of months. Can you see where this is going?”

I bite my lip, smiling, impressed. “You dirty dog.”

“So, I don’t think we need to worry about dear old Cher, if you get my drift.”

“But...how did you know that she’s looking for a house?”

I can hear the modest shrug over the phone. “I found her Facebook profile and she was live at some plaza where I know that there’s a real estate office that posts pictures of really nice places that are coming up for sale. On a whim I went over, hoping that I could tap into something useful about her that I could manipulate to my benefit. Sure enough, she headed over to this office and took a look at the photos of houses and estates coming up for sale. Started talking to her and found out that not only is she pregnant, but she’s also got about the biggest fucking mouth you could imagine. Hell, that bitch would tell me what position she used when she conceived her

child if I'd asked her. Stupid, really. But easy as hell to glean info from."

"You are a genius." I gush.

"No, she's just really stupid." Sara guffaws. "No wonder she's knocked up."

"Stop." I snort.

"And her boyfriend....uuuuugly."

I laugh out loud. "You're the best."

"Bye."

"I owe you one."

Sara clicks off. I smile at Travis.

"So, Sara came to the rescue, did she?"

I can't wipe the smile off my face. "Yeah. She's the best."

Kurt, overhearing, walks by, with an odd comment. "Did she steal Christmas decorations, too?"

My face mirrors Kurt's playful smirk. "Who stole Christmas decorations?"

Thumbing at Travis, Kurt answers. "This guy here. Stole them for his girlfriend over at the sheriff's office."

Why, I don't know, but something in the pit of my stomach drops. I try to stifle it, but it's too late. My face falls. "Girlfriend?" I look at Travis. I mean, I knew that him seeing someone else was something that I would have to consider. I

just...I'm not ready for that yet. The crack in my voice is palpable.

Travis hears it. He looks at me soberly. "It's nothing like that, Becky. I went over and asked her if she could check something for me. The place was all decked out in shabby Christmas decorations and the sheriff's too cheap to buy new ones. It was the least that I could do, and Laura's got enough lights and decorations to fill goddamn Noah's Ark if need be. That's all it was. I promise."

"Oh, shit, yeah." Kurt snuffles. "I was just goofing off. I didn't mean to cause any trouble."

"I...it's okay." I lie. "Would you excuse me for a minute?" I say, feeling a little sick. I walk into the ranch house and go to the washroom. My chest heaves with emotion. I don't know what's wrong with me. This is what I wanted. The possibility of Travis seeing someone else is inevitable. He's an adult male with needs just like anyone else. I am going to have to learn to accept this. Travis will move on just like me, and even though this instance is benign, maybe the next time it won't be. And I need to prepare myself for that. As I stand there, waiting for the nausea to pass, I can feel the tears come. I haven't cried much since Travis left, but I knew that they would come at some point. You don't end a marriage with dry eyes. Nobody ever has, I'm sure of it.

As I stand in Laura's washroom, I let it out. I push the toilet seat down and sit on it, checking to make sure that the garbage pail is nearby, in case I still need to puke. The sobbing comes

and I don't stop it. Until I hear a knock at the door. "Becky?" It's Laura. Her voice is solemn. "You okay in there, darlin'?"

Laura, I trust with everything. I know that she's got a soft spot for both me and Travis, seeing as she's so good to both of us. Unlatching the lock, I let her in. "I'm fine." I lie.

She comes in and closes the door.

"Did Travis send you in here?" I ask, not bothering to hide the sniffing.

She nods. "Yeah. He said that there was a little misunderstanding that upset you."

"Yeah. It's stupid. I know that Travis is going to see other people. I just didn't think it would be so soon. And even though I know that he's not, I also know that some day he will."

"Sweetheart, Travis loves you way too much to be seeing other people, and you know that. He still hasn't given up hope that you two will reconcile."

I sigh, rolling my eyes. "Laura, I can't. I can't stand to go through the whole marriage and baby thing with him anymore."

"But what if he doesn't care about the having babies part anymore? What if he just wants to be with you, Becky?"

"Laura, you don't understand. He's said that he'd rather go without having a family if it means staying together with me, but I know that deep down, he's always going to want to have them. Every time I got my period you should have seen his

face. He was devastated. It got to the point where we hated making love together and that's not healthy. We even tried taking a break from lovemaking for a while, just to see if we could rekindle the flame, and it just wasn't there anymore."

Laura is knelt down on the bathroom floor, so we're eye to eye. Her hand holds mine. "Darlin', I know it's none of my business, and both Grayson and Travis would kill me if they found out I told you, but, honey, I know that you and Travis had a little thing not so long ago." She says carefully, concern registered all over her face and in her voice, so it's impossible to get angry with her. "Were things a little different then, darlin'?"

I swallow, thinking about it. "It was. But, Laura, we were both drunk. And it was so wrong. We were in Macey's room. It should never have happened."

Laura squeezes my hand. "It's never a mistake if you love someone, Becky."

I scoff, sobbing again. "No, you don't understand. I totally fucked with Travis's mind. Now he thinks that there's a possibility of us getting back together. That's what I mean by it being a mistake. I never meant to hurt him, Laura, I mean it, and the last thing I ever want to do is manipulate him."

"You didn't manipulate him, Becky. You didn't mean for it to happen any more than Travis did. Now, quit blaming yourself, and just let it be what it was. And as far as Travis dating other women, well, he's not ready for that any more

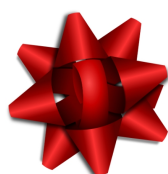
than you are, so y'all don't have to worry about that for a long time."

I draw in a deep breath and let it out. She leans in and gives me a hug. As she rubs my back, she says. "Gosh, Becky, I've missed having you around here. I'm so glad that you could come and throw this wedding here. It's so nice to have you again."

"Thanks, Laura. Hands down, you are the sweetest woman I know."

She pulls back and looks at me. "I know good people when I see 'em, darlin'. Now, come on. Let's get you cleaned up so you can come back out and watch Liam and Hanna get their pictures taken. They're a beautiful couple, darlin'. But is there something wrong with Hanna? She seems to be a little nervous around Greg."

I draw in a deep breath and widen my eyes slightly. "Oh, God, Laura, y'all don't know the half of it."



"So, that went well." Greg comments, tentatively, as we arrive back at my place.

"You don't sound very convinced."

"Did you see how Chris kept eying Hanna?"

I knit my brows. “Geez, Greg. If I didn’t know you any better, I’d say that you still held a torch for her.”

“I do, kind of.” He shrugs. “Seeing her again after all this time, man, it does something to me.”

“Well, you better get over that, and fast, before Liam catches on. And Hanna doesn’t seem to acknowledge you, so I hate to say it, but you’re yesterday’s news, my friend.”

“She remembers me.” he says, as if convincing himself.

“Well, I thought you said that you were relieved when it seemed like she didn’t. Have you had a change of heart?” I ask, half teasing, half bringing him back down to planet earth.

“I’m still trying to pinpoint if she was with Liam yet or not.” He states, ignoring my comment. “If she cheated on him with me, then we may have a problem.”

“Well, we’ve got a lot riding on this wedding, my friend, so I suggest that you buck up and forget about that.” I start to wonder if Greg is putting his personal feelings ahead of the business at stake here. Thinking about having to fire him just two weeks before Hanna and Liam’s wedding makes my head spin. Plus, Chris is his friend, and if I fire Greg, I risk losing the engagement photos and having a photographer for the wedding. We have a contract, sure, but contracts can be broken, especially when Chris is one of the most coveted photographers in Dallas, and our only hope for this wedding. What doesn’t help is that he asked for a hefty deposit, so he can easily walk away and still profit very handsomely, without having to complete the job.

“I can’t forget about it, Becky.” He says. “I’ve got to figure it out. I need to know when her and Liam got together.”

“Why does it matter? Are you going to try to sabotage their wedding?” I ask, getting very confused and agitated.

He tries to change the subject, making me nervous. “What happened to you today? How come you flew into the house like a bat out of hell, and then, when you came back, you were all...flushed...like you’d been crying or something.” The way he asks it, it’s like he’s taunting me, trying to point out that I’m no perfect angel, either.

“Quit trying to change the subject, Greg.” I warn. “What is it that you’re trying to pull here?”

“Look, Becky.” He guffaws, snarking. “I’m not trying to pull anything. If she fucked around with me while she was with Liam, then, he has a right to know, don’t you think?”

“That’s not our business, and we don’t have the time to be thinking about that, Greg. This wedding is less than two weeks away, and if you want to keep your job, I suggest that you get your head where it belongs and refocus.”

“I saw your agenda for the next three months, Becky.” He informs. The tone in his voice says that he’s one up on me, and he knows way more than he should. “You’re fucked for a photographer, and you don’t know shit about resources for that international gala opening in Dallas, either. You need me. I’ve got every contact in Dallas from florists to goddamn shoe polishers. So, I think that you ought to let me dig a little here.”

“Are you threatening me?” I turn to him, thinking that I’ll die if I’ve been had by this guy.

“No, I’m not threatening you, I’m just reminding you that you hired me for a reason.”

“Yeah, so that I’d have an extra body to help me, especially during a huge express wedding like this, not to extort me.”

He laughs, pleased with himself. “God, Becky, this is ridiculous. We don’t need to do this. Seriously.” I’m not sure if he’s back pedalling, or if he’s using another angle here. “Let’s move on, okay? Let’s just pretend that this conversation never happened.”

“Well, it might as well not have happened, Greg. We need to focus here.” I say reasonably, feeling my gut unclench. I get the feeling that there’s more to this thing with Hanna than he’s letting on. After all, if she was just a fling, then why is he so adamant on finding out the real story here? Don’t guys just like to get in and get out just as fast when it’s a one-night-stand?

“Fine. Let’s focus.” He says, relenting.

We proceed to go through the plans for the next week. We have the major stuff to be settled here, including giving the caterer a final headcount, and finalizing everything from colors, attire, and important points for the ceremony and reception, like who will be the MC and all the other people that will perform both basic and important functions. After we run through the list and get on a conference call with Hanna and Liam, we close off the day, with a clear understanding of

what each of us has to do. We've divided up the tasks evenly, giving myself the ones where Greg is in touch with people that I already know, and I'm in charge of connecting with those that are new. After our earlier conversation, I feel my back up, and I'm not letting him make new relationships on my behalf.

It's well past eight o'clock when we finally finish up, and Greg still seems like he has an endless supply of energy. He's only about five years my junior, but he could pass for a senior in high school with his motivation. "So, bright and early tomorrow?" he says, packing up his briefcase.

"Yes." I nod, feeling guarded, like I want to inspect his case before he leaves.

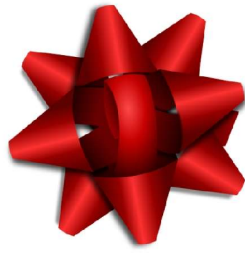
"Seven o'clock?" he checks, closing his case up.

"Sure."

"Here or at Hanna's? Catch her before she leaves for work?"

"Sounds good."

Something tells me he's going to be there before me...



Chapter 12

Travis

“**F**uck, Kurt! What did you have to go and say that for!” I hiss, not wanting to cause a scene in front of Liam and Hanna, but also wanting to let him know how not cool that was.

“Shit, I’m sorry, man.” Kurt says sincerely. His eyes are like dinner plates, and I suddenly feel bad for coming down so hard on him. “I mean it. I was just fucking around. I didn’t... I.” he looks over, watching Becky disappear into the ranch house. “What can I do to make it right, man?” he rakes a hand through his hair. His face is whiter than Becky’s.

“It’s okay, man.” I say, comfortingly, watching Laura observe the exchange. She walks over to us.

“What just happened?”

“Oh, man, I fucked up royally.” Kurt says. “I think Becky thinks Travis is boinking the girl at the sheriff’s office now, because of me and my big fucking mouth.”

Laura lifts a hand. “It’s okay. I’ll take care of it.”

“Thanks.” Both me and Kurt say on exhale. I keep looking back at the house, and watching the photographer and Greg, the asshole, every ten seconds or so, until Becky finally reappears. She looks like shit and my heart sinks. I’d never do anything to hurt a hair on her head, and even though it’s not my fault, it feels like that’s exactly what I did. I wait until they’re packing up and I pull her off to the side.

“You okay, Beck? You didn’t look so good earlier, you know, when Kurt made that joke?” my hand is on her back. Fuck it if she’s not okay with it.

“I’m fine. It was a joke.” She smiles, clearly embarrassed.

“Are you sure? You looked like you were gonna puke or something.”

“No, really, I’m fine.” She waves. And I don’t know whether she’s sloughing it off or if there’s something else going on, that I’m not privy to anymore, seeing as we’re not together.

“Becky, I’m not seeing her.” I urge. “I’m not seeing anyone, darlin’. I want you to know that.”

She swallows harshly, closing her eyes, as if the mere subject is painful. “Travis, it’s okay. It’s...not my business.”

“But I told you, I—”

She cuts me off, lifting a hand. “I know. And I believe you, Travis. I just said that it’s not my business.”

“But it is your business.” I argue. “I...” I want to say it so badly. I love every bone in her body. Every hair on her head. I’ve never stopped loving her and I never will. But if I say it, she’ll clam up, and walk away, and I want to keep her here for as long as I can.

“Travis, I have to go.” She says, gesturing to Greg, who is staring her down, like a fucking dog. I want to go over there and wring his fucking pencil neck, but I know that Becky will kill me if I do.

“Sure. Okay. I’ll see you later.” I want to kiss her so bad. I can’t help it. My eyes go to her lips. For a split second, hers go to mine, and I hang on to that look, burning it into my memory, since it’s been so long since I’ve seen it. She still loves me. I know she does. She misses it, too. She misses those little nuances that we had when we were together. I can feel it. Fuck it. I’m kissing her. I lean in and kiss her forehead tenderly. “You take care.”

She doesn’t say anything, but her eyes tell the tale. Something is going on inside those eyes of hers. I know it. My gut keeps saying so and I’m listening. As I watch her walk to that fuckhead of an assistant, I feel a shiver up my spine. He may not have a criminal record, he may not have a known face around town, and he may look good on paper, but so help me God, there is something sinister about that asshole. He’s got

that look in his eyes. I've seen it before so many fucking times I can recognize it in seconds.

Kurt walks up to me. "She okay, man?"

I nod, looking at the ground. "Yeah. She's okay. I can't say the same about that fuck for brains she's hired though. I don't like him. Not one damn bit."

"I can tell, man. And I think he knows it, too, so you better lay off, before Becky catches on."

"Kurt, so help me God, if he's got anything up his sleeve, I'll fucking kill him."

"I know you will." He rubs his hand across his chin, as if in thought. "Maybe it's time for you to have a little conversation with our friend."

"Maybe so." I say, watching him get into his car and pull out, into the street. "But anything I say to him is going to get back to Becky. And that's the last thing that I need."

"Well, it doesn't have to be you, man."

I look at him. "What, do you want to do it for me? He'll think I'm a fucking pussy, man, having someone else do my bidding for me."

"What's more important, man?"

I consider this for a moment. "Nah, he'll know that I'm behind it, anyway. It'll still get back to her."

"Up to you, Travis. But I think that if he's up to something, it's a small price to pay, having Becky mad at you. If anyone

came after my Lisa, I'd sooner have her mad at me and safe, then up shit's creek, but cool with me."

Taking a moment to absorb his point, I bite my lip. "If that's what's going down, man, I'll do it. I'd like nothing more than to tell that fucker what I think of him, and what I'll do to him if he does anything to fuck my wife over." I pause, thinking that if Becky were here, she'd correct me. "And she's not my fucking ex-wife, either, man. I fucking hate saying that word."

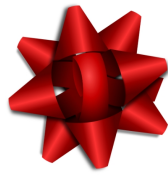
"I get it, man. It doesn't offend me at all."

Grayson comes over, holding little Grant in his arms. "Hey, man, where have you been hiding?" Kurt asks his brother.

"I was taking a nap with the tyke." He smiles. Grant is snuggling into his daddy. I rub his cheek with the back of my hand. "You wanna go see Travis?" Grayson asks his son.

Grant is such a cool kid. He'll follow me around like a lost puppy, while I work, and he's not afraid to pitch in and help. Quite the cuddler with me, too, he wraps his chubby little arms around my neck. In the corner of my eye, I can see Becky watching me from her car. Our eyes lock, and I watch her face fall, and that warm look in her eyes is replaced with that forlorn, deflated one that I've been seeing for longer than I want to admit. As Grant plays with my hair, I realize that Becky is still hurting so bad over not being able to have kids. It's so palpable it hurts me, too.

...and then I understand why she had me leave, and it scares the living shit right out of me.



Hanna

The engagement photos went well. Laura's made such a fuss over making everything perfect, and teamed with both Becky and Greg, Chris got some magnificent pictures of us from all over the ranch. We were lucky to get Chris, I'm told, and I can see why. He sends us over the digital images, promising to get those developed that we want to later, and both Liam and I pore over them, thankful that we're going to see this thing through to the end.

"God, they're beautiful." I breathe, in awe.

"Just think how breathtaking these will be with you and I all cleaned up." Liam comments, with his arm around me.

"I know. Gosh, I can't help but look at them over and over again."

"Yep, we should have just tied the knot today." Liam teases. "It's going to be hard to beat these babies."

We're using Liam's laptop to view the photos, and his background screen is a large picture of him with one of his coworkers, while they were both away for work, before him and I got serious. He's always said that that weekend with his work friend was the most fun he's ever had, which is why he refuses to change the picture. It's of him on a mechanical bull,

holding a beer in his hand. He made it to six seconds on the thing before he fell off and puked. Every time I see that picture, I snort a laugh. Liam's face is priceless.

"You want one of those things at the wedding, babe?" Liam jokes.

"A mechanical bull?" I laugh out loud. "Sure." I walk away from him, as my phone is ringing from my purse on the console table.

"Are you serious?" he blurts, teasingly, like I'd ever agree to that.

"Get two." I add, as I pick up the phone. It's my sister. "Fuck." I say.

"Great." Liam mutters, knowing that it's Cher. She's the only one that gets a response like that.

"Hey." I answer, somewhat tersely.

"Hey, guess what?" she gushes.

"What?" I say, adding mechanical excitement to my tone. It could be anything with her. She once sounded this excited because she had the perfect bikini wax done.

"I'm getting this kickass house! You should see it!" I can almost hear the words, 'way better than yours', because that's right up her alley.

"Oh yeah? When did you put an offer in?"

"Well, I haven't yet. It's not up for sale. But I met this realtor and she said that she'd call me when it is and get me first dibs

on it.”

“Does daddy know? Will he be able to front you the money for a down payment?”

“No, not yet. I’m thinking of telling him when I tell mama and daddy about the baby.”

I roll my eyes. Shrewd Cher, very shrewd. “When’s that going to be? Are you going to wait until your first trimester is over?”

“I don’t know yet.” She says, as if weighing the odds on when the best time is, and when that is, is when it’s poignant to screw as many people over as possible, namely me.

Two can play shrewd. “Mama probably knows already.”

She’s silent for a beat. “God, Hanna, you didn’t.”

“Of course not. Goodness.” My voice is low, just waiting for an in to get her to spill the beans as soon as possible. “I wouldn’t do that to you.”

“I didn’t think you would.”

“I just meant that mama’s no fool. Something about the way a woman smells when she’s expecting.”

“Well, I haven’t been around mama enough for her to take a whiff, and I’d like to keep it from them for a little while longer.”

“How come? Aren’t you dying to tell everyone? Isn’t it exciting?” I goad, hoping that she’ll cave. But this is just too good.

“It is exciting, but I’m not sure how mama and daddy are going to react is all, what with me not being married.”

“You’re not divorced, Cher. It’s kind of hard to be married again if that hasn’t happened.”

She tuts. “I know that. I just don’t want mama and daddy going off on me for not being married before getting pregnant.”

“Are you going to get divorced?” I ask, seeing if I can piss her off by talking about her ex.

“Hell, I don’t know.” she says, irritated. “I’d like to worry about this baby first.”

“That’s fair. I guess it’s kind of hard to have a shotgun wedding if you’re technically still married.”

“You’re funny. Way to shove that in my face.”

“I didn’t mean to. I was just stating the obvious.”

“Easy for you to say, Hanna. You’re just about to get married. You don’t know the half of it yet.”

“It can’t be that bad, Cher.”

“As long as you’ve got the right husband, no, it’s not bad. But if you marry an asshole like I did, it’s a different ball of wax.”

Marshall, Cher’s ex-husband, is no asshole. Aside from the fact that she was seeing Ricky on the side, the only thing that Marshall did wrong was encourage Cher to work. He believed in her, and if that’s his sin, then I’ll take it. He knew that she

was bored. He probably also knew that she was having an affair because of said boredom. Twenty bucks says that once this baby comes, and mama and daddy buy all kinds of crap for her, Cher will leave Ricky, too, for more sympathy and money.

Liam is eyeing me, guessing what the conversation is about. He rises to come over and talk in my ear at his to-be sister-in-law. My eyes widen as he blurts into the phone. “As long as you don’t do anything to fuck up our wedding, you’re golden.”

My eyes just about come out of the sockets. I just had a minor stroke. I pound him, even though my eyes are dancing, because he knows he got me. I thought for sure that the jig was up, and that he was going to rat me out, letting Cher know that I told him about her pregnancy. He winks, and I hear her gasp. “You didn’t fucking tell him, did you?”

“No.” I lie.

“You’re lying through your teeth, Hanna. I knew you couldn’t keep it to yourself.” her voice is raised. She’s pissed off.

“I swear I didn’t tell him.” I say.

“Tell me what?” Liam blurts. I smack him again. He’s enjoying this way too much.

“Hanna...” Cher warns.

“I didn’t tell him.” I shriek, but Liam’s smile is contagious. I really think he was serious earlier, about what he said. He doesn’t care what happens at the wedding. As long as we get

to be married, that's all that matters. And suddenly I don't feel as unsettled.

"She didn't tell me." Liam says out loud in a singsong voice.

"You so told him." She says flatly. "I know that you can't keep anything from him, Hanna. You sap."

"Thanks." I'm facetious. "I'm about to marry him. And based on this conversation, any idiot would have figured it out by now." I say, playing the 'I'm smarter than you' card, which almost always works, seeing as Cher is as dumb as a brick.

"So he knows?" she whines, and my battle has been won.

"He's figured it out. Plus, like I said, it was kind of obvious at the fitting, Cher."

"You mean you knew then?" her voice has raised an octave, in shock.

"Um...you ate six donuts, Miss 'I can't eat donuts, I'm vegan'. Everyone knows if they were watching you. That's why I say that mama probably already knows."

"Shit." she sighs, exasperated. "Then, why didn't you tell me?"

I shrug. "I didn't think you wanted me to know, or anyone else, for that matter." I feel my gut unfurl, thinking that I've got my sister right where I need her to be. "You might as well tell them, Cher. They're probably already a bit insulted that you haven't. They're all going to be at the wedding. You don't want anyone giving you the cold shoulder, do you?" I say, playing on the fact that it isn't enough that her friends like her,

that my friends have to like her, too. This screams at her constant need for validation.

“And nobody has said anything to you?”

“Nope. Tact, Cher. It’s a noble thing, you know.”

Liam winks at me. I wink back. I just hope that my sister catches on to the concept. “You just better hope that mama doesn’t say anything to you tomorrow at the final fitting. And y’all better tell everyone, seeing as you’re going to have to get the seamstress to put an elasticized waist on that dress of yours.”

That gets me a high-five from Liam.

Unfortunately, it sets Cher off. “You know, Hanna, you could be a little bit more supportive here. I’ve been there for you all through this wedding planning and everything, and I feel like you’re just trying to minimize the fact that I’m pregnant. Your wedding is going to last one day, but I’m going to be pregnant for nine months, and raising a baby for the next eighteen years. I think that what I’m going through is just a little bit more important.”

My brows lift. “Really?” I scoff, shocked. “Cher, life is about decisions. Liam and I made the choice to get married, and all I’m asking is for me to have my one day, just like you had your one day. I’ll support the shit out of you with this kid, but I’m telling you once, if you do anything to screw up my one day...” I trail off.

“Are you threatening me?”

“No, I’m not threatening you, I’m just asking you to have a fucking heart, Cher. You can do all the baby stuff you want after the wedding. It’s in a couple of weeks. I think you can manage.”

She’s snide. “Well, if mama and daddy already know, like you say, then this point is moot.”

“No it’s not.” I guffaw, exasperated, losing my shit. I put her on speakerphone right after I got the wink from Liam a few minutes ago. “It’s fine if the girls and mama know,” I say, referring to ‘the girls’ as the wedding party, “but if you use my wedding as a platform to announce your pregnancy, not only are you setting yourself up to look like a selfish whore, but you’re also going to make a fool of yourself and of this entire family!”

“She’s right, Cher.” Liam chimes in. “Everyone gets to have a wedding day. You got yours.”

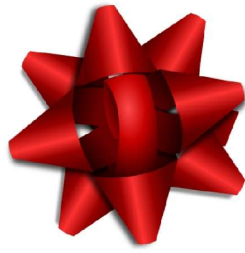
“Oh, fuck you, the both of you.” she spits. “I’ll tell anyone that I want to, when I want to. It’s a free fucking country! And, Hanna, if you go off and tell anyone else, I’ll make sure that everyone knows how big your fucking mouth is!”

“Oh yeah! Well, how about how big your fucking snatch is!” I shout, throwing my patience out the window, along with my reason and my sanity. “At least I didn’t cheat on my husband and get knocked up by some two-bit loser because you think he looks like fucking Sean Penn! Which, he doesn’t, by the way!”

Silence.

Liam looks over to see the display indicating that she hung up. He plops down on the couch next to me. My hands are in my hair. I've just dug my own grave and I know it.

Liam combs his fingers through my hair. "I think we need to take a drive over to your folks' place, babe."



Chapter 13

Becky

Just as I suspected, Greg is here before me, but luckily, Hanna has already left. “We spent the night at her folks’ place.” Liam explains. “I just came back to get a suit for work.”

“Would you like us to wait until you’re both here?” I offer.

“No, man, we’re fresh out of time, from what I understand.” he reasons. “Besides, Hanna’s in the middle of a crisis with her folks, so I’m the decision maker today.”

“What happened?” I ask, watching Greg make it look like he’s casually taking things out of his briefcase, but I can tell from the corner of my eye that he’s snooping.

“Well, it wouldn’t be a proper wedding without a family kerfluffle, now, would it.” Liam states. “Her sister’s a piece of trash and Hanna’s afraid that she’ll fuck the whole day up.”

“Oh, no. I’m guessing you know about...” I trail off, letting him fill in the blank, so I don’t overstep.

“She’s pregnant, yeah.”

Greg’s eyes dart over to Liam. “Hanna’s pregnant?”

Liam smiles sheepishly. “No, her basketcase of a sister is.”

Relief washes over Greg’s face, making me feel uneasy. My stomach starts to roll again. “Do you mind if I get a glass of water?” I ask Liam.

“Help yourself.” he gestures. “If you’re hungry, there’s croissants over there on the counter, too.”

Greg rises. “So, what’s her sister going to do to fuck things up?”

I give him a look. I thought he was sharper than that. My stomach eases slightly.

“Cher’s threatening to tell everyone about the baby at the wedding, but I think that we’ve allayed that through her folks.” Liam explains. “Hanna’s been browbeaten by Cher all her life, so she thinks that Cher has all this power over their folks, but they told Hanna that in no uncertain terms is Cher welcome to do any such thing, and they’ll make sure of it.”

“Oh, thank God. I bet Hanna’s relieved.”

“Sort of.” Liam says tentatively. “Now Cher’s pissed off that Hanna’s let the cat out of the bag, so to speak, even though most of us had already guessed about Cher, so now Cher is threatening to pull out of the wedding party.”

I laugh without a trace of mirth. “Great timing.”

“Yeah.” Liam scoffs. “Now that Hanna has ruined Cher’s big plans, she wants revenge.”

“Can’t she get someone else to fill in?” Greg asks.

“Cher’s the Maid of Honor.” Liam says, looking at Greg like he’s an idiot. I smile, thinking the same.

“Doesn’t she have a best pal or something?” Greg ventures.

“She’s already a bridesmaid, my friend.”

“So bump her up.”

“It’s not that easy, man.” Liam states. “There’s a dress. They’re not the same between bridesmaid and maid of honor.”

“Can’t Hanna make an exception?” Greg’s confused. He has no idea. I’m starting to feel like maybe he is all talk.

“Well, she could, if push comes to shove, but like I said, it’s not so easy. Just think about the repercussions here, and I’m not just talking about switching out a dress.”

“I get that. But if her sister’s being a bitch, what choice has she got?”

Liam, growing impatient, lifts a hand. “Look, I know that you guys didn’t just come here to talk about family politics. What have you got?”

I give him a rundown of the numbers that we need, and a list of the things that we're working on today and tomorrow. "I'll get you that later, once Hanna calms down." Liam states. After we finish with the quick debriefing, he suggests we come back later tonight, and we agree.

The second I get in my car and head home, I call Sara. "I think you can call off the dogs." I tell her.

"What are you talking about? Hanna?"

"Yeah. Apparently, they had a big fight, and it all came out."

Sara's tone is feigned disappointment. "Well, isn't that just a kick in the nuts. I had this whole thing planned out."

"Sorry." I chuckle. "Keep it on the back burner for now, in case plans change."

"Will do."

I pull up to my house, expecting to see Greg's car there, but instead, it's Travis's truck. Greg should be here any minute, so I feel a shiver up my spine, thinking that I better get rid of Travis before we have yet another awkward situation. "Okay, good. I gotta go."

"Why the hurry?"

"Damage control."

"Travis?"

I look at the display, wondering if my sister somehow is psychic, or if she knows why he's here. "What do you know?"

"Nothing. It was just a guess."

“Sara...” I warn.

“I swear to God, Becky, I don’t know why he’s there.” A pause. “But call me after to tell me why.” She clicks off and I scoff a laugh.

Swiftly, I walk to my door. Travis still has a key, because, technically, he still owns the house with me, since we’re not divorced. We’re not even legally separated if you’re keeping score. When I get inside, I see him going through an old box of his stuff. “What are you doing here?” I ask, keeping my tone neutral.

“Oh, I knew I had some Christmas shit tucked away in here somewhere, and I didn’t want to bother you.” he says sheepishly. “I hope I’m not intruding.”

“No, not at all, but I’ve got a ton of work to do.” I say, setting my keys on the table, and my messenger bag with my laptop in it, next to them. I want to get him out of here fast, but I don’t want to tell him why, fearing that he’ll berate me again, telling me how much he gets a gut feeling about Greg. No kidding. Message well received, and he’s right. But I’m not giving him the satisfaction.

“Sure, okay.” Travis chews on the inside of his thumb nervously. “Do you need help with anything, darlin’?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m fine, thanks.”

“Sure? You look a little nervous.” he asks, taking a step towards me. I want to hold him so bad, suddenly, but I don’t give in, for many reasons, mainly because Greg is going to

walk in that door any second. Setting my mind, keeping my feet firmly planted on the floor, I lift a hand. “Travis, really, this wedding is crazy. I have so much to do.”

“Well, where’s your handy helper?” he asks, not trying to keep the coldness out of his voice.

I hear Greg’s car pull up outside. Travis looks out the window and my heart sinks. “I didn’t want to upset you, but, yes, we have work to do, and our base is here.”

Travis places his hands on my waist. “Becky, I know you’re under a lot of pressure, darlin’. I’m not here to cause trouble. I’ll go.”

We search each other’s eyes. I want to kiss him, and he wants to kiss me, but instead, I swallow back the urge and take a step back from him. “Thanks, Travis. I appreciate that.”

He walks to the box that he pulled from the basement, and I feel like he’s taking his time doing this, just so that he can be here when Greg walks in. He can easily go out the side or the back door, but he’s making a meal out of retaping the box back up. “Travis?” I say, not keeping the urgency out of my voice.

“Yeah.” he says, just as I hear a tap on the front door.

“Can you...go?”

“Sure.”

I go to the door to let Greg in, and Travis is still taping the box. I sigh, opening the door with an eye-roll. “Hey,” Greg says tentatively, eyes scanning the room. “You got company?” He looks over at Travis. Travis tips his Stetson in a hello, but

he doesn't say anything to him. "Oh, hey, sorry. Sh...should I come back later?"

"No, it's fine." I answer. "Travis is just picking something up."

"Okay." Greg nods, tentatively stepping inside the house. I'll admit that he seems intimidated by Travis. My ex-husband is a little taller, and built a little more imposing than Greg here. Sure, it looks like Greg spends some time at the gym, but he's got manicured fingernails and perfectly coiffed hair. He's the poster boy for trust fund kids, whereas Travis was raised on a farm, and used to working with his hands, so he's rugged and he's got that virile fire in his eyes at times. He's full of a different kind of determination. I know who I'd rather be stuck on a deserted island with, that's for sure.

Plus, Travis hasn't got a lick of trepidation in his face. In fact, I think that if Greg were to have a slip of the tongue, Travis would be slick and quick, making Greg's pretty head spin. As Travis lifts the box, something falls out of it, but he doesn't notice. I walk over and pick it up. It's an old birthday card to Travis from his mama. And it suddenly hits me. Travis's birthday is very soon, in fact, it's before the wedding. This will be his first birthday since we separated. I hand him the card and it's like we're both thinking the same thing.

"Here you go." I stammer, handing him back the card. I can tell by his face that he wants to say something, but his gaze moves to Greg, who is standing by the table, taking things out

of his goddamn briefcase again. That thing is like a pacifier to him, I think.

“Do you two need some privacy?” Greg asks, not lifting his gaze.

“No, it’s fine.” I answer.

“Actually, do you mind, man?” Travis asks boldly, and I look at him like he’s just asked me to show him my panties in front of Greg.

“I’ll just be in the washroom.” Greg says, leaving the room.

“It’s my lucky number.” Travis says. And it takes me a moment to recall what he’s talking about. His birthday, the number, he’s always said is his lucky number. It’s true. We got married on the same day, he got accepted into school on the same day, and the list goes on. His superstition has always been endearing to me, but the forlorn look on his face, isn’t.

“I know, Travis.”

His gaze is fixed on my eyes. “Becky, it’ll kill me if I can’t see you on my birthday. I know you’re as busy as hell, but I just need to see you, even if it’s for five minutes. That’s all I want.”

The lump in my throat is palpable. Travis always has a way with me. It didn’t work for a long time, and that’s why when he begged me not to separate with him, it didn’t have the same effect. It seems to be growing on me again. “I’ll be there, Travis.” I tell him, not wanting to break his heart. “Is Buck planning something for you?” I ask, with a smirk. Buck,

Travis's brother, likes to throw the parties in the family. He's a real hoot. I love his parties.

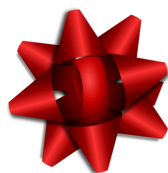
"Dunno. Probably. But it won't mean a damn thing unless you're there."

"I won't let you down." I say. "But I'm not buying y'all a present."

"You being there's my present, darlin'."

He wants to kiss me so bad, but I'm afraid that Greg is going to pop his head out at any second. I pull away before his gaze moves to my lips. I hate rejecting him, but I haven't had a choice since the breakup. With the exception of our bonus night the night we made love at Macey's birthday party, I've done nothing but walk away from him when he gets that look in his eyes. Then my phone rings, and I see that it's Sara, and I leave the room.

...later, I'll wish like hell that I hadn't.



Travis

His slimy gaze meets mine, and I feel like it's a pissing match, but I'm here to play for real money, not Monopoly shit, like he is. "You be good to my wife." I warn, lifting a finger.

I'd like to wipe the cocky smirk off his face with my fist. "Isn't she your ex-wife?"

I smile without mirth. “Listen, city boy, if you’ve got any sense at all, you’ll back the fuck off, man. I know why you’re here, you son of a bitch, and if you think for a second that Becky will play your game, you’re sorely mistaken.”

“She’s playing my game just fine, actually.” He says, as if I just asked him how his dinner tastes.

“Then she sees right through you, man. And she’s just waiting to make her move.”

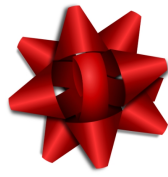
“I don’t see what business this is of yours, seeing as you’re not together anymore.”

“Listen, I love that woman more than life itself, and I’ll do anything to protect her, especially from slimeballs like you.”

He scoffs, smiling. “What makes you think I’m a slimeball? What exactly did I do to make you think that?”

I don’t have to answer to him. He’s just flapping his lips, buying time until I walk out the door, or until Becky comes back into the room, because he knows that this conversation needs to end once she does. So, I end it, with one final remark. “You’ve been warned, partner.” I tip my hat like my mama always taught me to do, no matter how you leave someone.

I swear to God I hear him mutter, ‘fuck you’ under his breath, and it takes everything in me not to go back in there and punch those words right out of his mouth.



Becky

Sara goes off on a rant about Macey's teacher and something that happened at school today. Ron's not home, so I'm up next on her list. It's too quiet out in the living room, and I know that Travis hasn't left yet, because I didn't hear the door close. Finally, when I do hear it close, I interject. "Look, Sara, I've got to go. I've got Travis and Greg out in the living room alone, and I need to make sure that Travis isn't dragging Greg's lifeless body out the door with him."

"Fine. Call me back."

I walk out to the living room, and Greg is standing there, with a sour puss on his face. "I don't know what's up his ass, but I don't have to put up with it."

"What did he say?" I ask, chiding myself for feeling a little bit like with Travis, chivalry never dies.

"The son of a bitch threatened me." he states, nostrils flaring.

"Like...physically?" I ask, thinking that there's no match.

"I...well, I don't know exactly. He just told me to watch out."

I sigh, waving. "Travis isn't going to hurt you. He wouldn't hurt a fly."

“Oh yeah?” he raises his voice. “Well, I don’t want to find out, frankly.”

A hand goes to my hip. “Let me put it to you this way, if you thought that someone was going to harm Hanna, wouldn’t you do the same thing?”

“That’s not the point, Becky. This is my job. I’m here to do a job. I’m not here to flirt with you.”

“Travis thought that we were flirting?” I chuckle, thinking how ridiculous that sounds, even though when I first met Greg, I’ll admit, I thought he was very attractive. That ship has sailed.

“Like I said, I don’t know. He just said to be nice to you.”

“Yeah.” I lift a sheaf of paper out of his pile. It has a list of all the Christmas decorations that we need to get for the wedding, now that the engagement pictures are done. God forbid we show the same background for any of them. “And what did you say?”

He hesitates. “I smart-mouthed him.”

“Well, that was your first mistake, then, Greg. Travis doesn’t put up with anyone’s bullshit, and he hates a smart mouth. He probably gave you the hereto right after that, right?”

“Well, yeah.”

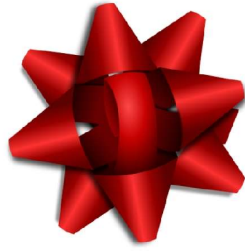
“That’s his way. You’d be smart to heed that.”

“Becky, this is bullshit. We’re both here for the same reason. I don’t need your big lug of an ex breathing down my throat.”

I look at him simply. “Then we have nothing to worry about.”

“Fine. You tell him to back the fuck off then.”

“I will.” I lie. And suddenly I would like nothing more than to watch Travis eat Greg for lunch.



Chapter 14

Hanna

Liam is quiet and respectful, but he has that look in his eyes, like he's not taking any bullshit, so I know that I need to spill the beans about Cher, whether I like it or not. Mama and daddy are out on the porch having tea when we arrive. It's nothing for us to show up unannounced, and we're always welcome, so mama's face lights up when she sees us pull into the driveway. When I say porch, it's more like a Parthenon, since the house is so big. It's really a mansion, but we don't like to call it that.

Growing up here had its moments, needless to say. Christmases were always over the top. Daddy always hired help to put all the decorations up, and he still does today. This

house has been known to be the best decorated for as long as I can remember. People actually come for a special trip to see this place when it's all decked out. Some years, daddy's even made it a competition with the neighbors. It's an affluent community, so putting up festive décor is no match for this block. Daddy's got his stuff up already, and it even looks beautiful during the day, without any lights.

The porch is set back behind a winding road. At the mouth of the road is a gated entrance, with garland strung all over it, to which there is a code, and now daddy's had the security company upgrade it, so there is a screen linked to both of their phones, showing who is here. They can both talk to visitors from their phones. But since I have a code, I bypass all that. My folks own a string of racetracks all over Texas. Daddy got into it when his daddy started one back when he was just a tyke. Mama actually worked at the track, which is how they met. It's proven very successful, and has paid huge dividends to the entire family.

I'm not ashamed to say that I haven't paid for much in my life. But I also own my own company, where I manufacture beauty products, and Liam is the CEO of his daddy's IT company. None of us have ever had to worry about money, but with enough drama to go around, sometimes I wish money was a problem in exchange. Daddy's usually at the track late at night, and I know that he's likely heading back after he has his tea with mama.

"This is a nice surprise." Mama says in greeting, rising to kiss me on the cheek, I reciprocate, and so does Liam.

“You two want some tea? Your mama just made a pot.”
Daddy offers.

“No, we’re okay, daddy. Thanks.” I say.

Liam and I take a seat on the steps. “Is that wedding planner helping out?” Daddy checks.

“Yes, she’s very helpful.” I comment. “But that’s not why we’re here.”

“Something wrong?” Mama frowns.

“To say the least.” I answer honestly, feeling a lump form in my throat. “Mama, I have something to tell you, and I’m not proud that I have to be the one to tell you.”

“What’s going on, Hanna?” Daddy asks, concern registered all over his face.

“Mama, daddy, Cher is threatening to ruin this entire wedding. We got into a big fight over it, and I’m so scared, mama. I need your help.” I plead, not wanting to sound too desperate, but the truth is, that I am.

“What is she threatening to do, dear?” Daddy asks, with a look on his face that I’m used to. It means that he thinks that the problem is much less than what I’m making it out to be. I hate that look. But that’s daddy’s attitude about everything. He never sweats. Even when my head is exploding, he’s as cool as a cucumber.

“Well, she wants to tell everyone something at my wedding, something about herself, that I’m not supposed to tell anyone, and that’s the problem.”

Mama is growing impatient, and her face tells it all, and that's another look that I'm used to. Suddenly, I feel like I'm back in elementary school. "What's Cher done, doll?" she asks with a sigh.

My gaze goes to my hands, as I'm reluctant to say. Their gaze goes to Liam. He has no problem blurting. "She's pregnant."

I look up at my folks to see that their faces are impassive, if not unimpressed. "So you know then."

Daddy looks at mama. "Strangely enough, just yesterday, we got something that confirmed what we'd already guessed."

My gaze is divided between both my folks. "What are you talking about?"

Mama chuckles. "Oh, Hanna, you haven't got anything to worry about, dear. Nobody is going to ruin your wedding, least of all your sister. She wouldn't be foolish enough, what with all the professional people attending, and we'll talk to her to make sure of that."

Liam smiles. "What gave you confirmation? Did Cher let it slip?"

"Well, we noticed that she's been eating an awful lot lately, and she cried the other day because she couldn't get her shoe on properly." Mama chuckles.

Daddy adds. "But then we got a whole bunch of junk mail the other day, and there was an anonymous letter that said exactly that...that Cher is pregnant."

Liam and I look at each other and frown. “Any idea who sent it?”

“Not a clue.” Daddy chuckles. “At first I thought it was some kind of prank.”

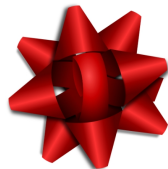
“I’m glad it wasn’t a threatening letter.” Mama says, matter-of-factly, but lighthearted.

“I’ll say.” Daddy agrees.

“Oh yeah, and something else happened that was very strange.” Mama adds.

I feel relief washing over me as I ask. “What’s that, mama?”

“Well, something we haven’t seen in years, is a pamphlet and business card from a realtor. And the note about Cher was stuck to one from some realtor named Sara...something.”



Travis

“How are them new boots working out for ya?” Buck asks me, as I walk into his shop, with Clint, Laura’s other brother.

“Just great, man. Clint’s looking for a pair, too, as a matter of fact.”

“Oh, hey, man.” Buck says. “Fancy a doctor needing a good pair of riding boots.”

“They’re not for me, they’re for my wife, Cassie.” Clint states. “Actually, I’m looking for a matching pair, to give her for Christmas.” He adds. “She’s one of those types that is hard to buy for. Always saying that she doesn’t want anything. She loves these boots, so I figure I’ll be cute and get us a matching pair.”

“Do you want them dyed or left natural?” Buck asks.

“I like these ones, actually.” Clint points to my boots. “Y’all think you can get me one like those, and pretty another pair up to suit a beautiful lady like my Cassie?”

“I sure can. Here, let me pull up the webpage, and you can take a look at some of the designs. If y’all don’t like any, I can do custom, too.” Buck gestures for Clint to come around the desk, and he clicks on the page for the different styles of boots that he offers.

Then he addresses me. “So, what’s your pleasure this year, my man? Y’all want a clown at your birthday party, or just the usual dancing girls coming out of a cake?” he teases.

“Y’all having a birthday, Travis?” Clint asks. “Geez, Will’s birthday is coming up, too. I’d almost forgotten.”

“Buck’s your man, then.” I pat Buck on the back. “He’s been throwing birthday parties for the whole family for years.”

“Yeah? You into that stuff?”

“I like entertaining.” Buck explains. “Ain’t many reasons to entertain in this field, I’m afraid. So, I’ve done these things for years.”

Clint looks around and sees the garland taped to the desk, the holly all draped throughout the drop ceiling, and the Christmas tree off to the side, with wrapped presents under it. “I see y’all are into Christmas, too, man.”

“Love it.” he says, grabbing his cell phone, which beeped, indicating that he’s receiving a text message. “So, are y’all coming to Travis’s birthday party?” he says when it is.

“Sure. What should I bring?”

“Just that beautiful wife of yours.” Buck says.

“And a gift.” I add cheekily.

“You ain’t even getting a gift from, me, partner.” Buck scoffs. “The party’s the gift.”

“I’m just teasing.” I scratch my nose. “Hey, I spoke to Becky already, and she’s coming, so make sure y’all include her, okay?”

“Already taken care of, my man.” Buck states.

I lift a hand. “Perfect. Thanks.”

Clint shows Buck a design he likes. “That’ll work.” Buck says. “I’ll show you some cool stuff I can do to make Cassie’s pair prettier.”

Clint’s phone beeps for a text message and he looks at it quickly. “I trust you, man. I gotta go. Work calls.”

I look at him. “Emergency at the clinic?”

“Yeah, just one of my patients is asking for me. He doesn’t like Grayson. Used to have a crush on Laura.” he smirks.

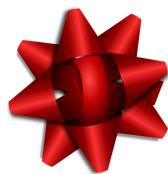
“I’ll take you back.” I chuckle. “Thanks, Buck.”

“Yeah, thanks. Just let me know when they’re ready.” Clint says.

“I’ll need a deposit.” Buck says, but he can’t keep a straight face.

“Smartass.” Clint mutters, elbowing him, as we leave. The drive back to the clinic is short, and I drop him off, and head back to the ranch. Cassie had borrowed his truck since hers was in the shop, and he wanted to slip out quick and get her Christmas present taken care of, without her knowing. Buck sends me a text message.

“Dancing girls it is.”



Becky

Both Hanna and Liam are home when we arrive. Greg’s attitude seems to have slipped a notch, as he’s not being cocky or presumptuous at all, which is a relief. I’m just hoping that he can keep his personal feelings towards Hanna to himself, seeing as, not only is she about to get married in days, she’s our client, but also that she hasn’t mentioned a word about any sort of past with Greg. I begin to wonder if it’s his imagination, and if this guy is just a freak in a suit. I tell you, the second that they tie the knot, he’s history, regardless of

how he thinks he's got me cuckolded in some twisted way. He doesn't.

Becky is all smiles when we get inside. "What's with you?" I ask.

"Cher is toast." Liam interjects.

"What do you mean? Did she already let the cat out of the bag to your folks?"

"No, but someone left an anonymous letter in their mailbox, throwing her under the bus." Hanna explains.

"But they already knew, on account of her eating her weight in donuts these days. The kid's going to come out looking like the Pillsbury Dough Boy." Liam adds.

"Don't your parents live in a huge house with all sorts of security?" I ask.

"Yeah, but their mailbox is outside of the gate. The letter was with their junk mail outside the locked box."

I smile inwardly, wondering if Sara was behind this letter. "Any indication of who sent it?" Greg asks.

"No, but it was with some pamphlet from a realtor." Liam answers. "A Sara...something."

I have to turn around so I can hide the smirk. Gotta love Sara. She delivers. Every time. We sit down and get everything on the table. All the last-minute tasks down to the rings and the vows. After we're done, we head back to the

ranch, to see what decorations we want for the big day, now that the engagement photos are done.

We go through mock-ups of everything and decide what we want, including a piece de resistance that nobody will expect and that will add a special warmth and flair to the day, given that it is a Christmas-themed wedding. Once we're done and with our list of tasks until our next meeting, I add everything to my phone, while Hanna stands next to me. She sees my calendar lit with all sorts of dates and tasks and things to do. "Oh, you've got a birthday party."

"Yeah, it's my ex-husband's. I know it seems a little awkward, but he's sweet and his brother's parties are something y'all don't want to miss."

"You're going to Travis's birthday party?" Greg interjects boldly, acting like I just admitted that I'm going to dance around naked in a go-go cage for the event.

"Yes. I've gone to Travis's parties for years, and I don't see the harm."

He snorts. "Maybe I should show up, too, then."

I give him a look, trying to hide the 'you better be joking' expression on my face. But before he gets the hint, Hanna interjects. "What's so special about them?" she asks, pure curiosity, and a little excitement is in her eyes.

"Oh, his brother Buck, he's a character. Even if it was just him and a cake, it would be fun. Buck's one of them types that can make any situation fun. We were once without electricity

for two days while we were on a camping trip out in the boonies, and he even made that fun.”

“We should invite him to the wedding.” Hanna suggests, and I think that she’s only half joking.

“Is he single?” Liam asks. “If so, we should set him up with Cher.”

Hanna gives him a look, but she’s smiling. “The trouble with Cher is that she’s got a sick sense of humor. They wouldn’t mix well.” She comes back to me. “Is this like an open party? Can we come, too? It sounds like fun.”

Awkward...

“S...sure. Buck loves to entertain.” I stammer.

“You sure you want to come and watch Becky squirm?” Greg adds, but he’s not looking at me. I mentally wish he would spontaneously combust, but it doesn’t work. Luckily Hanna just chuckles and Liam seems to ignore his comment.

Hanna pats my hand and gives me a wink. “Let me know. No pressure.”

I like her. She’s cool and she gets it.

“Are you still cool with your ex?” Liam asks, conversationally.

“Sort of.” I hesitate, being careful. I’m not sure how much of my personal life I’d like Greg to be privy to.

“Liam.” Hanna chides gently. “Maybe Becky doesn’t want to talk about this. Besides, we’ve got a ton of work to do.”

“I’m just curious is all.” Liam shrugs. “And I’m feeling a little bit like we’ve been doing nothing but talking about wedding stuff today. Just looking to change the subject. No big deal.”

“He’s a bit of an asshole.” Greg blurts. “He threatened me.”

Liam’s gaze shoots over to him. “Why did he threaten you?”

“Oh, God.” I sigh, raking a hand through my hair. “Do we really want to talk about this?”

They all seem to ignore me now that the focus is on Greg.

“I told you. It’s because he’s an asshole.” Greg guffaws self-righteously, making me want to pound him. “He’s trying to say that my business intentions with Becky aren’t genuine.” he pauses for emphasis. “I can see why Becky here left him.”

I lift a hand. “For the record, he’s not an asshole, and that’s not why we broke up. Not even close.”

Liam looks at me with grave concern on his face. “If y’all left him, why are you going to his birthday party? You don’t owe him anything.”

I sigh. “It’s not like that. We couldn’t have a baby together. It tore us apart. Not every couple can get past that.”

The muscles in Liam’s jaw are working. “Shit, I’m sorry. That can’t be easy.”

“No. It’s not.” I admit, with a heavy exhale. “It’s still fresh, too. This is his first birthday since we separated. I didn’t want

to traumatize him. He's been very sweet since the separation. Very kind and understanding."

"Good luck dating." Greg snorts.

I glare at him.

Liam's brows knit together as he looks at him. "Dude, take it easy, man."

Greg lifts a hand. "Sorry. You're right. I just don't like being accused of something I didn't do is all. Look, we should get back to business here. We've got a lot of work to do still."

Hanna interjects. "Do you want to talk about my deadbeat sister?" That gets a chuckle. "Anyone else have a sister that they swear was switched at birth?" she adds.

Liam, who was looking at Greg, like he's suddenly a suspected serial killer, turns his gaze back to his fiancé, and his expression softens.

I smile. "So, what did your folks say that they're going to do about her?"

Hanna shrugs. "They just said that they're going to talk to her is all. And that's all we need at this point. Cher won't do anything to upset mama or daddy, since they're her meal ticket."

"Seeing as she'll need a bigger one now." Liam is flippant.

Hanna smiles at him. "Stop it."

"You sure that's going to be enough?" Greg asks, unconvinced.

“Oh, believe me, it is.” Liam says, matter-of-factly. “Cher is the biggest suck up there is with her folks. That’s how come she gets away with everything.”

Hanna interjects, chuckling righteously. “That’s how come mama and daddy aren’t freaking out because she’s pregnant by someone that isn’t her husband. She can just be grateful that Marshall was happy to see her go, but I’d be willing to bet our entire wedding budget that she cheated on Marshall with Ricky.”

Liam gives her a look like there’s no contest. “Hell, yah, she did. There is no two ways about it.”

“Hey, why don’t you call Buck and invite him to the wedding?” Hanna suggests. “I think we could use a fun guy like that there.”

“Yeah, seeing as ninety-five percent of our guests are business contacts.” Liam states with a playful snort.

“You mean most of these people aren’t your friends?” Greg asks.

Liam shakes his head. “No, actually. I mean, a lot of them are coming, but the majority of our guests are people me and Hanna and her folks know through our businesses.”

“Do you want to invite more friends?” I ask. “It may be too late at this point, but it’s worth a try.”

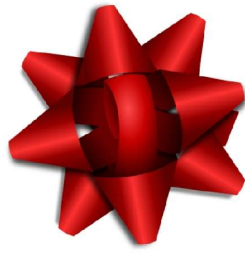
“Well, that’s why I’d like to ask this Buck guy. He seems like fun.” Hanna comments.

“But won’t your friends be upset if you invite someone you’ve never met over choosing them?” I point out.

Hanna stares at her hands. “The truth is I don’t have a lot of friends that aren’t through business. Liam’s my best friend.”

Liam goes over and gives her a hug. “It’s funny how high school kids seem to flock to the kids with the bread, but then spread like they’re running away from a fire when said kids with bread need them for something.”

Then Greg pipes up and asks a question that makes the hair on my neck stand up. “So, how did you two meet? And, when did you start to get serious?”



Chapter 15

Travis

Buck has gone all out, I must say. He's got all sorts of party games set up all over his house. It looks more like a frat house than a family dwelling, even though he's single. Buck's house is large enough to host large events, with a huge family area, which is on the main floor, and visible from outside. He spares no expense with his house, either, with cathedral ceilings and every square inch inside being either wood or leather. There are tiny white Christmas lights laced into everything through a string of garland. It looks great.

Four tables are set in the middle of the room, while a wet bar is off to the side, and conversational clusters of chairs and small tables are dispersed haphazardly. The bedrooms are on

one side of the house, while the dining area, office, workout room, and powder room, are on the opposite side. The kitchen is behind the large entertaining area. He's got an all season porch outside, too, and he uses that when he's not using the family room. For a leather boot and accessory maker, he sure packs a punch.

All of Laura's family are here, of course, plus the ranch hands, and my family. But it's when Becky and Sara show up, that I find my real smile. "Hey, darlin'." I say to Becky, giving her a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for coming."

"What about me? Am I chopped liver?" Sara blurts teasingly.

"Never mind the two of you, I'm the dude with the gift." Ron says, thumbing at himself. Little Macey is over playing with baby Grant. She loves little kids. I give Sara a kiss on the cheek and I take the gift that Ron has in his hand.

"Just what in the hell did y'all get me, anyway? You know the ropes here, buddy. No gifts."

"Ah, it's nothing special." Ron waves. "Open it later."

"Fair enough." I nod, setting the box down on a nearby table.

I'm so glad Becky is here. I can feel the grin on my face. Sara's gaze splits between me and Becky. "Well, let's go mingle, babe." She says to Ron. And I feel like that's for my benefit. She can read me like a book.

As soon as they're out of earshot, I pull Becky close, not caring if she pulls away or not. "I'm glad you're here." I

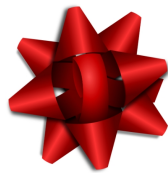
murmur, watching her face change between a combination of trepidation and something else I can't pinpoint. "You okay?"

"I'm fine." She says too quickly.

I search her eyes. "It wouldn't be a birthday without you, Becky." My voice is almost a whisper. "I miss you."

I wish like hell that I could read her mind. There's something in her eyes, but it's not the fire that I saw the night that we made love at Macey's birthday party. It's...fear? Nerves?

Then she says something that catches me completely off guard.



Becky

Coming here was a mistake. I know it the second I arrive and Travis pulls me to him. I feel like everyone is staring at us, wondering what our deal is. Are we broken up? Back together? What is Travis's ex-wife doing at Travis's birthday party? Shouldn't a new girlfriend be here instead? He's quite the catch, he should have another woman by now, what with the women that would love to be with him now that bitchy Becky is out of the picture. Why I'm thinking these things is beyond me. My stomach is rolling at the thoughts, and I stop myself from inwardly admitting that Travis holding me feels good.

So, instead of telling him that he shouldn't be making a spectacle of us, I throw him something out of left field. I don't even know where it comes from, but it comes out of my mouth, nonetheless. My words are cutting and snide. "Travis, just what did you say to Greg at the house that night that you were there?" I lift a hand before he can respond. "No, forget it. Just...stay out of my business, Travis. It is not your place anymore to stick up for me."

He swallows, digesting what I just said. "Well, that's where you're wrong, Becky." He argues kindly, licking his lips. "It doesn't matter what happens between us, darlin'. I'll always be sticking up for you when I think that someone's trying to take you for a ride."

"Travis, why are you making this so difficult?" I ask, feeling my hands shake with anger.

With a short pause, he answers. "Because I love you, Becky. I can't just turn my back on you. If y'all cheated on me or did something hurtful like that, it might be a different story, darlin'. But what we went through wasn't anyone's fault. And I understand why y'all thought it was best to end it. But that doesn't mean that I have to stop loving you. I'll never stop, Becky."

Why does he always say things like this when I'm trying to be horrible? This is why I left him or made him leave me. Because I didn't want to go down this road with him. I don't want to be like this with him, and I don't want to reject him, either, but he's not giving me any choice here. I've asked

myself a thousand times why he doesn't hate me. He should. I failed him, I failed us, and then I threw him out of his own house. He should hate me like a bad rash, but instead, I get this. "I have to go." Is all I can think of to say.

But just as I turn to leave him, I see Greg walk in with Hanna and Liam. "Shit. What's he doing here."

Travis sees him as soon as I do. "You want me to lose him, darlin'." He asks in a whisper, with his cutting gaze fixed on Greg.

"No, it's fine. It just doesn't make sense." I state. "He complained to Hanna and Liam that you threatened him, yet he's at your party?"

"It makes perfect sense, Becky." Travis counters. "He wants in on your territory. You'll notice that he came with your clients."

"I need to go and have a word with him." I say.

"No, I think I do." He says flatly. "Why the hell did Buck even let him in the door, I don't know."

"Because he doesn't know who he is, and he came with Hanna and Liam, my clients."

Travis looks at me, confused. "How does Buck even know them?"

"We got to talking about your other parties before, and Hanna was intrigued, so I took them over to his shop and introduced them. Hanna wanted to come to the party, and you know Buck."

“Yeah,” he scoffs. “I know Buck.”

There are so many people in this room, Liam, Hanna and Greg don't even see us yet. It's hard to believe how many people Buck can fit in this place. Hell, Liam and Hanna could almost have their wedding right here in his goddamn living room. Sara walks over and mutters to me. “Isn't that Greg?”

“Yes. It is.” I say acidly. “I'm going to go over there and make sure he's not trying to steal my two best clients.”

Travis places his hand on my waist. “Baby, let me go deal with it.”

My lips purse. My voice goes cold. “Travis, no. These are my clients, this is your birthday, I've got this.”

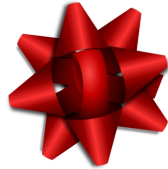
“Well, I know you've got this, darlin', but I know that that sumbitch is afraid of me, and I don't want him stressing you out. You're looking awfully pale, Beck.”

Sara studies my face. “Yeah, Becky, Travis is right. You look exhausted.”

Even though I'm terribly exhausted, and feeling anxiety build up the more I stand here, with my ex-husband's arm on me, my caustic business associate moving in on my two largest clients, and now my sister taking sides, I feel like I need to get away, so I do. “I'm fine.” I spit, stomping over to Greg.

Buck catches my gaze as I walk over, eyes fixed, shoulders squared.

...but I don't quite make it there. Instead, it's like the world goes into slow motion, and it feels like I'm swimming to Greg. Then all I hear is voices as my cheek makes contact with Buck's expensive hardwood floor, and everything goes black.



Travis

I feel my feet move so fast once her body almost makes contact with one of the drinks tables. The sumbitch, Greg, I swear to God I see a smirk on his face as my wife tumbles to the floor. But I'm too interested in reaching her as fast as I can to care. The table turns on its side as Becky collapses. "Becky!" I shout, running to her. Sara's squeal is audible from the other side of the room. In seconds I'm on the floor, shouting to Buck to call nine-one-one.

"I'm already on it, brother." Buck says, with his phone in his hand. "Everybody give her some air, please!" he demands, voice rising.

Clint and Grayson are not here, as one is covering at the clinic, and the other is at the hospital. A fine time for two doctors we share space with to not be here, I know, but it is what it is. But Laura is here in a heartbeat, more to comfort Sara than anything. "Oh my God, I knew there was something wrong." Sara comments. "I think she's taken on too much, frankly."

I place a hand on Sara's shoulder. "Sara, this isn't the time." I say directly, knowing full well that she's going to talk about the wedding and the separation, when ears are here that shouldn't be hearing that right now. Thank God Ron catches on and takes Sara over to check on Macey.

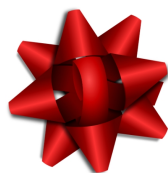
"Here, Travis." Buck says, handing me a pillow. "Put her head up on this."

"No, don't move her, Buck." Laura urges. "In case she's hurt herself when she fell. Grayson's always telling me that."

"Fair enough." Buck nods.

"Oh, darlin', what's going on." I murmur to Becky, combing her hair through with my fingers. "Come on, baby. Wake up." But she doesn't. And I end up holding her hand in the ambulance all the way to the hospital.

...looks like my birthday this year isn't going to be a lucky day. So much for my lucky number after all, huh.



"Have y'all heard anything?" I ask Grayson, who is the doctor on call in the emergency department. You would think that Becky's been here decorating for Christmas. The place looks like Santa Claus puked in here. Garland is hung all up and down a rail that runs down each hallway wall, Christmas banners are taped to the walls, phoney miniature Christmas

trees stand on each countertop in each little vestibule, including where Becky lies. She's half in and out of consciousness, but with the pallor of her skin, dehydration and exhaustion I think is the only thing that can explain it.

I pray every second that that's what it is. My mind won't go anyplace else. The thought of anything being wrong with Becky I can't even fathom. I won't fathom it. Not for a second. As I sit next to her, on a metal chair inches from the bed, I plead that Grayson's heard something from the blood tests that they did moments ago. "No, nothing yet, man. But you'll be the first to know."

"Thanks." I nod.

Sara and Ron came with us to the hospital, while everyone else stayed back, including Buck, who didn't want to leave a house full of people. He said he'd send everyone home at any rate, but it still wouldn't have been right for him to leave them all. I look over at Becky, and her eyes open. She looks awful. But most of all, she looks so sad. "What's the matter, darlin'?" I ask tenderly.

"God, if I'm sick, Travis. I don't know what I'm going to do."

I squeeze her hand. "Well, love, you'll get through it, that's all. There is nothing that you've not been able to get through since I met you."

She swallows, and a tear falls down her cheek. "Travis, that's not true, and you know it."

“Becky, you got through it, darlin’.” I counter, stroking her hand with my fingers. “You coped and did what y’all had to do. You’re still here and you’re still sane, and that counts for something.”

The look on her face is so hopeless, it tears my heart out. “Travis, I may still be here, but a piece of me died when it all fell apart.” She gasps, and I rise to hold her tight.

“A piece of me died, too, darlin’. But you and I can find a way. I think we already are finding a way. It’s just a...a new normal, Becky.”

“Travis, I don’t know if I’ll ever get over this.” She hisses emotionally, and then sniffs, wiping the tears off her eyes. “I’ve never had to deal with failure before, and I...I don’t know how to yet.”

“Becky, we don’t need to worry about this right now, darlin’.” I reason, pulling back to look into her eyes. “Right now, we need to get y’all better again.”

The tears pool in her eyes as she looks at me with such a desperate look, I almost have to look away, it’s so painful for me. “Travis, what if I’m really sick? I’ve never collapsed before in my life.”

“But you’ve also never taken on so much before, Becky. Something’s gotta give, darlin’.”

“Travis, I’ve not been feeling so well for a while, and I’m scared.”

“Well, why didn’t you say something, Becky?”

“Because I’m too busy to get sick, Travis.” She whispers, tears falling down her cheeks. “And I just thought it was anxiety. I heard that that can be a terrible thing, Travis.”

“If that’s all it is, Becky, that’s something y’all can deal with.”

“Knock knock.” We hear a familiar voice call, and then Clint’s face appears from the other side of the curtain. He’s dressed in street clothes.

“Hey, Clint. You got the clinic all closed up?” I ask, handing Becky a tissue, so she can wipe her face.

“Yeah. I heard that you had a bad spell tonight.” He says, addressing Becky.

“I did.” She says as she blows her nose.

“Well, the blood’s being done now, sweetheart. We’re just waiting for the CT scanner to be ready, and we’ll take y’all down for one of those, and take it from there.”

“What’s the CT scan for?” I ask.

“She lost consciousness, man. Gotta check and make sure she didn’t hurt her noggin.”

“Ah, okay.” I nod, showing how medically challenged I am. Environment and horses are my forte, not this kind of stuff. “You heading home now?”

“Na, Cassie’s back at Laura’s with everyone else. I’ll go join them.” He looks warmly at Becky. “Looks like we’re all

keeping vigil for you, darlin'. Y'all make sure you keep us posted."

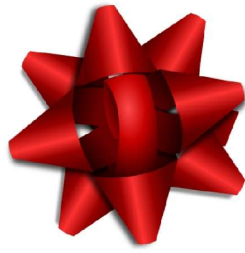
"We will." I answer for her, since another wave of emotion hits her.

Clint walks over and gives her a hug. "Ah, come on, Becky. You're going to be fine."

"Clint, this has never happened to me before." She sobs. "There's something wrong."

Then I feel it in my stomach. The fact that I've been feeling for weeks now that something is wrong. Sure, I was right about Greg, but that's not it. Or, at least, that's not all of it, anyway. Something in my gut has been telling me that there's something bad that's going to happen. I try to swallow the dread but it's no use. The proof is in the pudding right here. Becky's collapsed tonight, and now she's in the hospital. Today's my birthday, and up until now, this has always been the best day of the year, but it seems like since Becky and I broke up, that now this theory is right down the toilet.

Now, perhaps, this is my curse.



Chapter 16

Becky

My stomach is rolling, my head is spinning, I can't stop crying, and I've never been so scared in all my life. If I'm sick, I'm going to let so many people down, as if I haven't already let so many people down. I hate myself for needing Travis, and for loving that he's here for me, even though I've punished him for something that he didn't do. I don't deserve him. Half of me wants to hold him tight to me, which always makes me feel better, but the other half is telling me that it's not fair to keep leading him on like that.

I never realized until now just how overwhelming my life is. At the same time, I'm more successful now than I've ever been, and more independent, too. But I'd give it all away in a

heartbeat if things were different. If I could take it all back. But I can't. And as I look into Travis's eyes, as the night grows longer and longer, and there are no answers still, I could swear I see a hint of hopelessness and fear in his eyes. Something that I've never seen before. Travis is unstoppable. Hell, I threw him out, and he's still not giving up. Thoughts keep swirling around inside my head, when suddenly it's too much.

"Travis, hand me that sick basin, please." I utter quickly, feeling the bile rise in my throat.

He swiftly gives it to me and holds my hair back as I wretch into it. Sara walks in just as I finish puking. "Fuck, where the hell is Grayson." She gasps, rushing over to me. "We've got to get this figured out, Becky."

"I'll go see if I can track him down." Travis says, leaving with Ron.

Sara takes the basin from me and places it on the table next to me. "Do you feel any better after that?"

I can't stop crying. "No. Sara, what am I going to do?"

"Just what everyone else does, Becky. You take it day by day." She says, giving me a hug. Then she changes the subject. "Mama's worried sick. Daddy's trying to keep her calm. I think he gave her a shot of brandy."

I chuckle at that. My mama hasn't drunk a drop since she got tipsy at her fortieth birthday. That's the one and only time we got video evidence that my mama can sing all the lyrics to 'I

Will Survive', even though she claims she hates the song. "God, it must be bad." I chuckle as I blubber.

"Gosh, where is my sister Becky? Is she in there?" Sara says to me, searching my eyes. "Come on, you've been through worse than this."

"Sara, I've never been sick before. Sure, I've had ups and downs in my personal life, but I've never had to deal with something like this."

"Well, that's why y'all have an army of friends and family to help you."

I change the subject. "Where's Macey?"

"With mama and daddy. She doesn't know what's happened. I think daddy has his hands full with mama already."

"Did they tell anyone else?"

Sara shakes her head. "I asked them not to. Not until we know what's going on. There's no sense causing a fuss if we're just going to leave people hanging, Becky."

I think about that for a second. "Sara, I don't want anyone to know. Even if this turns bad. I don't want people to look at me differently."

"Now, Becky, let's take things one step at a time, okay? Let's not talk like that until we know." She urges.

"But, Sara, I collapsed. Passed right out on Buck's living room floor." I remind poignantly. "That can't mean good things."

Sara tuts. “Becky, lots of people pass out for lots of reasons. Don’t just think the worst.”

I swallow, and then Greg comes into my mind. “I bet you that sumbitch is dancing right now.”

“Greg?”

I nod. “Yeah. I bet you he slipped me something.” I joke. “He’d love nothing more than to see me fall, so he can take over and pick up the pieces.”

“And just what in hell were they doing at that party, anyway? What business did he have to be there?”

“He came along with Hanna and Liam. I introduced them to Buck and he invited them. I guess Greg jumped at the chance. He must have come over just when he thought that they’d be leaving for Buck’s.”

“Asshole.”

“That’s putting it mildly.”

“Becky, I sure hope y’all are showing him the door after this.”

“Sara, I can’t. He’s got Chris, and I need a goddamn photographer.” I say, frustrated. “I haven’t got a choice. He’s got to stay until after the wedding.”

She purses her lips, unimpressed. “Well...keep the asshole on a short leash until then.”

“Believe me, I’m trying to.”

We hear voices coming down the hall, and then Ron, Travis and Grayson appear. “How are we all doing here?” Grayson asks me.

“I puked.” I shrug. “It just keeps getting better.”

“The lab has let me know that they’re just doing the analysis of your blood now. I’ll go get you some Gravol in the meantime.” He says, as he takes the sick basin away and leaves.

“Thanks, Grayson.” Sara says. And I notice that she steps out of the way for Travis, while she goes to the other side of the bed with Ron.

“Gosh, y’all would think you got your hands on this place.” Ron comments. “People are sure getting into the Christmas spirit this year.”

“I’ll say.” Sara agrees. “It’s kind of nice, though, isn’t it?”

“I think, this year, we can all use a little extra Christmas spirit.” Travis says, taking his hand in mine. Then he looks at me. “How are y’all feeling, darlin’?”

I think about it for a moment, and then I shake my head. “I don’t know.” Is the only answer I have. I have a million things to do, so many people to answer to right now, and this is the last place that I need to be, and the very last thing that I need to be dealing with. But I guess that’s how it works, right? Nothing ever happens when you want it to happen, and everything always comes at the worst of times. I think they call it Murphy’s Law. Damn Murphy.

“I’ll go give daddy a call.” Sara says. “Make sure mama isn’t driving him nuts.”

“I’ll go see if Grayson’s got that Gravol.” Ron states. And I get the feeling that they want me and Travis to be alone...a lot.

Once they leave, he draws in a deep breath and releases it. “You need anything, darlin’?”

“To not be here.” I scoff.

“Nobody ever wants to be in a hospital, Becky.” He says warmly.

“I know that, Travis.” I say, irritated.

He just smiles at me, despite my cutting tone. Why doesn’t he ever get angry at me? I am being such a bitch, and he’s just taking it all in. Sometimes I wish he’d just bite back. But his dinner plate eyes tell the tale. And I back off. Sara comes in a few minutes later. “They’re playing a video game.”

“Mama, too?” I chuckle, shocked.

“Like I said, I think daddy slipped her some brandy.”

Travis scoffs, grinning. “That I’d pay to see. Remember that whole ‘I will Survive’ incident?”

I look at Travis. He’s been in my life almost my whole life. He has almost the same history as I do. The same memories. Funny thing is, he cherishes the ones that I cherish, and I can tell by the smile on his face. I’m looking at him admiringly when Ron walks in, with Grayson in tow. “Okay, there are far too many people in this room.” Grayson states. He’s all

business, with a file folder in his hand, and I'm guessing that my test results are back. "Sara, Ron, y'all want to step out for a moment, please?"

Sara pipes up, and I want to crawl into the nearest hole. "Grayson, anything y'all have to say, you can say it in front of us. We're her family."

A look that I've never seen before comes over Grayson's face. "Sara, with all due respect, y'all need to step out."

My stomach drops. This is not good news. My hands start to shake. I can feel my chin quiver. Travis interlaces his fingers through mine and it gives me a slight comfort, but I don't think that anyone is ever prepared for the worst, are they? I feel like I need the sick basin again, but it isn't there, so I swallow the bile back down again.

"Alright, fine." Sara seethes, pursing her lips, looking him up and down, like he just insulted her, and I guess he did.

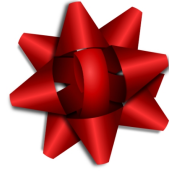
"Come on, baby." Ron says, taking his wife's hand. "Let's go for a walk. Let Grayson do his job."

My hand goes to my mouth, my eyes are fixed on my feet, that poke up from under the blanket.

"What's going on, Grayson?" Travis asks softly, like if he speaks any louder, it'll make whatever horrible news that is coming my way, much worse.

Grayson draws in a breath as he closes the curtain, lending us privacy, even though we're the only ones in the four bed ward.

...and when he speaks again, nothing, and I mean nothing, could ever prepare me for what I'm about to hear.



Travis

Becky's hand is trembling in mine. I'm trying like hell to stay calm, but I think I'm as terrified as she is. This woman, this incredible, beautiful woman, means everything to me. She is my everything. Always has been and always will be. And if anything were ever happen to her, why, I think I'd rather die first. And that's the truth. Grayson's face is set as he draws in a deep breath and lets it out, a signal that I'm guessing can't mean anything good is going to come out of there. He looks at the paper, and then he looks at Becky. He purses his lips and nods, and then he says two words that I never thought I'd hear in my life. I figured I would hear, 'you're dying', 'you're concussed', even, 'you're fine', but the two words that come out, I have to rewind about a dozen times before they register.

"You're pregnant."

I think I stop breathing.

I'm pretty sure that Becky stops breathing.

We both stare into space for a moment, and I feel her hand stop moving. My fingers stop stroking her skin.

"Um..." I lick my lips. "What?"

Becky blinks like six times.

“Lord, I wish I had a camera, so everyone can see the looks on your faces.” Grayson says softly, still in his doctor voice.

Becky looks at me, as if to say, ‘did I hear right?’

I swallow, eyes widening a bit, neck craned slightly.

Grayson pats Becky’s knee and says, still all business. “Congratulations. There’s that there...Christmas miracle y’all ordered.” And walks away. “I’ll give y’all a minute.” He frowns, winking, enjoying this.

You can hear a pin drop in here.

It suddenly dawns on me. My wife is having a baby. My wife, the woman that I love more than life itself, is having my baby. The one thing that we’ve tried and tried and tried to have, but it seemed to be the impossible task. While others around us were getting pregnant by sharing the same goddamn soap, we were going to fucking fertility specialists, and even with their help, we couldn’t do it. We couldn’t do it so bad that it tore us apart. And now, my God, it seems unreal. But what seems even more unreal is that my wife, the woman who wanted so badly to give me a son or daughter, that she couldn’t face me anymore, knowing that she couldn’t give me the one thing that we both wanted, is now carrying our child.

More than anything, even more than having a baby, I just wanted my Becky back. And the thought that maybe now she might be able to face me again, as her husband, the man that she never let down, and let me back into her life again, why,

that thought is a million times better. And the lump comes to my throat so quickly I can't stop it. And as I've been thinking these things, I hadn't noticed that Becky's face is still registering shock. I hunker down, so we're eye to eye, letting the tears well up in my eyes. "No, you didn't imagine that, Becky. In case y'all were thinking that." I say softly, draping a loose strand of hair over her ear. "We're having a baby, darlin'." My voice cracks. I swallow it back, but the tear comes down my cheek.

And I hadn't seen that her eyes had been welling up, too. Her chin quivers, and I rest my forehead on hers. I gasp. "I love you so much, Becky."

I never thought I'd ever hear her say it again, but she does. "I love you, too, Travis."

God, if I never get any other gift for the rest of my life, I wouldn't care. Hearing those words come out of her mouth after so long, man, I couldn't ever ask for anything more. She gasps, grasping the back of my neck with her hand, pulling my face into hers. I slip my arms around her, and pull her to me, and suddenly we're holding each other like we're each other's lifeline, like we're about to plummet over a waterfall or something, and we have to cling to each other, or we'll both die. We're both gasping and crying, happy tears, too, murmuring things to each other that are almost undecipherable over the sheer emotion that has overcome us.

"I love you to the moon and back, baby." I say finally, pulling back, as we hear Ron and Sara return.

Sara's face registers concern as she immediately goes to the other side of the bed, combing her fingers through Becky's hair. "What is it, Becky? What's wrong?" she asks, pulling her sister to her chest.

"Oh, something nobody would expect." I say, sliding a finger under my eye, wiping the tears.

"What's going on, man?" Ron asks, all business.

"It seems that we're having a baby." I explain, since Becky's crying so hard, she can't speak.

Ron's face softens, turning into a smile. "Well, look at that. See, y'all went to all them doctors and things, turns out all you needed to do was get her drunk."

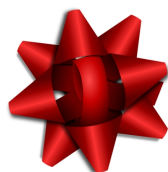
Sara lifts, looking at her sister, while slapping her husband from behind. "God, Becky, y'all can borrow Macey's room any time y'all want to."

"Something in the sheets, I'll bet." Ron adds.

"Stop." Sara tuts, good-naturedly.

Becky, finally composing herself, looks up at me with a slight grin. "Looks like your lucky number strikes again."

I kiss her lips, not caring if she gives me hell for it. "You bet your bottom dollar it does, darlin'." I wink.



Becky

After spending the night in the hospital, getting fluids, that CT scan, and some much-needed rest, I get to go home, with a clean bill of health. I can't stop touching my belly. I can't believe that there is a baby in there. Even though I feel like shit, now that I know why, it's so worth it. It's bad luck to tell anyone about a baby until the first trimester is over, but in this case, there isn't much choice, since I sort of collapsed in the middle of a birthday party with a guest count of at least fifty, most of whom I know well, too. Besides, I know I won't last if I have to keep it a secret. I'm too happy. It's too good not to enjoy.

Travis drives me back home, his hand not leaving mine. I'm not sure what this should mean for him and I, but it definitely changes perspective. When I look at him, I don't feel the same as I did since we broke up. At the end of the day, I am sort of glad that we split up for the time that we did, because if we had fought like cats and dogs, saying regrettable and irreversibly hurtful things to one another, there would be no looking back. We left each other in a good place, not in a hateful place, where there would be possibly too much healing to overcome.

He comes inside the house, and I don't know why, but I didn't realize how unlike home it's felt since Travis left. I think to myself that in about seven months time, there's going to be a baby here, too. That thought makes me smile.

“What's that smile for?” Travis asks, pulling me to him.

“Just thinking that we’re going to hear little cries in the house soon.”

He smiles. “If it’s my kid, ain’t no little cries are happening. Have you heard the stories my mama’s told about me?”

I chuckle. “Well, that’s true.”

“You need anything, darlin’?” he asks, kissing my lips, making me feel so warm inside it’s like I’ve just drunk a big mug of hot chocolate.

“No, I’m okay, but I really need to get back to work.”

“Grayson said that you should be taking it easy until those prenatal vitamins do their job.”

“Travis, I’ll be fine. I’ve already taken them, and Hanna and Liam are coming over here, so it’ll be okay.”

“What about Greg?” he asks, and I credit him for keeping the snark out of his voice.

“He’s coming, too.”

“Just be careful, Becky. He’s bad news.”

I sigh, but I’m too happy to get upset. “I know he is. As soon as this wedding is over, he’s history.”

“And the only reason why you’re keeping him is because of Chris?”

I nod. “Yes. I don’t know anyone else who can shoot a wedding on less than a week’s notice.”

“What about Luellen? Hawk’s wife?”

Hawk is Grayson and Kurt's brother. He and their other brothers own a ranch in El Paso, where Kurt and Grayson are originally from.

“Doesn't she live in El Paso?”

“Yeah, but I'm sure if we asked, she could help out.”

“I don't know, Travis. That's a lot to ask, and if she's a photographer, she'll be booked.”

“It's worth a try to get rid of this dirtbag.”

“Travis, you didn't see the engagement shots that Chris did. He's amazing. He captured every speck behind the lens. Every shot, even the rejected ones, were perfect. I'm not sure if anyone else can beat that. And I only want the best for Hanna and Liam.”

“Emma said that one of Luellen's photos they use for their ranch brochures, darlin'. She's gotta be good if they did that.”

“That's great that she shoots horses nicely, Travis, but does she do weddings like that.” I point out. “This business is all about referrals. And if I don't deliver, the whole town knows about it. I need to stay with what I know is the best.”

“Even if it means getting hosed by an asshole, darlin'?”

“I can handle Greg, Travis. I can be an asshole, too. And I'm going to have to be, if I'm going to be raising one of your kids.” I can't help the smile. I'm too happy to get irritated.

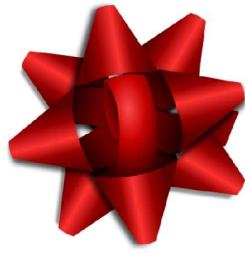
That gets a smile out of him, too.

There's something that I've been wanting to ask him since he walked in the door. But I'm not sure if we're ready for it yet. I ask him all the same, just because his face is what I want to see later, when all the dust settles. "What time will you be home?"

He kisses my lips, letting it linger sweetly, and I drink it in. God, I miss his kisses. He's always been a kisser. Every chance he got he was always kissing me. I miss that. "Man, have I been waiting a long time to hear those words, darlin'." He answers.

"There's a lot more words to be said in the next seven months, so brace yourself."

"Looking forward to it."



Chapter 17

Travis

“Hey, buddy.” Kurt chuckles, looking like he’s surprised to see me at work. “What the hell are you doing here? I thought you’d be spending the day with Becky.”

“Ah, she’s got to work, man. I figure I’d better stay out of her hair today.”

“I hear congratulations are in order.” Will says, coming out from behind the barn, overhearing.

“Yeah, thanks.” I say, as he pats me on the back. “Never thought I’d see the day, man, that’s for sure.”

“Grayson says she’s like nine weeks along?” Kurt checks.

“Yeah,” I nod. “We’ll know for sure at the sonogram tomorrow.”

“Bet she didn’t expect that, huh.”

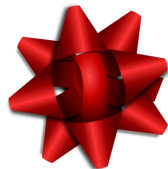
“Neither one of us did. Grayson said he wished he had a camera on account of our faces.”

“So is the separation over, man?” Will asks.

“She asked me what time I was coming home.” I say, matter-of-factly.

“Way to go, buddy.” Kurt congratulates.

They have no idea. This could not have turned out better. Not only do I have the woman I love back, but we’re also having a baby together. What could top that? Absolutely nothing, that’s what.



It’s great to pull up in the driveway at home again. For the little that I have at the ranch, it fits in the cab of my truck. I decide to leave it in there for now, because I can’t wait to see my Becky. She still looks tired but the smile on her face is telling. “How’d you do today?” I ask her.

“Well Hanna and Liam feel awful that I got so sick and they blame themselves. But thankfully we’re just about done, for planning, anyway, so there isn’t much left.”

“And what about Greg? Was he less of an asshole today?”

“He jibed me some for getting pregnant and made a joke about whether or not it’s mine, but Liam shut him down pretty fast.”

“I’d like to punch that kid square in the jaw. If Liam gets first dibs, though, I can live with that.”

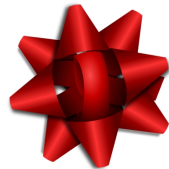
She smiles. “Are you hungry?”

“I could eat. You want to go get something?”

“My mama dropped something off for us. We just have to warm it up.”

“My favorite? Her marinated ribs?”

She wraps her arms around my neck, filling my heart. “You’ll have to wait and see.”



After eating the delicious ribs, I insist that Becky take the night off. We throw in a movie and snuggle on the couch. My arms are around her and her head is on my chest, and I couldn’t be happier if I just won a million dollars, and that’s the truth. My lips keep touching her head. I can’t believe I’m here. It’s the best birthday Christmas miracle ever. Becky cuddles into me further. “Are you purring, darlin’?” I tease.

“This is nice.” She murmurs against my chest. Then she lifts her head and kisses my lips. “We won’t be able to do this for a whole lot longer, once my belly gets bigger.”

“We’ll figure out another way to cuddle, darlin’.”

“I know.” She leans her chin on her hand, as it rests on my chest. Her eyes are on mine. The fireplace is glowing on her face, making her look luminous. “I just keep thinking about all the things that are going to change, you know, with me being pregnant.”

I search her eyes. “But you couldn’t be happier.”

She’s smiling with her eyes now, too. “I don’t know, Travis. I just think that God wanted us to go through a little something to get to where we are. I can’t figure out why, but I’m glad that he blessed us with a baby finally, after all these years.”

I kiss her lips. “I’m done trying to figure it out, darlin’. The Lord works in strange ways, you know.”

“That he does.”

“You look tired, Beck.” I say, pushing a piece of hair off her face. “Why don’t you go on to bed, hm? I’ll put the dishes away and tidy up and be up shortly. I know you said you’ve got an early morning.”

“Yeah. I do.” She admits. The truth is, I’ve got an early morning, too. In fact, every morning is early on a ranch. “I just don’t want to move from here.” She chuckles.

“We can cuddle in bed, too, darlin’.” I kiss her forehead. “You go on. I’ll be there in five minutes.”

“Okay.” She says reluctantly, making me snuffle a soft laugh. She’s so sweet and she doesn’t even know it. Five minutes later, I head to the bedroom. She’s standing there, by the dresser, in a silk nightgown. It goes to her ankles, but there are slits on either side that extend to her upper thigh. The spaghetti straps are criss-crossed in the back, with her flesh open, and the front plunges into a v, just between her breasts. She couldn’t be more beautiful if she tried.

“God, Becky.” I breathe. “Where did you get that?”

She grins. “It was actually your birthday present from Ron. It was supposed to be a joke but look who’s laughing now.”

I smile. “You opened my present?” I’m impressed.

“Sara told me to. Ron let the cat out of the bag and told her what it was. I heard the slap over the phone. So glad you didn’t open it in front of everyone. That would have been humiliating.”

“Remind me to punch him in the face, and shake his hand, next time I see him.” I look her up and down. Her breasts are definitely swollen with the pregnancy. They lay on her chest, perked up perfectly. I take a step towards her, and place my hand on her belly. “It feels hard.”

“I was hoping I’d be the one saying that.” She says, but she can’t keep a straight face, and we both end up laughing. I kneel, so I can touch her belly with my hands, palm down.

“It does feel hard, Beck. You feel that?” I ask her softly.

“I didn’t notice until today. I guess I’ve been so busy, I wasn’t paying attention to the changes in my body.”

I kiss her belly, and then I rub my nose on it. “Hi, baby.” I whisper. “I can’t believe you’re finally here. You’re gonna love us. We’ve wanted a baby for so long. You’ll be spoiled before you’re even born.”

Becky giggles. “That’s for sure. This kid will need for nothing.”

I kiss her belly again. “I think if it’s a girl, we should name her Hope.” I look up at her. “Because if it weren’t for her, we wouldn’t be together, and I don’t know about you, Becky, but I sure felt hopeless not being with you.”

Becky swallows, and I see that her eyes are glossy with tears. “I think that’s a fine name, Travis.”

“What if it’s a boy?”

“Depends how he comes out.” She comments with a playful grunt.

I snuffle a laugh into her belly and give it a final kiss, before coming to meet her eyes. My voice is soft. “You better take those jammies off before I put you down on that bed and make sweet love to you, darlin’.”

Her eyes have fire in them. “I was hoping that’s exactly what you would say.” She lifts her arms over her head, grabbing an end with one hand, and she peels the garment off in one fell swoop. Before me, I have the most beautiful woman in the world, and she’s all mine. I bite my lip, drinking her in, feeling

the effect that she's having on me below the belt. My zipper is tighter against my body, so I unzip it and undo the button, while Becky pulls my shirt over my head. I've never wanted her so badly before in my life. My pants and briefs are off in seconds.

Before I kiss her, I ask. "Are you sure you're feeling up to this, darlin'?"

Snaking her arms around my neck, pressing her body against mine, she says. "Oh, Travis, you have no idea the things that my body is doing right now, honey. But right now, you're gonna like it."

"I'd say I'm gonna love it." I counter, tilting my head, parting my lips, hungry for hers. My tongue finds hers, as I suck her bottom lip, making her moan instantly, and while my one hand makes a trail down her body, grazing her breasts, belly, and finding her wetness. I circle her clit with my thumb, while thrusting my middle finger inside, making her whimper. My other hand caresses her breast, deliciously pinching her nipple.

"God, Travis." She pants with need.

My lips don't leave hers, as I continue to bring her intense pleasure, and I can tell, because her tongue is deeper in my mouth, and her hand finds my rock hard cock, as she kneads it, pumping it up and down, reciprocating. She bites my lip, breathing hard, and I grunt, feeling her warm, soft hand touch me in the place that's needed to be touched by her for a while. Her clit is soaked with desire, and swollen, telling me that

she's getting close, and I know that she can come this way, so I keep going. When she cries in my mouth, tongue in my mouth, I feel her insides pulse, as her first orgasm courses through her, making my cock twitch, making me want more.

My fingers guide her through her climax, and then I lift her onto my waist, sliding into her, as I walk to the bed and lie her down. Still breathless, Becky's tongue continues to dance with mine, as I thrust inside her gently, suddenly fearing hurting her. She picks up on the hesitation. "Travis, it's okay." She chuckles comfortingly, still with heavy breaths. "I need you."

"Are you sure?" I ask, through slow thrusts.

She nods. "Yes. The baby's well protected in there, honey. And, God, I need you so bad." Her voice is pleading.

Sliding my hands to her rear, pulling her open further, I answer her, hitting that spot inside that I know is dying to be touched. Her eyes roll into the sockets as mine close, and we enjoy making love the way it's supposed to be enjoyed. My cock gets harder and harder as I feel her tighten further and further, until I feel her start to quiver, and I squeeze my eyes tight, trying like hell to hang on, wanting desperately to make her come once more. I pump her hard and fast, feeling her body quake inside, hearing her cry out again, this time digging her nails into my back.

I purposely lose my rhythm, so I can hang on, letting her finish. And that's when I go in for the kill. Without missing a beat, I help her onto me, sliding onto my back, and she rides me artfully, as my thumb, once again, finds her clit. My mouth

is on her breasts, as she revels in the sucking and licking, melting into me as I continually fill her repeatedly, riding on the aftershocks of her climax. Her breasts bob erotically in my face, bringing me to the edge, and as she leans down and sucks my nipple, it's on.

My thumb circles her faster, as my dick thrusts faster and faster, and it's suddenly a pleasure tug of war, between me and my beloved. Until we both lose, and come gloriously together, moaning, writhing, crying aloud in the silence. Breathless, she lies on top of me, as I wrap my arms around her. Stroking her skin with my fingers, I skate up and down her back, kissing her head. "You okay after that, baby?" I ask softly, hoping like hell that I didn't go too far.

"I am A-okay." She answers, still sounding like she's just back from a jog across town.

I chuckle.

She lifts her head. "Man, pregnant sex rocks."

I smile. "It sure does."

"Are you still going to want me when I'm a whale?" she asks playfully.

"I'll want you in whatever size or shape you are, baby. You are mine. All mine. That's all that matters to me."

She kisses my lips. "Always the one with the right things to say. That I'll give you."

"Why, thank you." I say in a game show host voice, which gets a giggle.

“Are you coming to the sonogram tomorrow?”

“If I don’t, Laura will kick my ass.” I joke.

“It won’t be gross.”

“I saw you puke yesterday, and I’ve seen you at your worst, Becky.”

“Yeah, well, you’re gonna see your kid coming out of me pretty soon, too. Fasten your seat belt, bucko. You’re in for a long ride.”

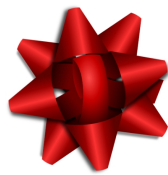
I lift a brow and wiggle it. “I think you were the one doing the riding just a minute ago, darlin’.”

“I’ll tell Ron you like your birthday present.”

I kiss her lips. “I think I like what was under it more, darlin’.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, darlin’.”



Hanna

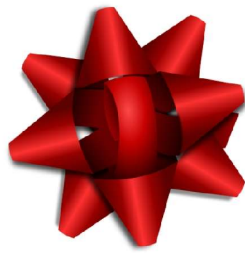
I pull up to the house and see that Liam is not home yet. It’s after six, and we have a ton of work to do tonight. He knows that tonight we’re putting together the engagement photos, making sure that everyone gets which one they want. Liam got home late last night and left for work early this morning, I

think. He has a leather couch in his office, and sometimes, if he has to pull an all-nighter, he does just that. He's been working so hard lately, too, with a new client, and I know, because I've hardly heard from him in the last couple of days.

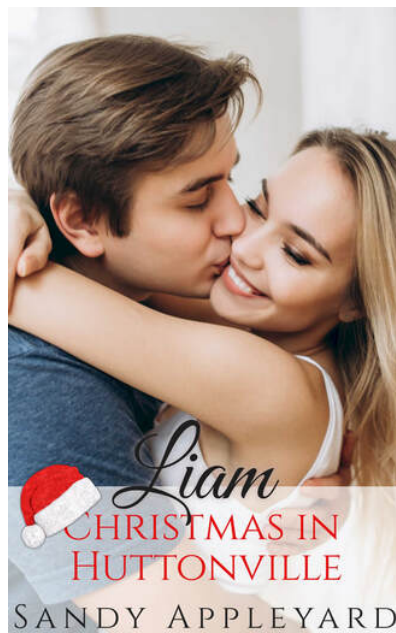
Plus, my phone has been acting up lately, so sometimes people have to call me, because my texting and email aren't working properly. I have an appointment tomorrow to get it fixed, but it's something that I've been living with for a few weeks now. Even Becky has given up on my phone, and she simply calls me. As I walk through the house, taking stock of what needs to be done, I look around, and notice that something is missing. In fact, a lot of things are missing.

I wonder if we've been broken into, until I go into the bedroom, and see that Liam's clothes are all gone, but mine are here. And that's when I find the note. It's a piece of Liam's business stationery, and it's his handwriting and signature. But it might as well not be him in the body of the message, because it sounds nothing like what my fiancé, the love of my life, would say.

... 'The wedding is off, Hanna. I'm sorry. Liam.'



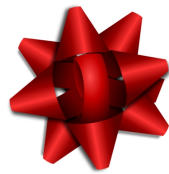
Liam



High school sweethearts. A shotgun-style Christmas wedding. And a bomb dropped just days before the nuptials that could end it all forever.

My brother hands me a beer. I'd love to wipe the smug look off his face. We both know what he's going to say. I've just

sealed the deal with Hanna, the girl I've loved since high school. Problem is, she doesn't know something about me. Something that I'm not one hundred percent sure of myself, and if ever there was a time to find out, now would be it. I sip my beer, thinking about my next steps, but instead of doing what I should, I do what I absolutely shouldn't.



I come home from work, expecting to see the love of my life, Liam, there. Instead, the house is void of his things, and most important, he's not here. He's blocked my number, tied himself up in meetings, and the only person who will be straight with me about what's going on doesn't know a thing. I'm part dumbfounded, part heartbroken, and part pissed off that he left me, days before our wedding. But what I find out is even more heartbreaking, more confusing, and most of all, more pivotal than anything else I've ever learned about Liam before.

Can we get past this? Can my long lived dream of having a Christmas wedding really come true? Or is that whole 'Christmas miracle' thing bogus?

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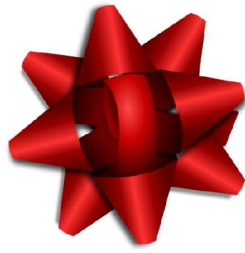
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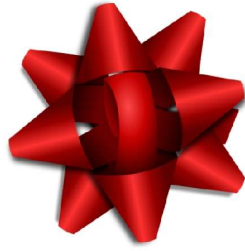
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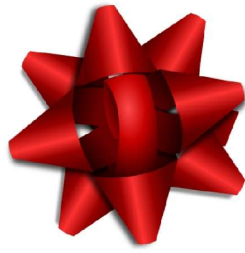
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Thanks very much,

Sandy

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Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading Travis: Christmas in Huttonville. I've never done anything like this before! Start a holiday series, that is! And I've also never started a side series, featuring characters from an existing series. But it's a lot of fun, and it's great to see these characters again! It's like visiting an old friend!

This series is going to be packed full of action, drama, but most of all, romance! All with the magical touch of Christmas.

I really hope you enjoyed this book. If you would like to know when I have a new release, sign up for new release updates.

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