

1005

ALAMO WAY

CEE  
BOWERMAN

BOOK

LONESTAR  
TERRACE  
SERIES

ONE

1005 Alamo Way  
Lonestar Terrace Series, Book 1  
Cee Bowerman  
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# **Cee Bowerman Master Book List**

## **The Rojo, Texas Universe**

### **Texas Knights MC**

**(completed)**

Home Forever

Forever Family

Lucky Forever

Love Forever

### **Texas Kings MC**

**(completed)**

Kale

Sonny

Bird

Grunt

Lout

Smokey

Tucker

Kale & Terra (Novella)

John & Mattie

Bear

Daughtry

Hank

Fain

Grady

Stoffer

Luke

Clem

**Conner Brothers Construction**

**(completed)**

Finn

Angus

Mace

Ronan

Royal

Tavin

Chess

**Rojo, TX**

**(completed)**

Rason & Eliza

Atlas & Addie

Jazmyne & Luc

Kari & Levi

Noah & Tallie

Nick & Cindy

Marcus & Reagan

**The Tempests**

**(completed)**

Wrath

Creed

Loki

Styx

Thorn

Freya

Sin

**Lonestar Terrace**

**(in progress)**

1005 Alamo Way

***Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series***

**Time Served MC**

**(in progress)**

Boss

Hook

Chef

Preacher

Captain

Bug

Santa

Kitty

Rodeo

Stamp

TS in NY

Hammer - COMING APRIL 1ST, 2023!

**The Four Families**

**(in progress)**

Rico

**Springblood**

**(in progress)**

One More Day - COMING APRIL 15TH, 2023!

**The Donovans**

**(in progress)**

Drink It Up

Pull It Up

Pretty It Up

Curl It Up



***The Rojo, Texas Universe***  
***In Chronological Reading Order***

Home Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 1  
Forever Family: Texas Knights MC, Book 2  
    Kale: Texas Kings MC, Book 1  
    Sonny: Texas Kings MC, Book 2  
    Bird: Texas Kings MC, Book 3  
    Grunt: Texas Kings MC, Book 4  
    Lout: Texas Kings MC, Book 5  
    Smokey: Texas Kings MC, Book 6  
    Tucker: Texas Kings MC, Book 7  
Finn: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 1  
    Kale & Terra: a Texas Kings novella  
    John & Mattie: Texas Kings MC, Book 8  
Angus: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 2  
    Bear: Texas Kings MC, Book 9  
Lucky Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 3  
    Daughtry: Texas Kings MC, Book 10  
Mace: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 3  
    Hank: Texas Kings MC, Book 11  
    Fain: Texas Kings MC, Book 12  
Love Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 4  
    Rason & Eliza: Rojo, TX, Book 1  
Ronan: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 4  
    Grady: Texas Kings MC, Book 13  
    Atlas & Addie: Rojo, TX, Book 2  
Royal: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 5

Stoffer: Texas Kings MC, Book 14  
Jazmyne & Lucius: Rojo, TX, Book 3  
Wrath: The Tempests, Book 1  
Luke: Texas Kings MC, Book 15  
Tavin: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 6  
Kari & Levi: Rojo, TX, Book 4  
Creed: The Tempests, Book 2  
Noah & Tallie: Rojo, TX, Book 5  
Loki: The Tempests, Book 3  
Styx: The Tempests, Book 4  
Thorn: The Tempests, Book 5  
Chess: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 7  
Clem: Texas Kings MC, Book 16  
Freya: The Tempests, Book 6  
Sin: The Tempests, Book 7  
Nick & Cindy: Rojo, TX, Book 6  
Marcus & Reagan: Rojo, TX, Book 7

## ***Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series***

Boss: Time Served MC, Book 1

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

Hook: Time Served MC, Book 2

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

Chef: Time Served MC, Book 3

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

Preacher: Time Served MC, Book 4

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

Captain: Time Served MC, Book 5

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

Bug: Time Served MC, Book 6

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

Santa: Time Served MC, Book 7

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

Kitty: Time Served MC, Book 8

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

Rodeo: Time Served MC, Book 9

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

Stamp: Time Served MC, Book 10

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

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

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

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome back to Rojo, Texas - home of the Texas Knights, Texas Kings, Conner Brothers Construction, and more.

If you're just starting your reading adventure with me, might I suggest you check out the reading order for the first generation of books before you jump into the second generation with both feet. If you don't want to do that, I understand and will make sure to introduce the different characters and families in a way that will give you some insight while the readers who have been with me for a while catch up on some of their tried-and-true favorites.

Brighten Duke was first mentioned in the second book, *Forever Family*, of the Texas Knights series. She was a baby then, adopted into a loving family. That's also when she met Kale Forrester, the man who became her godfather and one of her biggest supporters throughout her life.

We watched all of the other children come into the Rojo world as their parents got together and found their happily ever after. I've made some adjustments to the timeline so that the majority of those kids are adults now and ready to find their own way in the world. In the process, they get the love stories they deserve too.

This book answers a question that readers have had since Atlas and Addie's book was released on March 15, 2021. In the epilogue, I mentioned that Brighten Duke had a guest in her house, but I never said his name. When I wrote that, I had no idea who it was and wavered back and forth for quite some time trying to figure it out. Now that I made a decision, I'm excited to share their story. Of course, I can't make anything simple, so there are going to be a few bumps and twists on the path to this happily ever after.

This book has three points of view through the beginning, but that's necessary to be able to tell all sides of the story. Once you get a little further into the book, it moves to his and

her points of view and the third one drops off. You'll understand once you start reading. I hope you enjoy how everything unfolds.

Buckle up and enjoy the ride as I introduce you to the second generation. I'm excited to have you with me for lots of unforeseen surprises and heartwarming love stories.

Happy reading!

Cee

# PROLOGUE

## Atlas & Addie, Rojo, TX Series, Book 2

### BRIGHTEN

I came awake slowly, stretching out my muscles like a cat as I basked in the sun coming through my window.

*The sun was coming in through my window.*

“Oh shit!” I sat up in bed and snatched my phone off the nightstand. “Shit shit shit!”

I’d forgotten to set my alarm. *Again.*

He hated it when I was late, and I only had three minutes to get up, get dressed, and get moving.

I jumped out of bed and grabbed a pair of pajama pants, pulling them on as I hopped from one leg to the other.

“What are you doing, babe?”

I spun around and took in the gorgeous naked man in my bed, the sheet bunched down around his waist showing me all sorts of tantalizing muscles I didn’t have time to appreciate right now.

“I’m late!”

“Again? You’re never going to hear the end of it.”

“I know!”

I picked his shirt up off the floor and pulled it over my head.

“If I’m late, that also means you didn’t get out of here before the sun came up. What if someone sees you?”

“Who’s going to see me?”

“Anyone could see you!” I leaned over to give him a quick kiss. “If our parents find out, they’re going to be all up in our business, and I don’t want to deal with that.”

“If that godfather of yours finds out, I’ll just be dead, Bright Eyes.”

“He won’t kill you unless I ask him to. He loves you,” I said with a laugh as I walked toward the front door. “Get up and shower. I’ll be back in a bit.”

I let the door slam behind me as I rushed down the steps outside of my apartment.

“I know! I know!”

“You’re four minutes late, Brighten,” Warren informed me. “You know I ...”

“I know you hate it, but people are late sometimes, Warren. It happens.”

“It shouldn’t.”

“I’m sorry.” I kissed his cheek before I took the mug of coffee he’d brought for me. “Thank you for the coffee. What are we doing today? Want to go watch a movie?”

“Will your guest be coming with us?”

“My guest?” I heard the squeak in my voice and coughed to cover it. “What guest?”

“The one that’s very loud in the middle of the night.”

“Oh.” I knew I was blushing but couldn’t help it. “Sorry.”

“The walls are thin, Brighten,” Warren grumbled.

“When you move into your house by Mom and Dad’s, you won’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“I don’t want to move.”

My parents had built a two-bedroom house for Warren on the property they shared with my aunts and uncles. They’d been trying to talk him into moving for years and had finally just told him it was time.

He’d initially resisted, but with our encouragement, he’d realized over time that moving was a good plan.

He’d have his own house with a fenced yard, which meant he could get another dog.

Snowy, the small dog that Aunt Addie and Uncle Atlas had paired him with years ago, had passed away a few months



ago. I'd been talking to Warren about getting another rescue dog, and he seemed open to the idea.

"I know you hate change, Warren, but it's good for you sometimes." I bumped him with my shoulder. "I have to admit, although I'm glad you're getting your own house, I'll miss our morning conversations over coffee."

"You almost missed it today."

"It was only four minutes, Warren."

"When I move to my new house, will you be late for coffee then too?"

"You know, maybe sometimes, but I'll try not to be."

"I'll miss my morning coffee with you, too, Brighten," Warren admitted.

I knew that this change was going to be hard for him, and I'd talked to my mom and Aunt Addie about helping it go smoothly.

"We've already decided I'll be there at least once a week for our coffee time," I reminded him. "I'm going to miss you, Warren. I love you, you know."

"I love you, too, Brighten."

"You're one of my best friends in the whole world," I admitted.

"You're not my best friend. Atlas is my best friend."

"I get that, but you can have more than one."

"My other one is Terran."

I looked over at him, taking in his facial features that mirrored some of my own. I saw he was biting his lip and knew he was playing with me.

"Atlas and Terran, huh? What am I? Chopped liver?"

"You're my favorite girl, Brighten."

"I am, aren't I?" I smiled at Warren and tears suddenly filled my eyes. I would miss these quiet moments with him more than I'd realized.

“Why are you crying?” Warren asked, alarmed. “Did I say something wrong?”

“Thank you for giving me such a good life, Warren.”

“Your parents gave you a good life.”

“But they wouldn’t have had a chance if it hadn’t been for you.” I dried my eyes with a sniff and whispered, “You mean the world to me, Warren Green.”

“You mean the world to me, too, Brighten Duke.”

# 1.

## SIX YEARS AGO

### BRIGHTEN

“Let’s take a shot for the birthday girls,” Crow Forrester said as he appeared at our table carrying a tray. I glanced over his shoulder and saw his brothers, Hawk and Phoenix, along with Brawley Dumont and Zane Duke. I’d known these guys my entire life, but one of them had found a special place in my heart last year, even though I wasn’t ready for the world to know yet. Crow passed the shot glasses out, the first ones going to Janis Grissom and Gracy Mason, the two of my friends celebrating their birthdays. Once we all had one, I held mine aloft with everyone else as Crow toasted, “Here’s to the floor who will hold you when no one else will. May we get what we want but never what we deserve, and may all your ups and downs be under the covers. Happy birthday!”

“Happy birthday!” I yelled after I’d slammed my shot. “Who wants to dance?”

“And I’m out,” I heard Hawk say before he turned and walked toward the bar.

Brawley and Zane went with Hawk, but Phoenix and Crow stuck with us. Once we’d joined the crowd on the dance floor, Crow took my hand and spun me around a few times before he started two-stepping with me.

“You know this isn’t a country song, right?” I asked as I followed his lead.

“If you’ve got enough rhythm and a good partner, you can two-step to anything.” Crow spun me around a few more times and then pulled me back into his arms as I fell into step with him again. “Are you doing okay, Brighten? You seem a little off tonight.”

“I’m okay,” I said with a forced smile. “I’ve got some things going on, but I’ll work them out in time.”

“If you need anything, you know I’m here for you.”

I smiled, genuinely this time. “You’ve always been my protector, haven’t you?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice. You weren’t any match for Scott Turpin.”

“He was a fifth grader, and I was in first! Of course I wasn’t any match for him.”

“Well, leave it to the Forrester boys to watch your back and step in when we’re needed,” Crow said before he spun me around again. As the song ended, he threw his arm around my shoulders and walked me toward our table where his brothers were sitting with a few of the girls. “Anyone else need a fresh one? I’m parched after hanging out with the dancing queen.”

Hawk stared at me for a few seconds with a weird look on his face before he looked at his brother and shook his head. “I think I’ve had enough for tonight.”

Crow squeezed me and then patted me on the back and walked off toward the bar. Before I could sit down, a man that had offered to buy me a drink earlier walked up and asked me to dance.

I glanced around the table, hoping for a rescue, but the only one who was paying attention was Hawk.

“I’m gonna sit this one out, but thanks anyway,” I said with a half-smile as I pulled my chair out and started to sit.

The guy mumbled something under his breath and then turned around in a huff but stopped abruptly when he ran straight into my friend Lark Forrester. She started to fall back but grabbed his arm to steady herself. The guy, already irritated and probably more than a little drunk, yanked his arm out of her grasp, throwing Lark even more off-balance. She fell to the floor with a thud, and before any of us could even make a move to help her, the man she’d bumped into yelled, “Get the fuck outta my way!” and stepped over her to walk off.

Lark, not ever the kind of girl to let a man talk to her like that, yelled, “Excuse you, asshole!”

“Fuck you, dumb bitch,” the man yelled back as he glared at Lark.

His friend, realizing the guy was a millisecond from getting his ass kicked, rushed over to haul him away just as I knelt down to help Lark get up. The guy yanked his arm away from his friend, and I saw stars when his elbow connected with the side of my head.

There was a loud roar, and then chaos reigned as bottles, tables, and chairs flew. I was finally able to get Lark off the floor, and we were jostled back and forth by the motion of the crowd around us. I glanced over my shoulder and saw Hawk throw a punch at the guy who'd knocked his sister down, then Brawley shoved his friend.

A woman appeared behind Hawk with a bottle in her hand, and without even thinking, I grabbed her by the hair, yanking her away from her intended target. She let out an ear-piercing scream and swung the bottle my way, only to be blocked by Diamond Hamilton's arm when she punched her in the face.

I let the woman go when someone grabbed me from behind, and I heard Janis scream, “Let her go, bitch!” right before the woman holding me fell to the side, taking me with her to the floor. I spun around in her arms as we fell and landed on top of her with a grunt right before her fist glanced off my cheek. I slapped her face with my open hand before Janis pulled me to my feet. “We've got to get out of here!”

My eyes grew wide as I saw Rain Forrester clock a man in the head with a beer mug before she swiveled around looking for another target. Gracy had a woman in a headlock with her hand fisted in her hair, and Lawson and Jonas Dean were fighting two men right behind her. Esme Cardenas was on some guy's back with her legs around his torso and one arm tight around his neck as he tried to shake her off. She jumped to the floor just as my cousin Zane punched the guy in the face.

Suddenly, the lights came on, blinding everyone for a second as our eyes adjusted, and I saw Esme's expression change as she stared at something over my shoulder. I turned

in time to see several police officers barreling straight for us through the crowd with their tasers out as they prepared to break up the brawlers.

“Code Blue!” Diamond shouted at the top of her lungs. She repeated herself a few times as the guys *and* girls in our group immediately stopped fighting and stood up straight, finished with the scuffle and ready to face the music.

“Well, shit,” Janis muttered beside me. I couldn’t help but laugh when she said, “Looks like I’ll get to spend my birthday in the pokey. Dad’s gonna be *so* proud.”



I wrapped my arms around my knees to try and get warm as I leaned forward and looked down the line of us sitting on the curb. The police had told us to sit on the curb with a few feet between us, while the others who had been involved in the fight sat on the curb across the street.

The night air was filled with red and blue lights, and they gave everything an eerie glow as we sat in silence, wondering just how much trouble we’d be in by the time this was all over.

I wasn’t worried about any of the girls other than Diamond, who had a run-in with the law a few years ago and had just gotten off of probation. As far as I could remember, Hawk, Crow, and Phoenix were the only ones who already had a record.

I knew Hawk was probably going to be in the most trouble. I was positive he was still on probation for street racing and spent more than half his paycheck each week paying for the fines that had been imposed on him.

The police officer who seemed to be in charge hung up his phone and slipped it into the holder on his hip before he turned toward another officer and shook his head.

“What are we waiting for? I’m freezing my ass off,” my cousin Zoey said from beside me. “I wish they would just

hurry up and haul us in so we can make bail before our parents find out and lose their fucking minds.”

“Oh yeah,” I said with a giggle. “My mom’s gonna shit.”

“My mom’s probably going to shake her head and say she knew this was inevitable,” Diamond said from Zoey’s other side. “My dad, on the other hand, is going to yell. A lot.”

“They’re probably waiting for one of those big vans that they use to haul inmates,” Rain chimed in from down the row. “They don’t have enough cuffs for all of us either.”

“Why do they have the guys laying down but not the rest of us?” Wren asked.

“Because they’re wearing their cuts,” Diamond answered as we studied the men on the ground. They were on their stomach with their hands clasped behind their head and their feet crossed at the ankles. “They think they’re the most dangerous.”

I had to agree with them, if that was the case. Hawk, Crow, Phoenix, Jonas, Lawson, Brawley, and Zane weren’t any danger to me or my friends since we had all known each other for years. But, as they’d proved inside, none of them had a problem defending themselves or their loved ones when necessary.

I heard motorcycles in the distance and groaned at the same time as the women around me. Unless those were more of our friends who just happened to be arriving to join us for the birthday celebration, there was only one other reason that many pipes would be riding together.

“Fuck,” Zoey said as she rested her head on her knees. “We’re in for it now.”

“The second that officer looked at my ID, I knew he was going to call my dad,” Esme muttered. “Shit. I just want to go to jail. Please, don’t make me deal with my mom and dad right now.”

“Too late,” Diamond said as motorcycles started turning down the street. “Here comes the cavalry.”

“They were all together, I guess,” I mused.

“Poker night at the clubhouse,” Lark said with a sigh. “Of course they were together.”

The motorcycles lined up and parked with their back tires against the curb across the street, not far from the men sitting on the curb across from us. I watched as Nick Cardenas, or Uncle Nick, as most of us called him, got off his motorcycle while the other men stayed put.

I studied the line of bikers and happened to glance at the men facing us from the other curb. You could practically feel their nerves crackling as they realized that the men lined up not far away from them were part of the Texas Kings MC, just like the men who were laying facedown being searched by the police officers who were watching us.

I could feel my dad’s intense stare and found his eyes. Without even thinking, I lifted my hand to wave, then let it drop when he glared at me. My godfather, Kale Forrester, Rain’s dad, started laughing and reached over to push my dad’s shoulder before he said something that had him laughing too.

“Well, maybe if they think this is funny, we’ll get out of the ass chewing that I was sure would be coming,” I mused. Zoey looked at me like I was nuts, and I knew she didn’t believe that would happen at all. Our fathers were identical twins and were staring holes through us right now, laughter or not. “Okay, you’re right. We’re gonna hear about this for years, I’m sure.

“Well, happy birthday, Janis and Gracy,” Diamond said with a giggle. “I just can’t wait to see how we top this next year.”

“Next year?” Piper asked. “Posie and Dahlia turn 21 in six months.”

Diamond laughed and said, “Hopefully, we’ll be off probation by then, and we can do this again.”

“Good lord,” I whispered as I let my head drop to my knees. “I need to make new friends.”



“Can’t get rid of us, baby. We’re family,” Zoey said as she elbowed my side. “Shit. Here comes Uncle Nick.”

I looked up and saw the chief of police headed our way and bit back a groan. There was fire in his eyes, and I wasn’t ready to face his wrath and then have to deal with my dad’s too.

Somehow, jail seemed like a better option right about now.



I heard a motorcycle in the alley as the garage door underneath my apartment rumbled to life. I hopped out of bed and hurried to turn off the alarm panel, making sure that the cameras were paused while my visitor came up the stairs.

I threw the door open and let out a long, low whistle. Within just a few seconds, I heard footsteps on the gravel behind my apartment, and then a dark-haired man appeared at the corner.

He looked up at me and shook his head, and I smiled as I watched him climb the stairs to my apartment. Once he was inside, I shut the door and turned the alarm back on, resetting the cameras to record again.

“Hey, handsome,” I said with a grin as I stepped into his arms.

“Oh, so now you wanna talk to me,” he teased before he leaned down and gave me a kiss.

“I talked to you at the bar tonight!”

He scoffed and shook his head, and I knew we were about to have the same argument we’d had a million times before.

“Well, let’s get naked and down to business since that’s all I’m good for.”

“Whatever,” I said as I walked toward the refrigerator. “Do you want water?”

“Sure. It might soothe the burn I still feel from all those times you pretended that I was just one of your old friends instead of the man you let warm your bed.”

“I don’t just *say* I’m in love with you, I mean it,” I argued as I handed him a bottle of water. I opened my own and took a long drink before I said, “Come on, let’s not fight. It’s late, and I want to go to bed.”

“It’s been six months, Brighten.”

“I didn’t know there was a deadline. I like what we have together.”

“You do? So, this is it?”

“We’ve talked about this! If we tell everyone we’re together, it just ... There are just so many people ...”

“You think I’m not good enough for you.”

“Hawk,” I pleaded as I set my water down on the counter and walked closer to him. I looked up at his face and said, “I’m just not ready for the world to know, and I honestly don’t think you are either.”

“I was so scared you were going to get hurt tonight,” Hawk admitted as he pulled me into his arms. I laid my head on his chest and felt him prop his chin on top of my head before he said, “I just wanted to pick you up and carry you out of there.”

“We were both a little busy, if you recall,” I said with a laugh. I stepped back and let my hands trail down his arms before I pulled his hands up and inspected his knuckles. “I think you might need some ice.”

“I need you,” Hawk said as he put his bottle of water on the counter and then pulled me back into his arms. He bent his head and kissed me just the way I liked it, with all the passion and fire he felt for me. Within seconds, I was off the floor and in his arms. He cupped my bare ass with his hands and sat me down on the cold countertop. “Ready and waiting for me, just like you are every night.”

“Of course,” I whispered as I tugged at his belt. I could barely concentrate on getting it undone because his lips were on my ear, then his teeth nibbled on my neck while his hands roamed over my breasts. Finally, I was able to push his jeans down just enough to reach into his boxers and wrap my hand around his hard cock, causing him to hiss. “Fuck, baby, your hands are cold.”

“I know just how you can warm me up, big guy,” I said as I started to stroke up and down. “I was waiting for you in bed, you know.”

“Oh really?” Hawk murmured against my neck.

“Yep. I didn’t know if you’d make it, so I started without you.”

“My dirty sweetheart. You know what the thought of that does to me.”

“And you know what that does to me too,” I whispered before I caught his lips in a kiss. “I was almost there when I heard your bike.”

“I can get you back there,” Hawk said as he pulled me closer to the edge of the counter. He hooked his arms under my knees as I positioned the head of his cock at my entrance, and then he closed his eyes and sighed as he slowly pushed into me. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

Once he was fully seated inside me, I leaned back and set my hands on the counter before I pushed my ass even closer to the edge. “Fuck me, Hawk. Show me how much you’ve missed me.”

“I miss you every second we’re apart,” Hawk said as he slowly withdrew and then pushed back inside. He started to pull out again as he whispered, “Do you miss me?”

“So much,” I muttered, wishing I could tell him just how much.

I was already on edge when he arrived, and feeling him deep inside me was almost too much to bear. When Hawk lifted my leg over his shoulder and then reached around it to stroke my clit, I was gone. My orgasm hit me like a tidal

wave, and as my pussy clenched, it took him along for the ride.

“Fuck yeah, Brighten.” Hawk groaned as he pumped his hips again and again, letting me ride out my orgasm before he let out a shout and came deep inside me. He thrust his hips a few times as his cock twitched with the last of his release, and then his head fell forward until his forehead touched mine. “You make me so fucking crazy, but then your pussy soothes my soul and I feel sane again.”

“You’re so poetic,” I said sarcastically. I laughed and felt Hawk’s cock twitch again as I squeezed him. “Now, carry me to the bathroom, and let’s clean up the mess you’ve made.”

“I’ve made? Sweetheart, you were a mess before I even got here.”

“It’s a good thing I’ve got you here to clean me up then, isn’t it?”

“Yep,” Hawk said as he hefted me off the counter, his cock still inside me. I wrapped my arms around him and let him carry me to the bathroom like he’d done a thousand times before. I groaned when he pulled out of my body and reached down to catch his release with a washcloth. I watched him do it, then toss the washcloth away before he met my eyes. “Now we need to do that again.”

“Oh really?”

“Start the shower.”

## 2.

### A FEW WEEKS LATER

#### HAWK

“Man, I don’t know what the fuck has gotten into you lately, but I’m sick and fucking tired of watching you mope around.”

I shot daggers at my brother as I snapped, “Then fucking leave!”

“I live here, asshole,” Phoenix yelled. “God, just call her already! Shit!”

“Call who?”

“Whoever the chick is that has you tied in fucking knots ... The mystery girl you were banging every night.”

“Fuck you,” I grumbled before I flopped onto the couch and picked up the remote.

“Let’s go have a beer.”

“Not interested.”

“Okay, if you’re not up for a beer, at least come with me to the garage. It’s Merit’s 16th birthday. Uncle Luke’s gonna give him the keys to the car they’ve been working on together, and then we’re all going to Grazie’s for dinner.”

I thought about it and sighed. “Alright, fine. I’ll come with you but just until he gets his car. I’m taking my car, though. It’s cold as fuck.”

“Pussy,” Nix said as he pulled a hoodie over his T-shirt. He threw on his cut before he put the hood over his head and tied it under his chin. He took some gloves out of his pocket and then snapped his vest closed before he pulled them on.

“You’re still gonna freeze your ass off.”

“But I’ll be on my bike doing it. Pussy.”

“Whatever. I’ll see you at the garage in a minute.”

“Peace!” Nix said before he walked out the front door.

I flipped him off, even though he couldn’t see me, and then leaned my head against the couch and sighed. I hadn’t seen Brighten in almost a month, and I wasn’t ready to see her today. Hopefully, she wouldn’t be at Merit’s birthday dinner, but if she was, I’d just have to deal with it until I could make my escape.

I got up and put on my coat before I plucked my car keys from the hook by the front door. I sat in the car shivering as I waited for it to warm up and cursed the fact that I had to keep my foot on the gas pedal so the engine wouldn’t die.

The ride to the shop didn’t take but a few minutes. I saw that the parking lot was full of trucks, cars, and motorcycles I recognized as belonging to my family and club brothers who were all excited to see the finished product of Luke, Merit, and Daughtry’s hard work.

I remembered how I felt ten years ago when my dad gave me the keys to my dream car that I’d worked so hard to restore from a rusted-out shell to the beauty it was today. Before I went in, I pulled out my wallet and grabbed some cash to give Merit for gas money, knowing that was going to be a gift the kid could enjoy now that he was a licensed driver.

I could see my brother Crow standing outside the bay doors waiting on me. He smiled and slapped my back as he walked with me.

“It’s about fucking time you left the house for something other than work,” Crow said as he pulled the door open and let me walk through it ahead of him.

“I just came to give Merit a few dollars for gas money before I go to Gizzie’s for dinner.”

“Same. There’s snow in the forecast, and I want to get home before it starts.”

“I just want to go home,” I mumbled.

“What’s eating you, Hawk? Who is she?”

“She’s nobody you need to worry about anymore, little brother.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I stopped and looked him in the eye before I said, “You and Nix need to drop it, okay? It doesn’t matter who she was because it’s over.”

“Shit. Okay.”

“Now let’s congratulate the birthday boy and get some grub so I can go home and get warm. It’s like an arctic blast out there. I’m sick of this shit. I can’t wait until it starts to get warm again.”

“Man, we’ve gotta at least get through Christmas before we can even start thinking like that. You know this.”

“Well, I’m gonna ask Santa for some decent weather because I’m not sure I can wait until spring to ride again.”

“Pussy.”



“Hawk, this is not a good idea,” Nix said as he leaned down into my open window. “Just go home, man. Don’t let this asshole get under your skin.”

“Fuck him,” I said as I shot a glare at a guy I’d hated since elementary school. “I’m not backing down from his bullshit.”

“Then just fucking punch him in the face and get it over with so we can go home,” Crow said from the passenger seat. “There’s already snow on the ground, man. Traction is gonna be shit.”

“It’s not too bad,” I said, trying to reassure myself as well as Crow. “I’ve got this.”

“And you’re gonna end up in fucking jail if you get caught racing again,” Nix said before he pushed away from the car. “I don’t even want to watch. I’m going home. It’s cold as shit out here.”

“Seriously, Hawk, think about what you’re doing, man. If you get busted, you’re gonna be in a world of trouble.”

“I won’t get busted. The cops don’t want to be out in this shit either, so they won’t catch us. Just one run.”

“How much did you two bet?”

“Five hundred dollars.”

“Fuck. Really?”

“It’s not coming out of your pocket.” I watched as the woman who’d been with Scott inside the bar got out of her car with a bandana in her hand. I looked over at Crow and said, “Get out, man.”

“No, I’ll ...”

“Get out of the fucking car, Crow. If this ends up going sideways and something happens, I don’t want you in here.”

“That means you understand the danger. Any time you pull this shit, you usually let me stay. You know shit can go south if there’s even a tiny patch of ice.”

“Get out of my fucking car, Crow.”

“Fuck!” Crow yelled before he opened his door and got out. He leaned down and pointed at me as he said, “You be careful. Back off the gas if *anything* feels off, you hear me?”

“I hear you,” I assured him. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

“Shit!” Crow yelled as he slammed the door.

I watched in my rearview mirror as he joined Nix behind my car and then looked forward again when I heard a shrill whistle. I pulled up a few feet until the woman with the bandana put her hand up to stop me and then revved the engine as I waited for her to set everything in motion.

Seconds later, I punched the gas pedal all the way to the floor and was off like a shot, neck and neck with the asshole beside me. We had just passed the speed limit sign when I felt the back end of the car start to fishtail, so I let off the gas and waited for the tires to find traction again.



Scott didn't do the same, and I watched his tail lights as they moved back and forth rapidly until he completely lost control. The car slid off the road into the ditch and tumbled end over end a few times before it started rolling.

"Oh fuck!" I yelled as I drove closer to the wreck. I threw the car in park and jumped out, sprinting toward the wreckage before it had even come to a complete stop. Suddenly, there was a loud explosion, and I was thrown backwards by a super-heated blast. "No no no no!" I screamed as I jumped up, scanning the area around me, praying that Scott had been ejected and wasn't burning to death inside the fireball that used to be his car.

I heard cars and motorcycles behind me as I fell to my knees, my hands over my mouth as I watched the car burn. The snow beneath my knees and the biting wind didn't even register, and I sat just like that with my brothers beside me until a police officer forced me to my stomach and slapped cuffs on my wrist.

I was alive and Scott wasn't, and it was all my fault.



"I need to talk to you, little brother," I said as soon as Crow picked up the receiver of the phone bolted to the wall.

"What's going on? I just talked to Marcus, and he said the verdict wouldn't be in until Monday."

"I need a favor."

"Anything, man."

"While I'm gone ..."

"We don't know that they'll convict you, Hawk. Don't talk like that! If you do get sent away, Marcus will get you an appeal. You know that."

I shook my head and sighed. I had a feeling I was going to spend some time in prison, and there were things I needed my brother to do until I could get out.

“I’m not giving up,” I lied. “I’m making plans just in case, okay?”

“What do you need me to do?”

“It’s about a girl.”

“The one that fucked you up?” Crow asked with his eyebrows raised and anger in his eyes.

“I fucked myself up, and we both know it. You and Nix both tried to talk me out of it, but I was pissed off and stubborn.”

“What about the girl? Who is it?”

“Brighten.”

“What. The. Fuck.”

“I know,” I said as I stared at the counter in front of me. I finally looked up through the glass again and saw that Crow was still sitting there with his mouth hanging open in shock. “I broke things off with her a few weeks ago, and I just want to make sure she’s okay.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Check on her sometimes. She’s probably gonna be upset. Fuck, I know better than that. She’s gonna be beside herself but will have to hide it because nobody knows what we had.”

“You just want me to check in on her? I see her all the fucking time.”

“Make sure she’s okay when no one else is around,” I said firmly. “She’ll need someone to talk to and I know the two of you are already good friends, so maybe she’ll open up to you.”

“Shit,” Crow said as he leaned forward to rest his forehead in his hand. “You can’t go away, man. What are we gonna do without you here?”

“You’re gonna take care of each other and Mom and Dad, but I want you to take care of Brighten too.”

“Okay.”

“You promise?”

“I promise,” Crow said, staring into my eyes so I knew that he was serious. “I’ll make sure she’s okay.”

“Keep your chin up, Crow. I’m not the first Forrester to get sent to prison, although I do hope I’m the last.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth.”

“If things go south and I have to serve time, it’s up to you to take my place, okay? It’s gonna fuck Mom up something fierce knowing I’m gone for a while, but Dad can take care of her. You’ll probably have to help Gigi and Gamma. Pop and Papa will be okay, but the women ... Fuck, this is going to break their goddamn hearts, I know.”

“Everything’s gonna be okay, man. Marcus will get you time served and, like, a few years probation ... or something. You didn’t kill Scott. The weather did. His driving did. Not you.”

“Let’s hope the judge sees it your way.”



## **BRIGHTEN**

My phone vibrated, then vibrated again and again, in quick succession. I felt my heart drop as I snatched it up from my desk, knowing there was news about Hawk’s case.

I opened the ongoing group text that included my parents and siblings.

*“Hawk got convicted. They sentenced him to twenty-five years with the possibility of parole after eighteen.”*

“Oh no,” I whispered as tears started streaming down my face. “No no no. This can’t be happening.”

My phone kept vibrating as my siblings asked questions of my dad who’d sent the original text, but I couldn’t see the words anymore because of the tears in my eyes.

“No!” I wailed as I laid my head on my desk. My mind was racing as I wondered what Hawk was feeling right now. He must be terrified.

I heard someone knocking on my door, so I stood and wiped my face as I walked across the living room. There was no way I was fit to deal with anyone right now, but I was expecting a grocery delivery and couldn't leave it sitting on my porch.

I pulled the door open and took a step back when I saw it wasn't just my groceries on the landing but Crow Forrester too.

“I guess you've heard,” Crow said softly. I let out a sob and nodded, my heart breaking even more when tears started rolling down Crow's cheeks too. “He asked ... when I saw him on Saturday ... he asked me to take care of you.”

“Oh my God, Crow,” I whispered as he held his arms out. I stepped into his embrace and cried with him, great gulping sobs that shook both of us as we held each other in the frigid air. “What are we gonna do without him here?”

“I don't fucking know, Brighten. I just don't fucking know.”



## **CROW**

I leaned forward and rested my hands on the countertop, studying my reflection as I wondered how in the hell I was supposed to go through any part of my life without my big brother beside me. When the judge read the verdict, my dad's face was stoic as he pulled my mom to his chest while she sobbed.

My brothers and sisters were just as upset as I was. I knew that Nix was kicking himself for not trying harder to stop Hawk from racing that night because I was doing the same thing.

My grandparents were shaken, but I worried most about Gamma. She'd been beside herself since Hawk was arrested, worrying about him like I was sure she had my uncles when they'd gotten locked up.

And now, Brighten Duke was sleeping in a bed not far from where I was standing, having cried herself to sleep as she worried about Hawk and what their future held.

Brighten had known all of us her entire life, so it made sense for her to be upset when she heard he'd been convicted. The fact that she loved him would make it harder to accept, and I understood why my brother had asked me to check in on her.

Looking back over the last year, I thought about all the times my brothers and I had been around her and kicked myself for not recognizing the signs that there was more between them.

I didn't blame Hawk at all for his attraction to her. She'd always been beautiful, but it was her heart that could make anyone love her. She was a caring woman who went out of her way to treat everyone nicely, even if that person had wronged her. Since we were kids, she'd been the one who could see both sides of any matter and made sure to defend whoever needed it. She became passionate and emotional when she was invested in something or someone, but I'd never once seen her cry.

As I held Brighten earlier, she'd said something that hadn't registered at the time but made perfect sense now.

*"What am I going to do? How will I do this alone?"*

Her reaction to Hawk's conviction was extreme, and I had a feeling I knew why.

I picked up the box I'd found on the counter the second I walked into the bathroom, knowing what I'd find inside. I opened the end of the box and let the stick fall into the sink. It landed faceup and brought fresh tears to my eyes.

My brother was going to miss out on his kid's entire childhood. He most likely wouldn't even make it home in

time to see them graduate from high school.

I heard movement and realized Brighten was standing in the doorway.

“You know.”

“It’s his?” Brighten nodded. “You’re sure?”

“I’m positive, Crow. It’s only been Hawk for almost a year now,” Brighten assured me. “How do I tell him? What will he do when he finds out and he can’t be here?”

“It will kill him.”

“And it’s not like I can just keep his identity a secret. I mean, I guess I could just say the father is some random guy and refuse to tell anyone his name, but ...”

“My parents need to know. This is gonna be their first grandchild, Brighten.”

“And they’ll experience all of that while their son is locked up? And my baby is gonna grow up as that kid whose dad’s in prison? How is that even ... I can’t do that to my kid, Crow. But if I don’t, then your parents ...” Brighten sobbed and whispered, “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what’s right.”

“If he knows what he’s missing while he’s behind bars, I don’t think he’ll be able to survive, Brighten.”

“So, what do I do?”

“Keep your relationship with my brother a secret. He’s not going to tell anyone about the two of you, especially when he finds out that you and I are together.”

“What?” Brighten looked at me in shock and took a step back. “What are you talking about?”

“We’ll raise the baby together. Me and you. We’ll keep this a secret between us, and someday, when Hawk gets home and the kid’s all grown up, we’ll tell them both.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Hawk won’t realize he’s missing his kid grow up. He’ll just think he’s missing ...”

“He’ll think his brother betrayed him! That *I* betrayed him!”

“Wouldn’t you rather be the bad guy in his mind instead of him rotting away in a cell knowing that he’s missing every single day of his child’s life? Would that make it better?”

“No, but ... What about ... How would we ...”

“We had a thing and parted amicably. You found out you were pregnant, and we made the decision to raise our baby together even though *we’re* not together. It happens all the fucking time.”

“But ...”

“My parents get their grandkid. My grandparents get their great-grandkid. My niece or nephew has a dad that’s there every day. You have someone you can lean on as a co-parent, and my brother doesn’t spiral into a depression deeper than he can ever find his way out of.”

“You’re serious.”

“I’m dead serious, Brighten, and unless you’ve got a better idea, this is what we’re gonna do.”

“I don’t know ...”

“How far along are you?”

“At least six weeks.”

“We give it a few weeks, and then we tell our parents. My parents will have had time to accept that Hawk is gone, and then they’ll have a bright spot in their lives while we wait for the baby to get here.”

“You’re really serious.”

“Do this with me, Brighten. Do this for Hawk. Do it for the baby and my parents ... please.”

“Let’s take a week to think about it. I won’t say anything to anyone until we talk about this again. But Crow, you have

to promise me that you'll stick this out if this is what we decide to do. You have to be sure."

"I'm sure right now, and I'll be just as sure in a fucking week."

"We'll see."



### 3.

#### PRESENT DAY

#### BRIGHTEN

“But I’m not your grandfather,” I heard Warren say. Again.

“But you really are, huh?” Griffin asked.

“No. Zeke Duke and Bird Forrester are your grandfathers. I’m your great-uncle.”

“But you’re my grandpa too.”

“No. I’m not your grandfather.”

I spun around from the counter and pointed the wooden spoon in my hand at Warren and my son. “Stop! Please! You have this argument every single time you see each other, and it makes me freaking crazy.”

“He acts like you, Brighten,” Warren complained.

“Me? He acts like you!” I argued. “He’s like a dog with a bone. I can give in occasionally, but you *never* cave, no matter what. He’s like you.”

“Because he’s my grandfather,” Griffin said under his breath.

“Warren Green ...”

“I am *not* your grandfather.”

“... I swear by all that’s holy ...”

“Yes, you are.”

“... if you two don’t stop ...”

“No, I’m not.”

“... I’m going to lose my ...”

“Yes, you are.”

“*Enough!*” I roared. Warren and Griffin turned their heads and stared at me silently with eyes as wide as saucers, so I continued in a much calmer voice, “Griffin, Warren is your *biological* grandfather, but he prefers not to think of it that way. Instead, he likes to be called your great-uncle, which he is since Grandma and Grandpa adopted me as a baby. Warren, I’d like to remind you that you’re arguing with a 5-year-old.”

“Who is *not* my grandson.”

I let out a scream of frustration and turned the burner off before I tossed my spoon into the sink. “I need a time-out before I do something that ends with me wearing an orange jumpsuit and trading pudding cups for protection.”

I stomped out of my back door and across the grass toward the house next door. I threw the door open and walked inside without saying a word. I stopped at the refrigerator, grabbed a beer, and then flicked the cap at the trash can on my way past. I didn’t even stop to look for it when I heard it skitter along the tiles. I chugged half the beer before I flopped onto the recliner and flipped up the footrest while letting out a loud belch.

“Well, aren’t you just a picture of delicate femininity?” Crow said from the kitchen doorway.

“Fuck you,” I grumbled before I took another drink. I groaned loudly and then pushed the chair up before I sighed and said, “How was *your* day?”

Crow barked out a laugh before he said, “Obviously better than yours.”

“I didn’t sleep very well last night, but my day was just fine until I got home. I closed on a house that will give me a very nice little sum to put toward our vacation fund, and I’m pretty sure I’m going to sell another house tomorrow.”

“And then when you got home, you turned into Miss Hannigan, why?”

“Warren and Griffin are going at it again,” I told him.

“They know how that irritates you.”

“And yet they still do it, even though I tell them to shut up.”

“I think they do it just to fuck with you. They never bicker when I’m the only one around.”

“Are you serious?”

“I bet they’re laughing their asses off right now.”

“You bet? How much?”

Crow looked thoughtful for a second and then said, “You do my dishes for the next week.”

“That’s not even fair. You use every single pan and utensil in the kitchen when you cook. The last time you made dinner at my house, I found a noodle on the ceiling.”

“That means the pasta is done.”

“What does?”

“If it doesn’t stick, then it needs to cook a little longer. If it does, that means it’s done.”

I ran my hand over my face while I tried to tamp down the screams of hysteria that were trying to escape. I waited until I was calm enough to have a normal voice when I asked, “Does that mean that you have thrown multiple pieces of pasta at my ceiling?”

“I usually let Griff throw them, but we do that every time I make spaghetti.”

“Really?”

“And when I make that noodle casserole of Gamma’s.” I didn’t say anything, just let out a low growl that turned into another urge to scream when Crow added, “Only works on spaghetti noodles, though. The macaroni never sticks, and the curly ones don’t either.”

I tipped my beer up and finished it off before I held it out toward him and shook it a few times. “Beer me.”

“Should I go ahead and order pizza?” Crow asked as he walked into the living room and handed me another beer.

“I’m halfway through making dinner. I just needed a little breather.”

“By breather, you mean a quick dive into binge drinking and alcoholism?”

“Two beers an alcoholic does not make.”

“She’s already fucking up her sentences,” I heard Crow mumble as he walked back into the kitchen. A little louder, he said, “And quit flicking your goddamn bottle caps all over the place, Brighten Duke! I swear you’re just like your father.”

“Would you *please*, for the love of all that’s holy, put on some freaking clothes?” I yelled back.

“You sound just like my mom!”

“Thank you!”



“We may have taken it too far this time,” I heard Warren say from somewhere nearby.

“Is she dead?” my son whispered right before he poked me in the cheek. When I didn’t move, he poked me again and asked, “If she’s dead, that means I’m going to die because Crow is gonna cook dinner every night.”

“His cooking isn’t that bad.”

“He only knows how to cook seven different things.”

“But they’re all good.”

“But that’s not enough to live on.”

“I think it sounds reasonable.”

“Teach me how to figure out if she’s dead,” Griffin ordered.

“I can teach you some manners while we’re at it,” Warren shot back.

“*Please* teach me how to figure out if she’s dead.”

“Give me your hand. Okay, push two fingers in right here. No, never use your thumb because it has its own exclusive artery, the princeps pollicis, and will interfere with your reading since you’ll be feeling the heartbeat from your thumb at the same time you feel the pulse in the wrist.”

“On television, they always feel the neck,” Griffin said before he exclaimed, “Oh, I found your pulse!”

“Okay, now look at my watch. Remember our lesson on how to tell time ...”



I snuggled under the blanket and tried to roll onto my side but opened my eyes when I realized I wasn’t in my bed. I looked around the living room and remembered that I’d fallen asleep in Crow’s recliner and then sat up straight when I realized it was already dark outside.

“Oh shit,” I hissed as I tossed off the blanket and stood up. “I’m a horrible mother!” I proclaimed to the empty room.

I walked through the kitchen and onto the back patio and had to stifle a scream of surprise when I heard Crow say, “Hello, Sleeping Beauty ... or are you still Miss Hannigan?”

“What time is it?”

“It’s a little after nine. You’ve only been asleep for a few hours.”

“Did you feed ...”

“I took Warren and Griff out for burgers, and then we dropped Warren off at his house.”

“Is he ...”

“He took a long bath, brushed his teeth *three* times because he lied about the first two, and fell asleep explaining to me that his thumb has its own heartbeat. I have no idea where that ... Yes, I do. That came from Warren, I’m sure.”

“I vaguely remember them talking about that while I was in the chair.”

“That was probably while I was getting the food off the stove and storing it in the fridge for tomorrow night.”

“Nope. We have the wedding rehearsal followed by dinner at the clubhouse.”

“Shit. You’re right. Then we’ve got the wedding and reception on Saturday.”

“We can eat it on Sunday. I’ll make homemade rolls to go with it.”

“I have to work Sunday evening since I’m taking Friday and Saturday off.”

“Okay. I’ll pack you leftovers then.”

“Are you feeling alright?” Crow asked.

“I just haven’t been sleeping very well for the last week or so. I’m not sure why.”

“Could it be because you heard my mom telling Raven that Hawk’s in solitary for some unknown reason?”

I sighed and then nodded before I said, “Maybe. Probably. It started that night.”

“He’s a tough guy, B. He’s gonna be okay.”

“I know,” I said as I sat in the chair next to Crow. “Has he answered any of your letters yet?”

“I’d tell you if he did,” Crow said sadly. “I’m not going to give up, though. Whether he replies to them or not, he’ll at least know I’m thinking about him. You should write to him.”

“Um, no.”

“Why not? What’s it gonna hurt? Honestly, writing him letters is like writing in a journal ... it’s kind of therapeutic. No one interrupts you to ask questions, nothing you say is wrong, you can talk about everything and nothing.”

“I already keep a journal.”

“Well, I guess it’s not enough. You’ve got unresolved issues, B. It’s been six years. It’s time for you to move on before you get too old to enjoy yourself. Next thing you know, you’ll be playing Canasta at the old folks’ home, wondering where your life went.”

“I don’t see you jumping into anything permanent either, buddy.”

“You know why I haven’t,” Crow said grumpily. “Besides, I date.”

“You don’t date. You have meaningless sex with bimbos who use the word ‘like’ as if it’s a comma.” I tilted my head and changed my voice before I mimicked, “It’s, like, so, like, pretty outside. I’m, like, so into nature, and like, I love the clouds. They, like, remind me of marshmallows, and like, I *love* marshmallows. They, like, *give me life*.”

“Never, ever, ever do that again,” Crow said with an exaggerated shudder. “That was painful.”

“That one girl you went out with kept checking her watch, and I finally realized it was because the thing was monitoring her heart rate and reminding her when to take a fucking breath.”

Crow burst out laughing and said, “But she was really hot.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask where you found her.”

“She was a bridesmaid in a bachelorette party that came into the bar.”

“Of course she was.”

“I knew she was the one for me after watching her deep throat a dildo during one of their party games.”

“Uuuugh no. You’re so fucking gross.”

“There’s something to be said about a woman with no gag reflex.”

“She’s gonna end up in the emergency room because she swallowed something she wasn’t supposed to,” I said with a

shudder. “Make better choices, Crow. Seriously.”

“But, like, she was hot and I was, like, really horny,” Crow said, mimicking my earlier impression.

“When are you gonna quit playing around and admit that you’re not interested in meaningless hookups with bimbos whose names all end with -ie.”

“Huh?”

I lifted a finger with each name I listed as I said, “Candie. Brandie. Kaylie. Haylie. And the worst one. What was that ignorant bitch’s name? Trixie. Yeah. I hated her the worst.”

“Okay, I get the picture,” Crow said as he pushed my hand back down to my lap. “From now on, I’ll make sure that I don’t have meaningless sex with anyone whose first name doesn’t end in a consonant.”

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“I’ll start dating seriously as soon as you do.”

I sighed. “Why is it that every man I talk to needs to be smacked in the head?”

“Statistically, that’s impossible. What’s more likely is that *you* need to be smacked in the head and the men you talk to just have immense restraint.”

“I can always tell when you’ve spent time with Warren because you start to sound like him.”

“It’s hard not to sound like him because Griffin sounds *exactly* like him.”

“I think he sounds just like you, especially when he argues with me.”

“I don’t argue with you,” Crow snapped. He laughed and said, “Okay, maybe I do occasionally.”

“I’m going to bed,” I said as I stood up. I leaned over and kissed Crow on the forehead and walked toward my house. I waited until I was walking inside before I yelled, “Just make the call, Crow.”



I shut the door on Crow's response and laughed when I heard muffled yelling. After all these years together, I knew exactly what buttons to push to get a reaction, and so did he.

Too bad neither of us was interested in pushing anything else ... at least, not on each other.



## **HAWK**

I paced the length of my cell eleven more times before I started on burpees. Once I'd finished a hundred of those, I started doing sit-ups.

I had thirty-six hours left in this cell, and there was no way in hell I could rest without wearing myself out first. If I wasn't completely exhausted when I closed my eyes, I'd dream about Brighten and what she'd look like when I saw her again, just like I had for the last 2,248 nights.

And I was sure that dreaming about my brother's old lady was just plain wrong, even if he did it first.

## 4.

### HAWK

“I have to ask, man. Who did you piss off badly enough for them to force you to drive all the way down to pick me up before you turn around and go right back to Rojo?”

Damien, the cop who'd come to pick me up from prison, sighed before he said, “I'm the rookie so I get the shit work until another new guy comes along.”

“And they sent you down here on your off-time? That's *really* shitty.”

“It's a favor for Captain Vance. He's my ...”

“Count Chocula is your boss?” The detective turned and stared at me blankly for a second before he directed his eyes back to the road. “I'm not saying that to be shitty or racist or whatever you're thinking. We've been calling him that, among other things, since I was a kid.”

“Really?” Damien asked, and I could tell he didn't believe me.

“Let me break it down for you. Luc is married to Jaz. Jaz is the baby sister of some of my dad's best friends, Lout and Marcus Hamilton.”

“Vance is related to them?”

“He married into the family. You're probably gonna need a pencil and paper to track this, but let me try to explain. Luc married Jaz. Jaz's older brother is Lout. Lout is married to Aunt Willow, my mom's sister.”

“That's not all that hard.”

“Okay, let me throw you another one. Have you met the chief?”

“I sure have. Chief Cardenas.”

“Okay, the chief has four kids, right?”

“Yes. I’ve seen pictures in his office and met his daughter who works in dispatch.”

“I’m related to two of the chief’s kids, and so is Luc.”

“Huh?”

“My cousin Em is the birth mother of the oldest daughter and the youngest son, Esme and Ben Cardenas. Meaning that I’m technically a cousin to them and Luc is their uncle.”

“Shit. You were right about the pencil.” Damien mulled it over for a minute and then asked, “Does the chief know you blast his family information all over the place?”

“I’m not blasting anything they haven’t already announced. My cousin Em along with Nick and his wife, Cindy, and their kids, Esme and Ben, did a commercial for one of the adoption agencies in town. It was playing on the local stations when I got sent to prison.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Marcus and Reagan, the men whose anniversary party we’re about to crash, filmed one with their kids too.”

“I’m taking you to a wedding.”

“It’s an anniversary party.”

“No. I’m pretty sure the captain said it was a wedding. That’s why he sent the dress clothes for you and told me to wear a tie.”

“Who’s getting married?”

“Your attorney.”

“No shit? I thought they’d been married all this time.”

“Wait a minute. Marcus Hamilton has kids?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t he?”

“He’s got a reputation for ... ruthlessness.”

“I can see that,” I agreed. “But sometimes the most ruthless people are the ones you want on your side, you know?”

“So, he and his fiancé adopted?”

“He and Reagan have been together longer than I’ve been alive, so I just assumed they were already married. The wedding is probably just a technicality.” I thought back and tried to remember how old I was when Marcus and Reagan’s kids joined our family. “I guess Holly, Roscoe, and Ranger came along when I was 5 or 6. I was about to graduate when they got Tot and Noble.”

“I know Noble.”

“He’s also your captain’s nephew.”

“Holy shit. No wonder everyone lost their mind when Noble was one of the first to respond to that call about his ... dad?”

“Marcus?”

“Um, no. The white one.”

“Reagan. Why did the cops get called on Reagan?”

“He was attacked by his youngest son’s parents. Marcus’s niece and I guess one of your ... I have no idea. It was a Forrester. A bird of some sort.”

“A guy or girl?”

“Guy.”

“Crow or Phoenix?”

“Crow! He was part of it, too, along with some guy named Adam.”

“Was Crow hurt?”

“No.”

“What about Adam? He’s also a cousin.”

“Jesus,” Damien blurted. “How many are there?”

“At last count, I think it was somewhere around nine hundred and thirty.” Damien’s eyes practically came out of his head, and I laughed. “I’m just fucking with you. I have no idea, man. I would need to make a list, and I’d still probably fuck it up.”

“So anyway, the youngest son’s birth parents attacked Reagan.”

“I think you might have it twisted. Noble is their youngest son, and his birth parents can’t attack anything. Well, at least his dad can’t.”

“Nope. This boy is white. Still a minor.”

“Marcus and Reagan have another kid?”

“Yep. And he fits right in with the whole bunch because he was whooping ass and taking names too. Got his bloody shoe print off the shirt of one of the perps.”

“Damn. So they’ve got six in their brood now.”

“I guess *that’s* how you’ve got so many cousins.”

“They just seem to multiply. My parents have seven kids, and two of my uncles have nine.”

“Wait a minute. What is the name of Noble’s sister?”

“He’s got two - Holly and Tot.”

“Holly ... Hamilton?”

“Uh, yeah. She’s Marcus and Reagan’s oldest.”

“You’re fucking kidding.”

“Why?”

“Does she have kids, or does her sister?”

“Tot doesn’t have any, but Holly does. Little ones. I haven’t met them yet.”

“Oh man,” Damien said before he blew out a long breath. “I fucked up.”

“How?”

“I’ll take care of it,” Damien said as he shook his head and furrowed his brow. “Maybe.”

“Obviously, she’ll be at the wedding.”

“Well, I’d hope so since they’re her parents.”

“You know, for a cop, you’re not so bad, Damien,” I admitted.

“Well, Hawk, for an ex-con, you’re not so bad yourself.”



As silently as I could, I cracked one of the large doors at the back of the room and slipped inside followed closely by Damien. I watched the people on stage as I walked toward some chairs against the back wall and grinned when Pop’s eyes got wide before he was able to school his expression and start the prayer. While everyone’s heads were bowed, I took a seat next to Damien and looked around the room to find my family.

I found my mom and dad almost instantly, and as I scanned the room looking for both sets of my grandparents, my eyes caught the little boy fidgeting on the stage.

He was looking out over the crowd, and when he saw me looking at him, he frowned and pointed at me before he put his hands together as if to pray and then pointed at me again. It took all I had not to laugh out loud. I had to put my hand over my mouth to stay quiet.

The kid made a V with his fingers and pointed to his eyes and then to mine before he pointed back to his. I did the same thing back to him and then couldn’t stifle the snort that escaped when the little shit flipped me off.

I saw movement in the front row and gasped when I realized it was Brighten trying to get her son to behave. When she pointed at her son, he gave her puppy dog eyes and then made the shape of a heart with his hands against his chest.

Brighten leaned her head forward and started rubbing her temples. The little shit was still mimicking her when the prayer finished and the ceremony began.

“Who’s the comedian?” Damien whispered.

“That’s my nephew.”

“He’s a wild one.”

“He comes by it honestly. We were horrible children, always into something, although, I’m not sure we’d ever go so far as to flip off a stranger in front of a room full of people.”

“He’s a rule breaker, that’s for damn sure. Maybe the kid’s more like his uncle than his father.”

“I’m not the only rule breaker in the family, just the only one who got caught.”

The rest of the ceremony went by in a blur, and I felt myself get emotional as my grandpa introduced Marcus and Reagan as a married couple. While they were still at the front of the room, I slipped out so I could stay out of sight as the guests turned to watch the wedding party walk down the aisle.

I was searching for a place to hide when the doors opened. Marcus and Reagan were the first out of the room followed closely by Uncle Lout and Aunt Brenda.

Brenda’s face froze in shock for a second before she let out a loud squeal and ran toward me. I opened my arms and she ran into them, sobbing as she kept whispering, “You’re home!” over and over.

“Take him into your dressing room, and I’ll get his parents,” Lout said as he stood in front of the doors so they couldn’t open until I was out of sight.

Marcus rushed toward me with his hand out, but I pulled him into a tight hug instead.

“Congratulations!” I said as I pulled away.

The second I let him go, he smiled and said, “Looks like you’ve got almost as much reason to celebrate as we do.”

“Hell yeah,” I said before I pulled Reagan into a hug and then walked over to Lout.

“Boy, it’s good to see you home safe,” Lout said as he held me tight. “This is a good day. A *damn* good day.”

When I pulled back I saw that Lout had tears in his eyes just like I did. “You didn’t know?”

“He didn’t give us a firm answer just in case it didn’t go through. Follow Marcus, and we’ll find your parents.”

“He’ll bring them to us,” Marcus said. I heard the doors of the venue open behind us just as he ushered me into his dressing room. “Your dad knew it was possible, just not when. Your mom still has no idea.”

“She’s gonna freak.”

“I’m gonna go out in the hall and give you guys a few minutes, okay?”

“Will you try to find my grandparents and my brothers and sisters?” I begged.

“We’ll find them.”

“I didn’t mean to hijack your wedding, man,” I said with a wince.

“This just makes it the best day ever on more than one front. It’s good to have you home.”

I looked out the window and listened to people start moving around outside in the hallway. It wasn’t very long before the door opened, and my mom and dad walked inside.

“Hawk?” my mom gasped. “Oh, my baby! Oh my God!”

I wrapped my arms around her and felt my dad come in close too. I couldn’t stop the tears that fell as my parents cried in my arms.

My mom pushed me back and stared into my face as she asked, “How did this happen? How did you get here? I thought ...”

“I had another appeal because of the first judge’s connection to my case. It went in front of a different judge, and he lowered my charges and let me out with time served. I’ve still got a shit ton of fines to take care of and two years of parole to complete before I can apply for my driver’s license again, but all that really matters is that I’m home.”

“Oh, Hawk, I’ve prayed for this day,” my mom said before she leaned forward and rested her head on my chest. “This is



beyond my wildest dreams. I thought it would be years ...”

The door opened again, and my Gigi and Pop came into the room. Pop was expecting me but his eyes were flooded with tears when Gigi rushed over and threw her arms around me and my mom. A few minutes later, Gamma and Papa Smokey joined the fray followed by my siblings.

It was a reunion I’d envisioned for six years, one month, three weeks, and a day. That was how long it had been since I’d heard the cell doors shut behind me that cold December night. I’d been dreaming about the wreck, Brighten and this moment ever since.

It was funny how some dreams came true while others never stood a chance.



## **BRIGHTEN**

I saw Marcus rush off with Martha and Smokey Forrester in tow and became alarmed when he picked Crow out of the crowd along with his siblings and had them follow him out of the reception hall.

“Are you okay?” my mom asked as she laid the back of her hand against my cheek. “You’re flushed all of a sudden. Have you eaten today?”

“I ate with Crow and Griff right before we got here,” I answered as my mind raced.

The only explanation for dragging that part of the Forrester clan away from the rest of the family would have to be something to do with Hawk. If it was any of the other Forresters, they would have taken other kids, who I saw laughing and smiling as if they didn’t have a care in the world.

“Will you watch Griff for a minute, Mom?” I asked.

She nodded but Griffin clutched my hand and said, “I want to go with you!”

“Okay,” I said as I started walking away, trying hard to not drag my son behind me in my haste to get back to the chapel and see what was going on. We walked through the side door, and I didn’t see any of Crow’s immediate family in there. I rushed through the room toward the doors that opened into the foyer and stopped short when I saw Marcus standing in front of one of the doors.

“Is everything okay? Crow was supposed to take a picture with us, but I saw all of you leaving,” I lied. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothings wrong, sweetheart,” Marcus told me with a big smile. “I guess I can let the secret out since all the major players are already aware. I’ve got some great news!”

“What?”

“Hawk’s home.”

“*What?*” I whispered as my heart started to race. “He’s home? For good?”

“He is,” Marcus said as Brenda and Reagan walked through the door to my right. They were smiling from ear to ear, and I assumed they’d already heard the news.

I looked down at Griffin and then toward the door the two had just come through and made a split-second decision.

“Come on, Griff,” I said as I rushed toward the door. We got outside, and I realized that I didn’t have our coats or my purse with my keys.

“Brighten, it’s cold out here.”

“My name is Mom,” I said without even thinking as I hurried us toward my truck. I entered the code into the keypad on the driver’s side door and then boosted Griff up into the driver’s seat. He crawled into the back to buckle himself in, and I pulled my phone out as I got into my own seat. “Who can I call? What should I do?”

“Brighten, what’s wrong?”

“Mom. Nothing, baby,” I said as I stared down at my phone. I thought about all the times I’d needed someone to talk to and knew exactly who I could call to help me. He picked it up on the first ring.

“Hey, Bright Eyes. I’ve been looking for you. Where are you?”

“I need your help, but you can’t tell anyone, okay?”

“Of course. Where are you?”

“I’m in my truck in the parking lot. My purse is with my mom, but I don’t want her to know I’m leaving and ... Oh God, Uncle Kale. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“Brighten?” I heard Griff say softly from his seat in the back.

“I’m okay, baby,” I assured him with a sniff as I wiped my eyes. “Uncle Kale, I need your help. I fucked up so bad. I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m on my way, Bright Eyes. Sit tight for a minute. I’ll be right there.”

“Brighten ... Mama, why are you crying?” Griff asked as I heard his seat belt retract and then he was right by my shoulder. When I turned to look at him, I met eyes colored just like mine, studying me from a face that looked just like his father’s. His eyes filled with tears as he asked, “What’s wrong? If you did something bad, we can fix it. You always fix your bads. We can fix yours.”

“Sometimes, when you’re an adult, you do things that can’t be fixed, baby. I’m afraid I might have done that.”

“Crow can help you fix it. Or Grandpa. Papa Mokey can fix anything. He even fixed the special plate with my handprint on it after I knocked it off the Christmas tree and made Gamma sad.”

“This is different, Griff,” I said as I wiped the tears off his cheeks. “You know I love you, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And since I found out you were coming to me, I’ve tried to do everything with your best interest in mind. I want you to remember that, okay?”

“Okay.”

“You promise me, Griff, *pinkie swear promise*, that you’ll try and love me through anything that happens, alright?”

Griffin stuck his pinkie out and hooked it to mine before we kissed our thumbs and then touched our foreheads together. “I’ll love you no matter what you broke. I promise.”

Someone tapped on the window behind me, and I jumped before I spun around to see Kale. His wife, Terra, was right behind him, and I wondered what he’d told her about what was going on.

“Little man,” Kale said as soon as I opened the door. “Can you hang out with Aunt Terra for a while so I can talk to your mama?”

“She’s sad, Kale,” Griff told him as he hurriedly brushed the tears off his face. “Make it stop.”

“I’ll do my best, son.”

I gave Griff a kiss before he crawled past me into Kale’s arms. He turned to look at me again, his eyes still sad, and asked Kale, “You promise you’ll make her okay again?”

“I will surely try, little man.” Kale gave Griff a squeeze and then set him on the ground.

Terra reached for his hand and smiled at me before she said, “I’ll get your purse from Lisa and then take Griffin home and put him to bed when it’s time. Take as long as you need, okay?”

I sniffed and got out of the truck before I said, “Thank you.” I leaned down and touched my forehead to Griffin’s and said, “You go inside and have fun with your cousins. No worries about me, okay? I’ll be just fine with Uncle Kale.”

“Love you, Brighten.”

“I love you too.”

Kale put his arm around my shoulders as we watched Terra and Griffin walk back into the building.

“Let’s go to my Bronco, darlin’. We’ll cruise around and solve all your troubles just like we used to when you were small.”

“I don’t think you can fix this one, Uncle Kale.”

Kale squeezed me to his side and whispered, “You realize telling me that just makes me even more determined, right?”

I tried to laugh but a sob burst through, and then the tears started. I was crying so hard that I couldn’t even see where Kale was leading me. He helped me up into the passenger seat of his Bronco and then hurried around to get in on the driver’s side. I stared out the window toward the building as tears streamed down my face and then cried even harder when Kale reached across the console and took my hand.

“Now, tell me what’s wrong and who I need to kill, Bright Eyes.”

## BRIGHTEN

“Are you calm enough to talk yet?” Kale asked before he took another sip of his coffee.

I gave Scarlet, his parrot, another scratch on the back of her neck, then leaned back in my chair with a sigh as she walked across the table toward her perch.

“Have you ever made a decision, and I mean an informed decision where you thought of all the angles and considered every single outcome, only to have it blow up in your face?”

Kale tilted his head before he said, “I’m gonna need a for instance here.”

I rested my elbows on the table before I looked out the window at the night sky beyond the glass.

“Since you haven’t said anything, I’m guessing you didn’t hear the news.”

“What news? Are you pregnant again?”

“No, I’m not pregnant again. The news about Hawk.”

Kale leaned forward with an intense look on his face and asked, “What happened to him?”

“He’s out.”

“What?”

“I don’t know all the details, but he’s out. After the wedding, Marcus took Bird’s whole family into this room so they could see him alone first.”

Kale’s eyes got wide and he asked, “Are you sure?”

“Marcus said, ‘Hawk’s home.’ I’m sure.”

“And then what happened?”

I let my head drop and stared at the table for a few seconds before tears filled my eyes again. I looked back at Kale, one

of the most important figures in my life next to my mom and dad.

“I’m afraid that when I tell you what I’ve done, you’re going to hate me.”

“Bright Eyes, there’s *nothing* you could ever do that would make me hate you.”

“I lied. Not a little lie. A *huge*, life-altering lie,” I said without taking my eyes off his. “I told a lie for the right reasons, but I’ve heard you say a million times that just because something’s done for the right reasons doesn’t make it the right thing to do.”

“Who did you lie to?”

“Everyone. You, Mom and Dad ... everyone I know.”

“What does this have to do with Hawk getting released? That’s what upset you in the first place, isn’t it?” I nodded, and Kale looked down at the table. Finally, he looked back up at me and asked, “Is Crow Griffin’s father?” I shook my head, and Kale blinked a few times before he asked, “Is it Hawk?” I nodded, and he sighed heavily before he leaned back in his chair and ran his hand over his face and down his beard before he asked, “Does Hawk know?” I shook my head. “Does *Crow* know?” I nodded, and Kale’s eyes got wide as his eyebrows shot to his hairline. “I’m gonna need you to explain your reasoning here, Bright Eyes, because I’m not following.”

“I found out the morning before Hawk got convicted. I hadn’t told a soul, and Crow got to my apartment just a few minutes after I got the news. Crow had no idea that we were together until Hawk asked him to watch over me if he got sent away. That’s why Crow showed up at my place. We were both so sad and heartbroken, that we laid down on my bed and cried together for what seemed like hours. I fell asleep, and Crow went to the bathroom and found the test on the counter. He put two and two together and said that he’d stand in as Griffin’s father. We agreed not to tell a soul our secret until Hawk got out. By then, the baby would be an adult and ...”

“And would just say, ‘Oh, no shit? You’ve been lying to me my entire fucking life? How cool! I’ve got a new dad! Really?’”

“Crow said that Hawk was depressed enough and reeling knowing that he’d be gone for at least eighteen years. Crow thought that if we told him about the baby, that would make his time inside even worse and he might do something reckless.”

“I’ve been there. I mean, not in this exact scenario, obviously, but I’ve been in prison. Crow had a good point. Wondering what your friends and family are doing while you are locked up can make a man crazy, but knowing you’re on the inside while a part of you is growing up on the outside ... Fuck.” Kale rubbed his eyes before he ran his hand down his beard again. Finally, he looked at me and asked, “So you made a pact to protect Hawk?”

“Yes. If we said that the baby belonged to Crow, he’d get all of the same grandparents that he would if the baby belonged to Hawk. Bird and Summer would have a grandson to enjoy without thinking about what Hawk was missing every time they looked at him.”

“Okay,” Kale said. “And what does Griff know? Is this why he calls Crow by his first name?”

“He calls *me* by my first name. We’ve never said a word to anyone about this, including Griffin. We were going to keep it quiet until Hawk got out of prison.”

“Your parents don’t know? None of your girls know? You didn’t tell *any* of your friends? What about Phoenix?”

“No one.”

“Fuck. You two are dedicated, I’ll give you that.”

“What do we do?”

Kale lifted his hand as he sputtered for a few seconds before he said, “Well, you tell the goddamn truth even if it makes you look like an asshole.”



“We’ll have to talk to Hawk first, then Griffin. After that, we’ll go to Bird and Summer.” Fresh tears started to fall, and I wailed, “They’re gonna hate me.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind that’s gonna be their first emotion.”

“Was it yours?”

Kale winced. “I’ll admit, I was a little stunned, Bright Eyes. I didn’t know you were capable of a lie like that. You can damn sure play the long game. I see what the two of you were aiming for. It’s better to have him angry at his brother for a while because he poached his girl and knocked her up than to realize that he’s missing out on his child’s life from birth to adulthood without a goddamn thing he could do about it.”

“That’s exactly it.”

“I guess that’s why things were so tense when we would ask Crow about Hawk.”

“He hasn’t spoken to him since he found out about the baby.”

“We knew there was a rift, but we didn’t know what caused it. No one was talking, and now I see why.”

“Crow and I have to sit down and talk to Hawk, but I don’t know how I’m going to get him to meet with us.”

“I’ll arrange it. Be ready when I call you.”

“Okay,” I said softly.

“You know, Bright Eyes, I’ve always said that just because something’s done for the right reasons doesn’t make it right, but somehow, I think you’ve proved me wrong. I can’t see any other way about this now that you’ve explained your reasoning for telling that whopper of a fucking lie and holding to it for the last six years.” Kale laughed softly and said, “You’d have both gone along with it until Hawk got out, I’m sure.”

“That was the plan. We were going to make sure he was ... okay ... first, and if we saw that he wasn’t the same Hawk

we loved so much, we were going to keep the secret forever.”

“You’re a fucking vault, Bright Eyes. I had no idea. I’m actually a little proud. That’s fucked up, considering the situation, but it’s true.”

“You’ll find a way to get Hawk to talk to us?”

“I’ll get Hawk somewhere secure, put away all the sharp objects, and then let you three hash shit out. That’s the best I can do, sweetheart.”

“That’s more than I should ask for.”

“I’ve been telling you since the first day we met that I’d do anything for you, and I meant it.”

“Thank you, Uncle Kale.”

“Do you feel a little bit better now, Bright Eyes?”

“I do.”

“Okay, let’s get you home so you can talk to Crow and tell him the plan. I’ll get Hawk corralled in the next few days and let you know the details.”

“Okay. Thank you again,” I said as we both stood. Kale came around the table and pulled me into his arms, bringing a fresh round of tears. “I love you, Uncle Kale. I knew I could count on you. I just prayed that you wouldn’t hate me.”

“I could never hate you, Bright Eyes. You’re my girl.”



## **CROW**

Walking behind Marcus and my Gamma and Papa Smokey, I was terrified that something had happened to Hawk while he was in prison. That was the only reason I could think to explain why our slice of the family had been separated out.

Something happened and he had been attacked. He could be hurt or injured or facing more charges. Or he could be ...

standing right in front of us with my mom and Gigi in his arms as they cried.

Holy. Shit.

The girls went wild, sobbing as they scrambled to get closer to our oldest brother. Phoenix stood beside me with his mouth hanging open for a second before he rushed over and wrapped his arms around anyone he could find.

I stood, rooted to the spot with my heart in my throat and tears in my eyes as Hawk, one of my best friends in the entire world, stared at me with a blank expression.

I had committed the ultimate betrayal, as far as he knew, and I was dead to him. I'd known he was pissed because he refused to answer my letters and wouldn't allow me to visit him, but that was entirely different from what was happening now. When he was behind bars, I didn't have to feel the disappointment and loathing coming off of him in waves.

Now, he was right in front of me, but so far away that there was no way I could ever get close to him again.

"Come with me, boy," Papa Smokey said as he tugged on my arm. I broke eye contact with my brother and looked at my grandfather as tears rolled down my cheeks. I saw that Pop, my other grandfather, was standing next to him with a concerned look on his face, and my father was right behind him. "Let's go have a smoke."

I let Papa Smokey pull me out of the room, feeling the stare of my brother boring into the back of my head. I couldn't take his hatred and doubted there was even a minute chance he'd ever forgive me.

My grandfather pulled me into a side room that was being used to store stacked chairs and some folding tables leaning against one wall.

I took a few steps into the room and pulled my arm out of my grandfather's so I could find my own space to calm my emotions and think about what I ... *we* were going to do now that Hawk was home. I heard them setting up one of the tables and pulling chairs off the stacks, but I couldn't see them

because my eyes were squeezed tight as I tried to get the image of my brother's stony expression out of my head.

I slid down the wall and sat down, my forearms resting on my bent knees as I let my head fall forward and cried for everything I'd lost.

Memories of laughing with my brother while we played in the yard overwhelmed me. I could see the fear and panic in his eyes as he bent over me after I'd fallen and broken my arm, and years later, the knowing smile on his face as I told him about getting to second base with Trinity Booker.

I remembered all the times he'd been there when I needed someone and how we'd been close enough for me to confide my innermost secrets and feelings in him.

It was all gone now. Erased by a decision I'd made to protect him and his son ... A promise I'd made that turned into an entirely new life for me.

The door opened and closed, and I felt someone stop in front of me.

"Son, come over to the table so we can talk," I heard my dad say. I opened my eyes and saw his concern as he squatted just a few feet away. I couldn't do anything more than shake my head. "There's nothing you've done that can't be fixed. Get your ass up so we can get started on that."

I thought of Brighten for the first time since I'd realized my brother was home and shook my head. "I have to go find ... I need to call ..."

"No. You have to talk whatever this is out before you do anything else, you hear me?"

"Yessir," I said as he held out his hand. I wondered if he'd still offer me that hand if he knew what I'd done, but I accepted it for now and knew I'd remember it forever because it might be the very last time it was offered.

I stood and looked at the table where my grandfathers were sitting and was taken aback to see Pop pouring whiskey into some clear plastic cups. He finished and set the bottle in the

middle of the table before he leaned back in his chair and looked at me with concern in his eyes.

“Sit down, son,” my dad said as he pulled a chair out for me. As I sat, he took the chair next to me and then leaned his arms on the table. He said, “This talk has been a long time coming, and I honestly wasn’t sure we’d ever need to have it.”

“We’ve watched the distance grow between you and your brother, Crow, and we let it lie because he was gonna be gone long enough that we were sure whatever the problem was would pass,” Papa Smokey said.

My dad still had his face in his hands, and I watched him dig the heels of his palms into his eyes for a second before he wiped the tears off his face. “I can’t believe he’s home.”

“I know,” I said, my voice thick with tears.

“The look on your face when you saw him standing in that room was half joy and half ‘Oh fuck, someone just kicked me in the nuts.’ Your dad’s been worrying about this for years now, and he’s talked to us about it some, but there was really nothing we could do with Hawk locked up,” Pop said as he nudged one of the cups of whiskey toward me. “Let’s drink a toast to Hawk’s homecoming and then another to us figuring this shit out together.”

“He hates me,” I said before I threw the shot back and set the cup back on the table. “I don’t think that can be fixed.”

“Since the day I met the three of you, there wasn’t a foot of space between you, and now there are miles,” Dad said. “We know it has something to do with Brighten, and we can probably guess what, but we need to hear it from you so we can get it sorted out.”

“I have to talk to him first. I would have to reveal his secret to explain and ...”

“Fuck that. Get this shit out now so we can all enjoy your brother’s homecoming,” Papa Smokey said in his gravelly voice. “You included, son.”

“There’s nothing you can say to any of us that we haven’t already guessed,” Pop said before he sighed. He took a sip of

his whiskey and then stared into the cup. “I love Brighten, son, and that’s not gonna change, but you can’t let a woman get between you and your brother.”

“He’s gonna have to realize that whatever the two of them had wasn’t real if she went to you so soon after he was gone. That’s nothing against her, Crow. I’m not trying to shame her,” my dad insisted. “It’s understandable to know you were hurting and took comfort in each other. That’s something Hawk’s gonna have to deal with. We’ve got Griffin to think about too.”

“He’s a smart boy, and he’s gonna realize that he’s at the center of this turmoil. We can’t have that hanging over him,” Papa Smokey said gruffly.

“Brighten and I did this for Griffin. And Hawk.”

“Son, I’m not sure that’s the way to play this.”

“I told a lie. Brighten and I both did, but it was my idea. Hawk was going away, and Brighten needed help. I made a decision that was best for everyone, *including Hawk*, and I convinced her to go along with it. This is on me, not her,” I said earnestly as I looked from one man to another. “I can’t have anyone treating her badly for a decision I made.”

“Holy shit,” Papa Smokey said as his eyes got wide. “Griff isn’t your son.”

I swallowed and then let out a breath before I said, “He’s Hawk’s.”

“Well, shit. That’s a twist I didn’t see coming,” Pop said as he ran his hands over his face, trying to wipe his shock away. “I thought I’d come to a point in my life where nothing could shock me but ... well ... that did it.”

“What the fuck, son! You stole his girl *and* his kid? Fuck me. No wonder he’s ...”

“No, Dad. It’s not like that at all. I mean, it’s sort of ... Oh shit,” I said before I picked up Dad’s whiskey and shot it down. “I’ve never even kissed Brighten. We’ve never had anything other than friendship and never will. It never even

crossed my mind to see her as anything other than my brother's girl."

"Then why would you ..."

"He protected her," Papa Smokey said. "And you and Summer and Hawk but especially Griff."

I nodded. "Brighten and Hawk broke up right before he was arrested because he wasn't ready to ..."

My dad interrupted, "Hawk was gonna abandon his girl and his baby?"

"No!"

"Do the math," Papa Smokey said. "Let the boy talk."

"He started acting reckless, and we couldn't figure out why, remember?" I asked. When they nodded, I said, "It's because they'd broken up. They'd been seeing each other for a long time, and no one knew. No one. Not even me and Nix."

"Why did they keep it a secret?"

"I think it was about Uncle Kale at first, but then, when things got serious, it was mostly about Hawk's reputation. He was a love 'em and leave 'em kind of guy. Brighten didn't want to be known as another notch on his bedpost, so she insisted that they stay under the radar. And that way, when they did break up, there wouldn't be any hard feelings between him and Zeke or Kale."

"And then she discovered she was pregnant."

"She found out just before I went over to tell her Hawk had been convicted. At that point, I knew they'd been seeing each other, but after she cried herself to sleep a few hours later, I found the positive test."

"So, you decided ..."

"I stood there looking at myself in the mirror and made a plan at that very moment. I told Brighten, and she balked at the idea and made me think about it for a week before we talked again. We didn't go into this lightly, I promise."

“What was your reasoning behind ... I mean, we’d have done anything for Griff whether he belonged to you *or* your brother. Same with Brighten.”

“I was by Brighten’s side for every appointment and sonogram. I was there to cut the cord when he was born, and I’ve been with him every day since then, just like Hawk would have done. If I said the baby was mine, then it was yours too. All of yours, and instead of just being surrounded by family that love him while he was raised by a single mom, Griff had a dad, too, and Brighten had a partner through it all.”

“You gave up your life to be a dad to your brother’s son,” Papa Smokey said.

“And we didn’t tell him because we thought that would just make his time in prison worse, knowing exactly what he was missing while he was inside.”

“If he was angry, he’d be more on point, but if he was depressed, he’d have been stuck in his head rather than keeping an eye on his surroundings,” Dad mused. “And either way, we’re still his grandparents. But what about Griff? What’s he going to think?”

“The books say it’s important to remember that a kid like Griff is really still just a kid. He’s smarter than all of us, but he’s just a 5-year-old when it comes to other things. This could fuck up his anxiety and bring back some of the behaviors we’ve already worked through. I’m gonna have to get with Brighten and we’ll talk to his psychologist and see what he thinks.”

“And how is this going to affect *you* when everyone finds out he’s not your son?”

“Griff loves me, and I love him. That’s not gonna change. Hawk might not like it, but Brighten won’t let anything get between me and Griff. I’ve done everything a dad would do, but I know I’ve sort of held back a little bit ...”

Dad nodded and interrupted when he said, “Summer and Shannon have noticed that.”



“But I’ve been there with him through everything, and that’s not gonna stop just because I’m his uncle instead of his father. For his sake.”

“And yours.”

“It’s so fucking twisted. I’m happy - beyond fucking happy that my brother is home safe, but I’m not ready to give up the life we’ve made together for Griff,” I said as tears filled my eyes again. “I can’t lose that.”

“Do you love her?” Pop asked.

“I do love Brighten, but it’s the same way I love Raven or Lark. She loves me like she loves Booker or Bronx. We’re family.”

“Fuck,” Pop said as he leaned his head back. “This is so fucking twisted. I don’t know what to do.”

“I need to find Brighten. I can’t let her be blindsided by this. I’ll figure out a way to get Hawk alone so I can talk to him, but I’ve got to get Brighten’s input first.”

“We’ll give it a week,” Papa Smokey said, and my mind flashed back to the night Brighten said the same thing to me about this, just from a different angle. “He can get settled in at home, we’ll let everyone enjoy themselves, and then we’ll reassess.”

“This stays at this table,” my dad said firmly as he looked from Pop to Papa Smokey and then to me. “You can’t tell Mama, and you can’t tell Shannon. I won’t say a word to Summer. Brighten, Crow, and Hawk have to work this out. Our main focus needs to be Griffin anyway. This could fuck that boy up. With the way his mind works, there’s no telling how he’s gonna process it. Talk to his teachers or his shrink or whoever the fuck you think might help. We’ll all follow your lead.”

“I have to track down Brighten. She’s out there somewhere with Griff and ...”

“Go find them. We’ll be in touch,” my dad said before he rubbed his temples. “We need to go talk to Hawk. Everyone’s probably wondering where we disappeared to by now.”

“I say we have another drink while we figure out how we’re gonna lie to our old ladies,” Pop said as he pulled the bottle closer to him. “We love you, boy, and we’d do anything for you. Remember that.”

“I will.”

I stood and wiped my face dry before I took a deep breath and turned around to go find Brighten and our boy.

*My boy.*

My brother’s son.

## 6.

### HAWK

I looked around to make sure no one was watching and then slipped through the door that led into the chapel. All the overhead lights had been turned off except for a few dim canister lights along the edges of the room.

I sighed and appreciated the silence. I rolled my neck around for a second as I tried to relieve the tension in my shoulders.

Today had been an emotional roller coaster from the minute the guard unlocked my cell door. I'd checked the mirrors a million times on the ride home, sure I'd see someone chasing us down to tell me that there'd been a mistake and I had to go back.

I sat in a random pew near the middle of the sanctuary and then leaned forward and rested my head on the pew in front of me.

After a few seconds of silence, I heard a sniff and then another and realized there was a kid in here somewhere, probably scared and alone.

"Hello?" I called out. "Who's there?" When no one answered me, I realized a voice coming from somewhere in the darkness of this big room would probably terrify a little kid, so I said, "My name's Hawk Forrester. If you tell me who your mama is, I'll go find her for you."

"Hawk Forrester?" a voice asked from somewhere behind me.

"Yes. I'm Hawk. My mom is ..."

"My Gammy," the little voice said before there was another sniff. "You're my uncle."

I knew exactly who was out there in the darkness, and I leaned forward and let my head rest on the seat again with a

sigh. Finally, I sat up again and asked, “Are you scared?”

“Kind of,” the little boy said, but this time he was right beside me. I jumped, and the boy laughed before he sat down a few feet to my right. “Are you?”

I laughed for a second and then admitted, “A little bit.”

“You’re a grown-up. What are you afraid of?”

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly before I said, “I just got home, and everything’s different than I remember. That’s a little scary for me because I don’t know where I fit in anymore.”

“I never fit in,” the boy whispered. “I know how you feel.”

I decided to let that slide for a second before I asked, “Why are you scared? Did you get lost?”

“I told Aunt Terra I was going to play with some of the other kids, but I was really going to run away. It’s cold and dark outside, but I want to find Brighten.”

“Your mom?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t know where she is?”

“She left with Kale, but she was crying and I don’t know why. Crow went into a room with Bird, Smokey, and Grunt. Crow was sad too. I tried to listen at the door, but I couldn’t hear anything.”

“You probably shouldn’t listen at the door when grown-ups are talking. You might find out things you don’t need to know.”

“I do that a lot, and I know things that Crow and Brighten think are a secret.”

“Like what?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

The boy scoffed and said, “If it’s a secret, no one’s supposed to know.”

“You got me there, bud.” After a few seconds of silence, I asked, “Do you think Aunt Terra’s looking for you yet?”

“No. I’m playing with the other kids, remember?”

“Oh. My bad. Why *aren’t* you playing with the other kids?”

“Because I don’t fit in. Why aren’t you in there talking to the grown-ups?”

“Touché, little man.”

“If I stay here long enough, Brighten or Crow will come find me.”

“How will they know where to look?”

The little boy held his arm out and showed me the watch on his wrist. “They track me.”

I raised my eyebrows and had to ask, “Why?”

“Because when things get to be too much, I like to go where it’s dark and quiet so I can think. It scares them because sometimes I break the rules and go where I’m not supposed to. Now they can find me without freaking out.”

“You do this a lot?”

“I try not to, but sometimes things are just too much, you know?”

I laughed softly and said, “You remind me of Brighten’s Uncle Warren, but you’ve probably heard that before, huh?”

“I have. I like Warren.”

“So do I. He’s pretty cool.”

“What do you like about him?”

“You never have to guess what’s on his mind.”

“Brighten’s trying to teach me that sometimes it’s better to keep your lips zipped so that you don’t hurt someone’s feelings. I’m not very good at that, and neither is Warren.”

“I’ve heard that about you.”

“You have? From who?”

“My brother.”

“When he writes you letters?”

“Yeah. He’s written at least a thousand, and there was something about you in almost every one.”

“That sounds like a load of baloney.”

“You think so?”

“You went to prison before I was born, so if we round up to six years and he wrote you weekly, then he’s only written to you 312 times. If he wrote to you three times a week, that still wouldn’t be a thousand letters. Only 936.”

“Holy shit. How old are you?”

“Didn’t we just go over that? I’m five.”

“Wow.”

“I get that a lot.”

“I bet you do.”

I jumped when I heard a buzz, and then my brother’s voice asked, “Boy, are you okay?”

Griffin pushed an icon on his watch and said, “I’m okay.”

The watch buzzed again, and Crow asked, “Where are you?” Griffin pushed another icon and then Crow barked, “I don’t need to know the address! Where are you in the building?”

Griffin looked at me and asked, “What’s this room called?”

“The chapel.”

“We are not in a church.”

“It’s a place where people get married. I’d call it a chapel. What would you call it?”

“You’re the grown-up. I’m just a child.”

“Are you?”

The watch buzzed, and Crow again asked, “Where are you, Griffin?”

“I’m in the chapel that’s not part of a church.”

The watch buzzed. “What?”

“Tell him you’re in the room where they had the wedding.”

Griffin gave Crow that information and then looked up and said, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I like you. Can we talk again?”

“Sure. We’ll probably see each other around at family things.”

“But you’re not going to talk to Crow or Brighten unless you have to, huh?”

“That’s grown-up business.”

“That’s what grown-ups say when they don’t have an answer.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t have a brother, but I think Warren is kind of like a brother even though he’s really my grandfather.”

“You know about all that?”

“Obviously. I know everything about you too.”

“Like what?”

“You and Crow used to run around naked all the time, and you peed in Willow’s flower bed and killed the plants.” I laughed at the memory, but Griffin wasn’t finished. “One time, you built a brick house underwater and pretended you were a fish until you almost drowned because Phoenix parked his bicycle on your air hose.”

“I still think he did it on purpose.”

“You promised that Phoenix and Crow would be your best friends until you got old and died.”

“I did,” I said with a sigh.

“Will you do that with me too? Phoenix and Crow already said they would, and that’s my only chance since every time I ask Brighten to bring home a baby, she laughs like she did the time she ate too many gummy snacks with Lark and Amalia.”

“Gummy snacks?”

“Yeah. She keeps them locked in the safe with her gun.”

I laughed when I realized what he was talking about, and then a thought struck me. “How do you know they’re in the safe with her gun?”

“I looked.”

“Was she with you when you looked?”

“No.”

“Okay then,” I said, wondering exactly how I was going to approach Crow or Brighten and explain that not only did their kid know the location of their edible stash, but he also had access to their gun. “Do me a favor.”

“I can’t agree to that unless I know the nature of the favor.”

“Don’t get into that safe again unless one of your parents is with you.”

“Oh, I won’t. Firearm safety is very important, and I’m not allowed to touch it unless Crow takes me to the range. Also, the gummies she has are illegal in Texas, and I don’t want my fingerprints on the bottle. I’m going to grow up and join the FBI unsolved crimes task force, and they don’t let criminals apply.”

“Holy shit. That’s a lot but okay. Still, stay out of the safe. Promise?”

“I promise.” We were quiet for a few seconds, and then Griffin asked, “Since you don’t like Brighten or Crow, does that mean you don’t like me?”

“I like you just fine, kid. You’re cool.”

“Does that mean you’ll talk to me again?”



“Every time I see you.”

“Will you be my best friend until you die?”

I laughed softly and nodded before I said, “Yeah, I’ll be your best friend until I die.”

“Good. Smokey says you can’t have too many friends.”

The door at the back opened, and I saw Crow’s silhouette walking through the doorway before it shut behind him.

“Griff, buddy, where are ... Oh.” Crow stopped talking but kept coming closer. He stopped at the end of the pew and said, “Griff, it’s time to go.”

“I’m not ready. I need seven more minutes.”

“I’ll be quiet for seven minutes while we’re in the truck. Let’s go.”

“Can we sit here for seven minutes?” Griffin asked before he looked down at his watch. “Six and a half minutes?”

Crow glanced at me and then back at his son. He opened his mouth to say something, probably to tell the kid they had to leave, but I shifted closer toward Griffin as I said, “Have a seat, brother.”

Crow sat down beside me and looked straight ahead as he asked Griffin, “Do you have any idea where your mom might be?”

“She left with Kale because she was crying.” I felt Crow tense beside me before he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “Have you been crying too?”

“A little,” Crow admitted.

“Grownup business?”

“Something like that, bud.”

“I met your brother, Hawk.”

“I see that,” Crow said simply. “Did you two have a good chat?”

“He thinks Phoenix ran over the line that supplied his air on purpose. He thinks he was trying to kill him.”

Crow snickered and said, “I wouldn’t put it past him. I’m pretty sure he’s tried to kill me a few times too.”

“Grunt said ...”

I interrupted the boy and asked, “Why do you call everyone by their first name? Shouldn’t you call him Grandpa or something?”

“Everyone else calls him Pop, but that isn’t his name,” he replied bluntly.

For the first time since I’d spoken to him through the glass in the jailhouse visiting room, my brother spoke to me. “He’s been doing that since he learned to talk. We thought it was because he’d never heard anyone else call Brighten ‘Mom’ but that didn’t add up because he heard the other kids calling Grunt ‘Pop’ and still used his name too.”

“It drives Brighten crazy,” Griffin added.

“Yeah, that might not be why he started doing it, but I’m pretty sure that’s why he’s still doing it,” Crow said with a resigned sigh. “What’s our time?”

“We have thirty-four seconds.”

We sat in silence through most of those until Crow finally stood and said, “Mom’s looking for you. Dad told her you probably needed a minute of peace and quiet so you bummed a smoke and went outside. When we go in to say goodbye, I’ll tell her you’re in here but you need a few minutes alone.”

“Thanks.”

“When can we have another talk?” Griffin asked me.

“Whenever you want, I guess.”

“I’ll get in touch and let you know when I have some free time,” Griffin said, sounding like a harried businessman who had a lot on his schedule.

I laughed and said, “You do that.”

“I’ll walk over there while you tattle on me.”

“Huh?” Crow and I said at the same time.

“About the safe.”

“Oh!” I laughed again. “How did you know I was going to do that?”

Griffin didn’t answer. Instead, he sighed and walked into the aisle and then up about six rows before he sat down again.

“What was that about?” Crow asked.

“Your kid knows how to get into the gun safe where Brighten stores her edibles.”

“*What?*”

“Yep. Just thought you should know that.”

“Fuck.” Crow leaned his head back and sighed before he looked at me and said, “Thanks for the heads up.”

“Any time. That’s what a good uncle does.”

Crow laughed softly as he slowly nodded and said, “A good uncle does all sorts of things for his nephew.”

With those parting words, Crow turned and walked up the aisle to get his son. Before they went through the doors back into the reception area, Griffin turned around and made a V with his fingers and did the same motion he’d done earlier while he was on stage. I laughed as I did it, too, and then got a big smile before the door closed.

I tilted my head back and closed my eyes as I thought about the last few minutes that I’d spent getting to know my nephew. He looked just like the pictures I’d seen of me and my brothers at that age, but there was a little bit of Brighten in him too, especially around his eyes. She’d always stood out from the rest of us, and it wasn’t just because of her oddly-colored eyes that seemed to stare right through to your soul. She’d been a quiet little girl and always very direct when she spoke to someone. I remembered that some of the adults found it a little disconcerting.

Apparently, she’d passed that trait onto her son, just like she’d passed on that big brain she inherited from Warren.

I was sure that Griffin wouldn't think twice about our conversation or his promise to call me with his schedule, and that made me a little bit sad. Talking to him was like seeing a version of what my child with Brighten might have been like if we'd stayed together all those years ago. I felt like I'd really be missing out if I never got to sit down and get to know him better.

It was just as well, though. I had a lot on my plate right now too. I wanted to have things that most people took for granted like a place of my own, a way to get around, a phone ... and a life that included *all* of my family and someone who loved me through thick and thin.

All the things I'd had six years ago before I'd made a rash decision that had almost ruined my life.

## BRIGHTEN

“Did you decide what you want to make?”

I watched my son over the rim of my coffee mug while I waited for him to answer. He'd marked a few pages of the cookbook we'd purchased a few weeks ago with brightly colored sticky notes and flipped from one page to another as he tried to make a decision.

“Three nights?”

“Yes.”

“What if I found enough for more than that?”

“Decide on three for this week, and then save your other favorites for the coming weeks.”

“Why is choosing what to have for dinner so hard?”

“That's a question that millions of parents ask every day.”

“I can't decide.”

“Maybe it will be easier to decide with a full stomach. Pick what you want for breakfast first.”

“Happy face pancakes with chocolate chips, peanut butter, and Marshmallow Fluff!”

“That's gonna make today awesome,” I said as I lifted my cup up and held it under my nose, praying the scent of the elixir of life would start making me feel a little more human. “I'm going to go sit on the patio and finish my coffee while you gather the ingredients. When you're finished getting everything together, cut up some fruit to go with all the carbs and sugar we're about to scarf down.”

“On it, captain!”

I returned my son's salute and unlocked the patio door so I could have a few moments of peace and quiet before the day started in earnest.

Once, I'd complained to my mom about how hard it was to raise a gifted child, and she laughed so hard, she pulled a muscle in her side. Since then, I'd gotten tips and tricks and a lot more laughter but absolutely no sympathy at all.

Shannon, Griffin's great-grandmother, had no sympathy either, but she did have boxes of books and textbooks that had helped me. When I'd spoken to her a few weeks ago, she told me that she had another stack of boxes set aside in the attic for when Griffin outgrew the ones she'd already given me.

At the rate he was going, that might be next week. Possibly the week after.

Griffin had been a perfectly normal baby, and Crow and I had the usual complaints about parenthood at the time. Sleepless nights, colic, ear infections - all the normal things babies put their parents through. But by the time he started pulling himself up to stand, he had already said his first words. He was completing full sentences before he took his first steps.

I had worried, along with my mom and even Warren, that some of Griffin's quirks were signs of a neurotypical diagnosis, but so far, according to all the testing he'd been through, his behavior and attitudes about certain things were perfectly normal for a child with his level of intelligence.

A few of those quirks drove me absolutely insane, but Crow was able to deal with them much easier than me.

I wondered if Hawk would be as accepting once he came into Griffin's life - *if* he decided to be part of his life as something other than the uncle who Griff only saw occasionally.

I set my coffee on the table between the patio chairs and wrapped my robe around me a little tighter before I sat down and pulled my legs underneath my nightgown to keep the chill from my bare toes. Once I was settled in, I reached for my coffee and held it on top of my knees while I appreciated the quiet morning.

I heard Crow's patio door slide open and then his footsteps plodding across the grass before I felt him standing behind me. He put his own mug on the table and then reached around me with a blanket. I lifted my arms with my mug held between my hands before he pulled it over me and tucked it around.

"Thank you," I said as I settled my mug back on my knees. "You're up early. Did you sleep at all?"

"Not much. What about you?" Crow asked as he got comfortable in the chair beside me.

"A bit here and there. Griff was up before sunrise, but he played in his room for a while before he came in to get me."

"I saw your lights come on," Crow said before he took a sip of his coffee. "Is he making breakfast?"

"Cutting up fruit. He wants pancakes with all the things, so get ready for that."

"Are you ready to talk about what happened last night?"

"Not really, but that won't make it go away, will it?"

"Nope."

"Thanks for letting me have some time, Crow. I was just drained by the time you guys came home."

"Me too." There was a minute of silence before he said, "Hawk sat down and talked to Griff for a while last night."

"He did? Why?"

"I think it happened by chance. Griff was upset because he'd seen you crying, so he went and hid in the chapel. After I told my dad and my grandpas our secret ..."

"You told them?"

"And you didn't tell Kale what was going on?" I sighed and shrugged my shoulders, not able to deny that I'd spilled our biggest secret. "They knew something was wrong between me and Hawk. When they saw his reaction to me after Marcus took us to see him, they pulled me aside and wanted to get to the bottom of it."

“How did he react?”

“It wasn’t anything he did but more the way he looked at me. Emotionless with a slight twist of homicidal anger.”

“Oh.”

“I guess you didn’t see him?”

“No. Marcus came out of that room he stuffed you all into, and that’s when I found out he was home. I had to leave. I just couldn’t ... I didn’t know what I’d do when I saw him again.”

“Throw your arms around him, and welcome him home?”

“No. You seem to forget that we were over *before* he got arrested.”

“You were not,” Crow scoffed. “He was so twisted up about you. I see now that you were feeling the same way, you just kept it hidden better than he did.”

“He called it quits, Crow. I was happy with what we had together.”

“Bullshit.” I glared at my best friend and then looked down into my coffee before he asked, “What’s gonna happen between us, B?”

My head snapped up, and I stared at my best friend. “*Nothing* is gonna change between me and you. You’re my best friend and my son’s dad. Just because Hawk is home doesn’t mean we’re gonna erase you from our lives. You’re part of our family, and you own the house next door!”

“What if he decides he doesn’t want me around Griff?”

“That’s not his fucking decision to make. That’s not even my decision to make. That’s all Griff. He talks to who he wants to talk to and ignores the people he doesn’t. He always has, and that’s probably not ever going to change.”

“My dad gave us a week to talk it out and get with Hawk to ...”

“Kale is going to get him alone somewhere and then call us so we can come talk to him.”



“Is he gonna lock us in a room together and not let us out until we’re friends again or someone is dead?”

“It’s Kale, so I’d guess that’s probably his plan.” I laughed softly and then said, “That’s definitely something he’d do.”

“We’ve got to talk to Griff about this,” Crow said as he turned to look into the kitchen. “Why is he using a knife without supervision?”

“It’s one of those plastic ones for kids. He’s basically gonna have to saw the fruit into pieces. It should take him a while.” I sighed and then admitted, “I *hope* it takes him a while.”

“How did Kale react when you told him?”

“He was shocked, of course. Complimented me on my long game and said he was proud that I could keep such a big secret under wraps for so long. What did your dad and grandpas say?”

“Oh, they said a lot,” Crow said before he sighed and took a sip of his coffee. “They knew the rift between me and Hawk had something to do with you. I guess they’ve thought that since it started. They thought I’d poached his girl and knocked her up, then after I started explaining, they thought I’d poached his girl and stolen his son. At one point, I wasn’t sure they had any respect for me at all, but by the time we finished talking, they seemed to understand and even sort of agree with the decisions we’d made.”

“That’s good.”

“When are you going to tell your parents?”

“Fuck. I don’t know.”

“What’s the plan with Griff? Do we tell him now, before we talk to Hawk, or wait and see what Hawk’s reaction is before we say anything?”

“What do you think?”

“Should we talk to someone who knows what the fuck they’re doing?”

“Like who? Is there an expert on hidden parentage and lies that I don’t know about? Your mom and grandmas are going to hate me,” I mumbled before I took another sip of coffee. “That breaks my heart.”

“I don’t think they will. Any one of them would kill for their kids or grandkids. Hell, Gamma killed a man right in front of Nix when we were little. I mean, he deserved it since he’d kidnapped them but still.”

“What?” I asked, my mouth gaping open in shock.

“You never heard about that? These men came to the house to kidnap Lark. Her biological grandmother sent them ...”

“She’s adopted?”

“She’s my dad’s, and my mom adopted her just like he adopted us.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, still in shock. “And she was kidnapped?”

“No. Phoenix was kidnapped. A man grabbed me first, and him and Gigi had a tug of war before he knocked her out. She fell on top of me, and I guess he went after Phoenix, but Gamma had him. He managed to get Phoenix in the car, but Gamma jumped in, too, and then the guy took off.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah. I thought Gigi was dead. My mom came outside and moved her off of me, but my arm was fucked up, so I just laid there. I really don’t remember it all, but I’ve heard the story a few times and sort of pieced it together with what I do remember.”

“Wow. What was wrong with your arm?”

“My elbow was dislocated.”

“That’s how you knew what was wrong with Griffin!”

“Yep.”

When Griffin was about 2, we had all been sitting on the couch together. Griff started to slide off, and I grabbed his

forearm to catch him. There was a pop, and then he started screaming in pain. A quick visit to see Spruce Parker, a man who was technically Crow's uncle even though he was very close to us in age, at his medical office. One x-ray later, he popped Griff's elbow back into place, and he was fine.

I, on the other hand, was afraid to touch him because all I could think about was how much pain he'd been in and how helpless it made me feel. Of course, I finally got over it, but we were very careful to never pull on his arms since Spruce said that it could easily happen again until he was older.

"Griff said he wants to talk to Hawk again, but I think we should make sure that doesn't happen until we know for sure what Hawk's reaction is going to be to this whole situation."

Crow looked over at me and frowned. "He won't be ugly to Griff."

"I know that. I'm just saying that until we find out whether he wants to be in or out, we should keep this to ourselves. We'll talk to Griff about it once we've spoken to Hawk."

"That's if we make it out of the locked room that Kale is probably already working to secure."

"Surely he wouldn't do that."

Crow scoffed. "What is it he says to you every time you have a problem?"

"Who do I need to kill?"

"Exactly!" Crow looked at me and smiled before he asked, "Do you think he's playing? Really?"

"Probably not, but when I told him that you and I were having a baby, he didn't do anything." Crow snorted and then raised his eyebrows and blinked at me until I finally asked, "Did he?"

"He didn't lay a finger on me, but there are other ways to terrify a man," Crow explained. "I got off easy because I'm his nephew. What happened to that guy you were dating in

college? The one that got drunk and gave you a black eye when you broke up with him?”

“Ugh, Tracy. What an asshole.”

“Whatever happened to him?”

“Let me think,” I said as I stared out over the backyard and tried to remember. Finally, it came to me, and I said, “He took a job in Alaska working for the forestry service. A few years later, I heard he had been killed by a polar bear.”

“In the forest?”

“Yeah.”

Crow turned his head and yelled, “Hey, Griff! I’ve got a question for you.”

The glass door slid open, and Griff walked outside. “Mornin’, Crow. I’m making breakfast.”

“That’s awesome, bud. I’ve got a funny question for you. Remember when you were learning about bears?”

“Yeah! Bears are awesome! Did you know that ...”

Crow interrupted him, having heard more bear facts and statistics than he ever wanted to learn while Griff had immersed himself in his newest obsession a few months ago, “Do polar bears live in the forest?”

“No. Never. They’re called *polar* bears because they only live on the ice. Never in a forest.”

“That’s good to know. Thanks,” Crow said as he grinned at me. “Need any help in there?”

“I need a knife that works, but Mom put a lock on the drawer.”

“You’re gonna have to make do with the tools at hand, I guess.”

“I guess,” Griff said before he sighed and went back into the house.

Luckily, Crow and I were able to hold in our laughter at his exasperation until the door was shut and Griff couldn’t hear us

and get offended.

“You know, Aunt Terra is from Alaska. She lived in the forest. Kind of a strange coincidence that would be where he ended up, huh?”

“Kale didn’t ... did he?”

Crow shrugged and then smiled. “It’s a good thing me and Hawk are his nephews or we’d be forest-dwelling polar bear food.”

“Holy shit.”

“No, *bear* shit.”

“I guess you are both lucky to be alive.”

“We are, but that really has nothing to do with Kale. I’m surprised all of us lived into adulthood considering some of the stupid shit we did when we were kids.”

“Yeah. Especially when you all traumatized my dad. That was horrible.”

“Kale played the long game on that one. You know he set us all up for that.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’d been plotting it for years. When we were all finally old enough to get in on it, he met with each of us in secret and told us that Zeke was planning some gnarly prank on our dad and we needed to do something about it. He had the same secret meeting with my aunts and uncles, all one at a time, telling them that your dad was plotting some horrible prank on them and then swearing them to secrecy and making sure they wouldn’t tell any of the others what they were planning.”

“That’s diabolical. For months, shit was happening to my dad, and he couldn’t figure out why he was the target. He got so paranoid that he was jumping at the littlest things, and then Terra broke into the house while he was taking a nap. Dad got so spooked that he took off running through the house and broke his toe on the stair rail as he was trying to get away.”

“Her makeup was on point. You know he hired the drama teacher at the high school for that, right?”

“To do Terra’s makeup?”

“Yep. It took the lady *hours* to do all that stuff to Terra’s face. It was almost a shame when she had to take it off, but there are lots of pictures.”

“Oh, it was bad. She had a horn growing out of her forehead, and there were warts all over the place. She had so much facial hair that you couldn’t even see her lips, and when she smiled, almost all of her teeth were black.” I shuddered at the memory. “It was horrible. She woke him up from his nap making these weird snarling and snorting noises. I think Dad was more pissed about Mom being in on it than the fact that he broke his toe.”

“Yeah. Like I said, the long game. The two of them had been plotting on that since they met, and they waited *years* for the finale. Uncle Kale is a psycho - a loveable one but a psycho all the same.”

I shuddered again at the memory and then looked over my shoulder when the patio door slid open and Griff walked out.

“The fruit salad is ready, and I’ve got everything out for the pancakes.”

“Awesome,” I said as I stretched my legs out and lifted the blanket before it touched the ground. I handed it to Crow and then asked Griff, “Are you ready to start cooking?”

“I am, but we have to wait a little bit.”

“Why?”

“Your phone rang, and I answered it. Lisa wanted to check on you because she thought you were sick last night. I told her that you weren’t sick at all, you were just crying really hard. She’s coming over and bringing Warren. I want him to help me cook instead of you.”

“Oh,” I said as I looked over at Crow. “Did she say if Grandpa was coming?”

“He was putting his shoes on and then they were leaving.”

I rolled my neck and sighed. “I better go get dressed. Crow, you should put some fucking clothes on.”

“I’m wearing shorts. What more do you want from me, woman?”

“While Warren helps Griff cook, we should talk to my parents.”

Crow’s face fell, and Griff asked, “Are you going to cry again?”

“Probably,” I mumbled. I looked up at my son and gave him a small smile. “I will most likely cry, honey, but I don’t want you to worry about it, okay? Everything’s gonna be just fine.”

“Sure because that’s what people crying always means.”



## **HAWK**

“It’s so good to have you home, son,” my mom said as she perched on the stool next to me. She took my hand and held it against her face as tears filled her eyes. “A part of me has been missing for years, and it’s finally back in place.”

I tried to lighten the mood and said, “Hey, Raven’s home too. You’re going to make her jealous, fawning all over me.”

“I worry about her while she’s on the road, but at least I know she’s with family.”

“True. She and I stayed up for a while after we got home last night, and she was telling me about some of the places she’s been.”

“She’s traveled all over and had a million experiences I can’t even imagine. I’m glad she’s gonna be home for a while before they go back out on tour.”

“It was awesome to see them perform at the reception last night. I remember when they all started playing with the guys

when we had get-togethers. It's crazy to see that they're so famous now."

"I guess a bunch of people uploaded videos from last night, so the internet is buzzing with the story that they're all back in 'small town Texas.' There's no telling what they'll say about that."

"What do you mean?"

"When Raven had to come home from touring to have dental surgery for an abscessed tooth, one news outlet reported that she was in rehab for a heroin addiction and another said she was having plastic surgery."

"Oh man."

"Just so you know, I banned your dad from the internet."

I laughed and asked, "First of all, do you really think that's gonna work, and secondly, why?"

"I found him trying to figure out where this one really nasty reporter lives and then heard him and your uncles talking about taking 'a little road trip,'" Mom said, using air quotes. "We had a discussion about boundaries, and he agreed to stop cyber-stalking anyone who says something negative about any of the kids."

"So, the rest of the guys do it instead?"

Mom rolled her eyes and nodded as she said, "Probably."

"Is Raven still sleeping, or did she already leave?"

"She's in the shower, I think. Why do you ask?"

"I know Phoenix said that he'd packed up my things, so I was gonna call him and see where it's stored. I was wondering if Raven could drive me to pick it up and ..."

"When he bought his house, we packed up your things, and he insisted on moving them into his new place. All of your boxes are in his spare bedroom, waiting for you to move in."

"Really?"



“Yep. You know your dad and I wouldn’t mind having you with us, but I’m sure ...”

“Nix is already planning for me to live with him?”

“Yeah. Crow bought a house, too, so Nix lives alone. They live just a few houses away from each other in that new housing development Daughtry’s boys are building.”

“They’re building a whole neighborhood?”

“Not from the ground up. It’s the old air base. Adam, Joshua, and Heath went into business together and bought the entire property. They’re refurbishing the houses and then either renting or selling them.”

“Wow. Good for them.”

“At the rate they’re selling to all the kids in the family, the neighborhood is gonna be filled with Forresters. That’s gonna be a problem for Adam’s HOA, I’m sure.”

I laughed for a second and said, “Maybe since it’s Adam, they’ll fall into line. He’s always been one of the leaders since he’s an elder.”

“They hate it when you call them that.”

“I know. It really gets under Emerald’s skin.”

“And yet you boys continue to do it. One of these days, she’ll snap, and then you’re all in trouble. But you’ll have a few months of peace until she recovers. That’s gonna ...”

“Recovers from what?”

“There was an incident last week, and she hurt her hand.”

“How?”

“On some woman’s face,” Mom said as if that were perfectly normal. Well, in *our* family it was perfectly normal, but to others it might seem a bit ... extra. “Anyway, she had to have surgery, and she’s got some new hardware. She’s making your Aunt Willow crazy because she refuses to move back home so she can take care of her.”

“Is it going to make you crazy if I move in with Nix?”

Mom sighed and shook her head. “Not as crazy as we’d make each other if you decided to stay here. I do not want to think about what you boys get up to late at night, and I definitely don’t want to meet the bed bunnies you hook up with.”

“Us? Never.”

“You had quite the reputation for a while, so don’t even try to give me that innocent act.”

“I guess I did,” I said thoughtfully as I remembered Brighten saying almost that same thing after our last big fight.

“You did calm down some before you went to prison. I was happy to see it.”

I had settled down, but Brighten never acknowledged that. Instead, she kept making me pay for sins I’d committed before she and I even shared our first kiss. But that didn’t matter now since she and my brother were ...

“I thought your brother would calm down some once Griffin was born, but he’s still a total manwhore,” Mom said with an exasperated sigh.

“What?”

“Well, Nix is, too, but at least he’s a little more ... low-key about it. Crow seems to find these women with stars in their eyes. They see a biker and think ‘Oh! I want one!’ when they don’t have the first clue of what that entails. I swear, he finds the ...”

“What about Brighten?”

Mom looked at me like I was nuts and asked, “What about her?”

“I thought they were together.”

“No. I mean, obviously they were once, but that was it. That’s how we got our Griff, so I’m sure neither of them regret it, but they just spent that one night together. They make wonderful co-parents and the perfect team to raise Griff. They get along so well that they bought houses that are side by side so that he can just run from one to the other.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. They even did the same thing to their backyards that we did with your Gamma and Papa. They took out the fence so Griff just has the whole thing.”

“I thought they ...”

I let my voice trail off and thought back to all the letters I’d gotten from Crow while I was in prison. Looking back, I realized that they almost exclusively talked about his son and really never mentioned Brighten. At the time, I thought that might be because he didn’t want to rub it in my face, but he hadn’t done the same when it came to his kid. He’d told me about every step that led him to fatherhood, from the sonograms to the delivery room and then every milestone after that.

It seemed like I’d watched that little boy grow up. As much as it hurt to know that he was the son I’d never have with the woman I’d always yearn for, I actually enjoyed all the Griffin stories that Crow wrote about and looked forward to the next letter to see how he was faring.

I’d especially enjoyed the pictures that Crow sent because not only did I get to see my nephew but I got to see his mama in almost all of the photos, especially the ones of him as an infant.

At the time, I’d thought that my brother was taunting me with his relationship, but I realized that wasn’t the case at all now. He was just letting me see his son grow up like I would have if I’d been home.

No, scratch that. Like I would have watched my own son grow up.

Because back then, I would have moved heaven and earth to get Brighten to give me another chance. Now, though, I knew I’d missed it. I was six years too late.

“ ... and it really worries Lisa because she’s afraid that Brighten is missing so many opportunities for happiness that might not come back around again.”

“What?”

“Since she doesn’t date.”

“Who doesn’t date?”

“Brighten.”

“What?”

“Have you even heard anything I’ve said in the last few minutes? Are you feeling okay?” Mom touched my face and then tilted her head. “What’s wrong, honey? Am I talking too much?”

“No. That’s ... no, Mom. I just zoned out for a second.”

“After you took off for a few moments by yourself last night, I talked to your Aunt Terra about the best way to help you adjust to being at home. She said that it might be hard for you to concentrate because there are so many new things going on around you. Things we take for granted are completely new to you.”

“Really?” I asked, thinking that my Aunt Terra was a genius because that’s exactly what I was feeling right now.

“She was in prison for a few more years than you were, but it’s the same concept, I’m sure. I’ve been talking about everyone like you know exactly what’s going on when you probably have no idea at all.”

“I’ll adjust. It is kind of ... well, a lot.”

“There’s so much that we need to do, but I’m not going to bombard you with details.”

“I just need my clothes,” I said with a shrug. “And I guess I’ll need to get with Warren and see how much money I have and if there’s any way I can cash out some stocks and start a bank account.”

“Oh, there’s plenty of money,” Mom said as she slowly nodded. “Warren manages all of our investments now. That man’s a damn genius.”

“He’s always been smarter than all of us,” I said with a grin. “He had the best ideas when we were kids. Boy, he’s vindictive. I love him.”

“He still works with Zeke, but he’s a partner in the business now so he doesn’t go out on calls anymore. He spends most of his time teaching Griffin and ...”

“He’s a teacher?”

“Well, he’s not certified or anything, but he’s the only one smart enough to keep up with Griff. When Aspen’s home, he teaches her, too, but she’s going to stay in Colorado until Emerald gets back on her feet after her surgery.”

“So, he works on computers, takes care of everyone’s investments, and teaches. When does the man sleep?”

“Lisa said he’s never really slept for more than a few hours a night, and he likes to stay busy.”

“I got to meet Griffin last night. We talked for ...”

My mom’s eyes lit up, and she asked, “Crow introduced you to Griffin? Oh, I’m so glad that ...”

I shook my head as I interrupted, “I ran into the kid in the chapel when I went to get a few minutes to myself. He was there alone, and we struck up a conversation. That boy’s a genius.”

My mom’s face fell before she asked, “But you didn’t talk to Crow?”

“I saw him, and we talked for a second. Why?”

Mom sighed and turned away from me, busying herself with something on the counter. She turned around with tears in her eyes and said, “What happened to my three musketeers? All for one and one for all? What went wrong?”

I shrugged and said, “I went to prison.”

Mom walked back across the kitchen and stood on the other side of the island. She put her hands on the counter and stared at me for a second before she asked, “Do you blame your brother for not talking you out of the race that night? I’ll have you know that they were beside themselves with guilt because they didn’t, Hawk. I told them that wasn’t their job. You were 26 and knew right from wrong. I’ll not have you blaming ...”

“Mom!” I said loudly, interrupting her tirade. “I don’t blame them for anything. They were disgusted with me for even considering racing that night and tried to talk sense into me, but I wouldn’t listen. What happened is on me, and I know that.”

“Then what is wrong between you and your brother?” my mom yelled. She took a deep breath and then blew it out slowly before she asked, “What is it? What happened? You were best friends and then *nothing!* For the first two years I visited you, you shut down every time Crow’s name was mentioned. I tried to tell myself that it would work out somehow, and Crow insisted everything was going to be okay, but you’re out now, and it’s definitely not okay. He was with your grandparents when they walked into that room, and then all of a sudden, I looked up and he was gone.”

I sighed and shook my head. “I don’t know what to tell you, Mom.”

“You don’t know what to tell me? We all thought we lost you when you went to prison, but Crow lost more than his brother. So did Nix. They lost their best friend. And now that you’re back, you’re still gonna freeze out Crow while being roommates with Nix?”

“I’m sure we’ll work it out.”

“Work *what* out? What happened? Why ...”

“Sunshine, give the boy some time,” my dad said from the railing above us. “Come upstairs and take a minute. Nothing’s gonna get solved today.”

Mom sighed and then nodded before she looked at me with tears shimmering in her eyes. “Fix it, Hawk. Please? I have you back now, but Crow needs you too.”

I looked away because I couldn’t stand to see the pain on her face, and then she walked past me toward the stairs.

I leaned forward and put my face in my hands. I had a lot of shit to get done, but most of it would have to wait until tomorrow, and I could put the rest off for now.

It looked like I needed to get this shit settled with Crow before I tackled anything else. I couldn't stand to be the reason my mom cried. Again. God knows I'd caused years of pain and anguish while I was locked up. I didn't want to be the cause of more now.

The side door opened, and I looked up to see my sister, Lark, walking in with a smile. Her expression changed to concern as she neared me.

“What's wrong?”

I sighed and said, “Hey, Baby Bird. Are you busy right now?”

“Not at all. I just came over to see you.”

“Can you take me over to Nix's?”

“Sure.”

“I don't even have a way to call to see if he's home,” I said with a bitter laugh. “Hell, I don't even know his fucking number.”

“Get dressed, and I'll take you over there.”

I looked down at the T-shirt and pajama pants my mom had found for me last night.

“I am dressed. All I've got here are the clothes I wore to the wedding.”

“Okay. Let's go see Nix. You can get dressed over there since all of your things are in his spare bedroom,” Lark said before she looked around. “Where are Mom and Dad?”

“Mom got upset, and Dad made us go to our separate corners.”

Lark locked eyes with me for a few seconds and then said, “Fix it, Hawk. Do whatever you've got to do to make it happen.”

“Maybe I'm not the only one that has some things to fix.”

“I'm going to say the same thing to Crow as I'm saying to you ... Fix. It.”

“I’ll talk to Nix for a bit and then get started on that,” I said as I stood up. “When did you get so fucking bossy?”

Lark scoffed as she wrapped her arms around my waist and gave me a hug. As she pulled back with her arms still around my waist, she said, “As if that’s anything new.”

“I guess some things never change.”

“Some things should.”



## BRIGHTEN

“Are we going to have a lot more yelling and crying before someone finally decides this is kid business, too, and tells me what’s going on?”

I looked down at Griffin and winced at his innocent expression of confusion.

“I’m sorry, buddy. I know you hate it when things aren’t the way they’re supposed to be.”

“I guess that means no.” Griffin looked at the grocery list in his hands and sighed. “Which pasta do you want?”

I looked at the shelf in front of me, not really seeing the colorful boxes and bags as I tried to think of a way to make this easier for Griffin to understand. Just like Warren, my son *hated* change. His therapist had explained that his brain functioned better when there were specific categories for emotions and that it would most likely get easier for him to process combinations of feelings.

“Okay, I know you hate it when things are up in the air, so I’ll make a deal with you. Next Sunday, over breakfast, I’ll tell you what’s got everyone so ... worked up. That gives me a week to look for a ... solution, I guess you could say, and figure out ... Shit. You know, Griff, I’m in uncharted waters here, and I’ve got nothing.” I scratched the back of my neck while I tried to figure out what else to say. It didn’t help that we were in the middle of the grocery store, had a million things to get done today, and were already *hours* behind because of my parents’ visit this morning. “I need some time to get things settled in my world before it flows into your world. Do you get what I’m saying?”

“One week?” Griffin asked as he put a reminder in his calendar app.

“If it doesn’t all come to a head before then, yeah. We’ll talk next Sunday over breakfast.”

Still looking at his watch, he switched gears and said, “We should hurry. I’m going to do something fun with Crow in three hours.”

I rubbed my forehead for a second as I cursed myself for thinking that fucking watch was a good idea. Yes, it was very helpful in locating him when he ran off on a whim, but there were times I wanted to put it in a blender and make an Apple smoothie.

As if it could sense my thoughts, the watch on my wrist buzzed with a reminder that I needed to take my shot and then buzzed again when Griffin got finished entering our appointment for next Sunday’s breakfast.

“You really added an appointment?” I asked with a sigh.

Griffin shrugged and looked back at the list he’d laid on top of my purse in the grocery cart. After a few seconds, he said, “I need a whole package of the colored pasta, please.”

I pulled a bag off the shelf and tossed it into the basket and then watched as Griffin hung his head. He walked over to the basket and tiptoed up so he could grab the bag I’d just put there.

“I want colored pasta, not broken pasta.”

“And so it begins,” I muttered under my breath as I watched him sort through the bags on the shelf, looking for the one that had the least amount of broken pieces. “I thought we were in a time crunch.”

Griffin looked at me with such an expression of disgust that I couldn’t help but laugh, which irritated him even more.

“I love you, kid.”

Griffin stood up with the *perfect* bag of pasta and walked back over to the grocery cart. He stepped on the rail at the end and leaned over to gently lay the bag in the basket before he looked at me and waved his hand as he said, “Let’s move, woman. We’ve got a lot to do today.”

“Little boy, I have no idea which man in our lives you got *that* little nugget from, but you’re gonna have to refrain from using it in the future if you want to live.” Griffin giggled, and I couldn’t help but smile. “You’re such a turd.”

“I know. I get that a lot.”



“I know him!” Griffin squealed from the back seat as I turned the corner to go into our neighborhood. “I talked to him last night!”

I looked over and saw Phoenix standing in the grass at the park beside us, and my heart stopped when I realized Hawk was not far away. He had his arm cocked back and threw the football in a perfect spiral toward his little brother, who caught it easily.

“Stop and talk to them, Brighten!”

“We’ve got groceries in the back and ...”

It was too late. Griffin had already rolled down his window and was shouting to get the men’s attention. Phoenix dropped the arm he was raising to throw the ball back to his brother and turned around and waved.

I couldn’t be a total asshole and just drive on by, so I slowed the truck to a stop at the curb as Phoenix jogged our way.

Griffin unlatched his harness and twisted so he could see the men who were getting closer to the truck, and I tried to catch my breath as I watched the man of my dreams coming my way.

He looked good. *So* good. He’d bulked up even more during his time in prison, and the T-shirt he was wearing, one I recognized from ages ago, stretched across his chest and strained to cover his biceps. Until now, I’d never in my life been jealous of an inanimate object, but I wanted to *be* that shirt.

His colorful tattoos stood out in contrast with the gray shirt. I remembered tracing them with my fingertips as we laid naked in bed, content after a couple of orgasms and happy to be next to the man I loved.

“It’s the Griffinator!” Phoenix said as he approached the truck and reached out for a fist bump. “How’s my favorite little man?”

“Just chillin’,” Griffin answered, sounding so much like his uncle that I immediately cracked a grin. Hawk stopped next to his brother and rather than look at Griffin in the back seat, he studied me through the front passenger window. His face was expressionless, but I could see the pulse in his neck racing just as fast as my heart. “Hi, Hawk!”

Hawk’s eyes left mine as he gave Griffin one of those manly nods and said, “Sup, kid?”

“We went to the grocery store. I’m cooking dinner. Can you come over?”

Hawk’s eyes shot to me and then back to Griffin before he said, “I’m not sure if ... well, I ...”

“Please? I asked Crow for your number, but he said he didn’t know it, so I don’t have a way to call you.”

“I don’t have a phone yet, bud.”

“So, come to our house and eat dinner so we can hang out again. You, too, Phoenix. I’m trying a new recipe.”

“You cook?” Hawk asked.

“Three times a week,” Griffin said as he beamed. “I’m getting really good.”

“I’m not sure ...”

Phoenix interrupted Hawk and asked me, “Do you have enough for us to join you?”

I nodded and swallowed hard before I answered, “Sure. Do you want to come over now or ...”

“Now. You can help me unload the groceries, and I won’t have to use the wagon,” Griffin interrupted.

“Are you in?” Phoenix asked. Hawk nodded, and Phoenix reached for the door handle.

“Can we ride in the back like they did in the old days, Brighten? It’s not far, and I’ll be really careful. You can go slow.”

I could see my house from where we were, but the decision was taken out of my hands when Phoenix pulled Griffin through the open window. He let out a loud squeal when Phoenix lifted him over his head and then set him on his feet in the bed of the truck. Phoenix then grabbed the edge and stepped onto the wheel before he threw his leg over the side and crawled in. Seconds later, Hawk did the same thing. My truck rocked with their weight as they settled on the rails on either side of the bed.

I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Griffin bouncing up and down with excitement as I put the truck in gear before I slowly drove away from the curb. I held onto the wheel with one hand while I hit the button to roll up the window with the other, all the while internally chanting, “*You can do this. You can do this. You can do this.*”

By the time I pulled into my driveway, I was convinced that I could *not* do this, but I had no choice in the matter.

As soon as I put the truck in park, it shook as the men in the back jumped out onto the driveway. I took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly, steeling myself for what was about to happen before I opened my door and slid to the ground.

“I’ll get the door,” I called out before I walked around the front of the truck and opened the gate. Once it was propped open, I rushed across the grass and used the keypad to unlock the sliding door.

I frantically looked around the room and wondered why in the hell I’d left the house in such a mess. There were dishes in the sink and glasses on the table, a pile of clothes on the laundry room floor, and Griffin’s textbooks were spread out all over the coffee table from he and Warren’s study session earlier today while I sat on the patio and talked to my parents. Hawk was going to think I was ...

“What in the hell are you doing?” I whispered to myself as I leaned against the bar. “It doesn’t matter, Brighten. It doesn’t matter at all.”

“What doesn’t matter?” Phoenix asked as he lifted his arm and set more bags than I could carry in three trips on the bar. He did the same with the bags in his other hand and studied my face. “Are you okay? You’re awfully pale.”

“I’m fine. It’s just been a whirlwind of a day so far,” I said with a fake smile.

“If you need a little time, we can take Griff somewhere to eat, no problem.”

“I’m cooking!” Griff argued as he walked in, his arms clutching the sides of the bulk package of toilet paper that was wider than his body. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

“There’s one more load,” Hawk said as he walked in behind Griffin. He glanced at the bar and then the kitchen table, and I rushed over to move glasses so he could put the groceries down.

“I’ll get it,” Phoenix said, walking past Griffin and mussing his hair, causing my son to growl in frustration like he did every time his uncle did that. “Gotcha.”

Griffin dropped the toilet paper and spun around to chase Phoenix as Hawk settled the bags of groceries onto the table.

“It’s good to see you, B.”

“I’m glad you’re home,” I said sincerely. Even if it was going to flip my well-planned life on its edge, I was really glad that he was here in one piece. “It was quite a surprise to hear you got out so early.”

“No one was more surprised than me,” Hawk admitted as he studied my face. “You look good.”

“Thanks. You do too,” I said, resisting the urge to let my eyes roam up and down his body, taking in every rippling muscle before I appreciated the fit of those faded jeans. “Are you staying with your parents?”

“Nah. I’m gonna move in with Nix until I can get my own place.”

“That’s good.”

“I like your house.”

“Thanks. It’s definitely got that lived-in vibe today.”

Hawk shrugged. “That’s how a home is supposed to look.”

We turned as Griffin streaked by, screaming at the top of his lungs, followed closely by Phoenix who was making monster sounds.

“I like your kid.”

My heart flipped and then dropped like a rock. “Thanks. He’s pretty awesome.”

“I talked to him for a while last night. He’s cool. Reminds me of Warren.”

I laughed. “I hear that a lot.”

“When we were kids, everyone said you reminded them of Warren, but I didn’t see it then. I can see it in Griff, though.”

I didn’t know what to do with my hands or what to say now that we’d exhausted that subject, so I started putting up the groceries like it was my mission in life and the fate of the world depended on my concentration. As I opened the fridge to put the milk away, I glanced over and saw Hawk looking at the pictures I had hanging on the wall above Griffin’s desk.

He leaned closer and studied the one of him standing between Crow and Phoenix, all of them holding a beer and smiling for the camera. A sad look came over his face, and I felt tears pricking my eyes.

“He’s missed you, you know.”

Hawk nodded and said, “I guess.”

“Did you get his letters?”

“Yep.”

“Why didn’t you ever write him back?” I blurted.

Hawk looked at me with anger in his eyes before he flatly said, “I can’t imagine why I wasn’t interested in communicating with him.”

I felt the tears start to fall, so I leaned into the refrigerator and wiped my eyes, taking a second to get myself together before I had to face him again. I leaned back and shut the fridge door, and gasped when I realized Hawk was standing less than a foot away from me.

“Why didn’t you write to me?”

I swallowed and looked away before I admitted, “I didn’t know what to say, and I was afraid you wouldn’t write me back.” Hawk cleared his throat, and I looked back at him before I asked, “Would you have? Written me back, I mean?”

“I wrote him back, too, I just never mailed anything.”

I smiled softly. “I guess that answers my question.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to keep myself from mailing yours. I’ve never been able to resist you, B. You know that.”

“Are you ever going to talk to Crow?”

“He’s my brother,” Hawk said with a shrug.

“Brighten! I tackled Phoenix and broke his leg. He’s limping now,” Griffin said as he skidded into the kitchen. “I’m such a badass.”

“Language.”

Griffin rolled his eyes and said, “I’m a bad ... donkey.” I glared at my son, and he grinned wickedly before he turned and watched Phoenix come in with an exaggerated limp. “Look! I broke him!”

“Boy, I think you broke my phalange.”

Griffin cackled as Hawk and I laughed, and then he darted into the living room and came back holding a book. “Your phalanges are the bones in your fingers, goofball.” He sat in the chair next to Phoenix and put the book on the table before he started flipping through the pages. He finally found the one



he was looking for and tapped the page with his finger. “Look! Right here!”

Phoenix leaned closer as he winked at us and then asked Griffin, “So, which bone of mine *did* you break?”

“And they’re off,” I whispered as Griffin started flipping through the book again.

“Let me help you unpack while he gives Nix an anatomy lesson,” Hawk offered as he walked over to the bar. “It’s the least I can do since you’re gonna feed us.”

“I’m not gonna do anything but supervise. It’s Griff’s turn to cook,” I said as I started taking things out of the bags. Hawk started pulling things out beside me, so I grabbed an armful and walked toward the pantry to get some distance.

“Is Crow going to be okay with me here?” Hawk asked from the doorway.

I turned around and looked at him. “Crow doesn’t live here.”

“But still ... is he ... are *you* okay with me here?”

“You make me nervous,” I blurted. I shook my head and said, “Of course I’m okay with you here.”

“Why are you nervous, B?” Hawk asked as he took a step closer.

“I just ... You’ve been gone a long time, and things ... ended badly between us.”

“I didn’t want them to,” he said as he took another step.

I backed up a step and asked, “What?”

“End.”

“Well, I ... Why are you so close to me?” I asked when I bumped into the shelf behind me.

“Why are you so jumpy?”

“I told you why.”

Right then, Griffin peeked around Hawk and asked, “Can I start cooking yet?”

I took a deep breath and looked away from Hawk's penetrating stare and smiled at my son. "Give me a few more minutes to put things away and clear off the bar. Do me a favor and clean your textbooks off the coffee table while you wait, okay? It's movie night, and I don't want to spill anything on them."

"Can Phoenix and Hawk stay for the movie?"

"Um ... they probably have ..."

"I'll stay," Hawk interrupted. He turned around to Griff and asked, "What are we watching?"

Hawk followed Griffin into the living room with Griff chattering a mile a minute. I took a few seconds with my eyes closed to calm my racing heart and then came back into the kitchen only to find Phoenix at the table with his head tilted to the side, watching me. I smiled at him awkwardly, and he pressed his lips together tightly before he glanced into the living room and then back at me.

"Are you good?" he asked. When I nodded, he raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice when he asked, "Are you sure?"

"I'm totally fine," I said with another hideous fake smile. "Just catching up with an old friend."

Phoenix snorted and shook his head. "Right. Okay."

It was obvious he didn't believe me, but I didn't have time to think about that. I needed to gather my wits and steel myself for the rest of the day because apparently, it was going to be spent with Hawk Forrester. I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep myself together until he left.

## HAWK

“You made a really good dinner, kid,” I said before I took another bite. “What’s this called? I might need to get the recipe from you.”

“Bacon and spinach chicken alfredo,” Griff said after he’d swallowed another bite. “Mom won’t let me cook on the stove yet so we had to ...”

“Improvise.”

Griff smiled at me and repeated, “Improvise. She said no stove until I am tall enough to stir without using a stool.”

“You did a good job, Griff. I like it.”

“Thank you, Phoenix,” Griffin said, his face glowing from their praise.

I saw Hawk look past me to the patio door a split second before it slid open and I heard Crow say, “Sorry I’m late. There was a ... thing.”

Griff smiled at him as he went to get a plate and utensils. “We made a lot, and Hawk and Phoenix said it’s really good.”

“Your cooking is always good, bud. You’re a little genius in the kitchen just like you are in the books.”

“He’s really a genius, isn’t he?” Hawk asked.

“Mom says I shouldn’t be labeled,” Griffin said, sounding like a tiny adult. “There’s too much pressure.”

Phoenix snorted. “Yeah, like that’s gonna hurt you.”

“I’m only 5.”

“I know. I remember the day you were born,” Phoenix told him.

“When is your birthday?” Hawk asked.

“September 1, 2017.”

I saw Hawk's brow furrow as he got another bite, but my attention went to Crow as he sat down next to Hawk and started dishing out a serving.

"Sure smells good," Crow said as he picked up his fork to dig in.

"So, you had a 'thing' at work?" Phoenix asked.

"Yeah. I was supposed to get off an hour ago, but there was a problem."

"Spell it out, and see if I can catch it," Griffin said with a cheeky grin.

"I'll just wait until your nosy little self isn't within hearing distance, and *then* I'll tell him," Crow said before he took a bite. He moaned and then waved his fork toward Griffin while he chewed. Once he'd swallowed, he said, "Tastes great, bud. I'd say in the top five ... no, top three of all the things you've made so far."

"Which one's have a better score?" Griffin asked.

"Nix, can I borrow your phone for a second?"

"Sure," Nix said as he pulled it out of his pocket. He slid it in front of Crow's plate toward Hawk who picked it up and then leaned back in his seat.

I listened with half an ear as Crow and Phoenix ranked their favorite Griffin meals while I watched Hawk start typing on the phone.

"What's your favorite, Brighten?" Griffin asked.

"Spaghetti casserole, although you're never allowed to cook it again because last time, I found a noodle on the ceiling."

"The ones like I used tonight don't stick when they're done," Griffin said before he took another bite.

Phoenix chuckled and said, "I'm sure there's a good story behind this one."

Hawk leaned forward as he stared at the phone. "Was Griff a small baby?"

“He was average, I guess. Why?”

“How average?” Hawk asked as he stared at me with his eyebrows knit together.

“Um, just regular average,” I said uncomfortably.

“Griff, how much did you weigh when you were born?”

“I said he was a normal weight,” I snapped.

“Explain that.”

I scoffed and looked over at Griffin before I asked, “Are you ready for our movie?”

Griffin’s eyes were wide, and he kept looking from me to Hawk and back again before he answered, “Sure.”

“What did you choose?” Crow asked.

I was pointedly ignoring Hawk, but I could feel his stare boring through me as I glanced at Phoenix. Just like Griffin, Phoenix’s gaze was darting between me and Hawk until suddenly his eyes got wide.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Hawk lean forward as he asked, “How much did he weigh?”

I turned and stared at him, my heart racing with anger now rather than anxiety, and said, “Why?”

“Is it a secret?”

“It’s clearly not something I want to talk about right now, Hawk,” I fumed.

I heard a chair scrape against the tiles, and Griffin let out a squeak. I turned to see Phoenix holding Griffin under his arm like a football as my son tried to squirm out of his grip. He looked from me to Hawk and then over to Crow before he said, “I’m taking the kid to my house for a while. Call me whenever,” Phoenix swirled his finger around as if he were stirring a pot and then continued, “*this* is all done.”

“Put me down! I’m not finished eating,” Griffin squealed.

“Nope,” Phoenix said as he swiped his phone out of Hawk’s hand and turned toward the front door.

There was silence for a few seconds after the front door closed until finally, Hawk repeated in a deadly calm voice, “How much did he weigh?”

Crow ran his fingers through his hair before he put his elbows on the table and rested his forehead on his palms.

“He was eight pounds, four ounces, and twenty-one inches long,” Crow answered. Hawk blinked a few times as his face became an alarming shade of red. Crow didn’t notice, though, and finished, “We were going to tell you once you got settled.”

Hawk shot out of his chair, and it flew back and hit the bar behind him. He leaned forward with his hands on the table and roared, “You kept my baby from me?”

I jumped up and shouted just as loud, “You were in prison! What was I supposed to do? Put him in a basket and attach some balloons so he could float into the yard for a visit?”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Hawk surged.

“What good would have come of that?” I asked honestly as tears filled my eyes.

“Help! I’ve been kidnapped! I’m still hungry!” Griffin’s voice floated into the room from my watch and Crow’s at the same time. “Phoenix kidnapped me! I’m gonna call nine one one! Amber Alert! I’ve been taken by a man with tattoos and bad breath! Help!”

Crow cleared his throat and hit the icon on his watch before he said, “Stay with Uncle Nix until I come get you, and *do not* call nine one one!”

“But I’ve been kidnapped!”

“It’s not kidnapping if I know where you are and who you are with, bud. Chill out and eat some of his junk food.”

“Okay. Cool. See ya later,” Griffin said, perfectly calm now that processed sugar and preservatives were in his immediate future.

Hawk’s face fell and tears filled his eyes as he whispered, “That’s my kid, isn’t it?”

“We were going to tell you when you got out of prison,” Crow said calmly without looking up. “You’re my brother, and I just wanted to ...”

Hawk rounded on his brother and yanked him out of his chair by the front of his shirt. “I spent six fucking years thinking my best friend stole my woman, and yet, here you sit, so fucking calm, like it’s nothing to you!”

Crow’s face got red, and he grabbed Hawk’s wrists before he yelled back, “You fucked up, and I tried to fix it!”

“Let him go!” I screamed as I rushed around the table to get between them. “Get out of my house, Hawk! Get out!”

“I’m not going anywhere until you tell me why,” Hawk growled before he put his face just inches from his brother’s. “You stole my woman and lied to me for *years!* What kind of brother are you?”

“Stop it!” I yelled as I tried to push between the men. When I couldn’t budge either of them, I reached for the closest thing I could find. I smacked Hawk’s arm, accidentally getting Crow’s hand in the process. The men jerked back, but I wasn’t finished. I was beside myself now, frantic to stop what was about to become a fight that none of us would ever be able to come back from. I kept swinging, hitting Hawk on the shoulder and then slapping Crow’s chest. “Do not fight in my house! You’re brothers! You can’t do this!”

“My brother wouldn’t have fucked my woman and stolen my kid,” Hawk growled as he went for Crow again.

Without even thinking, I swung again and got Hawk on the ear before I turned to Crow and got him on the jaw.

Since they were far enough apart now, I stepped between them and shoved Hawk’s chest to make him step even farther back.

“Sit the fuck down and talk about this like an adult or get the fuck out.” Hawk’s breath was sawing in and out, and I could hear Crow panting behind me. I lifted the wooden spoon and pointed it in Hawk’s face before I hissed, “This is

my son's home, and it will not be turned into a fucking war zone. Do you hear me, goddammit?"

"You kiss my son with that mouth?" Hawk asked.

"You motherfucker," Crow yelled as he reached around me to grab his brother. I put my arm up to brace against Hawk's chest as I pushed my back against Crow's and then screamed when Hawk's fist flew over my head to punch Crow in the face.

"Enough!" a man's voice bellowed from somewhere near the doorway. Suddenly, arms wrapped around Hawk's chest at the same time Crow disappeared from behind me. I lost my balance, but strong arms held me upright as I watched Lucky Marks and Rocky Forrester drag the two brothers outside.

"Are you okay, Brighten?" Roar Forrester, one of Hawk and Crow's cousins, asked as he stared at me. "Did you get hurt?"

"No," I said as I let the wooden spoon drop to the floor. I heard men's voices yelling outside and felt my knees give out as I burst into tears. "Oh God! What have I done?"



## **HAWK**

"I'm not sure what the fuck is going on here, man, but I'm not gonna let you go until you calm down," my cousin Rocky said calmly as he bearhugged me. Rocky was part of my family and no stranger to backyard brawls and sibling arguments, so there was no escaping his hold. "Relax and talk to me, man."

Crow was standing on the patio of what I assumed was his house next door with our friend Lucky Marks next to him. Lucky looked ready to jump back into action at any second, understanding that this fight was far from over as he held his phone to his ear. Crow, on the other hand, was trying to catch his breath as he watched me fight Rocky's hold so I could get to him.



“I can do this all fucking night, Hawk.”

“He stole my woman and my kid,” I said as I held his gaze.

“He did *what?*” Rocky asked, the shock making him loosen his hold. I broke out of his arms, but just stood there with Rocky beside me. “I don’t give a whistlin’ fuck what he did, man. He’s your brother.”

“And?”

“I love Brighten. I’ve known her my whole life, but is she worth ... this?”

I looked at Rocky and nodded and then sighed and shook my head. “Fuck, man, I don’t know. There’s just so much ... too much going on, and I’m ... I’m just fucked up.”

“Take a few beats and just listen to him without trying to pound his face. I’m torn. Fuck. You just found out?”

“About five minutes before you got here.”

“So, you don’t really know shit.”

I turned and looked at him again before I asked, “This isn’t enough?”

“Why did they do it? How’d they decide this? I mean, does he love her? Did you expect her to wait for you? I mean, put the kid thing aside and ... Wait. Don’t. Are they both supposed to go without a man in their lives for eighteen to twenty-five years just because you fucked up?”

“We broke up before I even got arrested.”

“When the fuck were you dating anyway? How did I miss that?”

“We kept it quiet.”

“That’s more than quiet, man. That’s ... invisible. What? Were you just fuck buddies?”

“No!”

Rocky looked thoughtful for a second and then said, “You slept your way through at least half of the female population in

this town that didn't share our last name, and you're pissed at *her* for moving on?"

"I've been in fucking prison for six years!"

"Did she send you there? I distinctly recall standing in the fucking snow while that guy over there tried to talk some sense into your dumbass, but Brighten Duke wasn't anywhere around when that happened."

I looked down and vividly remembered why I'd wanted to punch my cousin in the face more than once in our lives, but I resisted once again because he was right.

"Fuckin' talk to him. Jesus, how many times did you wish you had him to talk to while you were inside? How often did something happen that made you wish you had your brothers there to help? Think of all the times you had Nix on one side and Crow on the other while you confronted someone who'd wronged one of you. One of *us*. You didn't miss that at all? And you're fucking pissed because you disappeared, and he stepped up and did *your* job? You're better than that, man."

"I was in prison."

"He waited on Brighten hand and foot like she wore a fucking crown, doing anything to make her more comfortable while she was cooking your baby." I snorted and shook my head, but Rocky wasn't done. "I remember the night she had that boy. Do you? No, you don't. You weren't there, but Crow was. Do you know what she went through? No, you don't. But he was there for every minute. He came out of that delivery room covered in so much blood that it scared the shit out of Mom and Gamma. Uncle Zeke too. Scared 'em to fucking death. But obviously, she's okay and so's little man. But do you *know* how hard it must have been for Crow, knowing all these years that the little boy he'd given up his fucking life for didn't even belong to him?"

"No," I muttered. "I don't."

"Well fucking ask him. Fuck that. *Thank* him. The shit with Brighten aside, man, he stepped up when you couldn't, and that's on *you*. Not him. You."

“Shit,” I said with a bark of laughter. “You’re like a less psychotic version of your dad.”

“Well, you’re like a dumber version of your dad.”

“Listen, if we’re gonna pick seconds and duel at dawn, I need to get some fucking sleep first,” Lucky called out from the other side of the yard. “Where are we doing this? Can it be behind Gamma’s? She’ll make cinnamon rolls if we ask nicely.”

I saw Crow looking at his boots and knew he was trying to hold in his laughter just like I was.

“Fuck! At this point, I’ll give one of you a gun just so we can get this over with and go in the fucking house for a beer!” Lucky yelled. “Are we fuckin’, fightin’, or gettin’ over it?”

“How many times have you hit him in the face while y’all were on the road?”

“Our publicist gets pissed when we hit each other in the face. We’ve gotta stick to body shots so we don’t leave any visible marks,” Rocky said with a dramatic sigh. “Fuck it. If you want, go ahead and hit him instead of your brother. We’re home for a while, so he’ll have time to heal.”

“I’m gonna talk to Crow, and neither of us are gonna hit anyone,” I assured him. “You can go home now.”

“Pardon my disbelief,” Rocky said sarcastically. “You two need to sit right in front of the glass door where we can see you, and we’ll go inside and eat and have a beer with your ... Brighten.”

“Okay.”

“Do I need to pat you down for weapons? Should I make you bend over and cough?”

“Fuck off with the prison jokes,” I said with a sigh. “The whole freedom thing is new, okay? Don’t remind me.”

“Still sore when you sit down, huh? Do you need some ice?” I sucked in a breath and resisted the urge to punch my cousin and then had to resist even harder when he grinned. “Seriously, no hitting. Understand?”

“I’ll try my very best.”

“I’m gonna talk to your brother. I’m probably gonna die of thirst if he gabs as much as you,” Rocky grumbled as he walked toward Crow. When he was about six feet away, he called over his shoulder, “Sit down. I’ll be back in a minute. Or ten.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle at his irritated tone as I walked toward the nearest chair. I looked into the kitchen and saw Roar sitting at the table with Brighten, his arm around her shoulders as she stared out at the yard forlornly. I took a few more steps so that I was standing in her line of vision and watched fresh tears fill her eyes as she stared at me.

I touched my ear and laughed softly when my fingers came away with blood on them. It wasn’t the first time I’d been smacked with a wooden spoon and it probably wouldn’t be the last, but this injury somehow hurt more than any of the others I’d had because it had come from her.

I was still holding my bloody fingers in front of me when I looked up and saw that Brighten’s hands were over her mouth as tears streamed down her cheeks.

I shrugged and wiped my hands on my jeans before I attempted a smile but turned away before I lost my resolve and walked into the house to pull her into my arms so I could wipe away her tears.

It wasn’t my place to do that anymore. That task was reserved for my brother.

## 10.

### HAWK

I'd been sitting in the chair for at least ten minutes when Rocky, Lucky, and Crow walked over. Crow sat down just as Rocky said, "Hear me when I tell you to behave. I'm going to go inside and have dinner and a beer. If I have to come out and separate you, I'm going to tell Gamma that you locked me in a box and almost starved me to death. You both know how she'll react when I tell her."

"You had plenty of air holes, dipshit, and you weren't fucking starving," Crow shot back. "God, you're so fucking dramatic, and you always have been. Maybe that's why we put you in that box in the first place! Have you ever thought of that?"

Rocky looked me dead in the eye and said, "Go ahead and hit him. He probably deserves it."

Lucky put his hand up as Rocky slid the door open and went inside. "No hitting. Got it?"

"Do you want us to pinky swear?" I asked him sarcastically.

"I hope he breaks your fucking face," Lucky grumbled as he walked between our chairs to go inside.

"They've been on the road too long. They're way too fucking cocky."

I laughed and agreed, "Seems like it. But then again, they've always been little shits."

"He was in that box for like half an hour, and he's still whining about it," Crow complained. "Pussy."

"We were quiet for a few minutes until I finally asked, "Do you love her?"

Crow laughed softly and answered, "Of course I do. How can you not? She's funny, sarcastic, a *great* mom, and my best

friend.”

It hurt my heart to hear him say that. All of that. “I used to be your best friend.”

“You still are. We just took a break,” Crow said as he finally looked at me. “You asked me if I love her, not if I’m in love with her. There’s a difference.”

“Oh, really?”

“A big difference.”

“Explain it to me like I’m stupid.”

“That’s not a stretch,” Crow said before he slumped down in his chair. “If I was *in* love with her, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now. I’d be inside making sure she’s okay. If I was *in* love with her, I’d take her upstairs to the bedroom and do everything in my power to help her forget what happened tonight, and I’d do it naked. Instead, since I love her, I’m gonna wait until all of you fuckers leave and lay beside her fully-clothed and let her cry on my shoulder until she falls asleep. That’s what I did the night you got sentenced. I went to her apartment to check on her, just like you asked me to. She opened the door and was fucking broken, man. Broken. And so was I. We just stood there crying for the longest time, holding each other so we didn’t fall apart. I convinced her to lay down and promised I’d stay with her. After she went to sleep, I went into the bathroom to wash my face and found the pregnancy test. She’d taken it that morning, all alone, and spent the day stressing about what the fuck she was gonna do as a single mom whose baby daddy was gonna be locked up until her kid could register to vote ... or longer, if things didn’t go his way.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what? ‘Hey, man. You’re at rock bottom right now. I’m gonna make it worse and tell you *exactly* what you’re missing at home after making a shitty decision that got you locked up.’”

I laughed bitterly. “No, you did that by giving me a play-by-play of that boy’s life, almost as if you were trying to rub it

in.”

“No. That wasn’t what I meant to do at all. I wanted you to be part of it. Every piece of it. That way, when you finally did get out ...”

“You were gonna tell me?”

“That was the plan all along. We were gonna wait and see if you were fucked up or if you were gonna be the Hawk we knew and loved. Then we were gonna tell you and see if you wanted Griff or anyone else to know. If you weren’t yourself or you didn’t want him to know, we were just gonna keep on keeping on.”

“So, you didn’t send all those letters to rub it in, you sent them so I could ... experience it.”

“Exactly.”

“What about Brighten?”

“What about her?”

“She never wrote to me.”

“She didn’t think you’d want to talk to her because you probably thought she threw you over for me. We know that was why we got radio silence all these years. But we weren’t doing it to hurt your feelings. We were doing it so your kid had a solid foundation with a father there through thick and thin.”

“Since it couldn’t be me, you gave him my equivalent.”

“Ahhh, using the big words. You’ll start to do that more often the longer you spend with him. You’ll learn about shit you never even knew was out there too.”

“If he wants me around.”

“That night, before Brighten woke up and realized I knew, I thought about a million different ways this could play out. She could have the baby and move on and fall in love, which would be fine, but then the only man that kid would know wouldn’t be ... us.”

“She wasn’t going to tell anyone in the family?”

“She didn’t want Griffin to be known as that kid whose dad was in prison with a twenty-year sentence. Somehow, she thought it would be better for everyone to just think it was some rando she had a one-night stand with than to be someone everyone would pity. ‘Poor Brighten, knocked up by that Forrester boy who got sent to prison.’”

“If she’d done that ...”

“Mom and Dad wouldn’t have had a chance to know their grandson.”

“Shit. But if you were the kid’s dad, they would.”

“Yep.”

“That’s ... Fuck, man.”

“It didn’t take much to convince her to roll with it. I mean, I didn’t give her much choice in the matter. I gave her two options: Tell everyone the baby was mine and we could parent him together, or I would tell everyone the baby was yours and she’d have to live as pitiful Brighten with the convict baby daddy.”

“So, you’re his father. You always will be now.”

“Nope. I’m Crow. I’m the only dad he’s known. But you’re his father.”

“I don’t think it works that way.”

“Tell that to Jonas and Lawson. They’ve got two dads. Of course, their mom is banging both of their dads, so that’s not the same.”

“She’s not gonna want to have shit to do with me, and can you blame her? I mean, it’s one thing to go from one brother to the other, but then to go back?”

“She didn’t go anywhere. I’ve never even kissed her. I’ve seen things, though,” Crow said as he slowly shook his head, a traumatized look on his face. “Man, I’ve seen things.”

“You’ve seen her naked.”

“I’ve seen her push out a baby whose head was *this big!*” Crow said as he held his hands up like he was holding a



basketball. “Seriously, brother, I just wasn’t ready for that.”

I barked out a laugh, and Crow just grinned.

“But, yeah, I’ve seen her naked, and not just ...” Crow shook his head and laughed for a second and then went on. “Man, she’ll kill me if she ever finds out I told you this, but it’s fucking hilarious.”

“What?”

“It was about, I don’t know, a week before Griff was born. We were living together in a two-bedroom apartment. Everyone thought one of the rooms was a nursery, but we had separate bedrooms. Anyway, I had just gotten back from the store because she just had to fucking have queso because ‘nothing else sounded good.’ I put the groceries away and realized she was in the shower, so I sat and had a beer. I waited and waited and waited, and she never came out. I finally went to the bathroom door and knocked, asking if she was okay. She wasn’t. She was in there crying, so I picked the lock only to find her sitting on the edge of the tub trying to prop this mirror up against the tiles so she could ... landscape, if you know what I mean.”

I snorted and then cleared my throat because the look on Crow’s face said this was no laughing matter.

“She was crying because she couldn’t, you know, get *all* the parts, and she was really upset that the doctors and nurses were gonna see her like that.”

“Like ... full bush or ...”

“More like the front yard was trimmed but the side yards and the back were a little ... um ... overgrown for her tastes.”

“Oh my God.”

“She was mortified, and no matter what I said to try and convince her that *no one* would give a fuck, she was inconsolable. I took one for the team and finished the job. A week later, I witnessed a bowling ball come out of a well-trimmed, if I do say so myself, place that I never want to see again. Ever.”

“Wow. I have no words.”

“Neither did I. I blocked it out for a while and then the nightmares started ...” Crow couldn’t hold it in anymore and started to laugh. Finally, he wiped his eyes and sighed. “I was there for all the good parts, the cravings, the mood swings, the swollen ankles, the scary parts, the crying jags, and the funny moments of the whole thing, but I’d give anything for you to have been there instead.”

“Damn.”

“And don’t even get me started on projectile vomiting or having a 3-year-old basically tell you that you’re dense because he can do math better than you.”

“You’re his dad. The only memories I’ve got are what I got from your letters, and I wasn’t looking at it like that at the time. I was bitter because I thought you were just rubbing it in.”

“I sent you everything because that was the only way for you to experience it. I missed talking to my brother and wanted him to know his kid.”

“I don’t know him well at all, and I can tell that he’s awesome. You should be proud of ...”

“It’s all Brighten. I’ve been beside her through it all, but he’s the kid he is because of her. I helped her by splitting the bills until she could get on her feet and all the other stuff but ...”

“I can see you in him. In his attitude. That’s you.”

“No, that’s Forrester, buddy. Pure Forrester. He’s got a little bit of all of us in him. Your DNA and everyone else’s fucking attitude, and believe me, it’s already getting him into trouble.”

“You’re his dad, Crow, and that’s never gonna change. Maybe someday he’ll see me that way, but I can never replace what you’ve been for him and the memories you have together.”

“You’re right. You can’t take my place, but you can make your own. I love him, and I’m not stepping back, but I’ll move to the side so you can be right there with us.”

“What about Brighten?”

“She’ll still be my best friend, and I’ll still hold her when she cries and laugh with her when she’s happy. What you do with her has nothing to do with me, but I have to say, if you fucking hurt her, brother or not, I’ll kill you.”

“That sounds fair,” I agreed, not even offended that he’d threatened my life. “Before I got arrested, I thought for sure that we’d get back together, but I fucked that up. I fucked everything up.”

“Pity party of one, your table’s ready.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m torn, brother. I love her to death, but I know that she’s in love with you. I’m afraid that if shit goes south, the fallout will fuck up everything we’ve worked so hard for, and it will hurt Griffin.”

“What should I do?”

“Prove you’re not the man that she thought you were.”

“What does that mean?”

“Why you broke up.”

“Fuck. I don’t even know for sure *why* we broke up.”

“Because you were a manwhore who was pretending to be a boyfriend. That’s why you broke up.”

I let out a breath. I couldn’t argue his point. “Once I started sleeping with Brighten, I convinced her to keep it quiet because I didn’t want to deal with the blowback. I never slept with anyone else, but from the way I acted and all the partying I did, people assumed I was the same old guy I’d always been.”

“Yep.”

“I tried to get her to ...”

“You tried to get her to be your arm candy when it was convenient, but you didn’t take into consideration that she didn’t trust you enough to make it public. You gave her an ultimatum, and let me just say, that was the wrong path to choose. Obviously.”

“What should I have done then?”

“The same thing you need to do now. If you want her, prove it by your actions. Don’t just come around and fuck when it’s convenient and then pretend you’re just old friends who grew up together when you’re in public.”

“I didn’t ... “

“The hell you say. Not a goddamn one of us had any idea you had a thing for Brighten. Not a clue. You, Nix, and I were thick as thieves. You didn’t take a shit that I didn’t know about, but I never had any idea you were banging Bright Eyes. That says it all. You weren’t ready, and she knew that. She was head over heels in love with you but didn’t want to end up as one of those girls you saw in public and pretended you didn’t know. She wasn’t asking for marriage, she was just asking for some fucking respect.”

“How do I fix it? How can I prove that I’m man enough for her to love?”

“Well, you’re gonna have to get her past the fact that for the last six years, you assumed she was the kind of woman that would jump out of your bed and straight into your brother’s.”

“Fuck.”

“I don’t know the answer or have a solution, but I know that she’s got a huge heart, and there’s still a big part of it that’s head over heels in love with you.”

“Are we good?”

“Me and you? Yeah. I knew you’d get your head out of your ass at some point, and I was willing to wait you out. I figured that as soon as you realized I never poached your girl, you’d find a way to get past your shit so we could be brothers again. Of course, I planned for that to happen when we were a

little older and wiser, but I'm glad we got it out of the way now instead."

"I want to get to know Griffin and be someone he can count on. I want to be his dad. I've only known him for a day, but I've dreamed about it for years. I'd read your letters and imagined I was the one there with Brighten, seeing and doing it all. I wished so hard that he was mine, and now I've found out that he is."

"Good. I'll make room for you to raise him right beside me. Now whether you're standing beside me holding Brighten's hand or just a part of the team is up to you."

"How do I get to the holding hands role?"

"You need to be the man she deserves, Hawk. That's the only way she'll ever let you into her life. She had you, but not all of you, and she wasn't willing to settle for that. Give yourself to her, and I promise you won't regret it."

"I'll start by being the father that Griffin deserves and go from there."

"Now you're talking, brother. Start there."

## BRIGHTEN

“Can one of you go outside and ...”

“Again, no,” Rocky said as he shook his head. “They’re gonna have to work it out, and as long as they don’t draw any weapons, we’re gonna let them do that.”

“They’ve been out there for over an hour.”

“They’ve been apart for years. That’s a lot of catching up to do,” Lucky said as he looked at the cards in his hand. “Do you have any twos?”

“Nope. Go fish.”

“How can you guys be so calm?”

“Would it be better if we started to cry and ripped our napkins into confetti like you’re doing?”

I looked down at the pile of paper I’d ripped up and thought it looked more like snow than confetti, but I wasn’t willing to start *another* argument with Rocky. Talking to him was like beating your head against a brick wall.

Talking to him made you *want* to beat your head against a brick wall. He was a lot like his uncle Clem in that way.

“Do you have any threes?”

“Fuck,” Lucky hissed as he handed him two cards. “How the hell do you cheat at Go Fish?”

“When you figure it out, let me know.”

“Fuck off. Everyone knows you cheat at cards.”

“Not everyone knows that, or no one would play with me,” Rocky argued.

“What do you think they’re talking about?” I asked when Crow started laughing out on the patio.

“You,” Lucky, Roar, and Rocky said in unison.

I picked up my phone when it buzzed and saw I had a message from Phoenix. I opened the app and found a picture of my son surrounded by cupcake wrappers and popcorn as he slept with a bottle of red soda in his hand.

I sighed and put my phone back on the table. This was making me crazy. I almost wished they'd throw down in the backyard and get it over with. At least then I'd know what was going on.

"So, how long were you banging my cousin?" Rocky asked. "Ow! Why the fuck did you kick me?"

"You don't ask like that. You've got to be delicate," Lucky snarled.

"Excuse me, madam. May I inquire as to how long you accompanied my cousin on the midnight train to Pound Town?" I stared at Rocky in shock for a second and then burst out laughing when he yelled, "Stop fucking kicking me!"

"Stop being such a dipshit!"

"You said be more delicate!"

"I didn't tell you to try to sound like a British aristocrat. I said be nicer. Have some tact. Try it. People might like you more."

"Everyone likes me."

"Well, everyone likes you more when you're gone."

Roar Forrester lifted his head and growled, "I like both of you more when you shut the fuck up." He sat up and sighed before he rolled his neck around. "I have to go with Rocky on this and ask, when you were oscillating the unmentionables with my cousin, was it a one and done or a let's pretend we're not fucking for the fun of it situation and do this a couple of times a week?"

I sputtered out a laugh and shook my head before I asked, "How has no one killed any of you by now?"

"I have an invisibility cloak, and they can run at super-speed. That just means that not only are they dumbasses,

they're really fast ones," Roar said with a deadpan expression. "Why won't you answer the question?"

"Because it's none of your business."

"Woman, you got snot on my shirt. I feel like I'm vested in this situation now," Roar explained, his mannerisms reminding me so much of his father, Clem, that it was eerie. "Exchange of bodily fluids means you've gotta pick a side, and I'm not comfortable doing that without more information."

"I'm sorry about your shirt, and we did not *exchange* anything."

"I'm sensitive to smells, and I accidentally sneezed in your hair." I vaguely remembered him sneezing and winced as I resisted the urge to run my hand over the top of my head. "We've had an exchange. Now you can explain it to us, or I'm gonna assume that you've achieved the trifecta with two brothers and a cousin under your belt."

"I've never *exchanged bodily fluids* with any of you other than Hawk, if you must know," I said primly.

"You've been with Crow all these years and never once let him check your oil with his dipstick? No wonder he's always so fucking cranky," Rocky said with a grimace. "Poor guy probably has carpal tunnel *and* tennis elbow by now."

"It's called making love," I snapped. "Fuck. You're all ... such ... Forresters."

"He's a Marks. You can tell by his markings," Roar said with a grin. "Get it? The Marks have markings?"

"I'm hung like a horse, but I don't have markings like one," Lucky argued.

"You know, in Medieval times, you would have been shunned by people who thought you'd been marked by the devil," Rocky said as he motioned toward Lucky's hair. Just like his father, he had a white patch at his widow's peak.

I couldn't help but point out, "They'd have freaked out about his eyes too."



“As if you’ve got room to talk, Bright Eyes,” Lucky said with a frown. “I don’t know why you’re picking on me when you’ve got the same condition.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Roar argued.

“We’ve both got heterochromia, dipshit. It just looks different since both of mine are brown with blue spots, and she’s got eyes like that kid in the first X-Men movie.”

Roar’s eyes got wide, and he said, “I never even thought of that! Can you read my mind?” He leaned a little closer to me and whispered, “I’m thinking of a color.”

“Pussy pink,” I guessed, knowing these guys well enough to be almost a hundred percent sure I was right. I knew I was when his eyes bugged out, and he leaned back suddenly with his mouth gaping in shock. I smiled like an evil villain as I laughed maniacally, then laughed even harder when he scooted his chair a little farther from me.

“Holy shit,” Roar muttered as he looked at the other guys. “She guessed it.”

“The only things you think about are pussy, music, sex, food, and beer. The odds were in her favor,” Lucky said drolly.

“I think about other things. They’re mostly violent, but still ...”

“You people make me want to take a bath with a toaster,” I said before I leaned forward and rested my head in my hands. “This is why I’ll never have more children. The thought of having to corral multiple Forresters for the rest of my life is terrifying.”

“So, you’re not gonna throw out little brother and start banging big brother again?” Roar asked. I stared at him blankly until he shrugged and said, “Technically, they’re both Forrester spawn, so either way, you’ve got at least two in your household. Three, if you keep one of the brothers as a backup.”

“I am not a whore,” I snarled.

“I didn’t say you were. We’re fucking irresistible. No one blames you,” Rocky argued. “It’s perfectly natural to get addicted. It happens all the time.”

“Why are you even here?” Roar motioned toward the back door and stared at me like I was stupid, so I said, “I know that, I just don’t know how you got involved.”

“Well, that’s easy. We were walking out of my house to get on our bikes when Phoenix sprinted past us with your kid squalling under his arm. We were still trying to process *that* when we heard yelling, so we came to see what was going on,” Roar explained.

“Shit!” Lucky said as he tossed his remaining cards onto the table.

“Pay up, buttercup. That’s twenty in a row,” Rocky said with a grin as he gathered up the cards so he could shuffle.

Lucky pulled a twenty out of his wallet and then wadded it up before he threw it at Rocky, hitting him right on the end of the nose. The twenty bounced on the table, and I snatched it up and slipped the little ball into my pocket. Rocky looked shocked, and I shrugged.

“That’s for the food and beer.”

“And to think, we saved your entire house from being destroyed while they went all Forrester on each other,” Rocky said as he slowly shook his head. “Some people have no gratitude at all.”

Lucky shook his head sadly and asked, “What *is* the world coming to?”

I heard laughter from outside again and waved toward the door. “Obviously, they’re not going to kill each other so you can go. Please. I need a few moments of peace and quiet, and there’s none of that with you guys around.”

“You’re pretty grumpy too. Maybe you should let one of them check your oil,” Rocky grumbled.

“Go away.”

Roar looked out the sliding door and said, “It looks like our good deed is done, brothers. Let’s go for a ride and see if we can make the most of what’s left of this night.”

Even though they made me crazy, they *had* stopped Hawk and Crow from tearing up my house and each other, so I said, “Thank you for your help.”

“You know we’d do anything for you, Bright Eyes,” Rocky said as he leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Holler if you need anything, you hear? I mean anything.” I glared at him, and he put his hand up in alarm. “Not *that*. I mean if you need help corralling the crazies. Everyone knows Bird’s kids are the wildest of the bunch.”

I laughed and shook my head because these three surely held that crown.

“We’re gonna be here for a while, and I seem to remember promising your boy some guitar lessons. We need to make that happen,” Rocky said as he gathered up their empty beer bottles and walked toward the trash.

Roar had gathered up the plates and silverware and was standing at the sink rinsing them off when he said, “I told him I’d give him drum lessons too. I’ve got a set-up in my house that he can practice on. If he gets into it, he can use it while I’m on the road.”

“Thanks, guys,” I said, my irritation with them forgotten now that they were being a little more mature. “I’ll get in touch with you about that.”

“My piano gets delivered next week. I’ll have Mom find some of my old sheet music so he can start noodling around with me. If it works out, you can hire someone to take over once I leave, and they can work in my house.”

“Music’s a good outlet for our kind of people,” Roar said. “Banging on the drums helps me not to bang people’s heads.”

“And playing guitar gets you laid. He’ll appreciate that when he’s older,” Rocky added.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Call us if you need us, and don’t forget about the piano,” Lucky said before he gave me a mock salute and turned to go. “We’re all close by and can come running in a heartbeat.”

“Although I’d rather have a brisk walk than the sprint we did tonight,” Roar said before he pulled me in for a hug. “I’ve got a delicate constitution, and I’m not really made for that kind of exertion.”

I laughed, knowing that was a lie considering the man’s chest was hard as a rock and his abs probably had abs of their own.

“See ya, Bright Eyes,” Rocky said before he mussed my hair. “It’ll all work out, babe. If it doesn’t, maybe you and I can ...”

“Get out of my house.”

Rocky winked at me before he disappeared through the doorway, and I shook my head as I walked into the kitchen to finish cleaning up.

There was just something about those Forrester boys that made them irresistible. Mind-numbingly irritating at times, but irresistible all the same.



I felt the mattress dip down before Crow molded himself to my back and rested his arm over my hip.

“Hey,” I whispered. “I guess you didn’t kill each other after all.”

“It was close once or twice, but ... it was good. Fuck, I’ve missed him.”

“I know.”

“Did you cry yourself to sleep again?”

“No.”

“You’re a shit liar, Bright Eyes. You sound like a Muppet, so I know you did.”

“I knew that this would happen someday, but it was ... someday. Not today.”

“He was always good at math. I guess he googled something and figured out ...”

“That we’re liars.”

“And that an eight-pound baby wasn’t premature, so either you were banging me on the side, which he knew would never happen, or we were lying.”

We were quiet for a few minutes, and I wondered if he was already asleep when I asked, “What’s gonna happen, Crow?”

“We’ve gotta talk to the boy tomorrow. Hawk’s anxious and really worried about how he’s gonna take it.”

“So am I.”

“However he feels, we’ll talk him through it just like we do with everything else.”

“We have to reassure him that he’s never gonna lose you. He has to know that, first and foremost.”

“I’ll make sure he does. *We’ll* make sure he does.”

“Does Hawk understand that?”

“He does. We talked about it.”

“What else did you talk about?”

“You. Mostly Griff, but there was a lot of talk about you too.”

“What about me?”

“He dreamed of you while he was locked up.”

“He did?”

“Yep. You’re a pretty dreamworthy girl, I guess.”

I laughed softly. “Did it physically pain you to say that?”

“Little bit.”

“I wish you didn’t have to be in the middle of this. I hate that it caused a rift between you and your brother, but I couldn’t have done it without you all this time.”

“A rift can be mended. We started on that tonight, and we’ll keep working at it.”

“Good. I guess we don’t have to worry about Uncle Kale locking us all in a room and playing May the Best Man Win, huh?”

“He’d have probably enjoyed that.”

“You know, I spent more time with your cousins tonight than I ever have.”

“My dad says they’re walking billboards for safe sex.”

“Huh?”

“Have safe sex or you could end up with a kid like one of them.”

I laughed for a second and then admitted, “Roar was really sweet while I was crying. When the other two came in, they started bickering, and that really took my mind off what was going on outside with you and Hawk.”

“They’re good at that.”

“Do you think they did it on purpose?”

“I can guarantee they did. They know how to be serious. I’ve seen them do it.”

“Really?”

“Twice,” Crow assured me as he laughed.

I laughed as I rolled over to face him. After years of practice, we were perfectly in sync as he slipped his arm beneath my head.

“Is everything going to be okay, Crow?”

“It will. It’s gonna take some time and adjustment, but everything’s gonna work out.”

“I think it will too.”

“You’re an awesome woman, and you know I love you, right?”

“Thanks. I love you too.”

“I need you to do something for me, B.”

“Anything.”

“Make sure that he understands your worth before you give him another chance.”

“I’m not going to ...”

“Don’t fight something you’ve dreamed about for years, babe.”

“Is he ... Do you think he’s going to want me after ... all this?”

“He’d be a fool if he didn’t, and other than a few glaring instances I don’t have to list off, he’s not a foolish man.”

“I don’t know if I can go back to the way things were before,” I said as my eyes filled with tears.

“Know your worth, sweetheart, and accept nothing less.”

“I still love him.”

“I know, B. And you always will.”

## HAWK

I felt something tickle my nose for the millionth time and cursed the fucking blanket I'd pulled off the back of the couch. Suddenly, I felt something crawling across my cheek, and I had a moment of sheer panic because I knew that was *not* part of the blanket.

I jackknifed to a sitting position, a scream building as I imagined a spider crawling into my hair. When I slapped my cheek, there was a loud splat and something cold and slimy spread over my face. My eyes shot open as I screamed like a cheerleader in a horror movie, horrified that my face was covered in spider guts.

I heard a little kid giggle at the same time someone snorted. I opened my eyes just in time to see Phoenix and Griffin high five as they started laughing their asses off. The feather he was holding fell to the floor as Griffin grabbed his stomach and threw his head back, laughing so hard that his entire body shook with it. As Phoenix bent forward to put his hands on his knees, loud guffaws coming out of his mouth, he tossed a bottle of hair gel onto the coffee table. It slid across the wood and bumped into the phone that was propped there, knocking it over so that it landed facedown with a loud thunk.

I pulled my hand away from my face and saw that it was covered in green goop. Since my other hand was clean, I used it and swiped my fingers across my eye trying to remove the slime hanging from my lashes.

“Oh shit!” Phoenix gasped, still laughing as he reached for his phone. “Fuck, that was perfect.”

“Did you get it?” Griffin asked excitedly as he clapped with anticipation beside my brother. “Let me see!”

Phoenix messed with his phone while I plotted his murder, but I couldn't help but smile when Griffin squealed and pulled



Phoenix's hand closer so he could watch the video that was playing.

"Mornin', big brother," Phoenix said with a grin.

I scratched my nose with my middle finger and quickly realized it was still covered in hair gel and I was making even more of a mess. Phoenix started laughing again and then looked down at Griffin when he pulled on his arm.

"You've got to upload it! What song can we use?"

I watched Griffin bounce up and down for a second, then jump onto the coffee table so he could see the phone in Phoenix's hand. They stood with their heads bent together while they went through a song list, discussing which one would be perfect for whatever it was they were about to do.

"Hawk! Do you like this song?" Griffin asked. An old pop tune played, and I shook my head. The look on my face made Griffin laugh. "Use that one! It's perfect!" Griffin said as he took the phone from Phoenix and jumped to the couch beside me. He lost his balance for a second, and it looked like he was about to fall, so I reached out to grab him and realized my hand was still covered in hair gel right about the time he righted himself.

Phoenix went into the kitchen and came out with a wet dishrag. He tossed it to me, still chuckling, and then flopped down onto his recliner.

I wiped my face as Griffin settled in beside me, looking at something on Phoenix's phone. I was still trying to get the gel off my fingers when Griffin squealed and said, "We've already got 43 likes!"

"That's because I tagged our cousins in the video. All of their fans are gonna jump on it, and you'll go viral, Griff."

"I'll be famous! So will you, Hawk!"

"For what?"

"There's been a new development in technology since you've been gone, big brother. Welcome to the world of TikTok."

“What the fuck?” I mumbled as I leaned closer to Griffin and watched the screen.

It was a video of him with a grin on his face trying to hold in his laughter as he squirted hair gel all over my hand. Then his entire body shimmied with excitement as he started tickling my face with a feather until I slapped myself, screamed like a little bitch and damn near launched myself off the couch.

The video started to repeat, and Griffin jumped up and started bouncing on the cushion beside me as I tried to get my bearings and form a coherent thought.

“You’d think after being surrounded by criminals for the last six years, you’d be a little more aware of your surroundings while you’re sleeping,” Phoenix mused as he watched me try and shake off my sleep.

“I usually am, but this couch is comfortable. What time is it?”

“It’s about six.”

My eyes got wide and I yawned as I looked toward the window where the sun was just starting to color the sky. “Why are you two up?”

“The Griffmeister doesn’t like to waste his life sleeping. He never has. He’ll wind down after lunch time, hopefully, and take a little snooze, but this is his usual time to start bouncing around.”

“Damn.”

“What time did you get in last night?”

“About three hours ago.”

“I hate to bring up a touchy subject, but I have to ask. Did you try and add one plus one and come up with a ...” Phoenix looked at Griffin, who was still jumping on the couch, and then back at me before he finished, “kid?”

Griffin dropped down to his ass and bounced just a little bit before he looked at me earnestly and asked, “Were you doing algebra?”

I raised my eyebrows and stared at him, wondering how he knew that word when I wasn't even sure I could spell it. "No."

"What does the kid represent? It has to be an even number because if you add two odd numbers you'll always get an even number, you know?"

"Uh huh."

"But that equation doesn't make any sense. You can't add two numbers and come up with a person. You had to have read it wrong, Phoenix."

Phoenix shrugged his shoulders and let out a little laugh before he said, "It looks like a lot of us read that wrong, little man."

"I'm hungry."

"I don't know what to tell you. You ate all my food last night."

Griffin shook his head in disgust and sighed before he looked at me and said, "He eats like a frat boy."

"Do you know what a frat boy is?"

"No, but that's what Brighten said. She usually doesn't let me eat dinner over here but last night was a special night."

"Yeah, it was," I said with a snort.

"Did you two throw down?"

I barked out a laugh and shook my head, "Not really. Sort of. Why?"

"You've got blood on your ear. Did Crow hit you?" Griffin's eyes narrowed and he stared at me with an expression that told me he was *all* Forrester. "Did you hit him?"

I didn't answer that question, instead I said, "Your mom hit me in the ear with a wooden spoon."

"You probably deserved it," Griffin said with a shrug.

"I bet he did," Phoenix agreed through his laughter. "I can guarantee he did. Did Crow get smacked too?" I nodded, and

Phoenix laughed even harder. “Go Bright Eyes!”

“Mom isn’t usually a mean person,” Griffin said, a confused look on his face. “She said that violence isn’t the answer, but if someone asks you the wrong question you should call Kale.”

“Oh shit,” I wheezed out through my laughter. “You’re freaking awesome, kid. I like you.”

“I like you too.”

My heart started thumping as Griffin smiled up at me and I hoped that he’d still like me after he talked to his parents ... yeah, they were his parents, not me ... today.

“Hey, kid,” I said as I got up off the couch to get in the shower. “Do me a favor.”

“I can’t say yes until I know what you’re asking for.”

“I remember that now. If something happens and you want to *not* like me, will you remember how fun the last few minutes have been instead and give me another chance?”

“I don’t usually forget anything,” Griffin said seriously. “Why would I not like you?”

I shrugged and told him, “Sometimes things change when we aren’t sure we want them to. So, you’ll remember?”

“I will,” Griffin assured me with a grin. “And if I start to forget I can always watch our video.”

“How many people have watched your video so far?” Phoenix asked. Griffin stood on the couch and jumped to the coffee table before he launched himself at Phoenix who was still a few feet away in the recliner. Once he was settled in, Phoenix opened the phone again and gave it to Griffin.

“If you’d tell me your password we wouldn’t have to do that,” I heard Griffin say.

“I learned my lesson the first time Griffmeister. It’s not gonna happen.”

“I’ll figure it out, you know.”

Phoenix yawned, and I smiled when I heard him say, “I’m sure you will, kid. I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

That fucking song started playing again, but I didn’t mind it so much this time since it was almost drowned out by Griffin’s ... my son’s ... laughter.

Once I finished my shower and put on some clean clothes, I walked back out into the living room to find Phoenix snoring on the recliner and Griffin sitting in the middle of the coffee table typing on Phoenix’s phone.

“Are you ready to go home?” I asked.

“Yes!” Griffin said as he kept typing away.

“Are you doing something you’re not supposed to be?”

“No one has ever told me not to,” Griffin said with a shrug.

“Close it up, and let’s get you home.”

“Are you hungry too?”

“Yeah. I’ll get something on my way into town.”

“Where are you going?” Griffin asked as he slid toward the edge of the table. He set Phoenix’s phone down and smiled wickedly at my sleeping brother before he looked up at me. “You can eat at my house. I’ll make breakfast.”

“You like to cook, huh?”

“I do. Did you like my dinner last night?” Griffin asked as he looked down at his feet. “It’s cold outside.”

“I’m sure it’s pretty chilly. Put your shoes on.”

“I don’t have any shoes.”

I looked around the room and then back at him before I asked, “Where are they?”

“At home by the back door. My kidnapper didn’t give me time to put them on.”

I laughed and asked, “Shoulders or back?”

“You can put me on your shoulders?”

“Well, yeah,” I said as I opened the front door. “Come on outside. You can climb up from the porch rail.”

“This is so cool!”

I stepped down into the yard and walked down in front of the porch, so Griffin could climb up, then held onto his legs as I took off toward his house.

“Your mom’s probably still asleep, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know the code to get inside?”

“8492.”

“You probably shouldn’t just blurt it out like that, man.”

“Okay,” Griffin said as he wiggled around and got situated. “Did you like my dinner last night?”

“It tasted great.”

“Did you get to finish it?”

I thought about it for a second and then lied, “I ate every bite.”

“When you finished arguing with Brighten and Crow?”

“Why don’t you call them Mom and Dad?”

“Was it a loud argument?”

“What do you call Gamma and Papa Smokey?”

“It must have been a loud argument if you made Brighten mad. She hit you.”

“What about Gigi and Pop? What do you call them?”

“Did Brighten say she was sorry for hitting you?”

“Dude, you don’t quit, do you?”

“I will when you say it’s grown up business because I know you’re not gonna answer me then.”

“Well, it’s grown-up business.”

“Okay.”

“Look both ways,” I said as I stopped at the curb.

I felt Griffin’s body move and then he said, “No one else is awake yet. You can go.”

“Say, ‘All clear.’”

“Why?”

I spent the next few minutes trying to explain why I thought he should say that and listened to his argument about it, then flipped him around and put him on his feet in front of the door of his house.

“You’re good to go if I leave you here?”

“Well, no. I can’t stay by myself while Brighten’s sleeping.”

I didn’t remind him that he was doing just fine a few minutes ago while Phoenix was snoring away because in reality he was probably doing something that was going to get him into trouble at some point.

“What time does she usually wake up?”

“When she smells her coffee.” I looked at his watch and then raised my eyebrows when I looked back up at his face. He grinned and said, “She wakes up at 7:15.”

“What time is it now?”

“6:48.”

“Okay. I’ll stay for twenty minutes, and then I’ve gotta go.”

“You can sit in the kitchen with me. I’m not allowed to cook by myself.”

“What do you want to cook?”

“Biscuits and gravy and bacon and fried eggs and ...”

“How about a banana and a bowl of cereal?”

“How about a toaster strudel and a banana? I can work the toaster. Can you?” Griffin asked as he entered the code to get inside. He climbed onto the bench beside the door and put in a code to turn off the alarm, then hopped down and went into the

kitchen. I looked around for a second, a little uncomfortable being in here alone, and Griffin asked, “Are you a vampire?”

“Do you believe in vampires?”

“Do you believe *you’re* a vampire?” Griffin asked as he pulled open the freezer.

He pulled out a box and shut the door before I asked, “Do you know how to answer a question?”

“Brighten says if I don’t ask questions I’ll never learn anything,” Griffin said as he slid a stool across the floor so he could reach the toaster.

“That’s still not an answer, dude.”

“Do you want two or four?”

I sighed and said, “Four.”

“I’ll make us each two, and we can eat them while the others cook,” Griffin offered as he placed four pastries into the toaster.

“Okay,” I said as I pulled a few paper towels off the roll and put them on the counter.

“You don’t want to use a plate?”

“Do you do dishes?”

Griffin giggled. “No.”

“Neither do I, so we’ll use paper towels.” I pulled a couple bananas off the bunch and handed him one before I peeled mine and ate a bite. I looked at Griffin and saw he was studying his, so I asked, “Do you know how to open that?”

“Of course I can. I’m 5,” Griffin said as he peeled the banana and then inspected it for bruises. “There’s a spot.”

I glanced at it and shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“No, it’s not fine. It’s got a spot.”

“This is one of those times where I could say any number of things, but I’m not sure which one is gonna get you to eat that banana.”



“You’re supposed to say you’ll cut it out and it will be fine.”

“Okay. I’ll cut it out and it will be fine.”

“You can’t. The knife drawer is locked, and Mom hides the key in a different place every time so I can’t find it.”

“Good to know,” I said as I started opening drawers. I asked, “Does she lock up the silverware too?”

“No,” Griffin said as he pointed to a tray with some glassware, each holding a cluster of different types of silverware. I picked out a butter knife and began surgery on the banana. Griffin watched me carefully, and after I’d cut off the first bruise, he pointed to another. After the third had been removed, he said, “Okay. It’s good now.”

The toaster popped up, and I got the pastries out and stacked them with the little packets of icing between them while Griffin put in the next round. He turned and looked at what I’d done and tilted his head in question.

“Why’d you do that?” he asked as he moved closer and studied the pastries.

“The heat from the pastry melts the icing and makes it easier to spread.”

Griffin looked at me in awe and whispered, “That’s genius.”

I didn’t want to analyze just how proud I was to have taught him something, so I just said, “Now you know for next time.” He snatched the box off the counter and started scanning it, so I had to ask, “Are you reading that or just pretending to?”

He looked up at me as if I’d just insulted his mama and then turned his attention back down at the box as he said, “I can read.”

“I wasn’t able to read yet when I was 5.”

“I learned to read when I was 3.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.” I wondered if I should tell him he shouldn’t cuss, but before I had a chance, he said, “We should write to the company and tell them your idea so they can put it on the box.”

“You go right ahead, kid.”

“I know! We should make a TikTok. I was *this old* when I learned how to melt the icing. Seriously. We should do that!”

“First of all, there’s already one video of me out there this morning, and second, I don’t have a phone.”

“We can use my tablet! I know Phoenix’s login so when Mom wakes up and unlocks my internet access I can upload it.”

Griffin took off across the kitchen toward the desk in the corner as I said, “You probably shouldn’t know that. Does he know you know?”

Griffin just shrugged and unplugged the iPad before he took the watch off his arm and connected it to a different cord. He walked back over holding the tablet and started the camera before he propped it against the fruit bowl and then got back up on his stool.

I made sure I was out of the frame and watched him work, marveling at his concentration and how unique he was compared to any other kid his age I’d ever met. The pastries popped up, and he put them on a paper towel with the icing tucked between them before he moved them to the side and picked up one of the first batch. He grabbed an icing packet and squished it around with his fingers before he gave the camera a thumbs up and pushed the button to stop filming.

“And cut!”

“If you ever start using your powers for evil instead of good, we’re all screwed.”

Griffin giggled before he said, “I know.”

I was carrying the freshly iced pastries over to the table when Crow appeared in the doorway with his hair mussed and T-shirt wrinkled. He stopped in his tracks when he saw me

and then nodded and looked over at Griff, who had already sat down. “I heard you talking down here, and thought Uncle Phoenix had walked you home.”

“He sounds like Phoenix and looks like Phoenix, but he’s not Phoenix,” Griffin said before he took a bite off the corner. He closed his eyes and savored the taste before he stuffed at least half of it in his mouth.

“I’ll go ahead and ...”

“Sit down and enjoy your breakfast.”

“It’s okay, I’ll ...”

“Take a chair, Hawk. It’s fine. Would you like some coffee?”

“Sure.”

“This is cool,” Griffin said through a mouthful of pasty.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Crow said without thinking as he poured us each a mug. He waited a second and then asked, “What’s cool?”

“We can sit here and eat breakfast like a family with no grown-up business,” Griffin said cheerfully. “We’re the Forresters!”

Crow laughed before he agreed, “Yep. We’re the Forresters. One big, happy, twisted family.”

## HAWK

By the time I turned the corner and saw Marcus's law office in the distance, I was freezing my ass off. The bank sign said it was in the mid-fifties, but as usual, I was cold down to my bones. When I was a kid, my brothers and I spent the majority of the time either naked or dressed only in shorts. But even then, I'd had cold sensitivity, and it had only gotten worse as I got older.

My parents had taken me to several doctors, and they'd run every test under the sun but never found a diagnosis or treatment that would help me. One doctor finally suggested we move to a climate that was warm year-round, but that wasn't an option. Our entire family was spread out between Rojo and Colorado Springs, so our solution had been for me to wear more clothes when it was cool outside and just deal with it.

Prison had been hell for me in more ways than one. Other than the obvious issues, the temperature made it a nightmare. In the warm months, it was stifling inside, but in the cold months, the entire place was like a meat locker. I couldn't exactly walk around in a parka and snow boots as those weren't prison-issued fare, so I just dealt with the shivers and kept myself moving on those cold nights, usually working out in my cell for hours on end.

That seemed to work, but now that I was out, it was causing a bit of a problem. I'd unpacked my clothes and was happy to see them and feel their soft texture on my skin, but everything seemed to have shrunk a few sizes. My shirts and hoodies fit like a second skin, and my jeans were so tight on my thighs that I worried for their integrity if I had to squat for any reason.

My coats that didn't stretch at all were useless. I'd packed them back into the boxes for next winter, knowing I'd lose some of the muscle mass I'd gained in prison now that I would

have a more sedentary lifestyle. I'd be working behind a desk if everything went according to plan.

Finally, I was in front of the office I'd walked all this way for, and I pulled the door open.

I sighed when I felt the warmer air and rubbed my hands up and down my thighs to warm them as I looked around. It looked the same as it had when I'd visited as a kid. That was comforting since I'd be spending most of my days here if things worked out.

"Hawk?" Ebbie Conner, a girl I'd known since we were kids, stared at me in shock from behind the reception counter. "Oh my God! You look ... Wow."

I laughed and walked up to the counter, then leaned forward and grinned as I said, "I have to say, you look pretty 'wow' yourself, Ebbie. You've grown up since I've been gone."

Ebbie blushed and said, "We weren't expecting to see you until next week when Marcus gets back. What are you doing here?"

"Well, my schedule is wide open, so I thought there was no time like the present to get started."

"That's great!" Ebbie said as she lifted the phone on her desk and pushed a few buttons. She told someone on the other end of the line that I was up front, and before she could put the phone down, Petra Parker, a woman who was not much older than me but technically my aunt, skidded around the corner and looked at me with wide eyes.

"Aunt Petra!" I said with a grin as I held my arms out for a hug.

"Hawk Forrester, my least favorite nephew," Petra teased as she stepped into my embrace and hugged me tightly. "I missed you at the wedding. It's so good to see you!"

"It's good to see you too. Ebbie said you guys weren't expecting me," I said as Petra stepped out of my arms and leaned against the counter.

Vada Conner, another old friend, and Trinity Booker, one of Crow's high school sweethearts, came around the corner and joined us in the front room.

After warm greetings and hugs and a few minutes to catch up, Trinity said, "We've got your office set up. Just the basics, of course, but we've got your phone charging, and I've just finished making arrangements for your transportation."

"My transportation? I just figured I'd buy a bike or something," I said with a shrug.

A stipulation of my parole was that I was not to operate a vehicle, car, *or* motorcycle for the next two years. I hadn't given much thought to how I'd get around, guessing I'd spend most of my time walking here and there or using public transportation when I needed to get all the way across town.

I'd have taken a bus this morning, but there wasn't a stop near my brother's neighborhood, and I didn't have any money for fare anyway.

"We've hired you some drivers," Vada said with a grin. "I've got a schedule worked out with each of them, and they're excited to be getting paid to cart you around."

"Really?"

"Yep. There are benefits to having a family as big as yours. Mine too."

"How's that?"

"There's always a fresh round of kids who need a job and have just gotten a license they can't wait to use."

"What?" I asked in alarm. "I'm gonna be riding around with ... kids?"

"It's better than hoofing it, my friend," Vada said with a laugh. "We'll show you your office and get you settled in there. Trinity can get you started on your paperwork while I help get your phone set up. I'll call our IT department and see if they can send a technician to set up your computer today."

"I'll get a phone?"

“And a tablet, a laptop, the works.”

“I never even thought of that.”

“That’s one of the perks and irritations of this job. You’re almost always on call, so we’ll supply your phone and any other electronics you’ll need.”

“Damn. That’s awesome,” I said as I followed her through an open door right off the reception area. “This is my office?”

“Yes, sir,” Vada said with a grin as she hurried around the desk to open the blinds in the corner of the room. “What do you think?”

“It’s ... Damn!” I said as I looked around the room.

It was easily three times as big as my cell had been, and there were shelves along one wall with the desk situated at the end with windows on either side of it. To the left of the door was a comfortable-looking couch with a matching chair on one side and a narrow coffee table.

Two more chairs faced the immense oak desk, the only things interrupting the shiny surface were a desk calendar and a cup of pens.

“I’m glad you like it since you’ll be spending *a lot* of time in here,” Vada said. “Have a seat, Mr. Forrester.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered as I walked around my desk and pulled the chair out. I sat down and rolled forward until I was situated, then leaned forward and rested my arms on the calendar as I smiled up at Vada. “This is fucking awesome.”

“We’re glad you’re home and happy to have you join us here,” Vada said as Trinity walked into the office. “While Trinity gets your paperwork together, I’ll show you the break room so you can get a cup of coffee before you get to work!”

I ran my hands over my face and felt a surge of emotion.

I’d gone from thinking I’d spend at least the next twelve years in prison, to being set free, with restrictions, of course. And then found out I have a son and now a cush office job with all the perks to go with it.

I was terrified that I'd wake up and realize I was back in my bunk, shivering, with only a thin, rough blanket to warm me while I listened to my cellmate snore.

"It's a lot to take in, I'm sure," Vada said softly. "Do you need a few minutes?"

"No. I'm ready. If this is a dream, I'm gonna milk it for all it's worth until I'm forced to wake up and face reality again."



## **BRIGHTEN**

"Did you take the rest of the day off?" Crow asked as I came through the gate.

"Yeah. By the time I got to the office, Brenda had gotten the scoop from Lucky, I'm sure, and she was stunned to say the least. When I told her that you and I planned to talk to Griffin today, she and Rosie arranged to take over a few of my tasks that I had planned, and I came home as soon as I finished what couldn't be put off."

"I've got to be at work at 3:30 for a delivery, but if I need to, I can come back after that."

"Where's Griff?"

"He's finishing an assignment."

I looked over his shoulder and saw Griffin sitting at his desk with a video showing him how to work out an equation that was a complete jumble to me, and then I looked back at Crow.

"How are you doing?"

"I'm ... fine."

"Isn't that supposed to be my answer? Fine?"



Crow shook his head and then sighed. “Okay. I’m worried the boy’s gonna be pissed at both of us and have a complete meltdown.”

“Me too.”

“I’ve been watching videos about how to break important news to kids, but they’re mostly about death and stuff like that. I tried to search ‘how to tell your kid you’re not his father’ but got nothing.”

“I guess once we’re finished, you can make a PSA,” I joked.

“I didn’t get a chance to ask you before you left. How did you feel about walking into the kitchen and seeing Hawk sitting there?” Crow asked.

“Stunned.”

“Me too.” Crow looked thoughtful for a second and then added, “It was kind of cool to see him interact with Griff, though. Then again, it was kind of sad too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Griff was his usual self, but it seemed like Hawk was walking on eggshells.”

“It’s not the most comfortable situation for any of us.” I sighed. “I hope it gets easier.”

“It will.”

Griffin knocked on the glass door and then waved at me. I smiled and then blew him a kiss before he pointed at his watch and then back at the computer.

“I guess he’s finished.”

“He had another session scheduled for this afternoon, but I sent an email to the teacher and told them we’d have to reschedule.”

“I called Warren and asked him to come over for dinner this evening. Dad’s gonna drop him off after work. I thought it would be good for Griff to have someone else to talk to in case he’s angry with us.”

“I love Warren, but do you think he’s the best option for that?”

“I do. He thinks like Griff, but he’s an adult, so he can rationalize things a little better but still understand the way Griff might be feeling.”

“I sent an email to his therapist explaining what was going on and that I thought it would be a good idea to get him in before his regular appointment. He sent me a few ideas and a note reminding us to let him ‘experience his honest emotions,’ whatever the fuck that means.”

“I guess that means we’ll let him drive and just go along for the ride.”

“Okay,” Crow said with a heavy sigh before he stood and held his hand out to me. I let him pull me out of my chair and into his arms. I held on tight, terrified about Griffin’s reaction to what we were about to tell him. “Let’s do this.”

I pulled away and walked into the house after Crow slid the door open. I greeted my son with a hug and a kiss on the top of his head. “Are you all finished with your lesson?”

“I am. I’ve got some homework to do before my next one, though.”

“Let’s put that aside for a bit. We need to have a talk.”

“About what?”

“I told you that I’d explain what was upsetting me, but I’ve changed the timeline. You don’t have to wait until next Sunday after all.”

“You’re going to tell me some grown-up business?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it about what happened last night or is that different?”

“It’s connected,” Crow said as he sat down at the table. “Have a seat, Griff.”

“I’ll get us something to drink,” I said as I rushed into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator door where they couldn’t

see me and took a few deep breaths, trying to calm my racing heart.

*You can do this, Brighten. He's gonna be fine. He's gonna be happy no matter what. You can do this.*

My quick pep talk over, I grabbed some bottles of water and let the door shut as I turned back to face the task at hand.

*It's all gonna be okay.*



“That makes sense,” Warren said before he glanced toward the living room where Griff was snuggled on the couch with Crow. “I never saw Crow at your apartment, but I saw Hawk.”

“I wondered if you’d ever put two and two together, but you never said anything so ...”

“Because it was not my business.”

“Well, thanks for keeping my secret anyway.”

“You made Griffin cry, Brighten.”

“I did,” I admitted. My dad lifted his arm and settled it over my shoulders, and I leaned into his side. He scooted his chair a little closer to mine and held me tight, and it was the best feeling in the world. “Crow and I thought that Griffin might like to hang out with you for a little bit. He might not be comfortable talking to us, but he always talks to you about things that upset him.”

“He does.”

“If there’s something you’re unsure about or a question you’re not comfortable answering, just ask me or ...”

“What is there to be unsure about? You lied to everyone for years, Brighten. That’s a fact, so I’m not sure why you think I’d have questions.”

I sighed and felt tears fill my eyes. Warren didn’t like subterfuge of any kind. I knew that he was angry with me not

only on Griffin's behalf but for himself too.

"She did lie. She's not denying that, Warren. I know how you feel about people who don't tell the truth, but there's more at play than how you or I feel. The only one that matters right now is Griffin."

"That's true."

"This is one of those times where you're going to have to be impartial about things, and I know that's difficult for you. Sometimes seeing both sides of an issue isn't your forte," my dad said. I had to hold back a laugh at his understatement, especially when Warren raised one eyebrow as if to ask, 'You think?' My dad didn't hold back and laughed softly before he asked, "Can you be supportive of Griffin and listen to his worries without voicing your opinions about her and Crowleying all these years?"

Warren looked thoughtful for a second and then nodded. "I spoke to Lisa and Addie about how to do that when we talked this morning. I believe I can. They also think it's something I can do."

"Then, so do I. You love Griff just like we all do, and I know you'll have his best interests at heart. He can really use a friend who understands him right now."

"I can be that friend."

"You've always been that friend to me," I whispered through my tears.

"I don't like to see you cry, Brighten. It unnerves me."

"Sorry," I said as I swiped the tears off my cheeks, only to have them replaced with more. "I'll try to stop."

"This is something a grandfather would do, isn't it?" Warren asked my dad.

"It is," my dad agreed.

"I think all of you should go away so that Griffin and I can work on our puzzle project," Warren said as he glanced toward the living room. "He talks constantly while we work and tells

me everything on his mind. It's tedious and makes me want to scream, but today, I'll be more understanding."

"It might take more than a day for him to get adjusted to this new ... everything," I said as I wiped my face again and sat up in my chair, letting my dad take his arm away. "I'll get the table cleared off so we can unroll the puzzle and get everything set up."

"I will try and help him adjust to this new dynamic. I don't like it when he cries either."

"I know. I'm sorry I made him cry, Warren."

"You should be."

"This is sort of the same dynamic we have with Brighten," my dad explained. "It's a little more twisted, but it's ..."

"It is relatively the same scenario. I agree," Warren interrupted. "That's an intelligent way to look at this situation, Zeke. I think I'll use that comparison when I'm speaking to Griffin."

"Holy shit," my dad said, shocked. "You've never once credited me with a bright idea."

"It wasn't your idea, Zeke. It was a comparison. There's a difference."

"Ah," my dad said with a chuckle. "That's more like it."

"You should make your tears stop, Brighten. They upset me and Griffin."

"Okay," I said before I sniffed and wiped my face again. "I'll wash my face and then set up the puzzle for you guys. I'll go out on the patio while you and Griffin work on it."

"That would be fine. You did promise to feed me dinner."

"I did. Talk it over with Griff and decide what the two of you want. I'll call in an order and have Crow pick it up."

Warren followed me into the kitchen where he reached for my arm and turned me to face him. He looked at me with a serious expression and then pulled me in for a hug. I

immediately started crying again because a hug from Warren was a precious gift, and he squeezed me even tighter.

“You’re an excellent mother, Brighten Duke, and Griffin will understand that someday. I’ll help him understand that for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice thick with emotion as Warren pulled away.

He looked at me and shook his head. “Enough tears. Once we work on this together, it can become a happy thing.”

“I hope so.”

“I’ll help him set his mind in that direction for you.”

“You’re still one of my best friends, Warren Green.”

“And you’re still my favorite girl, Brighten Duke.” Warren looked pensive for a second before he said, “But I like you better when you’re not crying.”

“I’ll work on that,” I said with a tearful laugh. “I just need a second to pull it together.”

“Do that. It’s upsetting.”

I glanced at my dad who shook his head as he watched Warren walk away and then looked over at me.

“I’ve spent decades with that man, and I still don’t understand him.” My dad chuckled and said, “If I told him that, he’d probably just tell me it was because of my lack of intelligence.”

“You’re probably right,” I agreed as I walked back over to start clearing the table. Once I’d moved the salt and pepper along with the small vase of dried flowers I liked to keep there, my dad helped me roll out the large felt mat that had Griff and Warren’s latest puzzle on it.

On a whim, I’d given Griffin an advanced puzzle for his birthday. Since then, he and Warren had put together several, and we kept their progress on a special mat that Crow had found online. The puzzle they were currently working on and

almost halfway through, depicted a jumbled pile of crayons on a white background.

Crow and I helped sort the pieces after this puzzle came in the mail, and by the time we were finished sorting, I'd had enough and so had Crow. Griffin and Warren, on the other hand, were excited to get started and had the border finished within an hour and large sections of the puzzle finished before they called it a night.

"How in the hell do they do these things?" my dad asked as he helped me flip over the pieces that had been disturbed. He studied the puzzle piece he was holding and then looked at the box when I handed it to him. "I don't get how this is relaxing at all."

"There are so many things I don't understand about those two that this doesn't even rank in the top twenty."

"Isn't that the truth?" my dad agreed. "Are you gonna be okay if I leave? I promised Bronx I'd help him drop the new engine into his car."

"I'll be okay, Dad."

"Have you talked to Hawk yet or made any plans to?"

"I might go down to Phoenix's house and see if he'd like to take a walk while Crow stays here with Warren and Griff."

"I think that would be a good idea, babe." Dad gave me a hug and then kissed my temple before he turned toward the living room to say goodbye to the guys. He stopped in the doorway and turned back to wink before he said, "It's all gonna work out. We've got Warren on the job now, and you know he's always a man on a mission when you give him a task to complete."

"I know. Thanks for bringing him over."

"He and I don't have a lot in common, but we do agree on one thing."

"What's that?"

"We love you, and we think you're a great mom. Call if you need me and keep in touch with your mama. She's

worried.”

“I will.”

“Talk to Hawk, baby. He’s gonna need some help adjusting, but at the base of it all, lies and hurt feelings aside, we’re still family.”

“Yeah, we’re still family.”



## HAWK

I heard a knock on the door, and when I glanced up, I was shocked to see that it was already getting dark outside. I shook my head, irritated that I'd been sitting there watching videos of strangers for over an hour but somehow itching to open the app again.

I opened the heavy door and was shocked to see Brighten standing there.

She smiled uncomfortably, and I shook myself out of my stupor and pushed the glass door open so she could come inside.

"Hey," she said as she stopped just inside the house. "Are you busy?"

I laughed. "I was wasting my life."

"Huh?"

"TikTok. It's new for me, and I fell down the rabbit hole about ... I don't even know what time it is, so I can't even tell you how long I've been sitting there."

"I would have called, but I don't know your number."

"Is yours still the same?"

"Yeah."

I shot off a quick text, and Brighten's eyes lit up before she pulled her phone out and looked at it. "Wow. You remember my number?"

"I remember pretty much everything about you, B. I never wanted to forget."

"Oh." Brighten slipped her phone back into the pocket of her hoodie and then looked around the living room. "Do you want to take a walk with me?"

"Sure," I said as I reached for the door again.

“It’s getting cool. You might want to put on a jacket.”

“Oh thanks,” I said before I walked over and picked up the hoodie I’d been wearing earlier. I pulled it on and adjusted it the best I could with the snug fit, then said, “Let’s go.”

I pulled the door shut behind us and braced at the cool breeze as I walked down the steps toward her. She was opening a package and said, “I stopped at the pharmacy when I was picking up dinner and got a few of these in case you agreed to go with me tonight.”

Brighten pinched the disc inside the plastic pouch and the liquid inside changed from clear to cloudy. She handed it to me, and I smiled when I felt how warm it was, then slipped it into my hoodie pocket so I could hold onto it with both hands.

“Thanks,” I said as I fell into step beside her. I tried not to read too much into it because that gesture was really something a friend would do. It didn’t mean she still had feelings for me, no matter what Crow had said.

“Put them in boiling water until all the crystals melt, and then you can use them again and again.”

“That’s cool.”

We were quiet until we reached the edge of the park and then Brighten asked, “How was your day?”

“Good. I’m gonna be working with Marcus as soon as I get my license, so I went up there and started setting up my office.”

“When do you take the bar exam?”

“I’m too late to apply for the test this month so I’ll have to take it in July. I can learn a lot being at his office and that’ll give me a few extra months to study, so it works out.”

“Griffin might enjoy helping you study. He likes to learn new things.”

“Is that okay with you?”

“Of course. We talked to him this afternoon and told him the whole sordid tale.” Brighten laughed and said, “Okay, not

the whole tale but the basics.”

“What did he say? How did he react?”

“This is something that you’ll have to keep in mind as you get to know him. He’s got the brain of a genius but the emotional maturity of all the other kids his age.”

“Okay, I’ll remember that.” I was quiet for a second and then said, “I guess that’s why it’s so funny to me that he can bounce around like an excited kid and then sit down and read. He’s so smart that it’s hard to put the two together.”

“I know.”

“So, what happened?”

“He didn’t take it well at first, but then he calmed down and asked a few questions. He’s working on a puzzle with Warren right now. Dad and I asked Warren to feel him out and help him sort of understand what’s going on. They’re pals.”

“Just like you were when we were kids.”

“Exactly. Warren’s easy to talk to when you’re a kid because he doesn’t interrupt or make you follow all the rules that other adults do. You can be yourself and show your emotion without having to worry about how he’s going to react. He doesn’t really even give you his opinion unless you ask for it or he’s really emotional about the subject, and then his blunt honesty can cut you to the bone.”

“I like Warren. I talked to him earlier today. Did he tell you that?”

“No.”

“While I was waiting for my trial, I had my dad sell my car. Marcus wouldn’t take payment from me and refused to bill me for anything, so I had all that money just sitting in the bank. I figured I’d be gone for a long time, and when I got out, I’d really need some cash, so I let Warren invest it for me.”

“He really enjoys the stock market. He’s teaching Griffin about it, and they work together on mine and my dad’s portfolios. I think he does a few others too.”

“Yeah. He manages my dad’s investments too.”

“So, Warren made you some money?”

I chuckled and said, “More than some. I’ve got enough to put a good chunk down on a house with some left over for later, and he’s still growing it. The man’s awesome at it. I asked him why he didn’t do it for a living, and he said it wouldn’t be fun anymore.”

“How he thinks watching the stock market and doing all that research is fun, I’ll never know.”

We’d made it all the way around the park when I asked, “Can we sit here and talk for a while?” I led her over to the gazebo in the corner of the park and sat down at one of the picnic tables there.

She sat across from me and then looked out over the grass before she admitted, “I don’t know what to talk to you about. I mean, there’s so much to say, but I don’t know where to start.”

“I’ll start.”

Brighten sighed and glanced at my eyes before she looked away again. “Okay.”

“I talked to Crow for hours last night, and we got everything out on the table.” When Brighten nodded, I continued. “I think I understand why you did what you did.”

“You do?”

“You didn’t do it to hurt me or even help yourself, you did it to protect your baby. Our baby.”

“Exactly.”

“And, in a way, you were protecting me too.”

“We knew it would be horrible for you to be locked away knowing you were missing out on your kid’s life. We didn’t want to make your time in prison worse by adding that to your burden, so we took care of it ourselves and kept the secret.”

“I see that now.”

“We always planned to tell you as soon as you got out, we just weren’t expecting it to happen so soon. We thought we had years before we had to deal with it, so we weren’t prepared.”

“I asked Marcus to stop letting my family know the ups and downs of my appeals because it was really stressful for my mom and my grandmothers. We’d file a motion or an appeal, and they’d be hopeful and excited only to have it shot down. He kept my dad in the loop, but they didn’t tell anyone else.”

Brighten laughed. “It was definitely a surprise.”

“Are you going to be okay with me being part of Griffin’s life?”

“Of course. It’s gonna take some adjustment for all of us, but that’s how it should be.”

“Will you be okay with me being part of *your* life?”

“As long as you know that Crow’s not going to step aside, and he’ll always be a dad to Griff, just like you are, I think we can all figure out how to co-parent together.”

“What if I want more than that?”

“You’re not going to push Crow aside, Hawk. That ...”

“I’m talking about between me and you.”

“We’re both completely different people now, Hawk. We’ve grown so much since we were together. I don’t think it’s a good idea ...”

“I’ve grown up, but that doesn’t mean I’m not in love with you anymore.”

“What we had was fun but ...”

“Do you still love me?”

“I love the *idea* of you, Hawk. I always did.”

“I don’t understand that.”

“At first, you were this bad boy that I had to keep hidden, but after a while, it got really intense between us, at least on my part. I would make sure I was home if there was even a

chance you might come over. If by some chance I did go somewhere with my friends, the second you called, I'd ditch them and go home to wait for you."

"I didn't know that."

"You didn't know that because I wasn't first in your head, I was just someone that was gonna be there when you called. You took that for granted."

"I'm sorry."

Brighten shrugged. "I'm sorry I let you."

"When you broke up with me, I was stunned. I knew I'd pushed you, but I'd been trying to get you to understand I wanted to take things to the next step."

"We didn't have the same idea of what that next step was, though."

"What do you mean?"

"I wanted you to ask me out on a date, but you wanted me to come with you to a party and just instantly be your girlfriend." Brighten bit her lip and then looked at me with the saddest expression on her face. "I didn't care if anyone else saw me with you. I wanted *you* to see me with you, but it was just a given that I'd agree because you were used to me being at your beck and call."

"I knew I was fucking up, but for some reason I just kept pushing and pushing until you kicked me out of your apartment."

"I've always wondered what would have happened to us if I'd said yes."

"I've spent six years thinking about what happened and playing a million different scenarios out in my head. I had plenty of time to analyze every decision I'd ever made. Not just how I raced when I shouldn't have, but all the things I'd done wrong, including how I treated you."

"Give me an example," Brighten said as she studied my face.

I couldn't read her expression, and that worried me. I hoped she was seriously considering what I was saying and not putting more walls up.

"I took you for granted. Your time, your attention, your heart, all of it. I just assumed you'd always be there, and you were. I never saw how I was treating you like an option when really, you were a necessity. It started out as just a fun secret and you were a cool chick to hang out with, but it became so much more. I was too fucking stupid and self-possessed to give you the respect you deserved. I fucked up and lost you, and instead of fixing it like my heart was telling me to do, I fucked up everything else."

There were tears streaming down Brighten's cheeks, and I was choking back tears of my own. She let out a sob when one escaped and rolled down my cheek, and when she looked out over the park, I swiped it away and took a deep breath so I could finish telling her what was in my heart.

"I know it's six years too late for me to fix what I did wrong. I know that. But I'm a different person than I was before, just like you're a different person now too." Brighten nodded so I took a chance and said, "Will you do something for me?"

"I can't agree to that until I know what it is."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "I guess Griffin gets that from you."

"Yeah. Or Warren. That's where I learned it."

"Griffin doesn't know me at all. He knows what he's heard, and Crow said he tells stories about us from when we were growing up, but Griffin doesn't know *me*. I've only really found myself in the last few years."

"Okay."

"I'd like to get to know my son and ... I'd like to get to know you. We have a history, but we're strangers again. I've changed from my experiences, and so have you. I want a chance to be the man I never dreamed I'd get the chance to be. I want to start with a clean slate and prove to you that I'm

worthy of Griffin's love and attention. And I want to prove that I'm worthy of the same thing from you."

"What do you want me to do for you?" Brighten whispered.

"Will you consider that clean slate?"

Brighten looked out over the park and slowly shook her head. "The mom in me is screaming that I should tell you no."

"Why?"

"Because we have a boy to raise. If everything gets as fucked up as it was before, we won't be able to come back. If things go south again, I won't be able to have you at the breakfast table in my house with our son while I'm upstairs sleeping. I'll have to be that mom who tries to figure out what to do with herself every other weekend and cries on holidays when my kid's at his dad's. But if we focus on Griffin and not on what might have been, we can be those parents who hang out at the park with their little boy without what's going on in our lives or who they're with making any difference."

"I understand."

Brighten tilted her head and stared at me for a second and asked, "Do you really?"

"I heard everything you said. I completely agree with you even though it ... it just fucking sucks, B. I hate it, but I get it."

"Do you want to know what the other part of me is screaming?"

I nodded because, even though I felt like my dreams had been shattered, I did want to hear it. I wanted to hear it because I finally knew how to listen instead of trying to be the loudest person in the room. I wanted to hear it because, from what she just said, all I'd ever have from her again was her words. Not her heart. Not her thoughts. Not her attention. Not her body. Just her words.

"The other half of me - the part that's ruled by my heart and not my head - is screaming for me to take this chance. To



grab it with both hands because it's all I've ever dreamed of. That part knows I'll never be able to stand beside you and watch our son play without wondering what life would be like if I'd said yes."

Brighten's words ended with a sob, and I couldn't resist reaching across the table and taking her hand. We sat there for a second with me choking back tears and her own streaming down her cheeks, as we both wondered where we should go from here.

Finally, I had to ask, "Do you know which voice you want to listen to now, or do you need some time?"

"You'd give me that?"

"I'll give you everything I have to give, and then I'll dig deep and find more."

"I want to believe this can work. I want it so much that I don't think I can let it pass me by."

"I have to say something before we go any further." Brighten nodded. "My brother said that because of the way I behaved toward him and toward you that it seemed like I thought the worst of you. I want you to know that I never really did."

"What do you mean?"

"I was so fucking angry when I found out that you and Crow were having a baby. I thought the absolute worst of both of you. But then I realized that if anyone could love you the way you deserved, it would be him, and if anyone could take care of him the way he deserved, it would be you."

"But you never said that."

"Because even though I felt that way, I still hated the thought of it. I behaved horribly, and it affected everyone but me. I was in there on my high horse while all of you were out here worrying about me. Instead of getting over myself and talking to two of my best friends, I punished you for having what I thought I never would. And while I was doing that, I punished everyone else in my family who worried about the

rift between me and Crow. I'm sorry, Brighten, and I'll tell each of them the same thing."

"You said you wanted a clean slate, but I don't think you need one."

"How's that?"

"You're nothing like the man ... the boy ... I remember, and that's a good thing. I loved him, but he was an asshole."

"You'll get no argument from me there."

"Please don't ever be that asshole again, Hawk. I don't think I can take it."

"That asshole didn't love you like I know I can, B, and I'm gonna spend the rest of my life proving it."

"Are we really gonna do this?"

"I hope so."

"How? We have to be careful because of Griffin."

"I've got a plan for that."

"Oh, do tell," Brighten said with a grin.

"When you first meet someone and start to get to know them, you spend a little time together and realize it's just right. It fits. After a while, you can't remember a time before them. I want to be with you and Griffin when you each have that moment."

"That's how it was when I first really saw you. Not just Hawk, that boy who ran around half-naked for most of our childhood. Or Hawk, one of those wild Forrester boys. But when I first saw Hawk, the really hot, funny guy who made my heart flutter with his smile and my knees go weak with his kiss. That Hawk. After a while, I didn't remember a time when I didn't have that funny guy beside me - until he wasn't anymore."

"Well, this is the Hawk that always will be. For you and for Griffin."

"I think I'm gonna like him."

## HAWK

“I’m about to go to work. Do you want to come to the club for a beer with me later?” Phoenix asked from my bedroom doorway.

“Can’t do it, man. Give me a rain check.”

“Shit. You’ve been home almost a week and haven’t done anything but work, study, and hang out with family.”

“Well, I’ve got lost time to make up for, and I’m still adjusting to the outside world.”

“Pencil me in for that rain check, and I’ll take you out to have a beer.”

“Okay. I’ll put it in my calendar for two years from now.”

“What the fuck?”

I spun my chair around so I could look at him rather than talk to him over my shoulder. “Do you know what being a parolee entails, little brother?”

“Nope. Never had the curse of that title and never want it.”

“It means that just because I’m out here in the free world doesn’t mean I’m a free man. I’ve still got a list of fucking rules to follow. If I don’t and get caught, I’ll go right back inside.”

“That’s why you haven’t used those keys I left for you on the table?”

“I’m not allowed to drive for two years or go to a bar. And I’ve got to go see some prick who knows he has my life in his hands every other week, piss in a cup, tell him *exactly* what I’ve been up to and where I’ve been, and if I miss a visit for any reason other than death, he can send me back with just a signature on a piece of paper. With my luck, if I decide to drive a car and go to a bar to hang out with you, I’ll pass that

motherfucker as I'm pulling out of the parking lot. He'll whip that piece of paper out and sign it right there on the hood of his car as he watches the cops haul me away in handcuffs."

"Shit. That sucks."

"*That* is an understatement if I've ever heard one."

"I've noticed that you haven't really hung out with Crow."

"It's touchy right now. They told Griffin about me on Monday, and he got upset. He was confused and worried that things might change between him and Crow with me around. On Tuesday, Brighten asked him again if he was ready to talk to me. He said he wasn't and then refused to talk to her and would only talk to Crow. Since then, every second that Crow's not at work, Griffin has been glued to his side. It's like he's afraid he's gonna disappear, and I'm gonna try and take his place."

"So, what happens now? Y'all just avoid each other until ..."

"Crow has a plan he's gonna put in motion tomorrow morning."

"Yeah. He called me earlier. It's gonna be cold as fuck outside, but I'll be there. What about this thing between you and Brighten? When you came home Monday night, you had stars in your eyes. It seemed like there was gonna be some forward motion there, but I haven't seen her around either."

"We've been texting back and forth, sort of getting-to-know-you stuff, but it's important that she prioritizes Griffin while he's adjusting."

"At least y'all are talking."

"Mom and Dad are picking Griff up in a little bit, so I can take her on our first official date."

"Yeah, Lyric's mom is letting her stay the night at their house too," Phoenix said, talking about his 3-year-old daughter. "As far as going on your first date, I guess it's better late than never, right? How's that gonna work since you can't drive?"

“You know, women drive all the time, Phoenix. Someday, your daughter’s even gonna get a license and drive a car.”

“Don’t remind me. I just meant, how are you gonna take her out if you can’t *pick her up*?”

“Women have been fighting for equal rights since the beginning of time and ...”

Phoenix raised his hand and interrupted me, “Don’t start that lawyer shit. Ranger does that all the fucking time and talks me into a circle until I don’t know if he’s insulting me or asking me out on a date. I can’t take it.”

“Does he bring you flowers when he picks you up? Does he kiss you on the front porch when he brings you home?”

“Man, I didn’t really wanna have a beer with you anyway,” Phoenix said as he turned around and walked down the hall. “I hope you wreck your bicycle and bust out your front teeth!”

“I already did that because of you, asshole!”

Phoenix’s laughter trailed after him, and then the house was quiet. I turned around to go back to my studies and then sighed, my train of thought lost after the conversation with my brother.

I was worried about the situation with Griffin, and for the millionth time, I wondered if Crow and Brighten were doing the right thing by making me stay away. I had to trust their process since they knew him better than anyone else.

As far as the situation with Brighten, we’d made a lot of progress getting to know the people we’d become in the last six years. Phoenix didn’t realize it, but I’d seen her more than once this week. She’d met me for lunch at a restaurant just up the street from my office, and every night after Griffin went to sleep, I met her at the end of her driveway to talk for a few minutes before I gave her a kiss goodnight.

I’d controlled myself as far as the kissing went. I’d like to think that it was my best side showing as I stuck to our pact to take things slow and get to know each other. In reality, I thought it might have a lot to do with how fucking cold it had been every night this week.

Last night had been a little different, though, and our goodbye kiss got a little more heated than the ones before. And then she gave me something to think about that made it difficult to do anything else.

Before she sent me a text to let me know Griffin was sleeping, I had been sitting on the couch flipping through channels, trying to find something to watch. I happened upon a romantic comedy, and it gave me an idea. I had just enough time to make a playlist and gather up a blanket to take with me before she sent the text that she was ready.

I'd walked over with a pep in my step and a plan in mind, and it had worked out perfectly.

*"What's the blanket for? Did you lose your gloves?"*

*"No. I had an idea."*

*"Okay, but it's a little bit too chilly to lay in the grass and look at the stars."*

*"Chilly? It's fucking snowing, B."*

*"The news said it's probably going to be the last snow of the season, and it should start warming up in the next few weeks."*

*"Then it's a good thing I've made plans for us."*

*"You hate the cold. If we stay out here too long, you'll turn into a popsicle." She laughed for a second and then said, "A Hawksicle."*

*"Har har har. You're just too funny," I said as I pulled my phone out and found the playlist I'd made earlier.*

*The first song started, and I slid my phone into my back pocket before I flipped the blanket out and wrapped it around me like a cape. I pulled Brighten into my arms, enveloping her in the blanket with me, and started to slow dance to the music.*

*Brighten laid her head on my chest and wrapped her arms around me. We danced in silence until the second song had almost ended.*

*“I’m freezing my ass off, but I think this is the most romantic thing I’ve ever experienced.”*

*“Wow. I set the bar low back then, didn’t I?”*

*Brighten chuckled and agreed, “You really did.”*

*The third song started, and Brighten laughed before she asked, “Really? Debbie Gibson? I haven’t heard this song in years.”*

*“Are you sensing a theme here?”*

*“Possibly.”*

*“You are nicknamed Bright Eyes for a reason.”*

*“This song is older than we are.”*

*“And?”*

*“I know you’re being romantic, so I’m almost afraid to tell you.”*

*“What?”*

*“Dad used to dance around the house with me and sing this song.”*

*“Well, that is not the vibe I was going for.”*

*“We should be able to get back into the mood as long as The Jeff Healey Band isn’t ...”*

*“Well, shit.” Brighten laughed as the song she was talking about came on. “Your dad used to dance around with you to this song too?”*

*Brighten laughed even harder and shook her head. “No, your uncle did. He still does.”*

*“Good grief.”*

*“My mom and Aunt Carlie have told me about the first time Uncle Kale sang that song to me at least a million times.”*

*“He’s a good singer,” I admitted. “When was the first time he sang to you?”*

*“The day my parents got me from Warren and Aunt Addie at the hospital in Utah. Kale sat in a rocking chair in the*

*nursery and sang to me and all the other babies. My dad swears every woman on that floor was half in love with ‘that sweet man.’” Brighten chuckled with me because anyone describing my gruff uncle as sweet was obviously on his level of deranged. “Anyway, this is sort of our song.”*

*“What can our song be?”*

*“Oh God,” Brighten said after she thought about it for a second. “I can’t tell you because you’re trying to be all sweet.”*

*“Okay, I have to know now.”*

*“Do you remember what we did that first night we were together?”*

*“Hell yeah, I do.”*

*Brighten slapped my chest and said, “Before that, perv.”*

*“It was Halloween. We got dressed up, went to the block party, and then went to Spokes and had a few drinks ... and we danced. I don’t remember the song, but it wasn’t really a dance song. You were dressed as Harley Quinn and ... Oh, hell no.”*

*“Well, you’ve gotta admit it fits, at least in our friend group,” Brighten said before she started laughing again.*

*I held onto the blanket with one hand while I reached around with the other and got out my phone. I held it behind Brighten’s head as I searched for the song by Twenty One Pilots, and she started giggling when it started.*

*I laughed myself when I heard the lyrics again because they really did fit our family and friends.*

*“So, I guess “Heathens” is our song?”*

*“I think it has to be.”*

*“Well, okay then.” We danced together to the song, but instead of just swaying, we got closer and moved to the beat like we had that night years ago. When the song was over, I went back to my playlist and said, “I’d known you all my life, but I saw you in a different light that night.”*



*“It was probably the tequila. I’m sure it affects your vision after a couple of shots.”*

*“You know what I mean. You were grinding against me wearing those booty shorts and that tight T-shirt. You went from Bright Eyes to holy shit! I remember thinking to myself, ‘How did I never realize how gorgeous she is before now?’”*

*“I was just another of those heathens you ran around with.”*

*“Or maybe it was self-preservation because everyone knew that messing with Uncle Kale’s Bright Eyes was a death sentence. A very painful and bloody death sentence.”*

*“He was a definite cockblocker,” Brighten said with a grin. “Good thing you were too drunk to consider that at the time, or we wouldn’t have Griffin.”*

*“And we wouldn’t be here together now with the rest of our lives ahead of us.”*

*“Brighten? Where are you?” Griffin’s voice said from the watch on Brighten’s wrist.*

*“Shit!” Brighten said as she pulled away. She hit the icon on her watch and answered our son, “I had to get something out of the truck. Get in my bed, and I’ll be there in a second.”*

*I pulled Brighten back into my arms and kissed her like the world was about to end. By the time she pulled away, we were both out of breath.*

*“Goodnight, Hawk,” Brighten whispered as she stepped back. “Sleep well.”*

*“I’d sleep better holding you.”*

*Brighten smiled, and I watched her jog up the sidewalk. She reached for the door, but instead of pulling it open, she turned around and said, “Tomorrow.”*

*“What?”*

*“Tomorrow night you can hold me and sleep.”*

*“It’s a date.”*

I was pulled out of my musings when someone knocked on the door. I jumped up and ran through the house, hoping it was Brighten. I threw the door open, and my smile fell when I saw my uncle standing there with murder in his eyes.

“Hey. What’s up?” I asked as I stepped back so he could come inside.

“You tell me, boy.”

“Um, nothing?” I asked, embarrassed that my voice cracked a little bit.

“We’ve gotta talk, son.”

“I knew this would happen but just assumed ...”

“Well, you know what that does, don’t you?”

“It makes an ass out of you and me?”

Kale tilted his head and asked, “You think I’m an ass?”

“It’s a saying. What do *you* think assumptions do?”

“They get your ass kicked, that’s what.”

“Are you here to kick my ass?” I blurted. There weren’t a lot of people on this earth that scared me, but this man was definitely one of them. When the front door opened, I looked over and saw two others on that list. “Are they here to help?”

“They are,” Kale said, incredulously, as he casually sat down in the recliner and started rocking.

“We haven’t even done anything yet!” I argued. Kale’s eyes got wide and then narrowed, so I asked, “What are y’all gonna kick my ass for?”

“Where the fuck have you been?” Clem asked.

“Prison,” I answered, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

“No shit!” Sonny snapped as he flopped down on the couch. “Since then, dumbass.”

“You haven’t gone out with *who* yet?” Kale asked in a terrifyingly calm voice.

“One beating at a time,” Clem said, glancing at his brother. “You haven’t been over to see any of us. If you aren’t willing to listen to others who have been in your situation, that’s gonna be your downfall.”

“My situation?”

Clem pointed to himself and the other men around the room. “We’ve been there, done that. We know how hard it is to come home where everything’s changed and there are temptations that are hard to pass up.”

“Temptations? Are you gonna clutch your pearls next or ...” Sonny asked.

Clem flipped him off and continued as he sat next to Sonny on the couch, leaving me just inside the door. I had a fleeting thought, wondering if I should go ahead and run since Brighten would be here any minute now and that would just be like poking the bear. The bear that just so happened to be sitting in the recliner less than ten feet away right now.

“When I got out of prison, I had someone to come home to, and I was a little older and wiser, so it all worked out. These dumbasses fucked around and went back. We don’t want you to be a dumbass like them; we want you to be smart like me.”

“Since when are you the smart one, Romeo?” Kale asked.

“Romeo? Where the fuck did that come from?” Sonny asked.

“Shit. Sorry. Koda was over earlier, and I watched that fucking cartoon with him. The one with the masks. The villain’s got a streak like yours.”

“That’s Ruf’s kid, right?” I asked. “How old is he now?”

“He’s 4, and don’t think it’s that easy to change the subject.”

“What is the subject?”

All three men glowered at me until Kale finally said, “It’s hard to come home where everyone has a life that, up until a few days ago, didn’t include you. That’s not even considering

the situation with my boy, Griff. Don't *even* get me started on the subject of Brighten."

"We just want you to know that if you're having a problem adjusting, you should talk to one of us or Hank or Tucker. Hell, talk to Terra. She's been there too," Clem reminded me.

"Don't get sucked into everyone else's freedom and lose your own. Since we've been out, we've all done shit that wasn't exactly law-abiding, and we've done it over and over again, but that doesn't mean you should," Sonny warned. "You're gonna have to mind your p's and q's and keep your shit straight so you don't end up being a two-timer like dumb and dumber over here."

"I'm not allowed to drive for two years, so I've had a 16-year-old kid picking me up every morning like I'm a child headed off to kindergarten instead of my office. Believe me, that ain't fun on more than one front. I see now why all of *you* started getting gray hair when all of *us* started driving."

"As if you and the rest of the little hellions didn't start giving us gray hair from Day One," Clem scoffed.

"And I explained to Phoenix earlier that I'm not gonna drop into the bar and have a beer with him because with my luck, I'll get busted somehow. Hell, I'm a little worried about sitting here with you felons. If my PO shows up, I'm fucked."

"We'd get rid of him before that happened," Kale assured me with a dismissive wave of his hand. Oddly enough, the thought of that didn't even bother me at all. "We've all been out a good long while, and if they really wanted to push it, we'd just push back."

"Okay," I said, knowing that there was no way in hell I could resist hanging out with my uncles, Sonny, Tucker, or Hank. "I promise that if I have any problems I'll call one of you. Does that work?"

"That works," Clem agreed.

"Now, let's talk about what you're going to do that you think is worthy of me whipping your ass," Kale suggested.

I shook my head and replied, "Let's not."

As if the world were conspiring against me, there was a knock on the front door. Kale, like a predator looking for weakness in his prey, must have sensed my distress. He jumped out of the recliner and rushed toward me. Before I could even attempt to move, he shoved me against the wall and opened the door with a big smile on his face.

Over his shoulder, I saw Brighten's beautiful eyes widen before she croaked, "Uncle Kale. Hi."

Kale's head turned so slowly that it took forever for his eyes to meet mine, but when they did, I saw a level of crazy that had been terrifying people for years. I could hear Clem and Sonny laughing, but it sounded like they were far away. Probably because my soul had already left my body in preparation for my imminent death.

"We've talked about this, Uncle Kale. I'm a grown woman, and I can date whoever I want."

Kale never took his eyes off me as he replied, "Yep. You can."

"And you're not allowed to threaten, hurt, injure, kill, maim, or any of those other things you like to do on days ending in -y unless I'm physically harmed in some way."

"Uh huh."

"And he's your nephew, so if you hurt him, Martha's gonna be very upset."

"Oh, that's playing dirty," Clem said from the couch. "She's good."

"Right outta the chute with a pretty decent threat. Good play, Brighten," Sonny cheered. "I'm proud of you."

Brighten glanced at Sonny and gave him an obviously fake smile before she flipped him off. She looked at me over Kale's shoulder and asked, "Are you ready to go on our date, Hawk?" She batted her eyes innocently and then handed Kale the nails for my coffin when she added, "I've got everything set up for a romantic night after dinner. I already lit the candles and scattered rose petals all over the bed. I can't wait."

“Shit,” I heard Clem whisper. “She really is evil.”

I glared at Brighten over Kale’s shoulder and said, “If you want me dead, just get it over with, B. Damn.”

“You’re really doing this, huh?” Kale asked. He studied my face for a second and then shocked the hell out of me when he warned, “Treat her right and make her happy.”

“That’s not what I was expecting,” I heard Sonny mumble.

I nodded as I said, “I plan to do exactly that.”

“Good, because if you don’t, you’ll be walking with a limp and eating your meals through a straw for the rest of your life.”

“That’s more like it. There he is,” Clem said with a laugh. “I was getting worried for a second there.”

“He’s mellowed with age,” Brighten said sarcastically before she gave Kale a big smile. “You’ll be happy to know that last night, he romanced me by dancing with me in the snow, but one of the songs he chose was the one you used to sing to me. That really killed the mood.”

Kale snickered as he grinned. “Good.”

“Can we go to dinner at a restaurant, or am I going to have to pick up something in the hospital cafeteria?” Brighten asked. She looked down at her watch and said, “Tick tock, guys. Those candles aren’t gonna stay burning forever.”

“Fuck, Brighten,” I mumbled as I leaned back against the wall and bumped my head on the plaster. I did it a few more times and then asked, “Can we be done here?”

“Don’t make me revisit this subject,” Kale said as he frowned at me. “You kids be safe, and don’t do *anything* I would have done at your age.”

“I guess going to church is out. We can’t go take donuts to the cop shop. We should avoid anything having to do with safe sex or morality,” Brighten joked. “Hell yeah! The world is our oyster!”

“Stop poking the bear,” I snapped. In a calmer tone, I addressed the men in the room, “Gentlemen, thank you for coming over and letting me know that I have your support and all that good shit, but please get the fuck out so Brighten and I can get on with our night.”

“You might wanna change your pants first, boy,” Clem said with a chuckle as he and Sonny got up from the couch. “Pretty sure you’ve shit yourself at least three times by now.”

“Don’t forget about the candles and the rose petals,” Brighten said cheerfully.

“You’re diabolical, girl,” Sonny said as he walked past her, tapping her on the nose as she grinned at him. “I like that.”

“Y’all have a good one,” Clem said as he walked out behind Sonny. “It was fun knowing ya, kid. I’ll say good things about you when you’re gone.”

Kale glared at me as he hugged Brighten. He whispered something in her ear that caused her to burst out laughing, then she nodded as he pulled away.

“I’ll keep that in mind, Uncle Kale. Talk to you soon.”

I closed the door behind him and threw the deadbolt quickly before he decided to come back.

“What the hell was that about?” I asked. “What did he say to you?”

“Do you want me to tell you before or after you go change your underwear?”

“Jesus! I was *this close* to dying,” I said, holding my finger and thumb a millimeter apart. “No wonder you never dated when we were teenagers.”

“Well, I did, but I’m clearly pretty good at hiding relationships. Griffin is living proof.”

“You have a point. Can we go now? I’ll feel safer when we’re in a public place,” I said as I grabbed my jacket. “I wasn’t really hungry before, but now I feel like I should eat something great since it’s probably gonna be my last meal.”

“You know he’s not gonna hurt you,” Brighten teased.

“Do I?”

“Well, he won’t hurt you anytime soon ... He’ll wait until your guard’s down. You’ve got a few days left at least. You should probably make them count.”

“I had no idea you were so fucking evil,” I said as I opened the door and ushered her outside. “I may have to rethink my hopes and dreams entirely.”

“He has always helped me weed out the weaklings,” Brighten mused.

“Oh, I bet. There are probably fields of well-fertilized soil out there somewhere because he’s had to get rid of so many bodies.”

“Just a couple, but they really did deserve it,” Brighten said with a determined look on her face. “I need to ask if he had anything to do with that one guy getting eaten by a polar bear.”

“What?”

“I’m sure it’s nothing. Anyway, what do you want for your last meal?”

“You’re enjoying this way too much.”

Brighten giggled. “I really am.”



## BRIGHTEN

So far, the ride back to our neighborhood had been spent in silence, and I had no idea what to say to break it.

I'd had such high hopes for this date, our first time to go out in public alone rather than as part of a group, surrounded by friends and family.

Hawk had no idea where to take me to eat. He wasn't even sure what there was other than Maria Dean's restaurant, Grazie's, and Martha's Diner. That prompted me to cruise around town and show him some of the places that had opened since he'd been gone. We finally decided on barbecue and went to Dylan and Jaxon Conner's new restaurant that was in an impressive building on the edge of town.

Since it was a Friday evening, the place was crazy busy, and we had to wait almost an hour for a table. During that time, we saw several of our friends, either waiting for a table themselves or leaving the restaurant. Hawk enjoyed seeing some of his old friends, who were shocked but happy he was already home, and catching up with family members he hadn't had a chance to reconnect with yet.

When it was finally our turn to be seated, Hawk and I said our goodbyes to the friends we were waiting with and then walked through the restaurant behind the hostess to our table.

When the waitress came by, we ordered our drinks and then perused the menu while we waited for her to bring them back. We agreed on an appetizer, and I watched the waitress smile coyly at Hawk as he ordered for us, and then I teased him after she walked away.

I had just picked up my drink to take a sip when someone appeared next to my chair and leaned across the table. My glass went flying, spraying iced tea all over everything when her arm flew out and she slapped Hawk across the face.

There was no warning whatsoever. She didn't yell or scream. She didn't call him names or insult him in any way. She just materialized, reached across the table, and slapped him.

I jumped up and shoved her away, my hand raised to retaliate, but Hawk pulled me away and twisted us around so that if she attacked again, I was protected. A few of the other customers in the restaurant intervened, and a man dragged her toward the front of the restaurant as Dylan Conner called 911.

The cops arrived minutes later, and Hawk explained that the woman who'd attacked him was the mother of the guy who had died the night he was arrested. He looked so forlorn when he told me who she was that I couldn't do anything but wrap my arms around him and hold him tight. While we stood like that, he said, "I know I didn't force him to do anything, but I'll take the blame if it helps her deal with her loss."

My heart ached at the sadness in his voice and the pain that woman must be feeling every day without her son, but when Hawk said he didn't want to press charges, I insisted that the officer make a report so that there was something on record in case this happened again.

My cousin Zoey was the police officer who had been dispatched to respond to Dylan's call, so I knew she understood what was going on more than another officer might. I also knew she'd be sure to file the report in case we needed to reference it later.

After all that drama, neither of us were hungry at all. He dropped a few bills on the table for our drinks and the appetizer we hadn't even seen and apologized to Dylan for the scene the woman had caused before he took my hand and walked toward the door.

Once we were on the road, Hawk broke the silence by saying, "I'm sorry, Brighten." I looked over and saw his disappointment as he stared out of the passenger window. "I wanted our night to be memorable but not like this."

"Hey! It's early yet. And look at it this way - we can go back to my house, kick off our shoes, and spend time together

in peace.”

“I’m not sure I’m fit for company right now, B.”

“And I’m not willing to let you go home and stew about this alone. If you don’t want to talk, then we can watch a movie, but I don’t think you should be by yourself right now.”

Hawk didn’t argue, so I passed Phoenix’s house and drove to my street before I pulled into the driveway and shut off the truck. We got out and went through the gate to the back door.

“Have a seat, and I’ll make us something to drink. How about some hot chocolate?”

Hawk rubbed his hands together and smiled, “I haven’t had that in years.”

“I’ll even put extra marshmallows in your mug,” I said as I walked into the kitchen. “Make yourself comfortable. It will only take me a minute.”

“I didn’t realize you were into puzzles,” Hawk said as he sat down at the kitchen table.

“I don’t mind them, but that’s actually Griffin and Warren’s project,” I told him. “Griff seems to relax while he’s working and starts talking a little more openly, so I’ve just left it out to kind of encourage that.”

As I heated the milk in a saucepan, I started breaking up the chocolate discs I liked to use and then tiptoed up to get the coffee container where I kept a few goodies hidden away from Griff’s sweet tooth. Once I had everything set out, I glanced over and saw Hawk hunched over the puzzle searching for a specific piece.

The look of concentration on his face reminded me so much of Griffin’s that I couldn’t help but smile.

By the time the hot chocolate was ready and I set his mug on the table, Hawk was searching for another piece, so I left him to it and got comfortable in the chair across from him. Finally, he looked up and gave me a sheepish grin before he picked up his mug and blew across the top of it to let it cool.

“Did Crow tell you what his plans are for tomorrow morning?”

“He did. I checked the weather, and it’s supposed to be pretty decent, but you’re still going to freeze your ass off.”

“Do you think Griffin will be okay? Maybe we should wait ...”

“Griff will be fine. The boy’s a walking oven. Plus your dad bought all the kids these really thick coveralls at Christmas. I made sure he took them over there along with his gloves and a hat.”

“I thought about buying him some things, kind of as a belated Christmas and birthday offering, but my mom said that I shouldn’t try and bribe him into liking me.”

“Oh, I bribe him all the time, but I do agree with your mom.”

“Does he like spending time with my parents?”

“What kid doesn’t like spending time with your parents? Their house is like a fantasy land. I remember running wild over there for hours at a time, going up the stairs and down the slide over and over until my parents dragged me out the door and forced me to go home to our boring house.”

“Your house looks pretty cool. It’s not quite as rough and tumble as ours was, but it fits him.”

“We have the brainier kid version.”

“Makes sense. None of us were like that. If we couldn’t hit somebody with it, break it, burn it, or stick an engine on it, we weren’t really interested.”

“Oh, he likes things with engines too. Just you wait,” I said with a laugh. “There’s plenty of Forrester running through those veins, believe me.”

“I’m sure I’ll get a glimpse of that tomorrow.”

I leaned forward and picked up a piece of the puzzle I thought might fit near the corner, and for the next few hours, I

realized that sitting at the table working on a puzzle didn't just help Griffin open up, it helped me and Hawk talk too.



I snuggled up against the man at my back. My eyes flew open when I remembered that it was Hawk here with me after our date. It wasn't Crow that had held me once again as I'd cried myself to sleep.

"What's wrong?" Hawk mumbled from behind me. He yawned loudly and then asked, "What time is it?"

"I don't know," I answered as I lifted my head to look at the window. It was still dark outside, but I could see a hint of the coming dawn. "Go back to sleep."

"M'kay," Hawk mumbled. I laid there for a few minutes before he asked, "What's freaking you out, B?"

"Well, I was thinking of how you used to wake me up in the night, and then we'd snuggle up and go back to sleep."

Hawk laughed softly and then pulled me closer, moving his hips closer to my ass. I could feel his erection through his jeans and couldn't stop from wiggling against it. He hissed in a breath and then said, "And that's usually how it started."

I spun around in his arms as I giggled and asked, "I don't have the candles or the rose petals but ..."

"Woman, I'm probably on his hit list, and here you are still joking about it."

"I've dreamed of having you here beside me again, Hawk," I said honestly, no more laughter in my voice.

"I'd lay in my bunk trying to sleep and remember all the nights we'd just lay in bed, wrapped up in each other, talking about everything and nothing all at once."

"I thought you hated me."

“B, I never hated you. How can you hate someone you’re in love with?”

“There’s a fine line between ...”

“Well, I didn’t cross it,” Hawk interrupted.

I leaned forward and touched my lips to his. I softly kissed and nibbled until he couldn’t resist me anymore and kissed me back with a long moan. In this close proximity with the dark room surrounding us, everything else fell away. All of our miscommunications, the lies, and the worry that things could never work out between us was gone. In its place was the passion that had engulfed us all those years ago, but now, it was more desperate, clawing to get out.

Hawk pushed me to my back and leaned over me, his hands roaming down my arm and back up before he moved the path just a fraction and ran his hand down to cup my breast. I had on a long T-shirt and nothing else, having stripped during my nightly routine while Hawk laid down with his jeans on. Now I was glad that there was only a thin layer of material between us, but I cursed even that.

I wanted his rough hands touching my skin, remembering how they had felt years ago when he explored my body. As if he could read my mind, he plucked at my nipple through the T-shirt and mumbled, “This has got to go.”

Knowing that Hawk was an impatient man and having lost countless T-shirts and pairs of underwear in his haste to get to my skin, I pushed him back a fraction and sat up so I could take off my shirt. While I did that, he pushed his jeans off quickly so that by the time I threw my shirt to the side, his hands were back on my bare skin.

“You’re so soft,” Hawk murmured as I laid back down beside him. He ran his hand over my belly, then up the middle of my chest before he wrapped it around the back of my neck and pulled me toward him for a long kiss. Soon, we were breathless, clutching at each other as our hands roamed and explored. “I missed this so much. I missed the smell of you, your soft skin, those little moans you make when I please you and the growls I get when I go too slow.”

“Like you’re doing right now?” I asked before I grabbed his hand and pushed it down over my stomach. Once I had him set on the right path, I let my hand trail over his rippled abdomen, enjoying the ridges there until my hand covered his cock. It was just as long and thick as I remembered, and I sighed, knowing just how good it was going to feel inside me.

“Holy shit, B,” Hawk said as I wrapped my hand around him and started stroking up and down. In his excitement, his hand stilled so that he was cupping my sex, and I moved my hips hoping to snap him out of it. He took the hint and swirled his finger around my clit, never touching the sensitive bud, just teasing me like he loved to do. I lifted my leg so it was propped up on his hip, giving him more access to my body as I stroked his cock. Hawk slowly slipped a finger inside me and pressed the palm of his hand to my aching clit as he curled his finger to rub against the front wall of my vagina. I gasped, and he whispered, “Found it.”

I couldn’t reply or do anything but grind against his hand, and Hawk laughed softly. I tried to focus on what my hand was doing and ran my thumb over the tip of his cock on the next upward stroke, causing him to hiss at the ease my hand went back down now that I’d swept up his pre-cum.

Hawk moaned into my mouth as I stroked him. His breath was sawing in and out by the time he trailed kisses across my face and nibbled at my earlobe.

“Gonna fuck you fast this first time, B. We’ll take it slow later but right now ...” Hawk groaned when I rubbed my thumb over the crown of his cock and then gasped when I let him go and brushed his hand away so I could place it at my entrance. The head of his cock sat there as we stilled. He pushed it in a fraction and then pulled out all the way before he groaned, “Fuck! We need something. It feels so good but ...”

“I bought condoms,” I whispered as I pushed away from him and rolled over to open the drawer of my nightstand. I’d gone to the pharmacy earlier today in the hopes that we’d end up like this. I hadn’t been sexually active since Griffin was born, and with neither the time, energy, or urge to have sex

with anyone else, I'd foregone birth control. I opened the box, ripped one off the strip, tore it open, and pulled it out of the package before I rolled back over toward him.

I stroked his bare skin a few more times before I rolled the condom down his cock and then gasped when he yanked me closer to him and rolled to his back.

"It's been too long ... I can't be careful," Hawk said as he held me on top of him, panting as he tried to calm down.

"I don't want careful," I murmured as I situated my legs on either side of his hips. I angled myself so I was straddling the length of his cock and rubbed against him, teasing my clit against him. "Fuck being careful, Hawk. Fuck me."

I lifted his cock up and settled onto it. I let my body slide down slowly, trying to relax as I adjusted to his size. I lifted up and came back down a few times, taking him deeper each time, until I rested with all my weight on his hips as I held his cock snug inside me.

As I started to move, Hawk kept his hands on my hips, lifting me up and down before he finally growled, "Enough!" and flipped us over so that I was on my back. He thrust his hips over and over again, bumping my clit just perfectly as I wrapped my arms and legs around him, tilting my hips to take him deeper.

Memories flew by of all the times when we'd been together before, but Hawk pulled my mind back to the present when he caught my mouth with his.

Suddenly, his urgency was gone, and he slowed his hips, pulling back until I almost lost him and then slowly pushing forward until he was deep inside. Our mouths were close together as we shared our breath, kissing and nibbling on each other as we murmured soft words. I've missed you. I've dreamed of you. I love you. All truths we hadn't really shared before he left but felt the entire time.

When my orgasm crashed into me, I held him tightly and heard him groan as his cock twitched inside me. We were finally still, our bodies molded together as we caught our



breath. After a few minutes, I felt him softening inside me. Hawk reached down and held the edge of the condom as he pulled out of my body. I stretched and sighed as I waited for him to come back from the bathroom where he was cleaning up. By the time he came back to bed, I was on the edge of sleep.

Once again, he fit himself against my back. For the first time in years, I was sated, sleepy, and right where I was meant to be.

## HAWK

I hated leaving Brighten alone in bed, her warm body calling to mine even though we'd made love over and over through the night, waking up in each other's arms and falling asleep the same way.

As much as I didn't want to leave her, I was really excited to spend the day getting to know Griffin.

Crow and Phoenix had planned a big day for us and made sure to include a bunch of our cousins and friends so Griffin didn't feel pressured to spend time with me. Crow and Brighten had spoken to Griffin's therapist at length, and she liked the idea and had seemed excited to hear all about any progress we'd made during Griff's upcoming visit Monday morning.

I hoped he had a lot to tell her and that this day would be something he remembered fondly for years to come.

I left Brighten sleeping and walked to Phoenix's house just after dawn. By the time I showered, he had coffee made and was ready to take a shower of his own. He never asked how my night had gone, probably because he could read it all in my relaxed posture and satisfied expression.

Finally, it was time for us to go. I was excited to join the rest of the men in my family for their long-standing Saturday morning breakfast at our grandmother's diner.

When we arrived, I was greeted by my little sister, Ava, who had taken over the day-to-day operations of the diner in my Gamma's stead. Of course, that didn't mean my Gamma wasn't around all the time. She had never been the type to sit still for long. From what she'd told me during her visits, she liked going to the diner once or twice a week and waiting on a few of the regulars and then being able to go home without having to wait for another waitress to relieve her since she wasn't there to work a shift.

“You look good, big brother,” Ava said as she leaned back from our hug and stared into my eyes. “I hope I know the reason behind that giant smile plastered on your face, but even if it’s something else, I’ll take it. I’ve been worried about you this past week.”

“No need to worry, kiddo. I’m getting settled in at Phoenix’s place and the office, and today, I’ll get to spend some time with everyone while I get to know Griffin a little better.”

“He’s excited. Like, beside himself. When I went by last night, he was leaving for Daughtry’s garage with Dad and Papa. They were going to gas up everything y’all might need today.”

“Hell, I’m worked up too. I remember doing that when we were kids and having a blast with Dad and the other guys.”

“Well, most of them are in the back room already. Griff came in with Dad a few minutes ago. The buffet is set up, so grab something if you’re hungry. I’ll be in with fresh coffee shortly.”

I walked through the diner toward the back room that had been added on when I was a kid. The renovation had become a necessity as our family got bigger because if we gathered here for any reason, we took up most of the dining room. The addition was a place reserved for us where the kids could run around and play without bothering the paying customers.

As if to prove my point, Phoenix’s daughter, Lyric, shot past me as I walked in, being chased by a boy named Jericho who belonged to Holly Hamilton, Marcus and Reagan’s daughter. Griffin was right on his heels, making growling noises at the top of his lungs.

I waited until the kids passed, not surprised that Griffin hadn’t greeted me, considering his focus on eating the little kids up. I walked over to sit next to my dad at the table he shared with my grandfather, Smokey, and my uncles, Daughtry, Clem, and Kale.

“It’s about time you boys got here,” my dad said as he tracked Phoenix around the room. He’d begun stomping behind Griffin, chasing all three kids as he snarled and snorted. Finally, he’d had enough and picked up Lyric as she ran past him, pulling her to his chest as he growled into her neck. I couldn’t help but smile when she giggled uncontrollably as she squirmed.

“I didn’t realize we were late,” I replied.

“You’re not. He just likes to bitch,” Daughtry said with a grin. “Plus, he was just telling us he didn’t sleep for shit because Griff and Lyric took over their bed. He said he woke up with one of their toes in his eye.”

“I remember a time where there was barely enough room for me and Summer to lay down without falling off the side, but it’s been a while. We’re having to readjust every time the kids spend the night,” my dad explained. “Even after raising seven of my own, I still don’t understand why kids sleep across the bed rather than with their head on the pillow.”

“That’s a question for the ages,” Daughtry said before he took a sip of his coffee.

“How’d you sleep after what happened last night?” Papa Smokey asked.

Phoenix had just settled into a chair and let out a snort of laughter. “What makes you think he slept at all?”

“You were that upset? I wish there was something we could say or do to help that woman, but I think it’s useless,” Dad said with a frown.

“What woman?” Phoenix asked. I explained what happened at the restaurant, and he just shook his head sadly. “I feel for her, but she’s done that to me and Crow more than once. I’m not sure if it’s because she knows we were there or if it’s just because we’re your brothers, but I’ve learned to watch myself in public. She appears out of nowhere sometimes.”

“She caused a scene at Grazie’s once, and sympathy or not, Martha was ready to beat her ass. Maria filed a report, and

she's not allowed back in there, so at least we have one safe place," Smokey said. "She hasn't ever showed up here, but I think if she did, Martha's sense of compassion would disappear pretty quickly."

"I wasn't gonna do anything, but Brighten insisted I file a report. Zoey was the cop that came out, so it was relatively painless. She was probably more understanding of my position than any other cop would've been."

"You were with Brighten?" Dad asked.

"We were on our first date," I answered with an uncomfortable laugh.

Griffin ran past us, and Daughtry laughed. "Boy, you never did anything right the first time, but I guess it's all working out now, isn't it?"

"It's a process, but we're moving forward, I guess."

"Crow explained his plan the other day when we started mapping out today's adventure, and I think it's sound."

"I agree. He said he wanted to pick me and Griffin up from here to run a few errands before we come over," I told my dad.

"He and Griffin have a long-standing appointment on Saturday mornings, and they rarely ever miss it," Dad explained. "It's good he's bringing you with them. I think that will help Griff get more comfortable."

I realized I didn't hear the kids laughing anymore and looked around the room. Griffin was sitting at one of the empty tables close to the back of the room watching me talk to my dad and the rest of the guys.

Smokey glanced over his shoulder and then said, "Go talk to him."

"I think I should let him come to me."

"Go to him. I bet he's just as nervous as you are. Nix, pave the way," my dad ordered.

Without a word, Phoenix stood up and started walking toward Griffin's table with his coffee mug in hand. When he got closer, he proclaimed, "It's the Griffmeister. How ya doin', my man?"

"Go on, son. Tiptoeing around will only get you so far."

"Okay," I said as I watched Phoenix sit and relax into the chair next to Griffin's. "I'm going in. Wish me luck."

"Oh, you're gonna need luck," Kale warned. "I'm not worried about y'all getting along, but that boy's gonna talk circles around your dumb ass. He's probably gonna embarrass you, and then we won't have any choice but to laugh."

"Thanks for the warning," I said sarcastically as I stood up. I meandered over to the buffet and put a variety on one plate, then put some biscuits and a handful of butter containers on a stack of plates. It took a little effort, but I was able to carry everything to the table. "Hey, guys! I brought snacks."

"Oh good," Phoenix said as he helped me set everything down. "Griff, I have to tell you man, nobody makes honey butter better than Hawk."

"You like honey butter?"

Griffin nodded. "I like how Crow makes it."

"His is pretty good, but he learned it from Hawk, so you might want to give his a try sometime."

I went out on a limb and tried to talk to Griffin as if he were an adult. "It's all about the balance of butter to honey. You have to have the right consistency. If you use more than a 2 to 1 ratio, it's just going to drip right off your biscuit. Now cornbread is another matter entirely." Griffin looked from the plate in front of me to my face and then back again. I could see in his eyes that he was dying to ask for a bite, so I tried to prompt him to join me by saying, "I'm sure your dad's pretty good at it, but he used to have me make honey butter for him when Gamma made fresh biscuits."

When I referred to Crow as his dad, Griffin's eyes shot up to mine in question.

“Wanna try mine out and see how it compares to your dad’s?”

“They said you *were* my dad.”

“Well, maybe someday I can be your dad too. Right now, I’m just your father, and that’s all about science and DNA.”

“I like science.”

“Do you know anything about DNA?”

“Not yet.”

“Maybe we could do some online research together some time.”

“I don’t want to have two dads.”

Phoenix jumped in to rescue me and asked, “Did you know that me, Crow, and Hawk had two dads?”

“No you don’t.”

“We weren’t lucky enough to have them at the same time, but we really did.”

Griffin narrowed his eyes at Phoenix and asked, “Was your uncle your dad too?” He looked over at the table where Daughtry, Clem, and Kale were sitting with my dad and Smokey and then back at me. “Which uncle is your dad?”

“Wow, that sounds way weirder than it should,” Phoenix mumbled.

“He wasn’t our uncle. He came from a different family. None of us remember him, but we’ve seen pictures,” I told Griffin. “I bet if you ask Gammy, she could find one to show you.”

“There’s a picture of him on the wall in the living room,” Phoenix said. “You know that picture in the corner with Crow and Hawk and some man you’ve never met?”

Griffin thought about it for a second and nodded. “Who is that?”

“That’s the man we got our DNA from. I never met him.”

I shrugged and said, “I don’t remember him.”

“Where’d he go? Did he get mad because Gammy got you a new dad?”

“No. We weren’t lucky enough to have two at once like your mom.” Griffin’s eyes got wide, and I knew he’d just realized I was right. Warren and Zeke were her fathers but in different capacities. “When we were kids, it was kind of cool because she had Zeke around all the time, but she had Warren around too.”

“I was always kind of jealous of that,” Phoenix lied. “She got more birthday presents *and* gifts at Christmas. How is that fair?”

“Warren always buys her at least two gifts,” Griffin said as he watched me mix the butter and honey together on my plate. “That looks different than the way Crow makes it.”

“I’m telling you, little man, it’s all about ratio. It makes all the difference.” Once I was finished mixing, I cut a biscuit in half and slathered both sides. I put them on a plate and passed it to Griffin. “Try it. If you like it, then you’ll have two options next time you have biscuits.”

“Best of both worlds, huh?” Phoenix asked. He slid his chair back as he looked around the room. “I’m gonna go make sure Lyric ate enough. I’ll be right back.”

Griff and I ate in silence for a few minutes, and when he was almost finished, I asked, “Want another one the same way?”

Griffin seemed torn, but finally said, “I do, but I’m still not sure if it’s as good as Crow’s.”

“Well, we’ve got years and years for you to determine your favorite.”

“Okay.”



“Griffin! My favorite customer in the world!”



“Hi, Lottie. You’re almost my favorite bookstore lady.”

“I’m gonna work my way up there someday, I just know it,” the woman said with a grin. “Follow me. I’ve got a new display I can’t wait to show you!”

“Who’s your favorite bookstore lady?” I asked Griffin.

“Her mom. She’s awesome,” Griffin answered.

“That’s Lottie Harper, man,” Crow said as he gestured to the young woman.

“Rason’s kid? No way!”

“Hank is Lottie’s uncle,” Griffin explained. “Eliza is her mom, and *she* is my favorite book lady.”

“Damn. I feel so old. We used to come in here when we were kids.”

“Was Eliza *your* favorite book lady?” Griffin asked.

“Yeah, she was,” I said with a smile. “She’s pretty cool.”

“She’s Crow’s favorite. I’ll have to tell Lottie that you voted for her mom too.”

“It might hurt her feelings,” Crow suggested.

“It might,” Griffin agreed.

When we caught up to her, I was glad he refrained from telling her she was outvoted and wondered if Griffin occasionally had the same problem as Warren when it came to people’s feelings. Sometimes, blunt honesty wasn’t the way to go, but as far as Warren was concerned, it was the *only* way to go.

Crow and I listened as Griffin and Lottie discussed the new display that was all about the history of St. Patrick’s Day, and once he chose a book from the array, he handed it to Crow.

“I’m not sure if that’s going to be in the final five yet,” Griffin told him. “We’ll see.”

“Are you looking for anything specific today, or do you just want to browse?”

“I’d like a book on the science of DNA, please,” Griffin said politely. “Hawk and I are both interested in learning about that.”

Crow looked at me with his eyebrows raised, and I grinned. After he arrived at the restaurant, Griffin had quizzed him on our birth father and seemed pleased that Crow had the same information for him. That led to them talking about DNA versus feelings, and Phoenix and I explained our earlier conversation.

By the time we were finished roaming around the bookstore, I was holding a stack of books as was Crow. I’d listened to Crow warn Griffin more than once that he had too many and would have to choose five before we got to the register. We sat down on a couch at the back of the store while Griffin spread the books out on a table and looked through them.

He made a stack of five books on one end of the table and another stack of five at the other end. He gathered the rest of them and then went to find Lottie so he could help her put them back.

As we watched Griffin and Lottie walk around the store, putting away books and looking at others, Crow asked, “So, breakfast was good?”

“It was. He didn’t come over to sit and eat with Dad and the guys, so Phoenix and I joined him at that back table where you found us and had a good conversation.”

“Good. He’s not quite himself today, but it’s gonna take some time for him to adjust. Poor guy just hates change.”

“That’s what Brighten said.”

“How’s that going?”

“Good. We had our first date last night ...”

“I heard about that,” Crow interrupted. “She found me in the grocery store while I was there with Mom a few years ago. She didn’t smack me, but she gave me a piece of her mind. When she raised her hand at me, Mom got between us and used that serial killer voice, so the woman backed off.”

“That tone of voice still scares the shit outta me.”

“Me too.”

“Okay, I’m ready to go,” Griffin said as he walked back over with Lottie.

“Which stack are you getting?” Crow asked him.

“Both.”

“You know your limit is five per trip, bud. That’s our deal.”

“Right,” Griffin said with a nod. He pushed a stack of books closer to Crow and said, “These are the five books my dad is going to buy me.” He pushed the other stack closer to me and said, “This is the stack my father is going to buy me.”

“Where’d you get that idea?”

“Shit,” I whispered. “I think that’s on me and Nix.”

“Brighten gets gifts from Zeke and Warren because she’s got two dads. I will get gifts from you and Hawk because I’ve also got two dads.” Griffin pointed at the first stack and said, “Our deal is Saturday with Dad means a trip to the bookstore for five books. I have two dads, so that means I get ten books.”

Crow turned and stared at me before he shrugged. “I’ve got no clue how to play this, man. None. Totally uncharted territory here.”

“He’s got a point,” I admitted. “But what does that mean for the future? How does this work out?”

Crow sighed and looked at Griffin before he looked back at me. “I guess we’ll just make sure you don’t come to the bookstore with us on Saturdays again.”

“They’re open on Sundays, Hawk. You and I can come then.”

I felt my heart start to race, knowing there was a chink in the boy’s armor, but I didn’t let my joy show.

“Well, I’m willing to roll with it if you are,” I told Crow. “Sunday is my bookstore day with Griffin. I’ll mark it on my calendar as soon as I get home.”

“Okay, here’s the scoop, Griffin. You got us on a technicality this round. However, going forward we’re not playing it this way. Birthday and Christmas, yes, you’ll get gifts from both of us. On a regular day, not so much.”

Lottie pressed her lips together tightly to hold in a smile, and I knew she must have already heard about the drama unfolding in our family.

“Got it,” Griffin said with a satisfied smile. He held his hands out and asked, “Can we buy my books now, please?”

“Fuck,” Crow muttered under his breath. As I stood next to him, he said, “I’m glad you’re home for a million reasons, but I just added another one.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m completely outgunned here. I’m really glad you’re my back-up.”

I stuck my fist out, and he bumped his against mine as I said, “I’m glad too.”



My grandfather walked up and stood next to me beside the fire barrel, and as he stretched his hands out for warmth, he mentioned, “I hear the bookstore trip went well.”

“He made out like a bandit,” I replied with a laugh. “Crow and I came to an agreement on something while we were there.”

“What’s that?”

“We’re outgunned. Completely.”

Smokey laughed. “That boy’s been keeping us on our toes since he learned how to sit up on his own. Scary smart, that one.”

I watched as my little sister, Raven, mounted her dirt bike. She and my cousin Rebel, who was just about to graduate from high school, laughed as they both took a second to braid their hair into a long plait. Once they were done, they pulled their helmets on and started their bikes before they drove slowly across the grass toward the track that my family built when I was a kid.

Phoenix was moving snow and dirt with the backhoe while his daughter sat in his lap. Her hot pink snowsuit was so puffy, I wasn't sure how she could even move. It didn't seem to bother her as she bounced on his knee and 'helped' him work the controls.

"You're not riding today?" my grandfather asked.

"I want to so badly, but I took that release agreement to mean that I couldn't operate anything with a motor, so I'm not even gonna use a lawn mower for the next two years."

My grandfather threw his head back with laughter, and when my Uncle Clem walked up, he explained what I'd said, and he laughed too.

"I'm glad to hear you're taking your parole requirements seriously, Hawk."

"I'm not ever going back there," I said firmly.

"There are different kinds of parolees," Clem explained. "There's a kind that doesn't give a shit if they go back so they do what they want, the kind that's leery of going back so they're more careful when they break the law, and the kind that's not even gonna blink wrong because they aren't gonna risk wasting another minute of their life behind bars."

"Which kind were you?" I asked.

"A little of the first one but a little bit more of the second," Clem said honestly. "You see how that worked out for me, considering I've been locked up twice."

I shook my head. "I'm not gonna do shit to risk it."

"Good for you," Smokey said as he slapped my shoulder. "I'm proud of you, son. Keep it up and stick around. My

Martha was awfully worried about you while you were gone. I don't like to see her upset."

I smiled because I knew that meant he was, too, but I didn't say anything because that was just the way my grandfather had always been.

"You know what? You can take Crow's place."

"Isn't he already doing that?" Clem deadpanned. My grandfather smacked the back of his head and growled, and my uncle looked sheepish for a second before he apologized.

"Let me go see what I can do, Hawk. No sense in you sitting out on all the fun. If what I'm thinking pans out, Crow's gonna appreciate my idea and have a little bit of fun himself."

"Can you help me put this on?" Griffin asked from beside me.

I jumped and looked down at him, and he grinned up at me. "You're like a ninja."

"I know," Griffin said with a giggle. "Makes Brighten crazy."

"You need help with ... Is that a neck brace?"

"Yes. I can't get into my ATV without it. I've got a special harness, too, and even though Jamie reinforced my roll cage, I still have to wear my helmet."

"You've got your own ATV?"

"I do. Pop and I built it together. We work on it all the time."

"That's cool. You don't ride dirt bikes like the rest of them?" I heard Clem laugh. I looked at him in question, but Griffin answered before he could say anything.

"I did for a while, but everyone kept freaking out. Smokey said I was going to give him an aneurysm. Warren and I looked it up, and that's not how an aneurysm works, but I didn't tell Smokey that."

"That's probably a good thing," I conceded.

“I’m not allowed to ride alone either.”

“Maybe when you get older.”

“Nope,” Clem said firmly. “Not happening. Not *ever* happening.”

“Why?”

Griffin sighed dramatically. “Bird said that I made you, Crow, and Phoenix look like Sunday drivers. I wasn’t able to find a definition for that, though.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked at Clem who was grinning. He shook his head and said, “Have fun today, Hawk. I’d hate to be the one that has to do your laundry. Your underwear is about to pay the ultimate price. Again.”

Clem laughed as he walked away, and I squatted down in front of Griffin to help him put on his neck brace. “You’ll get better at driving, bud. Someday, they’ll let you drive alone.”

“They might if you talk to them about it,” Griffin hinted.

“Griff!” Crow called out as he came around the corner pushing an ATV. “Come here and let me get you strapped in. Hawk, come on, it’s your turn to run the gauntlet.”

“Since he’s riding with me, will you record us? I want to get Phoenix to put it on TikTok.”

My brother chuckled and said, “I’m sure there will be plenty of recordings from everyone for you to choose from, but I’ll definitely video it too.”

I walked around and inspected the ATV as Crow buckled Griffin into a five-point harness and then checked the fit on the brace around his neck and that his helmet was buckled and snug.

When Crow stood, I said, “This is definitely a custom. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Originally, it was a side-by-side, but since he’s so small, the weight distribution was off so it was too easy for him to roll it. We moved his seat to the middle, welded the larger

adult seat right behind him, put a governor on the motor, and installed a remote shut-off for emergencies.”

“Damn. He’s not gonna know what to do when he gets a regular car. I can’t imagine what it will be like if Grunt helps him soup it up.”

“This boy’s never gonna be able to drive on the street. He’s gonna be hoofing it like you.”

“Come on. He’s just a kid, man. Cut him some slack. He can’t be that bad.”

Stone Marks, one of Sonny’s kids, walked up holding his camera in front of him. “Hawk, do you have any last words?”

I shook my head and took the helmet from my brother, then looked at Stone. “You boys need to grow some. He’s 5, for God’s sake.”

“I’ll clear everyone off the track,” Clem called out as he walked across the grass. “Phoenix is moving the backhoe now.”

I looked over and saw the backhoe creeping across the track as Clem waved the drivers toward him.

“I’m glad we got to reconnect, big brother. I’ll say kind words about you at the wake.”

“Fucking drama queens. It can’t be *that* bad. You’re still here.”

“Barely.”

“Get in or get left!” Griffin yelled from his seat.

I crawled in behind Griffin and laughed when Smokey tried to help me with my harness. Once it was on, he nodded at me solemnly and patted my knee before he stepped back.

“Checking the shut-off now,” Crow said before he had Griffin start the motor. A few seconds later, Crow hit a button on a small remote and killed the engine. “You’re good to go, Griff.”

“Give ‘em hell, Griffmeister!” Phoenix yelled.



Everyone had crowded around the fire and cheered Griffin on.

“Did you give him your safeword?” my dad asked as he approached the ATV.

“*Really?*”

“Uh, yeah. Really. What’s your safeword?”

“Fuck. I don’t know.” I thought about it for a second and said, “Beetlejuice.”

“That’s not gonna work because if you say it three times, he’ll appear.”

“If I have to say it more than once, then how is it a safeword?”

“Oh, he doesn’t pay attention to that. The safeword is so I know when to shut it off,” Crow said before he reached in and slapped Griffin’s helmet. “Have fun, little man. Start it up, and try not to give your passenger a heart attack.”

“Did you take the governor off?” Griffin asked.

“Hell no.”

I heard Griffin sigh, and then the engine fired up with a roar. The last thing I saw before we shot off toward the track was my brother’s smiling face.

That was the same smile he’d always worn when he was about to do something crazy, and it scared me more than all the warnings I’d already gotten.

Griffin jumped the ridge that separated the track from the surrounding grass and turned the wheel so we skidded sideways onto the track. His excited voice screaming, “Shake and Bake!” before he hit the first small hill and went airborne.

I’d been in prison for six years and faced some dangerous situations in my life that would scare the daylights out of some, but as Griffin started sliding into the first turn, I realized that nothing had prepared me for being this kid’s father. All I could do was hold on, literally, as he took me on the ride of my life.

## BRIGHTEN

I touched the back of my hand to Hawk's forehead and asked, "Are you sure you're okay? You're still really pale."

"Give him a break. He saw his life flash before his eyes repeatedly this afternoon. I can't believe you rode with him three times! We usually have to draw straws because Crow starts getting motion sick during the first round and then he's out for at least a few hours."

Uncle Joe, the man who'd been part of my life since my parents brought me home, laughed and said, "He had a couple of near-death experiences today, sweetheart. It's going to take him some time to recover."

Caroline, Joe's wife, who I'd adored since I was 9 and she let me pick out my own flower girl dress for her wedding, winced before she said, "I've seen the video. It might take him a day or two."

"Oh shit," my cousin Zoey said before she yelled for Griffin to come into the kitchen. "Hawk, you've gone viral."

"Really?" I asked as I hurried around the table to look at her phone.

Griffin ran into the room and skidded to a stop beside Zoey's chair before he panted, "Are people watching it? Are there comments?"

"The video that Memphis posted and shared on the band page already has over a million views. You're viral, Griffin!"

Griffin bounced up and down a few times and then squealed loudly before he launched himself at Hawk. "Did you hear what Zoey said, Hawk? We're famous because you screamed like a little bitch!"

"Griffin Kestrel Forrester!" I snapped.

My urge to strangle him flew out the window when Hawk started laughing and Griffin threw his arms around his neck, laughing right along with him. It was a sight I never imagined I'd see, and I knew that this image was one I'd never forget.

I watched as Zoey passed around her phone so everyone could watch it again. Tears filled my eyes when Griffin took the phone and leaned into Hawk so they could watch it together.

My mom was standing next to me and reached for my hand before she tugged me toward the living room. We walked past my dad and Warren, who were working on their laptops, and went into my parents' room. My mom let my hand go so she could shut the door, and when she turned around and looked at me, she had tears in her eyes.

"I was so worried, Brighten. So worried."

"About Griffin?"

"Griffin. Hawk. Crow. All of you. I've been beside myself since we talked last week. I just couldn't imagine how this would play out, but I think it's going to be okay. I really do."

"I'm sorry I never told you, Mom."

"That's water under the bridge, baby. Now we've got to focus on the future."

"Right," I said as I climbed onto the bed and laid on my dad's pillow. I breathed deeply and felt a sense of calm when I smelled him, remembering all the times I'd curled up in between him and my mom in the middle of the night, warm and safe. I sighed when I realized that I was finally content for the first time in forever. "I feel like everything's going to be okay too. We're all going to have to work together, and Hawk understands that."

"Good. He's such a different person than the boy I remember, but prison will do that to a person. It will either make them stronger or turn them into someone you don't want to know. Luckily, Hawk is of the stronger variety," Mom said

as she got on the bed and laid down facing me. “It almost broke me, but I had Terra to help me adjust.”

“We’ve got a lot to work on in our relationship, but he understands that making Griffin feel safe and loved is the most important thing.”

“I know he didn’t want to see him, but I think Crow pushed it at just the right time in just the right way. Taking them to the track was perfect, and Hawk’s being a really good sport about it. I know that when your dad rode with Griff that time, he was jittery for days afterward. He said he saw his life flash before his eyes, and I believe him.”

“That’s why I can never go out there when they’re on the track. I just can’t watch. Neither can Shannon. Summer and Martha seem to handle it okay, but I just can’t do it.”

“Look at the hellions Summer and Martha raised, Brighten. It’s a wonder either woman is still sane. It looks like the apple didn’t fall very far from the tree with Griffin. He acts just as crazy and reckless as those boys did when they were young.” My mom snickered and said, “It’s so funny to me that when I compare him to his father, I could either mean his biological father or his uncle.”

“It’s so ... I don’t even have a way to describe it.”

“Warren actually cracked a joke about it last night at dinner. He said, ‘Looks like Brighten is remembering her roots.’ It was a horrible joke, but he’s right. Warren, Addie, and I came from a life that’s got more of that than I’d like to admit.”

“That’s so crazy. You’ve told me some stories that just amaze me. I still have to shake my head at the thought of what your lives were like.”

“It doesn’t matter what they were like back then because they’re wonderful now. Addie and Atlas are still head over heels in love just like your dad and I. Warren’s even got his own lady love. As peculiar as that relationship might seem to me, it makes him happy, and that’s all that matters.”

“I don’t understand it either, but you’re right. As long as Warren is happy, I’m happy.”

A few years ago, Warren met a woman named Emilia who was an awful lot like him. Emilia had her own personality quirks, some resembling Warren’s, but that seemed to make things work. They were just friends for a while before they officially started dating. Just recently, he mentioned he would like to look into building a house for her next to his on my parents’ property. He said he couldn’t imagine ever living with anyone again, even her, but he’d like to have her nearby so they can spend more time together.

“Have you and Hawk been able to find more time to hang out?”

“He stayed over last night while Griff was at Bird and Summer’s.”

“And? Were there fireworks?”

“Definitely,” I admitted easily. I’d always had a wonderful, open relationship with my mom. She was easy to talk to while still maintaining that mom vibe of support that I needed. I appreciated that in her. “It was intense and fun and crazy and ... right. It just felt so right waking up with him beside me.”

“That’s good, sweetheart.”

“We’ll let Griffin slowly adjust to having Hawk in his life, and then we’ll see where our relationship goes in the meantime.”

“As long as you’re not moving too fast.”

“We’re molasses. I mean, he did spend the night, but instead of rushing into an all-consuming relationship, we’re taking baby steps.”

“So he’s not moving in tomorrow?”

“Oh no. We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. As it is, he’s just down the street at Phoenix’s, so we’ll be able to see him all the time.”

“And Crow’s adjusting too?”

“Yes. We sat down together and wrote out a schedule. It’s really going to be helpful having another set of hands to help take care of Griffin. I don’t have to worry about finding someone to watch him if I have a late showing, and the three of us can spend time together in the evenings while Crow is gone. He’ll have him all day while he does his studies and brings him to meet me for appointments, then Griffin will be able to spend some time with all of us for dinner before Crow goes to work. And Crow will be there with him in the evenings when he can. That sounds very ... grown-up.” We laughed, and then I told her about their trip to the bookstore earlier today. “It’s only been a week, and he’s already learned the art of playing this for all it’s worth. We’re going to have to nip that in the bud, but my son’s evil machinations aside, more than a few good things came from that outing. Going to the track just added to that.”

“Well, I know Griffin would call the book haul a good thing. What else?”

“He and Hawk now have a Sundays with Dad appointment, just like he has Saturdays with Crow.”

“That’s excellent. It sounds like you’ve got your schedules all worked out, but what about your heart?”

“Oh, that old thing? I lost it to Hawk years ago. Luckily, he’s more than willing to keep it safe for me now.”

“That’s exactly what I wanted to hear.”



“What do you think about this one?” I heard Hawk ask Griffin. When I looked over at the table, I watched him slide the cookbook he was leafing through closer to Griffin and point to a page. Griffin looked it over for a second and then nodded. “I’ve never had it but it sounds good.”

Griffin concentrated on the recipe and furrowed his brow before he asked, “What’s that? I don’t know that word.”

Hawk laughed and shook his head. “I have no idea. I guess we’ll have to look it up.”

I smiled because that was a surefire way to my son’s heart. Griffin pulled his tablet closer to him and then looked at me and asked, “Can you unlock me for a few minutes so I can look for something?”

“Sure,” I said as I walked over to the table and sat down. I took the tablet from Griffin and switched to the adult profile to remove the kid-safe settings. I slid it back across the table and watched Griffin concentrate as he typed the ingredient he was looking for into the search engine.

“You have to unlock it?” Hawk asked.

“The internet is no place for a kid his age to roam without supervision. When he’s done, I’ll show you how to put it back on his profile.”

“Good to know,” Hawk said as he looked over and supervised Griffin’s research.

I walked into the kitchen, giving Hawk and Griffin a little room to spend time with each other but still close enough to jump in if I was needed. Once I was finished in the kitchen, I worked my way into the living room and started picking up in there. I ran the vacuum, and when I went into the kitchen to dump the canister, I heard Griffin ask a question that stopped my heart.

“I really want a brother, so will you talk to Brighten and tell her to give me one? Crow won’t do it no matter how many times I ask.”

Hawk’s answer brought my heart back online and made it race when he answered, “It’s a little early to be thinking about that, but I love your mom a lot. Maybe we’ll decide to have another kid someday.”

“Can you live in the house next door like Crow?”

“I’m living with Phoenix right now, and that’s not very far away.”

“You should live next door so I can have an even bigger backyard.”

“Oh, you mean on the other side.”

“Well, yeah. Unless you want to live in the spare room like Crow did until his house was ready.”

“I haven’t talked to your mom about anything like that yet, so I can’t say what’s gonna happen either way.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

“You’d be okay with me living here?”

“Of course. Crow said it was going to happen someday because you love her differently than he does.”

“Really?”

“He loves her like I’ll love my brother when Brighten finally decides to give me one, but you love Brighten like Smokey loves Martha or Grunt loves Shannon.”

“I do.”

“Well, Smokey lives with Martha, and they even share a bedroom. Are you going to do that?”

“I hope that someday we can do that.”

“If you do that, will I get a brother?”

“That’s not a guarantee.”

“You sound like Smokey. He says that nothing’s guaranteed but death and taxes.”

“He’s been saying that forever.”

“I don’t want you to die, but you better take care of the taxes.”

“I’ll make sure I do.”

I peeked around the corner so I could see them once they were quiet. Hawk must have sensed me there because he raised his head and smiled. I raised my eyebrows, and he winked and gave me a thumbs up before he looked back down to the book where Griffin was pointing.



My heart was in my throat at the thought of Hawk living with us and spending his nights here rather than having to say goodbye and then sneaking out to meet me after Griffin went to sleep. I knew it was too soon to even consider moving in together, but it felt good knowing that possibility was open to explore later.

I walked back into the living room and sat down on the ottoman with the full vacuum canister still in my hand. There was a lot to process from what I'd just heard, but all I could think about was how good it felt knowing that Griffin was starting to not only accept the possibility of a future with Hawk in it but encourage it.

For the past six years, I'd been focused on my career and my son. I'd loved my life and couldn't imagine it any other way. Until now. Now, the future looked brighter than ever before, and lucky for me, it included Hawk Forrester.



"I feel like I barely got to talk to you this weekend," I told Crow as I settled into the corner of the couch in the waiting area of Griffin's therapist's office. "What's going on?"

Crow sighed and shook his head before he looked at me with a forlorn expression. "I've got some things happening that I'm not quite ready to share yet."

"Because of what's happening with Hawk?"

"No. All of that is good, as far as I'm concerned. It's something else."

"When you're ready, you know I'm here."

"How are things with you and Hawk?"

"They're good so far. We're getting reacquainted while he's getting to know Griff. I'm happy with the direction it's going. It's really more than I ever imagined."

"After breakfast this morning, Griff asked me to take him to the office supply store so he could buy stuff to make flash

cards to help Hawk study for his bar exam.”

“Really? I’m just amazed at how different he is than other kids we know.”

“How do you think it’s going in there?” Crow asked as he stared at the door to the office where Griffin was having a session with his therapist.

“He’s probably talking her ear off. She had mentioned a few weeks ago that he might not need to come see her as often, but in light of all that’s come up, I think it’s important that we keep this schedule for a while until we’re sure he’s adjusted.”

“It still cracks me up that our 5-year-old has a therapist.”

“Lots of kids do.”

“I know there’s nothing wrong with it. I just think it’s funny that he goes in to see her so she can give us advice on how to raise him. Phoenix and Lyric’s mom usually just get their advice from Mom, Gamma, or Gigi. With our kid, they’re out of their element, so we need a professional.”

“Imagine how different Warren’s life might be if he’d had professional help when he was young.”

“That’s true although he’s a whole different person than he was when we were kids.”

“He’s been talking to Mom about having a house built next to his for Emilia. That’s definitely a big step for both of them.”

“When we get finished here, I’m going to pick Warren up from his office to take him back to my house for Griffin’s lessons. He’s gonna hang out with him while I nap. Will you be home on time this evening? I need to go in a little early, so I’m going to miss dinner.”

“Shit. I told a client I’d take them to see a few houses this evening, so I was going to leave dinner to you.”

“We could see if my mom ... you know what? Hawk can hang out at your house with him. Warren probably wouldn’t

mind staying for dinner, and he and Hawk have always gotten along well.”

“You’re right. It never even crossed my mind to consider that option,” I said with a laugh. “I’ll send him a text and see if he’s up for it.”

“He better be. At this point, he’s got no choice in the matter.”

**THREE WEEKS LATER****HAWK**

“Thanks for the ride, kid,” I said as I reached into the back seat for my laptop bag. “Is it you in the morning or ...”

“I won’t see you until Thursday. I think Stevie is the one scheduled to pick you up in the morning,” Cruz, Marcus and Reagan’s son, explained. “Have fun with that.”

“Thanks,” I said sarcastically as I opened the door. Stevie had obviously learned to drive from her father, Uncle Clem. Riding with her was a toned-down version of my adventure with Griffin on the track. “Have a good one.”

I waved at Cruz as he drove off and then walked up the sidewalk to Brighten’s. Griffin and I were going to chill together while she went to a business dinner and Crow went in for his shift at the bar.

I heard Crow’s raised voice before I even opened the door and was shocked at his tone, but worse than that, I was assaulted by a horrible burned plastic smell. The house reeked so bad that it made my eyes water. I didn’t even want to take another breath. The fumes were absolutely noxious.

“I know you heard me, Griffin. Go sit your ass down until the timer goes off or I’m gonna reset it. *Again.*”

Crow turned around and jumped when he saw me, “Fuck, you scared me. I didn’t even hear you come in.”

“Rough day?”

“That boy. I swear.”

“What’s going on?”

“He’s just in a mood. It happens sometimes, and I have to remind myself that he’s just a kid and not a really short adult.”

This wasn't the first time I'd heard about Griffin getting in trouble, but it was the first time I'd seen it in person. "How long's he in for?"

Crow looked at the clock on the oven, and I saw the timer was going. "He's got four minutes left. I'll hang out until it's over and talk to him, but just know that he's on restriction until he goes to bed. No electronics, and that includes letting him use your phone to look something up."

"Shit. What did he do?"

Crow sighed and explained, "He put some of his army men in the microwave because he wanted to melt them down and create a hybrid or some shit. He asked me if he could do it and I said no, so he waited until I was in the bathroom and did it anyway."

"That's the smell."

"It's giving me a headache. He was already on thin ice because he got into it with Brighten and tried to refuse to go to school. Then, when he got there, he was such a snot that they called me to pick him up early because he made some kid cry."

"How'd he make him cry?"

"He yelled at him or some shit. Fuck, I don't know. He's just in a mood. If I were you, I'd see if he wants to work on his puzzle after you finish dinner. That might calm him down, and maybe you can figure out what's bothering him."

"Well, wish me luck," I said as I set my bag on the bar and walked over to the refrigerator.

"You're gonna need it, big brother. May the force be with you." The timer started beeping, so I walked over to turn it off as Crow said, "I'm going to talk to him, and then I'll send him in here to you. Text me if you need anything."

"Will do," I said as I turned around and looked at my brother. "Is everything okay? You seem a little ... distracted."

"I've got shit going on. I'm not ready to talk about it yet."

"I'm here when you are," I said as Crow turned and walked out of the kitchen. I got myself a bottle of water and

sat at the bar before I pulled my laptop out.

I wasn't nearly the cook that Brighten had become or even as good at it as Crow seemed to be, but I was muddling through with the help of videos on YouTube and a little input from Griffin. Taco casserole was on tonight's menu, and I had no fucking idea what *that* entailed, but I was sure I could find something to help me.

I had just opened the search page when Crow called out his goodbye, and I looked up to see Griffin standing in the doorway.

"Hey, bud. Rough day?"

"Yeah," Griffin grumbled. He walked over to the bar and tried to shut my laptop, but I held it open.

"What are you doing?"

"No electronics."

"Pretty sure that doesn't apply to me. Don't touch my laptop."

"It's not fair that you get to look at stuff, and I don't," Griffin whined.

"I'm not the one that messed up, buddy. I'm not on restriction. You are."

Griffin sighed and sat on the stool next to mine before he asked, "What's for dinner?"

"The schedule says taco casserole, so I'm figuring out how to make that."

"I don't want taco stuff."

"Why not?"

"My throat hurts a little, and I don't want to scratch it."

"Okay, then let's figure out something else. What can we eat that's not scratchy?"

"Can we have soup?"

"Do we *have* soup?" I wondered as I shut my laptop and got up to check the pantry. I found a few cans and gave him

the options. Once we'd agreed on tomato soup and grilled cheese, I asked, "Do you dunk or tear it up and let it float?"

"I let it float. Can I have two sandwiches?"

"Sure," I conceded as I started looking for a pan. "Get the stuff out that we need for those, and I'll start the soup."

We worked together in silence, and I let Griffin stand on his stool to help me assemble the sandwiches.

While we waited on everything to cook, I asked, "Wanna work on your puzzle when we're finished?"

"Sure," Griffin said, his usual excitement nowhere to be found.

"Do you feel okay?" I asked. I studied his face and saw that his cheeks were more pink than usual, so I reached over and touched his forehead. "I can't tell if you're hotter than usual because my hands are cold."

"They feel good," Griffin sighed when I put my other hand up and cupped his cheeks. I knew something must be wrong.

"We can eat at the bar. Go clear the table, and I'll help you get the puzzle set up, okay?"

"Sure."

I sent a quick text to my mom asking her what I should do and then flipped the sandwiches and took the soup off the burner while I waited for her to reply. Once I had everything on the bar, I called Griffin over. He tore into his food like it was his last meal, so that answered one of the questions my mom sent back.

I sent the phone aside and finished eating, then helped Griffin get started on the puzzle before I went in search of a thermometer. Once I'd found it, I realized that the battery was dead, so it wasn't going to be of any use.

I went back into the dining room and found Griffin on his knees in his chair, leaning over to look at the puzzle pieces in the middle of the table. I inspected his face again before I asked, "Do you feel any better since you ate?"

He shook his head, so I sent another text to my mom asking if she could pick up another thermometer and then come over to help me figure out what was going on with my kid.

It still made me smile every time I called him that. It filled my heart with pride to see how far he and I had come in just a few short weeks. Considering he didn't even want to talk to me for the first week after Brighten and Crow explained our situation, I thought the fact that he and I were getting along so well now was almost magical.

While I was in prison, I'd imagined myself with Brighten and pretended that Griffin was my kid and not my brother's. Somehow, I'd gotten my wish. I hadn't gotten to experience her pregnancy or Griffin's infancy, but I was getting more than I'd ever thought was possible, and for that, I was eternally grateful.

Since Brighten and I had only been seeing each other for a month, we were obviously taking things pretty slow with stolen kisses in the pantry while Griffin was elsewhere in the house and late-night rendezvous after Griffin went to bed. The speed we were going made no difference to me. I was happier than I'd ever been and knew that she was the one for me.

I'd found my forever in her years ago, but I was just too damn stubborn and immature to realize it at the time. It wasn't often that someone got a second chance like this. I was willing to take it as slow as she wanted because I knew I wasn't going anywhere and we had the rest of our lives together.

We'd been working on the puzzle for about twenty minutes when Griffin gasped and looked up at me with wide eyes.

“What's wrong?”

“I don't feel good.”

“I know, bud. Gammy and Pap are gonna be here in just a bit with a thermometer to see if you have a fever. She's really good at taking care of kids, so she'll know what to do until your mom comes home.”



“I don’t think I can wait,” Griffin said in a weak voice.

“I don’t know what to tell you, little man. There’s nothing ...” My voice trailed off when Griffin’s eyes bulged. I opened my mouth to ask if he needed anything but didn’t manage to get a word out before he made a garbled noise and vomited like that fat guy who ate too many blueberry pies in *Stand By Me*.

I gagged as he continued to hurl. I didn’t want to think about what had landed in my mouth as I yanked him out of his chair and sprinted toward the bathroom. I didn’t know where the hell it was all coming from and asked God for answers as he continued to puke during our entire trip down the hall and into the bathroom.

By the time I got him settled in front of the toilet, he was finished and burped loudly before he burst into tears.

“I’m sorry,” Griffin wailed as he looked up at me. He was still leaning over the toilet with his hands on either side of the seat, thank God, because when he saw the condition I was in, he started dry heaving and leaned over the bowl.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” I chanted over and over again as I turned to look at myself in the mirror. It was so bad that I was afraid I’d lose it myself, and I wasn’t sure what to do.

“I don’t feel good,” Griffin wailed.

“I know, little man,” I said as I reached into the shower and turned the water on. “I’ll try and make it better.”

Griffin looked at me and gagged again, and I had to close my eyes and swallow hard a few times so I didn’t throw up all over him. When the water was warm enough, I gently helped him in so we could both stand under the spray.

Once we’d rinsed off, I told him to strip and drop his clothes into the corner of the shower. I washed his hair for him before I handed him the loofah and told him to wash his body. By the time my hair was clean, he was finished. I opened the shower door and told him to grab a towel while I finished.

“Get dried off and find some pajamas, okay?”

Griffin nodded and reached for one of the towels on the hook. With him taken care of for now, I went to work on myself.

As I took off my disgusting clothes, which I was going to put in a trash bag right along with his and then take them to the dumpster, Griffin dried off and wrapped himself in a towel before he walked out.

Once I was done, I quickly dried off and wrapped a towel around my waist before I went out into the crime scene that used to be the hallway of Brighten's house.

The smell hit me first, then I saw the mess. I wanted to cry at the thought of cleaning all that puke. I didn't know what the dining room looked like, but I could only imagine. I wasn't prepared for this at all.

Who could be?

I stood there, a little woozy since I was trying hard not to breathe, and considered my options. I was leaning toward burning it all down and helping Brighten rebuild, but I knew she might balk at that, so I had to come up with something else. I'd watched a show the other day about a team of people who cleaned up crime scenes and wondered if there was a local business like that I could call.

I knew that neither of those things were really feasible, so all that was left was for me to get to work. I peeked into Griffin's room and found him in his underwear, sprawled across his bed on top of the covers, sleeping like a baby. I'd never been jealous of a 5-year-old until now. I knew it wasn't a good look, so I tried to tamp it down.

I had work to do and standing here envying my child wasn't helping at all.

I was still wrapped in a towel on my knees in front of the trash can, having just finished dry heaving for the thousandth time, when the glass door slid open. I turned and looked at my parents and almost laughed at the look on their faces.

Dad gagged and then backed out the door onto the patio, but my mom was made of sterner stuff and put her hand over

her mouth before she asked, “I see that things have progressed since we talked.”

“Understatement,” I said, still out of breath from heaving. “I already cleaned up, it’s just the smell. Fuck this shit.”

I stood, and Mom shook her head. “I thought you’d stopped running around half-naked when you were a kid.”

“It was all over me, Griffin, the floor, the *walls*, everything.” I moaned, traumatized. “I don’t know how such a small person can hold so much. Oh fuck, it was bad. It was so bad.”

My dad’s laughter came in through the open door as my mom bit her lip to hold in a smile. She ended up laughing right along with my dad when he yelled, “Welcome to parenthood, my boy. The adventures are disgusting and endless.”

My mom finally got herself together, but started laughing again when I asked in a weak voice, “Help me?”

She straightened her back and started barking orders, just like she’d done when something like this happened when we were kids. Within just a minute, my dad was on his way to my house to get me some clothes, and my mom was off to Griffin’s room to take his temperature and see what might be wrong.

I tied the trash bag I was holding and then searched under the counter for something to conquer the horrific odor. By the time my dad got back with fresh clothes for me, I was walking around in a fog of air freshener that guaranteed to take away the worst smells imaginable.

I was pretty sure that was a lie because whoever invented that shit probably hadn’t lived through what we’d just suffered, but it was all I had. We’d have to make do.

I had just finished tying my shoes and my dad was walking in from taking out the trash when Mom came into the kitchen with a fully-dressed Griffin.

“I called Amethyst, and she’s still at the clinic. They closed half an hour ago, but she’s going to wait for us. He’s

got a pretty high fever along with a sore throat, and he says his ears hurt. I think we should get him seen tonight rather than wait until tomorrow,” Mom explained. “I already sent Brighten a text, and she said she’d meet us there.”

“I say we open a few windows and let this place air out while we’re gone,” Dad suggested as he raised the blinds at the window above the sink. “It smells like a field of wildflowers covered in puke next to a plastic factory.”

“I cooked my army men in the microwave and got a timeout,” Griffin explained.

“Well, that explains it,” Dad said before he slapped me on the shoulder. “Ain’t parenthood grand, son?”

“Don’t let your father scare you,” Mom warned. “The good outweighs the bad. Things like this happen when you least expect them just to keep you humble.”

“If that’s the case, then I’m more humble than I’ve ever been.”



## **BRIGHTEN**

I walked through the house, checking to make sure all the windows were locked after Bird had attempted to air the house out earlier and then made my way toward my bedroom where Hawk was saying goodbye to Griffin before he went to sleep.

I stopped when I got to the doorway and watched as Griffin and Hawk whispered to each other. They looked so much alike with their dark hair, so much different than my blonde.

While I was pregnant, I prayed every day that my child would inherit his father’s eyes rather than the heterochromia condition that gave me one blue eye and one green. My prayers hadn’t been answered, though. But Griffin’s white blonde hair had changed to a gorgeous rich brown just like Hawk’s.

“I’ve gotta go home, bud. Your mom’s ready for bed,” Hawk said before he kissed his forehead. He started to get out of bed, and Griffin clutched at his shirt.

“No, Hawk, I want you to stay with me,” Griffin whined. “You can sleep in bed with us.”

Hawk looked at me, and I nodded and said, “That’s fine. You guys get comfortable while I put on my pajamas.”

Hawk ran his hands over Griffin’s tousled hair. “Will that make you feel better?”

I heard them talking while I finished my nightly routine in the bathroom. By the time I walked back into the bedroom, Hawk had Griffin sprawled over his chest as he snored softly.

I turned off the lamp and then got under the covers, laying on my side so I could look at two of my favorite guys.

“I didn’t think I’d get to spend the night with him here for a while yet,” Hawk admitted.

“The other day, he asked if you were going to live with us or buy the house next door from Karen.”

“I thought her name was Margaret.”

“It is, but she’s a pain in the ass, so I call her Karen. She hates it, but it brings me joy.”

Hawk laughed softly and asked, “What did you tell him?”

“I said that I’d like for you to move in someday, but I wasn’t sure when that would be.”

Hawk smiled and reached across Griffin to rub his hand up and down my arm. “Any idea when someday might be?”

I laughed softly and asked, “What are your plans this weekend?”

“Are you sure that’s not too soon? I know you wanted to get to know each other first and ...”

“I’ve known you almost my whole life, Hawk. It’s not like you’re a stranger. I’ll admit that you’re different now, but so

am I. We've grown up since we were last together. If we had tried to make it work back then, it wouldn't have lasted."

"I think you're right, but I'm in it for the long haul now, Brighten. I hope you know that."

"I do."

"Someday, I'm gonna ask you to marry me."

"When you do, I'm sure I'll say yes."

"And someday, I'm gonna ask you if we can give this guy a little brother or sister."

I laughed softly and realized I wasn't as quick to say no to that as I would have been a few months ago. "I might consider it someday."

"I want to wait until my parole is finished, and I've got a little more experience under my belt at work, though."

"That's reasonable."

"That means I've got a little less than two years to get you to the altar and convince you to birth another Forrester spawn."

I grinned and said, "That's what he is, huh?"

"Oh, down to his bones."

"I can't believe my dreams are finally coming true," I whispered as I leaned over Griffin to give Hawk a kiss. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Bright Eyes. I think I always have."

# EPILOGUE

## TWO YEARS LATER

“Are you going to come out and watch?” I asked as I pulled Brighten into my arms.

“I’m not sure I’m up for that,” Brighten said before she took a deep breath, her face going pale with yet another wave of nausea. “I think I’m gonna ask your mom if I can lay down for a while.”

“Do you want me to stay with you?”

“No, Hawk. You’ve been waiting on this day for two years. I’m gonna have morning sickness whether you’re sitting next to me or out having fun with the guys.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. Your mom’s an old pro at morning sickness. She helped get me through it when I was pregnant with Griff too. She and the other women in your family have lots of experience and about a million remedies for me to try.”

“Okay. I’ll come in and check on you in a little bit.” I gave Brighten a kiss on the cheek, and then she turned to walk back into the house. I watched her go before I turned around to look at everyone getting ready to ride. I spotted Griffin and waved before I called out, “Are you ready, son?”

He shook his head as he walked toward me, and I thought about how much he’d grown and matured since I first met him in the chapel two years ago.

“Are you ready? You haven’t driven since before I was born, and I’m 7 now.”

“Believe me, it’s all gonna come back with no problem. It’s in our blood.”

“Whatever,” Griffin said as he rolled his eyes. We walked toward the ATV we’d built together, and he said, “I don’t think one’s driving ability is hereditary.”

“It sure is. Just look at the Bakers, the Earnhardts, the Andrettis ... Should I keep listing them out or have I proven my point?”

“There’s such a thing as nature versus nurture. Have you ever heard of that?”

“Put your helmet on to protect that big brain and strap yourself in, boy. You’re about to take the ride of your life.”

“That’s what people say when I’m driving.”

“I know. I’ve been your passenger for two years. I’ve got gray hair and PTSD to show for it.”

“Being the passenger is boring,” Griffin complained before he settled his helmet on his head. I helped him adjust his neck brace, then strapped him into his harness before I adjusted the netting over his window. “Don’t forget that you promised I’d get to take mine out too.”

“I won’t forget,” I assured him as I took my helmet from Crow. He grinned at me, and I winked before I put it on. Within just a minute, I was strapped in and he was adjusting the netting over my window. “Are you ready for me to show you how it’s done?”

“Shhh. I’m trying to take a nap over here.”

I laughed wickedly and started the engine. My brothers, father, grandfathers, and I had worked for hours on my ATV with Griffin right there in the thick of it, but I’d never test driven it. I’d always had one of them do that so I could follow my parole restrictions to the letter.

I’d been officially released four days ago, and since then, I’d taken my driving test and passed it with flying colors before I’d gone with my dad and grandfathers to pick out a truck of my own. I still had the money from the sale of my old car that Warren had invested for me, and I’d helped that nest egg grow with my salary from the law firm.

After I’d passed the bar, I made it my mission to show everyone, including myself, that I was more than capable of representing my clients in court. I had an excellent track record of wins under my belt already.



Brighten and I still hadn't picked a date for our wedding, and since she was already pregnant, I knew that it would be at least another year before I could drag her down the aisle. She was adamant that we take the poofy white dress and tuxedo route no matter how hard I'd tried to convince her to elope with me.

But I'd wait as long as she wanted and wear whatever she told me to as long as I could someday say she was my wife.

"You know what the difference is between my rig and yours, son?"

"You're driving it?" Griffin asked sarcastically.

I looked up and saw that more than one person already had their phone out, ready to record before I answered, "No one's got a shut-off for this thing, buddy. It's all me."

"What does that mean?" Griffin asked warily.

"Remember, if you can't take any more, just yell 'Beetlejuice,' and I'll stop."

"Whatever. Do your best, old man. I can take it."

I laughed and said, "We'll see."

He didn't make a sound when I hit the gas, but by the time I straightened the ATV out on the track and hit the first turn, he was gripping the bar in front of him like his life depended on it.

By the time we made it around the track the first time, I was in my element. By the second round, Griffin was beside himself. He was still holding onto the bar, but I could hear him laughing maniacally when he wasn't screaming in fear.

Yeah. He was my son alright, and I couldn't be more proud of him.

## **SEVEN MONTHS LATER**

"Look at you, big brother," Crow whispered as he touched my son's cheek. "How's she doing?"

"They gave her something to help her sleep about an hour ago," I said softly.

“How are *you* doing?”

“I’m ... stunned. Happy. Terrified. Just ... I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“I remember that,” Crow said as he took the baby out of my arms. He adjusted him in his arms like it was second nature, and I wondered if I’d be that comfortable any time soon. He stared down at my new son’s sleeping face and said, “Hello, Faulkner. I’m your uncle.”

I decided that there was no other way to get comfortable with it unless I practiced, so I picked my daughter up from the bassinet and held her in my arms just like I’d been holding her brother.

When the baby’s eyes opened, I was positive that she was staring right into my soul, and I smiled as I said, “Hi, Starling. I’m your dad.”

**THE END**

Please take just a few minutes to leave a review of this book on Amazon and feel free to share the link with your friends. I enjoy discussing my books and characters and would love to hear from you. Check out Cee Bowerman on Facebook. You can also find information about the author and her books on [www.ceebowermanbooks.com](http://www.ceebowermanbooks.com).

# COMING SOON

## **Hammer**

**(Time Served, Book 12)**

**COMING APRIL 1st, 2023!**

After a rough childhood, Hammer settled down to live the good life. He had a wife he adored, children he doted on, and even the house in the suburbs with the white picket fence. But most of all, he finally had the stability he longed for growing up.

When he made a decision to help a woman in need, that bliss was short-lived. What he thought was a horrible accident changed his life forever. Blinded by rage, he committed a crime that sent him to prison and gave him the nickname his brothers know him by now. He lost everything he'd worked so hard for while trapped behind those prison walls. He's been searching for that life again since the day of his release.

Pita learned early on that information was the key to her freedom, but she needed a little help to find a new life with her children. After meeting the only man she's found she could trust, she got that help but vowed to herself to repay that kindness however she could. When the man's life spun out of control, Pita stepped in and fulfilled her vow, changing the lives of everyone involved.

Now, it's Hammer's turn to rescue Pita, even though she's perfectly capable of rescuing herself and her children this time. Life's twists and turns in the years since they first met have formed a bond between them that neither wants to sever. If they're lucky, it will lead to a happiness neither had ever dared to dream of.

## About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over fifty published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

You can find her on Facebook @ceebowerman or online at [www.ceebowermanbooks.com](http://www.ceebowermanbooks.com).

Look for more fun romances in the coming months and get updates on the Facebook page for more information on characters and stories that are in progress.