



# BABY FOR DAD'S BEST FRIEND

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
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**BABY FOR DAD'S BEST  
FRIEND**

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## DAD'S BEST FRIEND: BOOK 12

LENA LITTLE

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Also by Lena Little

## PREVIEW

Why oh why did it have to be *him*?

When my dad's police officer partner catches me trying to act older than my eighteen years, he promises not to haul me down to the station, or tell my dad...but one promise I can't make in return is not getting turned on beyond belief when he teaches me a little over-the-knee discipline.

He's says it's for my own good, my own safety...but why does his heavy handed punishment feel so dangerously exciting against my skin?

He's giving me a lesson in adult responsibility, and all I can think about is giving him something I've been saving just for him, unknowing that it's going to lead to us both getting a surprise that neither one of us was expecting.

I've been hiding my secret fantasies for my dad's best friend my entire life, but one secret I can't hide is his baby.

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# CHAPTER 1

**T**he girl in the picture is perfect.

Yeah, I know. I know it's a damned silly thing to say and nobody is perfect. It's impossible, though, to see the curve of her face and not recognize the beauty, made doubly difficult because I know the curves of her face well and, more to the point, I know the curves of McKenzie's body. I know them well enough to have every millimeter of her etched into my mind, to see her in profile when she's comfortable at home and so she forgoes the loose clothing that hides her body. I know them well enough to envision the way her ass fills her jeans and draws my eyes at the worst possible times, times when I can't hide my attraction but must.

Like now. Like right now when the way my heartbeat accelerates, my pupils dilate, and my breathing grows a little rapid is just short of noticeable in the best of circumstances but obvious if I'm not careful.

"Granite, you good?" I curse and turn the switch on the radio that sends the volume to the earpiece in my ear instead of from the speaker on the handset. The voice belongs to the man who makes it impossible for me to show my attraction. Well, Hank Riley makes it undesirable, but I don't think God Himself can make it possible for me to hide it all the time.

"Good thing I'm still in your car, Hank," I say, "because I hadn't switched the earpiece on yet."

"Rookie mistake."

"Yeah, you've had your share."

My partner chuckles and says, “At least I won’t have to be rescuing your ass again.” It’s a running joke between us. For the last fourteen years, the number of times each of pulls the other out of danger is large enough it’s almost laughable. Hell, that’s gone on for longer than fourteen years, before our shields and before our Academy days, although our asses are in a hell of a lot more trouble as detectives than cadets, uniforms, or kids. I guess a lot of cops have someone they can claim saved their lives. I have Hank and Hank has me. It happens so damned often, we just end up laughing once the adrenaline drains.

From the back, Lopez says, “How come he calls you Granite? Should I call you that?”

“Rookies don’t get the privilege,” I respond and Thompson chuckles. Thompson isn’t a rookie, and he knows only Hank calls me Granite.

“All Good?” Hank asks over the radio. I look at the two others in the car with me. Lopez nods and so does Thompson.

“Count to twenty and send them out,” I say.

I slide out of the driver’s seat and say, “Guns out boys. Nice and easy now.” I say it for Lopez’s sake. This is likely the first time his service weapon is out of its holster. I take the picture from where it hangs on the rearview mirror and slip it into the glove compartment.

“Why did you do that?” Lopez asks.

Thompson says, “Because if any of these fuckers get away, we don’t want them to know what Riley’s daughter looks like.”

The reason I cannot show my attraction. Hank’s daughter. McKenzie Riley. Eighteen years old. Everything I want. Everything I need. She’s the one. Denying it makes no sense now, not now that she’s eighteen and I can’t just pretend she’s a child. She’s the one and she’s my best friend’s daughter. She’s my partner’s daughter. She’s the one.

And she’s completely unavailable to me.

“Abort,” Hank says suddenly, “Civilians. Too many.”

“Damn it,” I say.

“Can’t risk it,” he replies, “Not for this.”

“I know,” I say, “Holster your weapons, boys.” Hank’s right. We’re supposed to be arresting Donald French and his goons on charges that are minor in the hopes we can flip one or more of them and get to French’s fentanyl supplier. Any collateral injuries in the process won’t just bring a shitstorm down on our heads, it’ll be a storm we actually deserve.

I lean toward the glove compartment and then straighten up. I want to pull McKenzie’s picture out and hang it back on the rearview window, but I need to stop being so damned eager. I can feel my neck grow hot. I imagine it’s red and to keep anyone from realizing it has nothing to do with the situation, I curse. “Damn it! I wanted these guys.”

“I know, partner,” Hank says, “Clear out and we’ll meet back at the deli. Regroup and talk there.”

I start up the car, hoping the little outburst did the trick. I can feel my heart pounding, though. It always beats faster when I think of her but now it’s more about fear of discovery than anything else. I don’t know what I did in some past life to piss off God. I don’t know why he puts the perfect girl in front of me and makes her completely... what’s that damned word.

Crap. What is it? It comes from Hawaii, I think. No... No, it comes from another island, like in the South Pacific or something. It’s something forbidden. Tribespeople weren’t allowed to eat things for social reasons or because they were consecrated for priests. Why the hell can’t I think of the word? “For Christ’s sake,” I say.

“We’ll get these bastards,” Lopez says. He wants to prove he’s one of us.

I’m surprised the words came out of my mouth to prompt his. Damn it. I’m twisted up over this situation. “Yeah, kid,” I say, grateful anyway. McKenzie is definitely prohibited for social reasons, and I suppose she’s consecrated for some other guy, a man her age. She’s a complete...

“Taboo,” I say. That’s the damned word. *Taboo*.

“What?” Thompson asks. “What do you mean?”

Damn it all to hell! I stretch my neck a little and grab the steering wheel a little too tightly because I’m afraid they’re actually shaking a little. This situation with McKenzie is going to have to go away or it’ll come to a head. I turn the corner and try to come up with an answer. I see the sign for the strip club across the street from the deli, and it provides one. As I pull in next to my car, I say, “The strip club across town. Taboo Nights, I think.”

“Taboo Dreams,” Lopez says quickly. I turn the engine off and Thompson and I look at him, eyebrows raised. “I... I have a... I have a CI, there!” he says almost victoriously.

“Sure you do, kid,” I chuckle.

“What’s up with that club?” Thompson asks.

“I think French’s brother owns it,” I say. It’s true. His brother owns it legally but it’s probably a front to launder French’s money.

“You think French will go there?” Lopez asks.

“It’s a Hail Mary,” I say, “But I’m too pissed off to just go home.”

“You want us to go with you?” Thompson asks.

I shake my head. “No. Me alone, I’m just a cop at the club. They make two of us there...” I finish with a shrug. “You guys want coffee?”

They both want coffee, and they step out of the car. I reach into the glove compartment and try, and fail, not to look at the picture as I put it back on the rearview mirror. Then I step out and take a breath to steady myself. I remind myself the men aren’t in my head. They have no idea what drives my guilt or, for that matter, even that I’m guilty.

“Man,” Lopez says, “That girl is hot. I wouldn’t mind a few hours with her.”

I look around but I don’t see anyone. “Where? What girl?”

“Riley’s daughter.”

Hank and I often find ourselves in danger because of our line of work. In one sense, it's run of the mill, and I no longer spend sleepless nights shaking as we replay the day's gunfight in our heads. In another sense, I react the same now as I did as a fresh-faced rookie fourteen years ago. My pupils dilate, my senses enhance, and I am instantly aware of everything that happens around me with perfect clarity.

That is how I react now when Lopez mentions his attraction to McKenzie. The rest of the world fades around me and all I can see is Lopez in a sea of red while my own senses grow white-hot with anger. Before I can stop myself, I grab Lopez's shirt, slam him against the car, and say, "You think that's funny asshole? You want me to tell Hank what you said?"

The blood drains from Lopez's face and his eyes go wide as dinner plates. He puts his hand over mine and weakly tries to push me away, but adrenaline lends me strength and I don't move as he protests, his voice squeaking a little, "Man, let go! I was just saying she looks good! Obviously, I'm not gonna do anything!"

"Damn straight you won't," I growl at him. "Or I'll make sure you can't do anything with any girl ever again."

I feel Thompson's hand on my shoulder and my anger breaks instantly, replaced instantly by guilt. I allow Thompson to pull me away and avert my eyes while he says to Lopez, "Detective's daughters are off limits, asshole. Wives, too, in case any girl over fifteen would give you a second glance."

The danger passed, Lopez is no longer fearful and responds hurtfully, "What? I said I wasn't going to do anything. I just said she's hot. Don't tell me you haven't noticed."

"How about you stop talking for ten seconds, rookie?" Thompson says after a quick glance back at me. It's a good thing he glances back because he puts his hand on my chest as I step back toward Lopez. "You think you can do that? Can you shut the fuck up?"

Thompson directs his anger at Lopez, but his hand remains pressed against my chest, ready to hold me back if I throw myself at Lopez again. My guilt strengthens and fear mingles

with it as I realize my reaction was over the top for someone simply trying to protect his partner's daughter from the attentions of a rookie cop. I don't imagine Thompson suspects my true feelings, but I come too close to giving them away.

"I'm heading out," I say thinly, "You two enjoy your night."

"Yeah, see you later, man," Thompson says.

Lopez says, "What about Riley?"

"He has Stone's phone number."

Thompson keeps his hand on my chest until I back away and get back into my car. Then he leads Lopez away by the arm. The dejected rookie pauses as though to say something else to me and Thompson pulls him away.

I drive to Taboo Dreams and regret the events of the evening the entire way. I don't actually want to go to the club. Even if French is there, there's no way I'll bring him in by myself. I want to just head home except that Lopez might want to show up and apologize and I want to make sure I'm where I said I would be.

Poor Lopez. He shouldn't have said what he said, but there was no reason for me to jump on him like that. Thompson's reaction was appropriate, the kind of reaction a veteran cop would have to a rookie overstepping his boundaries. My reaction was uncalled for, the kind of reaction a man would have to someone objectifying his lover.

I sigh and lift my hand, letting it fall back onto the steering wheel. "Dammit," I swear softly.

I can't get away with those kinds of outbursts. I need to do a better job of controlling myself. Besides, Thompson's right. Detective's daughters are off limits and that includes me.

I round a corner and stop when I see a commotion going on in an alleyway to my left. I frown and when I get closer, my frown turns into an expression of shock that almost immediately turns to anger.

McKenzie stands in the alleyway with two men dressed in the typical slovenly bad boy outfit of violent insecure tweens who

think they look tough in ragged hoodies and jeans three sizes too big for them. She stands with her back on the wall of the alley, looking down at her feet and hugging her arms to her chest. She is dressed in a skirt that is shorter than most panties with stiletto heels and a tight halter top that clearly shows off her incredible upper body. She never dresses this way. Ah... there's a long jacket on the ground by the men.

She's dressed like she's advertising herself and these men are responding to that advertisement and not accepting any other answers. I park next to the alley so I block the exit and step out of the car. I don't put the light on the top of the car and I don't turn it on. I don't want them to know I'm a cop until it's too late.

The taller of the two men looks at me. When he sees me, he smiles non-threateningly and says, "Hey, Officer, nothing to worry about here. I'm just taking my sister home."

"She's not your sister, shit face," I say.

He frowns and opens his mouth to speak, but my fist connects with his jaw before he can say anything more. He hits the ground with a thud and remains motionless. His companion shows signs of at least one or two working brain cells when he sprints past me, leaping onto my car's hood, sliding across, and taking off down the street.

I turn to McKenzie, who looks at me with a worshipful expression that does nothing to help me control my feelings for her. "Are you hurt?" I ask.

She shakes her head and I say, "Use words to answer me, McKenzie."

I don't change my tone or put any kind of command in my voice, but she gasps and blushes and her tone of voice when she says, "No, Grant, I'm not hurt," betrays an attraction to me that I can't acknowledge.

So, I don't acknowledge it. I decide that she doesn't feel what she so obviously feels and there's no reason for me to think about it anymore.



That works about as well as I might imagine it does and there's a little more irritation in my voice when I say, "What happened? What the hell were you doing with these guys?"

McKenzie hangs her head and shrugs, her lip pooched out in a pout. "I was just having fun. I was at the eighteen-plus club up the street and these guys said they had some alcohol for me, so I followed them outside."

I need to address that, but I don't address it right away because the kid I knocked out begins to stir and moan. I look down at him with disgust before I reach down and lift him to his feet.

"Get in the goddamned car, Mack," I say as I drag him that direction, "And get your damned jacket."

At the car, though, I let him go. If I bring him along, I'll need to bring him to the station. If I bring him to the station, that means McKenzie comes along. I'll be damned if she catches hell about this from Hank. I'll be damned if she catches hell about this from anyone...but me.

## **CHAPTER 2**

**T**his isn't the first time Grant Stone saves me. It isn't even the thousandth time. Of course, it's the first time he does it in the real world and not in my idle daydreams or far less idle night dreams. What do you call the kinds of dreams that you intentionally manufacture in your head while you...

Okay, I'm embarrassing myself.

Let's just say this is the first time he actually saves me, but I have a great many fantasies that all start out with him rescuing me from this danger or that danger. My repertoire includes hostage situations, near misses from busses and trains, kidnappings, and unrest in the streets. I occasionally think about being lost in the woods only to see his perfect form crest a hill to rescue me. When the heroines in the books I read are rescued by the heroes, I am the heroine and Grant Stone is always the hero.

In all my daydreams, night dreams, and other dreams, something always follows my rescue.

I can say if you somehow magically see all of my fantasies from start to finish one right after the other. I'd end up embarrassed about the adolescent schoolgirl rom-com stuff, giggly about the more recent contemporary romance inclinations, and utterly horrified that anyone knows about the fantasies that involve post-rescue activity far more fit for movies with titles like *Eighteen-Year-Old Girl Fucked Hard by Cop* or *Teen Services Older Man*.

Yeah, I sometimes watch those movies. Whenever I do, I think of Grant. I think of Grant and imagine myself in those movies. I certainly don't have any experience of my own to imagine. That's doubly dumb if you consider that I don't have the skinny, perfect bodies of any of the girls in those movies. Nice people call me curvy or voluptuous. Mean people call me, well, much meaner things. Go ahead and really think of me as stupid but I'm saving myself for him.

Or my husband, I guess, if I ever finally accept that I can't have Grant...an admission of sanity that won't come anytime soon.

But in all the fantasy rescues, all the times I owe Grant Stone my life, not once do I imagine that what happens next is me waiting nervously and guiltily in the passenger seat and hoping like hell my father doesn't find out about the rescue.

My God, I'm stupid!

I know I ought to feel stupid for putting myself in that situation. I'd like to say that's why I feel stupid now but if I do, I'll be lying. I mean, I guess it's fair to say it never occurs to me a guy might want a girl like me. I mean, I guess in general I don't imagine anyone having ulterior, sexual motives when I'm the girl in question. Still, I know I ought to feel stupid about that. I don't. It's another reason. I feel stupid because my nipples are hard as hell despite my nervousness as I think about the way Grant's body moved, how he dealt with... with... My God, I don't even know those guys' names! I put myself in danger with guys I don't know and my reaction is just to consider how images of Grant rescuing me will provide fresh, new direction to fantasies when I manage to get some time alone.

"Get up and out of the car, Mack," Grant says, opening the door to his place, not mine. It makes me hope he's not going to tell my dad. He's the only person who calls me Mack. I don't know why he settles on that. My parents call me by my full name. I'm Kenzie to my friends.

I stare at him for a second and then ask, "What happens next?"

“Damn it, get up,” he replies, “This isn’t a conversation. Get on your feet now.”

I blanch at his tone, but it also brooks no disobedience, so I step out of the car. This isn’t the first time my heart beats irregularly in Grant’s presence but it’s the first time the tone of his voice scares me. He takes hold of my upper arm and pulls me along. “That hurts!” I whine. It’s not entirely true. I mean, if he drags me another two hundred feet or so, his tight grip will hurt. For now, it stings me nowhere near my arm.

“Good,” he replies and continues to drag me along, “I probably ought to take you inside, bend you over my knee, and show you something that really hurts.”

“I didn’t ask you to jump in like I needed some... some... body to rescue me.” Wow. That’s the best I could come up with? It’s also irritating to start out with plenty of vitriol and irritation and just fall flat, embarrassed by blanking on the appropriate vocabulary. It’s like I start out heavy metal and end with some children’s song about baby animals.

He pulls me along and drags me up the stairs. Okay, he doesn’t actually drag but the point is, I have to scramble like crazy to keep from ending up flat on my face. He doesn’t let go of my arm as he fishes in his pocket for a key, and I just feel like an idiot. I mean, I’m in trouble. I’m in big trouble, especially if he tells my father.

But when Grant manhandles me, I feel like I can just float away.

He gets the door open and pulls me inside. He doesn’t bother turning on the light, but he knows where we’re going. We take some steps and then I gasp when he swings me almost violently and I hurtle forward, landing on something soft and turning around with a yelp. “What the hell?”

The light switches on and I see his eyes stare down at me with a fierce expression that sends a thrill through me from head to toe. “What were you thinking, Mack?” he says, “How could you put yourself in that situation? You think it’s cool to dress like some slut and parade around with strange boys? You could have gotten hurt! Hell, you could have gotten killed!”

Everything he's saying is right, but my hurt and anger outweighs my guilt and I stand so I'm inches from his face and shout, "I'm not a slut! Fuck you!"

His eyes grow dark, and he sits down on the couch. The look in his eyes is so... God, I don't know the word for it but *terrifying* is a pretty good possibility. It's impactful enough that I can't react. I just stare at him. He says quietly—and speaking quietly is more frightening than if he screams—as he looks at me, "I didn't say you're a slut, Mack. I said you dressed like a slut. If you were a slut, dressing like one wouldn't be a problem."

I swallow hard. I don't know what the hell is happening but I'm afraid of it. "Are you going to tell Dad?" I whisper.

"That's up to you," he says, "I can either tell your father or you can do what I tell you to do." When he says those words, my nipples turn into bullets, the response involuntary. The idea that he might blackmail me into sex is arousing only in the crassest way. As I process his words, my body reacts with excitement, but my mind reacts with terrible disappointment.

If this man drives me to my house and then just takes my body without a word, I think I'll love it. If he goes through a process of seducing me, I'll love that, too. If he even says something about teaching me what happens to girls who dress like sluts whether or not they want it to happen, I definitely love it. I mean, sweet and beautiful with Grant is a breathtaking idea. Rough and demanding with Grant is an even more amazing idea.

But I can feel the horrible loss of Grant turning out to be someone other than the man I worship. I agree to his terms more out of a defeated sense of grief than because I don't want my father to know about my stupid adventure. "Okay," I say softly, "You can do whatever you want to me." My hands shake as I take hold of my blouse and start to lift it up.

"Stop!" Grant says angrily. "I don't want you to take your clothes off for God's sake. Get over here!" I'm confused as heck now, but I walk closer. He grabs my arm, and his movements are so fast, I don't really feel like he pulls me over

his lap as much as I feel like I'm just, I don't know, teleported there. "I'm not telling you to screw me, for God's sake," he says.

I don't know what's going on. He moves my body, and my butt kind of ends up over his leg. Maybe I'm just stupid but I'm further confused when he lifts my skirt up so my rear end is exposed. How is that not getting ready to screw me. "I'm going to do what I sure as hell hope Hank would do if I told him." What my father would do? What in the world is going on? My father most certainly isn't going to lift up my skirt and pull my panties off.

Pull my panties off.

Grant doesn't do that. I think everything finally makes sense the instant before his hand impacts with my ass cheeks. I guess it makes me doubly dumb that I actually fantasize every now and then about Grant spanking me but still don't realize that's his intention until his arm swings down for the first spank. How do I not anticipate it when he tells me he should do it when he drags me into the house? I yelp when it impacts, suddenly knowing what's going on is very small comfort.

Dear God, that spank hurts!

In all my fantasies about Grant spanking me, it's sexy but it's not like this, not like a real spanking, for Pete's sake. The only reason I don't immediately burst into tears and only let out a surprised yelp is because I'm so shocked by how absolutely painful it actually is.

This is so insane. I finally find myself alone with Grant and instead of getting my brains screwed out, I'm getting them spanked out. It's so unbelievable that I don't fully believe it until his hand falls a second time and another searing bolt of pain convinces me in no uncertain terms that this really is happening.

"Grant!" I cry when his hand falls a third time.

He shows no mercy, not even when the next spank brings the tears that my shock delays. When one of my hands moves instinctively to protect my ass, he grabs it with his other hand

and forces it up behind my back and holds it there while he continues to spank me.

“It hurts!” I cry out, more out of instinct than an actual desire to complain.

“Not as much as it would hurt if I didn’t get to you before those boys did,” he growls.

That realization hits me hard. I don’t go silent, because each spank continues to send lightning bolts of pain up my spine, but other than the cries I release when his hand falls, I no longer speak or complain.

I guess my mind just kinda blocks out what would have happened if Grant hadn’t rescue me. At the time, I was afraid of course, but I didn’t think of the specifics of why I’m afraid. I only know those boys meant to use me even if they had to hurt me, but I don’t think of exactly what they planned on doing to me.

I think of that now and though my ass feels like someone presses a branding iron to it, I realize that Grant is right. This is nothing compared to what I would feel like if those boys managed to get away with what they wanted to do.

Finally, Grant says, “All right,” and lifts me off of his lap. He picks me up and gently sets me down on the couch, then adjusts me so I am comfortable. The contrast between his sternness and roughness only a moment ago and his tenderness now is powerful and though my ass still throbs like crazy, my tears subside.

“All right, McKenzie,” he says again. “I’m going to drop you off. I suggest you stay home the rest of the night and you better not let me catch you doing anything stupid like that again.”

I’m too overwhelmed by everything that happens tonight to put together a coherent response, but I do manage to nod and say, “Okay,” in a soft, barely audible voice.

Grant nods and though his scowl remains, I see something else behind his eyes. Something that looks almost like...lust?



No, that can't be it. If he wants me, he can take me right now. It must be more of that tenderness he shows when he helps me to my feet. My rear end hurts like hell then and it hurts like hell when I have to sit on it in the car. It still hurts when he gets me home and it hurts when he walks me to the door. He remains until I lie down on the couch, a little devastated that it's only my imagination that allows me to hope there's anything there other than kindness and concern for his best friend's daughter.

He leaves without another word, and I lie on the couch and try to wrap my head around everything that happened to me tonight.

I've been attracted to Grant ever since I first meet him. I've wanted him since I was twelve years old, even though in a much different way at the time. At that age, I don't really see him the way I see him now, but I recall how handsome he looked and how my heart flutters whenever he smiles at me.

He's the first person to make me feel confident.

I suppose that's not exactly true. My parents love and encourage me and tell me repeatedly that I can be whatever I want to be, but they're my parents. They're supposed to say that. I know that's shitty of me to think, but it's true. They're supposed to encourage me, so while I know they believe what they say, it's hard to believe them when they're the only people who say it.

I want to be a journalist. Ever since I was a kid and I read comic books about the superhero with the reporter girlfriend, I wanted to be a reporter. I want to bring into the light the hidden things in the world and I want to give people the information they need to make good decisions about their lives.

My classmates make fun of me, of course. They tell me that reporters are supposed to be smart, so why would a dumb girl like me think I can be a reporter? Well, I tell Grant one day when he visits what they say and not only does he very seriously tell me they're wrong and not to believe a word they say, he goes shopping and returns an hour later with a book on

journalism and a subscription to a leading news periodical that I still have. He not only encourages me, he gives me the tools I need to succeed and I will always love him for that.

He's also the first person to make me feel beautiful.

I doubt he remembers my fourteenth birthday. He probably doesn't remember finding me in my room, crying on my bed with my phone open to a text from a classmate saying he's not coming to my birthday party because he only goes to pretty girls' birthday parties. He probably doesn't remember putting his arm around me and telling me that I'm beautiful and if that boy can't see it, then he doesn't deserve my time.

He has no way of knowing that I hang onto those words for the rest of my life and whenever I feel discouraged or down on myself, I hear his voice tell me I'm beautiful and amazing and it gives me the strength to make it through whatever struggle I face.

And of course, he has no way of knowing that ever since that conversation, I have eyes for no one but him. That night at fourteen was the first time I fantasized about sex and Grant Stone was the hero of that fantasy and every fantasy I've had since then.

A lot of high school boys miss out after that. Not long after Jimmy Heinz tells me I'm too ugly for him to attend my birthday party, it becomes clear to me that he's in the minority of boys in my school. I think I turn down over a hundred boys in high school. Of course, I know part of why I'm asked out so much is that I have a pretty face but not a perfectly skinny body. The boys think of me as attainable.

They're wrong, though. Even though I harbor no illusions about my looks and my body, I'm completely unattainable. They're nice enough boys, but they're boys, with all of the immaturity, silliness and let's be frank, stupidity of boys. Grant Stone is a man and when your every dream of love and sex is a dream of a man, no boy on Earth can compare.

I shake my head at myself. Why on Earth did I go to the club? I don't even like clubs. They're loud and full of obnoxious drunk people who jostle and bump into you and men who

think it turns girls on to whisper gross things into their ears with breath that smells like beer and steak fries. I don't even remotely like those boys and on the rare occasions I drink, I like to drink at home where I can curl up with a good book and a pint of ice cream.

Instead, I put myself in serious danger and the first time I'm alone with Grant, he has to spank me for essentially being an idiot. Way to go, McKenzie. If he didn't think of you as that same dorky child of four years ago, he definitely does now.

Then again, there was that look in his eyes. I know it's dangerous to hope that the lust I imagine isn't my imagination after all, but as the throbbing in my ass cheeks prompts an even more powerful throbbing in my pussy, my hand slides in between my legs and I decide it can't hurt to dream.

Except it hurts like hell to move my ass off the cushions of the couch when I remember it's a better idea to go upstairs to my room.

## **CHAPTER 3**

**T**his is my sanctuary.

I realize most people will look at this place and wonder how in the world anyone can think of it as a sanctuary. I realize most people won't understand how a guy can pack up his car and drive four hours to get to a place like this, a place that doesn't look like a sanctuary at all.

It's a summer camp. My mind is filled with summers here from the age of seven all the way up to eighteen. I come here probably once every two months now, and it's just to use the gun range. The camp is still owned by same family and the current manager is the grandson of the couple who managed it in my youth. He and I took our first shots right here on this range years and years ago, and unless he's out of the area I know he'll show up at some time today.

Of course, I'm not shooting a .22 these days. I do have three .22 guns, two rifles and one handgun, but they're in the gun safe at home. Today, I have my service piece, a Smith and Wesson, and I have my personal handguns, a Glock and a Sig-Sauer. I also have two hunting rifles. People can go ahead and think I'm a gun nut if they want but I don't really care how they feel. I'm a cop and I come to this range in order to keep my skills up and to get my mind in order. There's nothing to bring the world back into focus like having to focus on a target.

And I sure as hell need to bring the world back into focus.

That's why I don't tell Hank I'm here. Any time I head out to this place, there's a fifty-fifty chance he's coming with me and he's why I can't focus. Well, at least he's why the images in my mind won't let me focus.

There's an image in my mind that won't go away. Okay, there are two images. The first, of course, is the image of Mackenzie's beautiful, perfect ass. I'm only human and when she's bent over my lap and I'm spanking her the sight of her is seared into my head. That image certainly refuses to leave my head for long but what I really see is her face, her eyes open in surprise and her lips closed over a wooden spoon in a bemused smile. That moment is at her graduation dinner.

The bemused smile comes as she tries beef tartare for the first time at her first fancy restaurant ever. The look of shock is when the flavor hits her, and she realizes she loves it. The image of her fills my mind because that's the moment I realize I want her desperately. That moment happens about three minutes after she thanks me for a gas gift card she receives on her birthday and it occurs to me it's not just Mack's graduation we're celebrating. It's also not just her birthday. It's her *eighteenth* birthday. She's eighteen and nine days old, suddenly an adult, my partner's daughter instead of my partner's kid. That epiphany hits me and then the waiter arrives with the tartare. I dare her to try and that wide-eyed look is my reward.

I feel awkward for the rest of the dinner, of course. How do I celebrate with my best friend and his wife the academic success of his daughter when I can't get thoughts of her as a love interest out of my mind? I guess to an extent that awkwardness is still present here with me in the middle of the desert with my weapons arranged on the old table behind me and my Glock in my hand with a full magazine and two more on the counter in front of me.

I lift it and aim at the hanging metal tube about forty or fifty yards away. As I empty the magazine and hear the twelve reports and the twelve clangs that tell me I hit the target, I realize my mind isn't really doing a very good job of quieting down. Part of the problem is just that I'm a good shot. In fact,

that's a big part of the problem. With a semi-automatic handgun, aiming and firing is just second nature for me now. It doesn't require any real concentration, which means it doesn't really require much thought or clarity.

Still, when I decide to fire three magazines, I fire three magazines, not one. I pop out the empty, slide the next in, and empty it at the target. I do the same with the third and then grab one of the rifles. It's a 30/30, which is a good rifle but essentially an early version of hunting rifles compared to later types. The 30/30 is probably still so popular primarily because so many grandfathers teach their sons and grandsons with them. I only still fire it because it's my grandfather's, passed down to me. I don't use a scope, so I actually have to pay attention as I fire at an old, five-foot metal CO2 cannister long empty and battered with bullet holes. The camp paints it bright yellow every five or six months.

I don't use a scope because the whole point is to make me focus. I pull the trigger guard to chamber a round and fire.

And I miss.

I can't recall the last time I miss that target. I certainly don't have any misses at that target since becoming an adult. This situation with Mack has me a hell of a lot more twisted up than I want to admit. I carefully aim and pull the trigger.

You have no idea how good it feels to hear the bullet ricochet from the cannister.

"You want to try the fishing hole next?" I don't turn around, but I smile at the sound of Jacob's voice. "I can get you a pole if you didn't bring one."

"Why would I want to stop doing something I'm so much better than you at just so you can beat me at fishing?" I cock and fire my rifle repeatedly until all the bullets are spent. I hit every time. Hell, twisted up about Mack or not, a guy doesn't want to miss a chance to do some dick measuring with a buddy, right?

"Yeah, I saw you miss your first shot," he says.

I sigh. Of course, he sees that. “Just because I knew you were there,” I say, “and I wanted to give you hope.”

“Whatever it takes for you to feel okay about yourself,” he replies, “Mary’s putting lunch on the table, you hungry?”

“Don’t you have campers?”

“You think you’d be shooting today if there were campers?”

“Sure, I would,” I reply. “Hell, you’d probably introduce me and trick me into giving a shooting lesson.”

“You should,” he says, “You’d be good at it.”

I chuckle and aim the rifle again. This shot once more hits the target and after the ring of the spent shell dies, I say, “Yeah, I don’t think so. I can just imagine the first time some knucklehead kid forgets to safety his rifle or sets it down with the barrel pointing anywhere other than downrange. I’d probably rip the poor kid’s head off.”

“Hey, that’s not a bad way to learn gun safety,” Jacob says, “That’s how my dad taught me.”

“Yeah, me too.” I shrug, then aim the rifle again. “You have a point there.”

*Crack. Twang.* Another shot on target.

“So, what brings you to my neck of the woods?” he asks.

“Do I have to have a reason to visit an old friend?” I counter.

“Well, you went straight to the shooting range without so much as a text letting me know you were coming, and you refused dinner with me and Mary, so—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I say. “I ain’t refusing anything. Let me fire this last shot and I’ll be right over. Lasagna today?”

“Scampi,” he replies. “They had fresh shrimp at the fish market today.”

“Since when do you shop at a fish market?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Mary does. On the coast.”

“She drove five hours to the fish market?”



“Once a week. She keeps it on ice on the way back. She’s talking about getting one of those coolers you plug in for the trunk. She started watching cooking shows and now she’s on a roll making gourmet meals every day.

I fire my final shot, nodding in satisfaction when a fresh nick appears in the center of the target I aim at. I eject the spent shell, safety the rifle and set it on the rack to let the barrel cool before I pack it up. “You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Hey, I don’t mind eating like a king every now and then,” he says, “But I wouldn’t mind mac and cheese once in a while either. I’m a man of simple tastes.”

“Well, I’ll make sure to let Mary know you said that,” I say.

“You do and I’ll show you the proper way to shoot a rifle,” he retorts. “Speaking of which, leave your guns here. You know how Mary is about weapons in the house. You can pick them up on your way out. Nobody else is here and the dogs are out.” What he means is his seven mutts will tear the throats out of anybody who approaches the range. The guns are safe.

I follow him to a little golf cart parked just outside the firing lanes. It’s the same as any golf cart you would find at a golf course or city park anywhere in the world, except this golf cart has thick knobby tires on it like it was designed to trek through swamps and not ferry lazy people across a few hundred yards of compact dirt.

The cart takes us about a quarter mile up the hill to an old wooden ranch house that was probably built right around the time California became a state. This house has been in Jacob’s family since back when revolvers came with ramrods and Jacob maintains it as lovingly as though it were family, which, I suppose it is, at least as far as he’s concerned.

Mary greets me with a smile and a warm hug, and, as she always does when she sees me, clucks her tongue and says, “You never eat, Grant. Come, sit down. Dinner’s almost ready.”

“Thank you, Mary,” I say with a smile, “And may I say that pregnancy has treated you very well.”

She rolls her eyes, but there's a smile on her face as she heads to the kitchen to serve dinner. Mary grew up with me and Jacob, but ever since she and Jacob marry, she's stepped into the role of surrogate mother and most of our conversations now are repeated assurances that I'm eating and sleeping well and spending enough time outside.

I don't mind it. It's nice that people feel concern for me, even if it's a little more than is warranted.

Mary returns with two plates piled high with angel hair pasta and shrimp in a savory garlic butter sauce. I take a bite and my eyes widen in appreciation. "Damn, Mary," I say, "This is delicious. I hook a thumb at Jacob and say, "Hey, if you ever get tired of this asshole, I have a nice view of downtown from my apartment."

She laughs and says, "Well, thank you, but as much as this one's stoicism gets on my nerves, I'd rather put up with that than your constant moodiness."

"Hear, hear," Jacob says. He looks closely at me, and I catch an unreadable expression cross his face, but he doesn't say anything.

Dinner allows me the break from my thoughts that shooting doesn't. I enjoy two helpings of the scampi—which really is delicious—and make small talk with the two of them. After dinner, I offer to help clean up, but Mary declines, by which I mean she physically pushes me out of the kitchen and warns me not to come back unless I want a frying pan-shaped dent in my skull.

I elect to avoid head trauma and instead follow Jacob to his front porch. He packs tobacco into a corncob pipe that—like everything else here—is old enough to be on a first-name basis with Abraham Lincoln.

"That stuff will kill you someday," I say.

He flicks his lighter and takes two puffs out of the pipe, holding the smoke in for a second before breathing it out with a satisfied sigh. "It'll have to get in line," he says. "There's at

least one mountain lion and several hundred idiot shooters who are more likely to do the deed before the smoke does.”

He takes another puff, then says, “So who’s the girl?”

“What girl?” I say.

He looks at me with an expression that is very appropriate for such a stupid question and doesn’t say anything.

I sigh and say, “There’s no girl, man.”

“Bullshit,” he says, “I’ve known you for thirty years and this is the first time I’ve seen you miss from fifty yards with that carbine of yours.”

I sigh and say, “There’s a girl, but there can’t be a girl.”

“What does that mean?” he asks. “She either exists or she doesn’t.”

“Yeah,” I reply. “I know.”

Thankfully, he doesn’t press the issue. We stand there for a while and I finally say, “That’s enough tobacco sidestream for me. I’m heading back to the range.”

He nods and says, “Take the cart. You can just leave it there when you’re done.”

A couple hundred rounds later, I still know. She either exists or she doesn’t.

The problem is McKenzie most definitely exists and I’m having a hell of a time pretending she doesn’t.

## CHAPTER 4

I'm not thinking clearly.  
It's that simple.

I'm not thinking clearly because when I think clearly, I don't do stupid ass things like showing up at my partner's house when I know he's on a rare and desperately needed weekend out of town with his wife. I certainly don't show up bringing tools borrowed a week ago and 'just happen to see them' when I park my car in the garage.

The power drill and the belt sander are just an excuse.

He won't see them until Monday so why I am I at his house now at six o'clock on Friday? What possible reason is there for me to do that when I drop Hank and Marjorie off at the airport at four, and know I'm the one who will be picking them up on Sunday night? Really, if I need to get the tools back to him, it makes a lot more sense to just have them in my car when I bring him home after his weekend.

But that isn't going to give me a chance to see his daughter.

Maybe I need to reevaluate that thought. Delivering the drill and sander when I pick him up won't give me the chance to *be alone* with the girl I have no business being alone with. How can I even try and pretending I'm not heading over here just to see my best friend's daughter and not in an innocent dad's-best-friend kind of way? There's no excuse for how my mind is working and there's no excuse for this behavior. There's just no excuse at all, and I feel disgusted with myself.

But not disgusted with myself enough to turn around when I get to Hank's street and not disgusted enough to keep from pulling into the driveway. At least I have the presence of mind to carry the drill and the sander when I go up to the front door and ring the doorbell. I know the supposed purpose of my visit is silly fiction, but I like that I can at least pretend the fiction is something real, can at least act like there's something to it.

Ring the doorbell I wait, my heart hammering in my chest as I know I shouldn't be here. Thoughts of turning around and going don't enter my mind, which is more troubling than if they had.

Tapping my foot I prepare to ring the bell again, but it's not necessary. The thick slab swings open and there she is... wearing shorts.

I suck in a breath of air and immediately my pants tent. Her shorts are Daisy Duke's and I can only see the very bottom of the hem because she's also wearing an oversized tee-shirt. She looks sexy and innocent, and it really gives me pause because how in the world am I supposed to pretend I'm here for any other reason than to see her looking sexy and innocent?

She looks at me and I see her face transform from placid quiet to surprised joy but almost immediately, it changes to a scowl. "Are you here to prove you're a man?" she asks.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I mean, are you here to prove you can spank a grown woman?"

I know she's trying to anger me, which makes the way my cheeks heat up, my eyes narrow, and my heart beats rapidly piss me off. "My experience so far is only spanking children," I reply.

I feel far too satisfied with how she looks stunned, like she's been slapped. "Well then, why the hell are you here?" she asks. Jesus, she's beautiful when she's angry.

"I'm returning your father's tools," I say. Then, I step past her and into the house, "Excuse me."

As I walk toward the kitchen, which has a door to the garage, she says, “Excuse you? Excuse you for just walking into my house without an invitation, you mean?”

I stop and turn around. “This house belongs to my best friend, not his spoiled and entitled daughter.” Again, she looks like she’s been smacked, and this time, her expression isn’t just beautiful. It’s frightening. The withering stare she gives me makes me happy I’m between her and the kitchen knives.

She takes a breath and says calmly, “You can leave the tools on the table. I’ll put them away.”

“I’ll put them back where I found them,” I reply. Her eyes almost seem panicked at my response. I have no idea why.

I turn and walk through the kitchen but before I pass the refrigerator, her hand is on my arm. “Grant, please. Wait.” I turn and look at her. There’s no anger at all now. There’s fear, though. Nervousness, perhaps.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. I can’t make my voice as gentle as I want to when I ask.

“I... I’m sorry for getting mad. I’m sorry for saying you... I know you weren’t trying to prove you were a man.”

I can’t tell if she’s sincere. I hate that I can’t tell. I give her the benefit of the doubt, though, and I nod. “You’re young,” I say softly, “And young people make mistakes.” I can see a bit of anger in her eyes at the words, but she doesn’t say anything until I turn around and add, “Let me get these tools back and we’ll forget about what happened.”

Then, she says, “Wait!” and grabs my shoulder. I turn around and before I can react, her mouth is on mine, one of her hands still on my shoulder and one hand on my cheek. Her tongue slips tentatively past my lips and the moment is almost like some kind of electric shock.

And brief.

She pulls back suddenly and stares at me. Her face almost shows horror at her behavior. I have no idea what she sees in my face, but I imagine she sees something similar because I’m

most certainly horrified at letting her kiss me and regretting that it ended so quickly.

Neither of us speak.

We just stare at each other.

Finally, I say, “You’re playing with fire, little girl, and that’s a good way to get burned.”

I don’t know how in the world she says the best possible thing, or worst possible if I let myself think rationally. She says, “You’re burning, too.”

The drill makes a loud thump as it hits the tile. The belt sander is a little quieter because I’m positioned so when I drop it, it lands on the little rug McKenzie’s mother has in front of the kitchen sink. Neither of us look where the tools drop. Our eyes don’t leave each other’s face until they close when my mouth reaches hers and this time the kiss is going to last until I’m damned good and ready for it to end.

There’s a movie from when I was a kid about a princess bride about to marry an evil prince. The guy who plays Detective Columbo is a grandfather in the movie reading the story to his grandson, the boy from a sitcom when I was a kid. Who cares about the story. It’s a funny fairytale, I guess. The important part is the end, when the grandfather reads the part when the princess and the pirate who rescues her kiss. The guy says, “Since kisses were invented, there are only three of them that can be called perfect, passionate, and pure. This one left them in the dust,” or something like that, anyway. If that makes four perfect kisses in the world, there are five now.

The way the kiss begins is almost exploratory, almost like a continuation of the test kiss from before. It doesn’t take long before any hesitance on McKenzie’s part disappears, though. She goes from kissing me to being kissed. Any defenses this girl might possess disappear. Her guards come down. Her gates open. Any other way you want to put it, there’s nothing happening at the moment for her but me. Since my world is distilled down to Mack and Mack alone, I’m completely happy with that.



Perfect. Passionate. Pure.

And then the front door opens, and Hank says, “What the hell is Grant doing over here?”

McKenzie and I back away from each other and there’s that look of terror on her face again. “I didn’t need you bitching about me borrowing your tools and never returning them,” I say as I reach down and pick up the drill and the sander.

McKenzie says, “Daddy, you’re home!”

He comes around the corner holding a suitcase and I open the garage door. “Goddam snowstorm. The airport’s closed. They waited until we got to Vegas to tell us.”

“So, we flew back,” Grace, Hank’s wife, says stepping in.

I smile at her and step into the garage. “If you need me to kick his butt and make him drive you to the beach or something, you let me know.”

I hear something about driving along the coast or something, but the door has one of those automatic closers. I end up in complete darkness in the garage and have to put the sander down to fumble for a light. When I get it on, I reach for the sander and freeze.

There’s a box full of kid booze in the garage...flavored vodka. Those cherry and grape things Canadians call alcopops that used to be called wine coolers back when I was Mack’s age. Jägermeister. Peppermint schnapps. Mack’s planning a party or something. This is the booze kids throw parties with.

I can feel my muscles tensing but I force myself to walk to the workbench and slide the drill case into its slot. I put the sander in its slot just as the door opens. “What the hell is taking you so long?” Hank asks.

“I’m just trying to figure out if it’s safe to drive around when the guy with a loaded weapon, the one in the passenger seat, is the kind of a psychopath who has perfectly sized cubby holes for his power tools right next to all the hand tools color coded with electric tape on the handles.”

“Says the guy who calls me if he wants to fix his drywall.” I turn around and chuckle, and he says, “We’re taking off in the morning. Gonna drive up to San Francisco and do the weekend there. Taking Monday off.”

“Guess you get to stay married, then,” I say as I walk back toward him. If I can just get him out of the garage, the alcohol goes unnoticed.

Why the hell do I want that?

“What the hell is this? McKenzie. Get in here!” Okay, so that ship has sailed. Both McKenzie and her mother step in. Her mother looks curious. McKenzie looks... Well, she looks a hell of a lot like before, when she kissed me to keep me from walking into the garage and seeing her stash. “What the hell is this?” he says gesturing to the box, “You know how many kids I have to scrape off the pavement getting drunk and all the crap it causes?”

McKenzie’s goes pale as a ghost. Her mother says, “Your father asked you a question.”

“What’s going on?” I ask. I can’t believe I’m doing this.

“There,” Hank says. He points to the box without taking his eyes off Mack.

“Aw hell, Hank. I brought that.” He and his wife turn and look at me. “Caught a college kid delivering to some high school kids on Valley View. Not on duty, just picking up my dry cleaning. Anyway, I figured making them shit their... Sorry, Mary. Sorry Mack. Uh, what I mean is, I flashed my badge, scared the college boy and the kids, and sent them on their way. I figured you might want it for your bar.”

“Seriously? What am I gonna do, throw a rave?” He glances at McKenzie, “Sorry, Honey.”

“Do kids still do raves?” I ask.

He lifts up the box. “I guess I’ll take the schnapps. Holidays coming up.”

“You don’t want anything else?”

“Nah.” He looks at his wife. “Grace?”

She smiles and says, “Are we going to invite the other kids and play *Never Have I Ever* and that quarters game?”

“Well, I don’t want it. Hey Mack, why don’t you pour all that out in the sink. You mind?”

“No problem,” she says in a tone of voice that makes it clear she has a problem with it. Hank has no idea her problem is with me.

“Come on, McKenzie,” her father says, “Take a little break from your very, very busy schedule to do your old man a favor, okay? Look, I’m sorry I thought it was yours.”

She rolls her eyes and smiles. “Okay, Daddy.”

“Since you’re here, you want a drink?” He laughs as Mack grabs an orange cream bottle. “Not that stuff. I mean a real drink.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m good. Wouldn’t have come by but when I got home, I put the drill and the sander in the trunk so I wouldn’t forget when Sunday rolled around but then the booze thing happened. I got something going on tonight.” That’s pretty much code for me checking in with informants and keeping them motivated.

God, I’m an asshole. That’s the second lie I tell Hank in the last hour.

“You have to come for dinner sometime, Grant,” Grace says.

“Soon, I promise,” I say, “Do you guys need any help with the luggage before I leave?”

“No. I brought the suitcase in already and it’ll go back with everything else in the morning,” Hank says.

I nod, give Grace a hug, and head out. I get three texts from Mack as I drive home. I don’t read them. I just turn off my phone.

## CHAPTER 5

**H**e finally responds to my texts on Saturday at about ten-thirty. *I don't want to hear it.* I guess I don't have any right to be pissed but I still am. What he doesn't know is that I look at the text shortly after pulling into his driveway. He's going to hear it whether or not he wants to.

It's amazing how I can be angry and confident because of the anger. That confidence pushes me across the driveway and along the path to his front porch. It also gives my arm a hell of a lot of strength when it comes to beating my fist on the door instead of knocking.

It's kind of frustrating how all the confidence disappears when he opens the door and glares at me. Mostly to avoid his gaze, I slip past him and stand behind him. "I was trying to tell you something with the texts," I say, "And you..." Uh, I sound so damned weak!

"I'm not interested, Mack," he says, "And I was up most the night so I'm going to bed. You can see yourself out."

He walks away and I rush to the door and close it. "I'm not going to see myself out!"

"Suit yourself." He reaches the corner to his hallway and disappears into it.

I rush after him. "You bastard!" I say, "Why are you being such an asshole?"

He ignores me and steps through one of the doors. I reach it before he can close it and wiggle in. "Why are you such a

jerk?” I shout.

“Why are you so intent on being self-destructive?” he asks. It doesn’t really sound like a question but more of an accusation.

“What makes you think you have any say in my life?” I intend for my tone to be very biting and bitter. Instead, it sounds like I’m weakly and tentatively asking. I swear it’s like I’m some kind of silly, mousy student in the back of the classroom trembling as she raises her hand to ask a teacher to explain some concept a little more clearly. It’s the closeness. Any closer than this and it will be like back in my kitchen and the kiss.

“Somebody sure as hell ought to have a say in your life,” he growls, “Because you don’t seem to think there’s anything in your life worth protecting.”

“You can’t just keep dragging me over to your house to... to....” Yeah, I’m not being very effective here. This time, I came to his house. “You’re not in charge of me!”

“You’re not the boss of me?” he asks with an irritating as hell smile. “Really? That’s what you’re going to go with here? What’s next? Are you going to hold your breath until you get your way?”

“Fuck you!” I shout.

Don’t I learn? I mean, am I stupid? This is exactly how I got the spanking before, and here I am shouting at him again. His eyes grow dark just like before, and just like before I see how alluring and terrifying those eyes can be. I’m still filled with belligerence, though, more from habit than anger at this point. So, I stare defiantly back at him. We stare at each other for a moment and in that moment, every ounce of self-control we have disappears. I see the look in his eye a split second before it happens and know that my own expression mirrors it.

“What did you say to me?” he asks.

There is no mistaking the danger in his voice. It’s not that I want a spanking. Hell, I don’t even want to fight with him. Nonetheless, I can’t stop myself. “Fuck. You. That’s what I said. Do you need me to spell it?” I keep staring at him and I

swear if someone takes a picture I'll look like a caricature of an angry child. "Fuck you."

Then it happens. He says, "Yes. You will."

His lips are on mine and his hands are tearing my clothes off before I even register what's happening. When I do register what's happening, I realize that my own hands are quickly undoing his belt and yanking his pants and underwear down. I start to unbutton his shirt and he pushes me back, just holding onto my shoulders and driving me backward until I fall down onto a bed.

I guess it makes me pretty damned stupid that I only realize then that we're in his bedroom. I don't dwell on that because he finishes the job I start and gets his clothes off. It only takes a minute or two, but I swear to God it seems like time stops just so I can watch.

I stare in awe at his naked body and wonder how on Earth the man can actually be more attractive than I imagine him to be in all the fantasies. He looks like Adonis come to life, His muscles are powerful and clearly defined as though chiseled from marble and the expression on his face is as godly as his body.

He looks at me possessively, like I belong to him, and he finally gets to claim what's his. I shiver and open my legs automatically, as though he were controlling my body and not me. "Grant," I whisper, "I... Grant, that stuff wasn't mine. It's my friend Shelly's booze for her party and—"

"Hush!" he commands sharply, and I feel like my whole body will explode.

I open my mouth to beg him to screw me, but the only sound that comes out is a sharp intake of breath as Grant drops to his knees and buries his face in my pussy. I stare open-mouthed and wide-eyed at him as his lips and tongue travel expertly over me, sliding through my folds, delving deeply into me, and flicking lightly over my clit. He awakens sensations in me that until now, I don't even know I can experience. I wonder how on Earth in all of my many fantasies of Grant, I never fantasize about him going down on me.

His hands come around my thighs and grip my hips to steady me, which is a good thing because every movement he makes sends a lightning bolt of energy through me and my body jerks and shivers as he gives me more pleasure than any of fantasies dare to suggest.

“Oh Grant,” I finally say when I can draw in enough breath to speak, “Oh God, yes... Oh, Grant.” I’m about to repeat myself so I clamp my lips together to keep from speaking.

The anger and humiliation are gone from my voice and my thoughts. All I can feel is his mouth on me, driving me closer and closer to an orgasm that I can already tell will be more powerful than anything I ever give myself.

My body no longer belongs to me. It belongs utterly and completely to Grant. I can’t escape him even if I want to. He stimulates the most sensitive parts of me in ways that make it impossible for my body to move of its own accord. He takes me with confidence and assurance, as though there’s no question in his mind that I am his and he is only taking what already belongs to him.

The shock fades from my mind and as it disappears, I focus entirely on the pleasure he gives me. “Oh Grant!” I shout, “Oh God, Yes!” So much for not repeating myself.

My voice is ragged and hoarse and my body begins to flail uncontrollably as he licks and sucks in a way that seems like it ought to consume me.

And then I feel my climax hit and I am consumed. It starts by curling my toes and sending tingles up my thighs that merge right in between my legs, consolidating on the little magic button that Grant takes for his own. The energy builds there for a fraction of the second before traveling rapidly up my spine until it erupts from my mouth in a scream, “Grant! Oh fuck. Yes!”

Then it all bursts and I explode.

“Grant!” I scream once more before all speech is robbed from me and I flail and jerk under him as pleasure pulses through me like a series of tidal waves, rolling up from my toes to the



crown of my head and back down to burst inside my pussy and over my clit.

He keeps it up while I cum, not pulling off even when my hands instinctively try to push him away, my body overwhelmed by the intensity of the sensations he gives me. I feel sudden panic when I realize he will stop when he's damned good and ready to stop and I don't even have the voice to beg for it.

He stands and I cry out once more when the connection between my pussy and Grant's mouth is suddenly, violently severed. I stare up at him and for the first time, I notice his thick, powerful cock, throbbing in front of me as it waits for its turn to claim what it already owns.

He's so big. That doesn't really come as a surprise but what is surprising is how much bigger he is even than my fantasies. I may not have the qualities of the girls in those videos I watch but Grant most certainly has the primary quality of the guys.

He steps closer and positions his cock to enter me and I remember to tell him what I dream of telling him in this moment just before the opportunity passes. I have to fight myself to be able to speak. The head of that monster between his legs presses up against me before I finally manage.

"I'm a virgin, Grant." The words come out far quieter than I expect given how hard I work to find my voice.

He doesn't thrust in but instead stares down at me in shock. I'm confused by his reaction at first, but after a moment, it occurs to me that he might interpret my words as meaning that I'm not ready for sex. I breathe out, "I've been waiting, waiting until you could be my first."

His expression changes into a knowing smirk, the shocked, hesitant look replaced once more by a possessive snarl that sends another shiver of pleasure through me. He still hesitates and I say, "I want this. I really want this." Now, his look says that I'm his, completely and utterly his and when he takes me, he will be taking what already belongs to him.

And I can't wait for him to take it. When he thrusts into me, it feels like fireworks go off in my body and the climax he gives me with his mouth rockets right back to peak, filling me with pleasure that can only be described as indescribable. I think there was pain, too, just a brief flash. It's sure as hell not as bad as my friends say the first time will be.

"Oh Grant," I cry, "Oh God, yes!" Is that the sum total of my vocabulary during sex? I mean, at least not that announcing my virginity is no longer relevant. "Oh God, yes!"

My words are a cry of appreciation and not permission. He already thrusts into me fast and hard, using me the way I want to be used, making me his in the most visceral way possible.

"Oh Grant!" I cry out, "I'm yours! God, I'm yours!" Okay, so I know a few more words.

He shifts positions and puts his hand around my throat, squeezing tightly enough that the sensations I feel instantly intensify but loosely enough that I can still draw breath to say, "Oh yes, Grant. Oh God, yes!" At the same time, he thrusts deeper and faster into me, and I am overwhelmed by the sheer power of the man. I seem to weigh nothing compared to him and if his hand around my neck weren't holding me still, I would fly across the room from the force of his thrusts.

And I feel so... so... good. I know I keep saying that, but I just don't have words to describe the pleasure that he gives me. It's transcendent, it's celestial. It's—

"God!" I cry as a second climax, more powerful than the first orgasm is compared to all my previous ones, strikes me like a lightning bolt. My body stiffens and my legs stick straight up into the air, shaking for a few seconds before slamming back down onto his ass. He keeps thrusting forcefully, not slowing or stopping at all, and his hand remains clasped firmly around my neck.

After a few seconds, he growls, "Tell me you want this again."

I don't hesitate. "Oh fuck yes I want this, Grant! I want this. I fucking want this so damn much!" Okay, so I'll be able to say anything during sex as long as he tells me what to say.

“Tell me,” he commands.

My hands fly to his face, and I put every ounce of my being into my response as I say, “I want this. I want this fucking forever, Grant. I want this. I want you.”

When I say that last part, he groans and the first pulse of his cock deep in my pussy sends me right back to peak and then beyond it. The dimensions of my body fade and then disappear entirely and at the same time as an intense pleasure overwhelms me, I seem to float on a warm cloud of satisfaction that permeates every fiber of my being and every square inch of the space around me. This isn't from the sex, it's from the rest of it, from saying I want this forever.

I float on that formless cloud for a long while, drifting through space to the sound of Grant's slowly steady breathing. When I come to, he is atop me and my arms and legs are wrapped tightly around him, his still-throbbing cock pulsing deep in my pussy.

I remember then that I'm not on any kind of birth control and Grant doesn't wear a condom. I wonder if he got me pregnant.

Actually, I don't wonder.

Don't ask me how I know he did, how I'm certain Grant's baby grows inside of me. I just do and that's the most wonderful thing about this...about my life. Ever.

## CHAPTER 6

I ought to feel bad.

I really ought to feel bad.

I mean, there's no legitimate reason on Earth for me not to feel bad about this but whether or not my intellect, my conscience, and my experience demand guilt here, I just don't feel bad. I should. I know I should. I don't.

God, how many times am I going to keep repeating that in my head?

I'm not repeating the words because I feel bad and I'm trying to mask it. On the contrary, I keep repeating it because I feel like there's something broken inside of me, some part of my brain that connects my emotions to my rationality. I sure as hell ought to feel bad and my mind keeps replaying the situation precisely because I can't figure out how to overcome the contradiction between how I ought to feel and how I do.

Of course, right now Mack's head is on my shoulder and her perfect body is pressed against me. I can feel the breeze of her breath over my chest and I'm not sure there's a more satisfying sensation possible. Maybe in the morning I'll have to deal with the real-world consequences but for now I can just remain in bed and let my mind gradually fade to black. Hell, I already lived the perfect dream. I don't even need one when I eventually do pass out tonight.

In movies or in books, people always talk about perfect moments. I guess now I understand that. I mean, sure, the time spent with her before she ends up sleeping against me is

wonderful. It's hard to imagine a better way to spend my time. But right now, this moment, this... Hell, I'm going to sound like some kind of loon if I keep it up. It's perfect. Best to leave it at that.

So, of course, my phone rings.

Thankfully, I can reach for it with my free hand. It doesn't work though, because I feel her stirring before I get my hand on the phone. I look at the screen and feel an absolutely imperfect moment. It's Hank. Damn it all to hell. I know he can't possibly know who's with me, but it still feels like he's calling to ask me why the hell I'm naked in bed with his daughter.

I clear my throat and then swipe to answer. "Hank. Some of us are trying to sleep."

"We got him."

"What?"

"That P.O.S. French. How quick can you get to Fifth and Crock?"

"The rescue mission?"

"Yeah."

I realize Mack isn't against me anymore. I groan and sit up. "Wait a minute," I say, "I thought you were in San Francisco."

"Been here about an hour." I look at the time on my phone. God, it's only three in the afternoon. Maybe I'll make her breakfast, but it seems more likely I'll be making dinner for her.

"Then how the hell am I going to meet you at the mission?"

"You're not."

"I don't have time for this, Hank. Tell me what's up."

"French has one of the workers hiding his drugs there. He's a parolee, and he told his P.O. about it last night. He failed a piss test and didn't want to go back to prison. P.O. said if it checks out, he'll cut him slack."

“Martinez?” Martinez used to be a detective but got shot in the leg. He has a limp now and transferred to Corrections from the department. He often cuts parolees slack if they volunteer at rescue missions and food banks. The people who run those places tend to help parolees get back on their feet.

“Exactly.”

“So why now?” I ask.

“Why not? You shacked up with a girl or something?” It’s amazing how his words cut into me. If he says, “Why not, too busy fucking my daughter?” it won’t surprise me.

“I don’t care how much he has there, it doesn’t do anything for us,” I say.

“Unless he shows up to pick the bag up,” Hank says, “Which is scheduled to happen in about an hour and a half.”

“Jesus!” I say, leaping to my feet. “Why are you only calling me now, for Christ’s sake?”

“Martinez just got the call from his boy and just called me,” Hank says, “so I’m calling you.”

“Okay, on my way. Can you call everyone else?”

“Fuck you. I’m on a weekend with my wife,” he replies. Then he laughs and says, “Yeah. I’ll tell everyone to meet you at that Korean joint on Main and Ophelia. I already sent the file from Martinez to your email, so you’ll recognize the parolee. Martinez already told him to just give French the drugs like he ordinarily would.”

“All right,” I say.

“Kick ass for me, partner,” he says and hangs up.

I put my phone down and see McKenzie on the bed in front of me. She’s naked, which is distracting as hell. She also looks really uncertain. I imagine that’s what happens when a girl loses her virginity. I lean over and kiss her briefly. “I have to run. Hank, that is, your father just called with a lead on a bad guy we’re chasing.”

“Okay,” she says. Her tone of voice suggests to me she’s not okay at all.

“As soon as I’m done with this guy, I’ll head over to your place, all right?”

She says, “Okay,” again. Once again, she most definitely doesn’t sound okay about things at all. She says, “Okay,” when I tell her I don’t know how long it will take. She says, “Okay,” when I tell her I’ll come over as soon as I can, and she says, “Okay,” when I say I need to get dressed. She’s not okay and I know she’s not. It’s damned frustrating to have to think about that while I take a quick shower but it would be even more frustrating to come out of the shower and discover she’s already left, which thankfully she hasn’t.

What the hell am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to keep a violent drug offender on the streets because she’d rather I cuddle for a while? I know I really should offer her some sort of reassurance, or at least try.

I’m just able to do that considering the circumstances.

I think the bottom line is that this relationship is already something I ought to regret, but I don’t. I’m already risking my relationship with my best friend. Hell, I’m risking McKenzie’s relationship with her father. I think the disconnect between what I believe is the right thing to do and what I’m actually capable of doing is just too powerful. Maybe I get dressed efficiently and silently simply because I don’t want to reassure her. Maybe I want her to rethink this thing. Maybe I want her to decide this is a one-off occurrence and that’s it.

Yeah, that’s all bullshit.

I mean, maybe that’s why I dress silently but there’s no way in hell I want her to move on from me. I sure as hell don’t want her to move on to another guy. “Go home,” I say, “And I’ll get there as soon as I can. You don’t have to wait up for me. I have a key to your place. I’ll be there when I’m done.”

“Okay.”

Damn it all! I walk over to her, lean down, and kiss her gently. “I hate this, but we’ve been after this guy for a long time and



getting him off the streets is going to keep people safe. I'll be there and if you're asleep, I'll wake you up long enough to let you know I'm there, okay?"

She says, "Okay," and I think I'll fucking explode. Then, she adds, "I'll see you then," and that gives me just enough to nod and leave without obsessing too much about it, although the pain of the quick separation is clearly there...for the both of us.

Just as I walk to the door, I turn and say, "That was the most incredible experience in my life, Mack. Let's not forget I've run into burning buildings to rescue hostages. I've had a lot of incredible experiences in my life. That was definitely the best."

I don't know if the disappointment completely leaves her eyes, but she breathes in deeply and her lips part as her face registers something like shock. As she exhales, she says quietly, "Me, too."

"I'll see you later," I say. I put on my shoulder holster, check the gun, and then put on my jacket. I give her a last look and leave the room.

And I know I can never let her go.

It isn't a big emotional revelation. It's intellectual. I'm not a tender person. I'm not a romantic person. I'm a hard man, a man who focuses on duty and accomplishment ahead of anything else. Nonetheless, I just stopped to reassure Mack even though I'm irritated by her need for reassurance. There is nobody on Earth who can make me act that way. Nobody else.

The drive to the rescue mission takes maybe ten minutes. It should have taken fifteen, but I break quite a few traffic laws on the way. Normally that's not a problem, but for obvious reasons, I can't hit my lights. I slow down a couple miles away and drive sedately so there's no chance of French or one of his goons seeing a crazy driver and connecting the dots.

I park in the parking lot like anyone else would and walk casually inside. One of the ironic benefits of never successfully catching French is that he's never seen me and in

plainclothes with my stealth shoulder holster, I look just like a normal guy, probably a volunteer.

At least that's what I hope. I check my phone and see I have about an hour give or take.

Well, that's what I get for tearing out of Mack's place like a bat out of hell. I decide to put my time to good use and case the place. The guy who taught me to be a detective back when I was a fresh-faced rookie gave me the best advice I ever heard, not only as a police officer, but as a private citizen.

"Friends and exits, Grant. Always know where your friends are, and always know where the exits are."

After ten minutes, I know where my exits are and after another twenty, my friends arrive. Thankfully Thompson has the sense to come in plainclothes. He sidles up to me and pretends to know me from work. Well, I guess that's not pretending. He just doesn't mention that we work catching assholes like Donald French.

He offers to buy me a cup of coffee and we step outside and head to the coffee shop next door. When we have our coffee and a legitimate reason to be hovering just outside the rescue mission, he asks, "Are we sure he's actually going to be here?"

"Hank is," I say, "I guess Martinez has a source."

"Yeah, I got the email," he says, "Are we sure he'll actually *be* here, though?"

I shrug. "This is the best information we've gotten so far. We'll see how it works."

"Fair enough," he says.

"Who've we got?" I ask.

"Ricky, Lopez, Guardado and Sampson," he says. "SWAT is on standby four minutes away."

"Good," I say.

I doubt we'll need SWAT, but French is notoriously skittish, so it doesn't hurt to be prepared.

We enjoy our coffee and the work completed for the moment, waiting until ten minutes before go time. Then we offer a fake goodbye and split off to stage ourselves on either side of the meeting spot just behind the mission.

Right on schedule, I see French approaching the meeting spot, guarded by two steroid-freak meathead thugs. They'll be strong as hell but just as slow. No biggie. I quietly radio Ricky and Lopez to be ready to block the vehicle they arrived in and then radio Thompson, Guardado and Sampson to be ready to go on my command.

The informant is a few minutes late and looks extremely nervous. I hope that that's his natural personality or his skittishness will blow the whole op.

We get lucky. I overhear French say, "Jesus, Parker, why are you always so nervous? It's safe here. These are poor people who are bettering themselves. The cops only care about poor people who aren't. No one's coming for us."

"Yeah, I know, I know," Parker says, rubbing the back of his neck and looking around anxiously. "Look, you got the money?"

French offers a cold smile. "You want to try that again, Parker?" he says breezily.

"Yeah, yeah, of course," Parker says. "Sorry."

He unslings the backpack he carries and hands it to French. One of the meatheads stops him and grabs the bag, then looks inside. He shows it to French, who nods.

"All right," he says, "Now for your payment."

The other meathead draws a pistol and aims it at the terrified Parker.

*Shit.*

"Drop your weapon!" I cry out, drawing my service weapon and aiming it at the meathead. "Police!"

"*Chrissakes, Granite!*" Thompson cries through my radio, clearly unhappy that I jumped the gun. He'll have to deal with

it. Parker might be a piece of shit, but he's our piece of shit and it's bad business to let an informant get killed.

French, miraculously, turns out to be smart enough to throw his hands in the air and back away. The meathead with the gun isn't so lucky. He begins a ponderous turn in my direction and a single shot from my handgun puts him down.

The other meathead drops the bag and the lone brain cell in his head fires just as Thompson, Guardado and Sampson burst onto the scene. He drops to his knees, his hands in the air and is quite placid as he is led to the waiting cruiser.

French isn't placid, but he doesn't resist. He unleashes a constant stream of profanity, promising to fuck and/or kill various relatives of ours. We don't pay him any attention. He's lost and he knows it. The knowledge just hasn't made its way from his brain to his mouth.

Everything else is pretty much just procedure. We read him his rights and lead him to Ricky's cruiser where Lopez does his best to impersonate some hotshot Hollywood cop.

Rookies. Gotta love 'em.

When it's all said and done, Thompson and I enjoy a much lower quality but much more satisfying cup of coffee at the station.

"Think he'll do time?" Thompson asks.

"If he's lucky," I say. "He's been careless. Most likely he'll be dead before he ever stands trial."

"Shame," Thompson says in a voice that makes it clear that it isn't. "Well, what can you do?"

I shrug, down the last of my coffee and say, "Well, I have a dinner engagement, so I'll leave you boys to it."

"Oh yeah? Tell her I say hi," Thompson says.

I stare quickly at him a moment before it occurs to me he can't know that it's Mack I'm going to see and he's only offering me a generic ribbing, one cop to another.

"I would, but I don't want to put her out of the mood," I say.

“You better tell her I say hi, then,” he says, “So she can close her eyes and imagine a real man fucking her.”

“Fuck you,” I say genially.

“Fuck you too,” he replies just as genially.

Then I head to Mackenzie’s place.

## CHAPTER 7

**W**hen he actually shows up, I feel like the wind is knocked out of me. It's like an emotional slingshot, I guess. What I mean is it's like my emotions are stretched so far in one direction and then they snap back when he actually arrives, and I realize he's not just discarding me.

I hate feeling so relieved when Grant actually shows up. I hate the way my mind works, how I actually let myself believe that somehow the whole thing is a setup, that he just lets his normal, male horniness make him give in to baser desires and then immediately tries to find a way to get rid of me. I hate it.

So, when I see him on the porch, I'm already on the verge of tears. He steps in and the moment the door is closed, I rush to him and start crying like a stupid baby. He holds me and whispers softly. I don't really hear the words. I'm too relieved. Eventually, I pay attention to what he says and realize he's trying to tell me he's okay.

He thinks I'm worried about him getting hurt in the line of duty!

I pull back and shake my head, wiping away tears with the back of my hand. "No, no," I say, "I... With Dad being a cop, that's always somewhere in the background but that's not why I'm crying."

"What's wrong, Mack?" he asks.

"I thought you weren't coming back."

“You just said that wasn’t it,” he says with a frown. “You’re not making any sense.”

“No. I mean, I thought you wouldn’t...” I can’t form the words and just end up staring at the floor in front of me.

There is a pretty damned significant and pretty damned uncomfortable silence. Then, I feel his hand on my chin. He lifts my face so I have to look at him. His expression is strange. It’s like a combination of stern and unyielding but also soft and reassuring. I can’t understand how any man, even Grant, can manage to convey those opposite things at the same time.

“Are you saying you thought I wouldn’t want to come back to you?” I still have tears evidently because as I nod, one rolls down my cheek. “Use words, Mack!” he says sternly.

I gasp at his tone, and I don’t know how I can be both thrilled and frightened at his voice. “Yes,” I say, “I thought you were just getting rid of me.”

“You knew your father called, though,” he says, “Did you think I arranged for that call or something?”

“I don’t know,” I say. God, my voice sounds so weak! No, that isn’t entirely true. My voice doesn’t sound weak. I sound weak. “I just... A man like you...” I try to look at the floor again, but he still has my chin and I may as well try to move a mountain. “Men like you don’t have to settle for girls like me.”

“What do you mean, girls like you?” he asks. There is so much restraint in his voice. I mean, it’s like he’s fighting back a great deal of anger.

I can’t turn away and as much as I don’t want to vocalize things, I say, “Overweight. Dumpy.” I manage to hold back tears as I say, “Guys like you don’t settle for fat girls.”

His eyes narrow and his voice is dark when he says, “I don’t ever want to hear you call yourself that again. In fact, I don’t ever want to hear you say mean things to yourself ever again.” His words are kind and sweet, but I swear to God his tone of



voice is absolutely appropriate for threatening someone with great bodily harm.

I swallow hard and say, "Okay."

"You're not overweight," he says sternly, "And you're not dumpy or fat. For God's sake you're fucking beautiful and if you ever say anything like that again, I swear the spanking you get will make the last one feel like a walk into the fucking park!"

How can I be terrified of him, grateful to him, and desperate for him all at the same time? I don't understand it, but I nod and say, "I won't. I promise. I won't." I imagine I must sound like one of those low-level criminals he lets off the hook with a promise not to keep breaking the law.

He pulls me to him suddenly and kisses me fiercely. I can feel my body respond. Actually, it's like my whole being responds and not just my body. I kind of melt against him and even though all of the emotions of the last several hours don't exactly disappear, it almost feels like he just takes them over. It feels like they don't belong to me anymore. My problems are not his concern, not mine.

When the kiss ends, he says, "Yes, you will. You'll keep being vicious to yourself but every single time I catch you, you're going to deal with me. I don't care what the hell it takes, Mack, but you'll learn. You'll learn to see yourself how I see you, and by God, until then, you'll wish you did."

I swallow hard and since I don't really know how to respond, my mouth just takes over and I whisper, "Yes. You're in charge."

I think I might just shrink into a ball of stupidity at the words, but he nods sharply and says, "In this department, I am." Then he kisses me again, another one of those kisses that tells me he most definitely is in charge. He'll be my self-esteem until he can force feed me some of my own.

He finally pulls his mouth away and asks, "Have you eaten?" I'm too breathless to speak so I just shake my head. "Are you hungry?" Again, I shake my head. "Good," he says, "Then we

don't have to waste any time." He kisses me again with the same savage ferocity and then just lifts me up like I weigh nothing. I feel like I'm a spectator in my own life as he carries me up the stairs to my bedroom. I don't feel like a spectator when we're naked on the bed together, though. I don't feel like a spectator at all.

This time is different. There's still a great deal of extraordinary passion but the urgency isn't the same. This time, it's more exploratory. That's not the right word but the point is the first time was wonderful and the culmination of ever-growing desperation that just couldn't be restrained any longer. This time doesn't have the overpowering urgency to it. This isn't me finally getting what I desired for so long. This is more like me discovering that I get to keep what I desire, that it isn't some kind of an anomaly.

After we make love, and this sure as hell feels more like making love than just fucking, even though I wouldn't think of such a crass term for the way I gave him my virginity because it doesn't fit, he leads me to the bathroom. As we shower together, it feels like I discover an entirely new definition of intimacy. His hands move over my body building a lather, and I guess even my self-destructive mind allows me to feel like when the water washes away the soap, it washes away a lot of my fear and uncertainty with it.

After the shower, he shows the same careful attention to drying me off as he showed with the body wash in the shower. By the time I'm dressed, it's like the world is gone. It feels almost like there is nothing in my mind other than the sight of Grant and how he makes me feel. I know that's exactly what someone expects from an eighteen-year-old girl mooning over a guy in her complete inexperience, but it doesn't feel shallow. It doesn't feel like it's driven by my youth. I know what shallow, youthful feelings are like. No matter how wonderful a crush might feel, it's always shrouded in uncertainty, worry, and a general tendency to review every second for mistakes or misinterpretations.

I don't experience that at all right now. Instead, everything feels gone except for Grant, and that includes all misgivings,

potential or real. It includes all worry and fear. It includes anything that might cloud the perfect joy of seeing him getting dressed and not once taking his eyes from me. It includes anything that might otherwise distract me from how this man is a force of nature, but his eyes don't storm when they regard me with kindness and placid determination.

Once he's dressed, he extends his hand to me, and I take it. As he leads me from the room, I ask, "Where are we going?"

"I'm cooking you breakfast," he says, "At my place. I'm going to make breakfast just like I would have if I didn't have to go deal with French."

"French?"

"Donald French," he says, "The drug dealer last night."

I almost giggle as I say, "It's still night."

He swats me playfully on the ass, but still hard enough to make me gasp. "You gonna start with that attitude already?" he asks. "I'm going to make you breakfast in the morning. After."

"After what?" I ask.

I already know the answer. I just want to hear him say it.

"After I take what's mine again," he says, his voice a low growl.

What happens at his place can definitely be described as fucking. There's a lot of love, of course, but other than the fact that it feels good to get fucked into oblivion by the man I love, there's little that can be described as romantic. Grant takes what's his and I willingly give it, begging him over and over not to stop, please don't stop, don't ever stop.

When he finally does stop, I am shivering from what could either be four separate orgasms or one orgasm with four different peaks. It's hard to tell where one orgasm ends, and another begins when the orgasms don't really end but just roll right into the next one without softening at all. Suffice it to say that when it's over, I feel better than I ever have in my life and

drift to sleep in his arms with a smile on my face that I still wear when I wake up in the morning.

Grant makes me eggs, sausage links and pancakes for breakfast. I stare at his powerful, naked body and wonder how on Earth I can be so lucky. When I tell him this, he kisses me tenderly and says, “We’re both lucky, Mack.”

When breakfast is ready, he sits across from me and asks, “So how is the journalism thing coming?”

I shrug and say, “Okay, I guess.”

He stops eating and looks directly at me. “You guess?”

I shrug again and say, “Well...” I try to think of how to say, but finally, I sigh and just tell the truth.

“It’s really hard to be a journalist,” I say, “And I don’t want to spend all this time trying really hard for something only to fail. I don’t... I don’t think I could handle that.”

I know what he’s going to say before he says it, but it still feels wonderful to hear it come directly from him. “Mack, the only way you can possibly fail at this is if you give up. You’re smart, you’re passionate and you’re driven. Those three qualities will make you the best damn reporter the world has ever seen. I’m not saying it will be easy and I’m not saying that all your goals will come to you immediately, but I promise you, if you work for it, you’ll reach whatever dreams you have.”

I smile at him and say, “Well, I’m glad you think so.”

“No,” he says, so sharply that I jump. “It doesn’t matter what I think. What matters is what you think and more importantly, what you *do*. So,” he says, “What are you going to do?”

I take a moment to recover from my shock, then say, “Um, well, I was thinking of applying for an internship while I’m in school. It will take a lot of work, and I probably won’t have much of a social life, but if I get work experience while I’m in journalism school, then I’ll have a foot in the door when it comes time to look for a job.”

He smiles and says, “That’s great, Mack! I only have one problem with that.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Does no social life mean no me?”

I return his smile and tease, “Yep. Completely. I’ll never see you again. The only way you can spend any time with me is if you make—”

My words are cut off when he crosses the table, grabs the back of my head and kisses me fiercely. My senses come alive, and he makes it clear that I still belong to him, regardless of how I might feel about it.

It’s a damned good thing I feel absolutely overjoyed about it.

## CHAPTER 8

**A** *few days later*

The moment Mack walks into the room, I can tell by her expression she's troubled. I have a pretty good idea what's bothering her. "You're pregnant," I say.

She looks at me in wonder. "How did you... I... did you see the test?"

I shake my head. "I think I knew from the start. I don't know how. I think it happened the first time, Mack."

She nods, her bottom lip quivering. "Me, too." She looks down at the floor for a moment and then says in a desolate voice, "I guess I knew the moment it happened."

"You don't want the baby?" I ask. It's a bullshit question. I know she wants the baby, but I know what's really bothering her, what's making her feel so frightened and nervous. She's far more concerned about Hank's reaction than anything else.

"What do you want?" she asks. God, I'm completely misreading her. She's not worried about her father. She's worried about me. "Do you... I'm not going to have an abortion, Hank, but I won't tell anyone who the father is if..."

"That's enough," I growl. "I want this baby. I want this baby and I want you."

I can see the disbelief in her face as she says, "You do?"

Stern isn't working. Oh, it has a short-term effect but this girl needs building up. "Mack," I say as I take her hand, "I want

you.” I lead her to the couch and sit her down. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted. You’re beautiful, smart—hell, brilliant. You’re sweet and caring. You’re perfect for me and you’re all I need. Someday you’ll see yourself the way I see you but for now, you just have to trust me. I’m not a liar. If I say you’re beautiful, believe me. If I say you’re everything I want and all I need, believe me. If I tell you I want our baby, believe me.”

“Grant,” she whispers breathlessly, “I... Oh, Grant!” I think she wants to hug me, but her brain is still processing things. I wonder if this is the first time that she actually believes I find her beautiful. That isn’t the same as believing she actually is beautiful but it’s a damned good start. She’s still tentative, though, and I pull her to me and hold her tightly. She repeats, “Oh, Grant.”

She sounds confident, relaxed, and happy. There’s something we definitely need to address but I want to give her this moment, this time of safety and comfort. I kiss her forehead and her cheek and just keep my arms around her for a while. I gently run my hand up and down her back, but she keeps her hands right in place, just clinging to me. This is a perfect moment for her. I have to admit it’s a perfect moment for me as well.

I hate to ruin it. It can’t be helped, though. If I’m going to keep her safe and content, it can’t be accomplished anymore in secret. I can’t wait at all now that the pregnancy is out in the open. I kiss her cheek and grab my phone. Her eyes turn into saucers when she sees me dial her father. Saucers? Make that platters.

“What’s up, Granite?” Hank asks.

“I’m going to ask your daughter to marry me,” I say, “And I know she’s going to accept.”

He laughs and says, “Damn, I needed that this morning.”

“She’s pregnant with my baby, Hank. I’m going to marry her and I’m not taking her to Vegas so you only find out about it when it happens. I want you to give her away just like you’ve always wanted to.”



“All right, all right,” he says, “That’s enough.” I don’t respond and after a moment of silence, he says, “Jesus Christ.” I still don’t respond, and he asks, “Here or there?” The tone of that last part underscores the tension of the situation.

“We’ll be right over,” I reply. When I do, Mack instantly tenses. It’s a fight or flight response. I imagine if her face was spotlighted, she would look just like one of those horror movie girls right before the scream. I slide my hand to hers and squeeze her hand.

“Do you know what discipline is, Mack?” I ask.

“What?” she asks in a whisper.

“Discipline is making the decision to face pain now to avoid more pain later.” I stand and lift her hand. She hesitates just a few seconds but then nods and stands up. “Do you want to drive your own car or ride with me?”

“You won’t hurt him, will you?” That surprises me. There will definitely be posturing. There might indeed be a fight. What surprises me is her assumption that I have the advantage when it comes to a physical confrontation with her father. She’s right about that. The only man I trust more than Hank in a fight is me. If anyone gets hurt, it will be him. To me, it’s obvious but it’s still surprising that she knows.

“Nobody is getting hurt today,” I say. It’s a lie. I’m getting hurt. It’s nothing I won’t recover from but unless I’m completely wrong about how things go, I’m getting hurt. “Ride with me?”

She shakes her head. “I want to, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.” She’s probably right about that, too.

“Okay,” I say, “But you follow me to your place. I don’t want you going into the house to face things alone.” Her eyes grow wide at the comment. It’s gratitude and, I suppose, surprise that anyone cares about her feelings. Even now, it surprises her. For God’s sake is everything I do going to make her act like I’m some kind of hero? I have to look away. A girl like that can make a man believe he’s what she sees him as.

I get her into her car first and then get into mine. I adjust the mirror so it focuses entirely on what's directly behind me. Usually, it's angled so I can see the sidewalk on the passenger side as I drive. Usually, we're looking for people going in and out of establishments, not already in their cars. We start the journey, and I can't pretend I drive slowly for traffic safety reasons. I don't want to face my best friend any more than she wants to face her father.

It's still the right thing to do. I pull up to the house and Mack turns into the driveway while I park on the street. I get out and walk to her. My movements are quick because if Hank is watching me, and I'm pretty sure he is, I want him to see me walking without any tentativeness. I want him to see me arriving here without any sense of shame or guilt. I want it clear to him I don't think I'm in the wrong even if he doesn't like it.

Although, I guess, I don't feel that way. I *am* in the wrong.

No. That's not true. I was in the wrong. I suppose it was wrong for me to ever allow myself to get this far. Hell, it was wrong to allow myself to take the first steps. That was wrong but not now. Now, what exists between McKenzie and me is something worth protecting, something worth dying for. My mistake, if there is one, occurs at the very beginning. There's no mistake in play right now.

The door opens when we're still on the pathway from the driveway to the door. I let go of Mack's hand and push her back slightly. I keep walking. "You son of a bitch," Hank says darkly and swings wildly. The haymaker he throws is a horrible punch and indicates just how upset he is.

With a haymaker, I can just drop, wrap my arms around him and tackle him.

With a haymaker, I can just lift my leg in a kick to his gut.

With a haymaker, I can just lean back and then lunge forward with a right hook of my own.

I do none of those things. I just stand there and let his fist connect.

Mack lets out a wordless cry and I hear her mother shout, “Henry!”

“I’m fine, Gloria,” Hank says, his voice far more controlled. “I just needed that one. Grant’s fine, too. That was a shitty punch. I just needed to release some anger, I didn’t want to hurt him.”

The reality is that even if he wanted to hurt me, he’d only succeed if I allowed him, but I know he needs to feel that the opposite is true, so I just nod to Gloria and say, “He’s right. I’m fine.”

“Mackenzie,” Hank says, “Go with your mother.”

“No!” Mack says, “Dad—”

“Now,” Hank repeats.

His eyes never leave mine and mine don’t leave his when I say, “Go ahead, Mack. It’s okay.”

Mack tentatively walks inside to her waiting mother, who casts a look at me that hurts me far worse than Hank’s punch did. I don’t feel the slightest shred of guilt, but I definitely feel the harshness of Hank and Gloria’s judgment.

Hank walks past me wordlessly and I turn and follow him. He leads me a few dozen yards from the house, then stops at the corner of the street. “You want a smoke?” he asks, pulling a pack from his pocket.

“No, thanks,” I say. “Since when do you smoke?”

“Since when do you fuck my daughter and not tell me until she’s pregnant?” he fires back.

“Fair enough,” I say.

“Seriously, what the hell?” he says, lighting up. “I mean... Christ, Grant.”

I sigh and say, “Look, I didn’t want to have to come to you like this, Hank.”

“Don’t give me that crap,” he says, “You don’t *accidentally* have sex with a girl. God, I can’t believe I’m talking about my daughter like this. I can’t believe I’m talking about *you* like this. I mean for fuck’s sake, Grant. She’s *eighteen years old!*”

“I know, Hank,” I say.

My voice is soft, but steady and my gaze never wavers from his. He takes a drag on his cigarette and says, “When?”

“When what?” I ask.

“*What the fuck do you think?*” he shouts, “When did you start fucking my eighteen-year-old daughter?”

“A few days ago,” I say.

“A few... After the French arrest?”

“Just before, actually,” I say.

“Just before,” he repeats incredulously. “And it didn’t occur to you to stop at a gas station for a condom so that my eighteen-year-old daughter doesn’t have to be a mother years before she’s ready?”

I feel my emotions rising, but I know better than to react to Hank’s anger with my own. I keep my voice steady as I say, “Hank, you’re my best friend, and I love you, but you don’t have the right to decide what she’s ready for.”

I expect him to hit me again, but instead, he says, “Neither do you, asshole.”

He leaves it at that and stares a challenge at me, not a physical one, but a challenge, nonetheless. Behind the anger in his eyes, I can see pleading—pleading that I will say something, anything to make this make sense or at least reassure him that Mack will be okay.

“Hank,” I say softly, “She told me.”

“She told you that she wanted a baby,” he says contemptuously. “Come on, Grant. At least do me the favor of not treating me like a complete fucking idiot.”

“She told me that she was pregnant, and she told me that she was keeping it whether or not I want to stay with her.”

“So that’s why you’re with her,” he says. “Because you knocked her up.”

“No,” I say. “Because I love her. I’m only telling you what she said so you would know that she really does want this. I would stay with her whether she was pregnant or not. I would stay with her whether she wanted the baby or not. I love her, and I’m sorry Hank, but regardless of how you feel about it, I *will* marry her. I hope you can see a way to accept this, but if you can’t, then you’re going to be unhappy until you do.”

“And this all happened in just a few days,” he says, making it clear he doesn’t believe it. Well, that’s fine, because in this case, he’s right.

“No, Hank,” I say. “I’ve loved her for a long time. It didn’t develop into anything... anything *more* than just affection until a few months ago, but I’ve always loved her.”

“And now that she’s legal, your feelings conveniently include sex?”

I feel my anger rise again and just manage to control myself as I say, “Hank, I would appreciate it if you didn’t talk about her like that.”

“Well, I would appreciate it if you didn’t use her like that, but here we are,” he retorts immediately.

I sigh and choose my next words carefully. “Hank, I hope that you can someday recognize that my love for her is real and that I’m not just using her. In the meantime, you’re just going to have to deal with it however you need to. I love her. I’m marrying her. She’s having my baby. That’s how it is.”

He stares at me wordlessly for a long time. Finally, he says, “Hank, I trust you more than I’ve ever trusted any man. For the record, I know I stand no chance against you in a fistfight. Believe me when I say, if you ever give me a reason not to trust you when it comes to McKenzie, you won’t get the chance at a fistfight.”

Hank doesn’t have a chance against me in any kind of fight, but I sympathize with his feelings right now and I know he needs to feel that he has some kind of say in the situation, so I only say, “You have my word, Hank. I will never give you a reason not to trust me.”

He nods and says, “In that case, congratulations, asshole.”

I chuckle and feel the tension in my shoulders ease somewhat. “Thank you, prick.”

He takes a final drag on the cigarette, drops it on the floor and grinds it under his heel. “All right,” he says. “Let’s get back to the house so Mack can see she still has a father... and a fiancé.”

We head back to the house, and I pull the ring out of my pocket. I bought it on my way to Mack’s house after we collared French. I obviously haven’t told her yet.

Hank looks at the box, chuckles and says, “Boy, you’re really rubbing this in, aren’t you?”

“Hank, believe me, I never meant to—”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, already,” he says, “Just go make her happy.”

I smile and say, “Will do.”

We reach the house and Mack and Gloria open the door as soon as we start up the driveway. Mack throws her arms around Hank and not me, which surprises both of us, but also gives me a chance to get down on one knee.

“Thank you, Daddy,” Mack says, tears streaming down her face. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, Yeah,” Hank says. “All right. You’re welcome.”

She hugs him for a while before Gloria, who sees me on one knee with the ring, clears her throat loudly. Mack separates from Hank and turns toward her mother.

She stops when she sees me. She gasps and her hands fly to her mouth. I smile up at her and say, “Mack. I’m in love with you and only you, in a way I never thought possible in my life, but you convinced me otherwise just by being...you. I’m sorry I waited so long to tell you. I—” I chuckle, “I guess I thought it was too good to be true. I still think that, but I finally found the courage to act on my feelings instead of burying them. I’m so glad I did. You’re the best woman on Earth and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Will you marry me?”

I know the answer to that question even before Mack gives it, but my heart still floods with joy when she throws her arms around me and says, “Yes. Yes! Oh, Grant. I love you, too.”

We laugh and cry and hold each other for a long time. When she pulls away, it’s only enough to kiss me deeply. That kiss is broken when Hank says, “Christ, will you two give it a rest? We get it, you love each other. Now come inside so I can sit down so I can rest this pounding headache you two gave me.”

We laugh and separate and follow Hank and Gloria inside. Gloria offers to have us for dinner, and I smile and say, “I would love to.” I turn to Hank and say, “That is, if it’s okay with you—Dad.”

He looks at me and very seriously says, “Don’t make me hit you again.”

We laugh again and I think to myself that this is what the fairy tales mean when they talk about happily ever after.

## **EPILOGUE**



**T***wo Years Later*

“Come here, Mack,” Grant growls and I look up from where I’m chopping veggies. I don’t see him so he’s calling me from the living room. I hesitate for a moment and finally put the knife down. I turn around and start moving in that direction. I open my mouth to ask what’s up but then I hear him say, “I’m gonna get you!” and I hear Malcom giggle.

I giggle a little myself and get back to the vegetables but not for long. Instead, I put the knife down again and make my way out of the kitchen. I hear Malcom giggle nervously and step around the corner and look at the two of them. Grant is on all fours making a menacing monster face which I can see in profile. My son is shaking with excitement. Malcom is wonderfully, happily afraid. He stares at Grant but then sees me. He looks up at me and says, “Tickle monster!” It sounds like *tickuh monsser*. He points at Grant and repeats it.

I smile at my son and nod conspiratorially. “Better be careful!” To my husband, I say, “You know, Grant, if I knew you were going to call him Mack, too, there’s no way I would have agreed to name him Malcom.”

Grant pounces and soon my son is a giggling, shrieking, and squirming mass of limbs on the floor. I watch his trying to wiggle away from Grant’s attack, laughing and kicking. Without turning his attention away from our son, Grant says, “You picked the name. I’m the one who agreed.”

“I don’t know about that,” I say, “I think maybe you used some hotshot detective trick on me, like how you get bad guys to confess without them knowing that’s what they’re doing.”

Grant reacts as though he’s shocked by my response. He asks, “What?” but it sounds like he’s saying, “Whaaaaaaaat?” In the process, he lets go of our son, who scrambles away like a wild animal just released from a trap. In the same exaggerated way, Grant says, “Darn it! Mack got away!”

Malcom creeps carefully to the other side of the coffee table, waiting for his father to catch him again. His face is filled with joy and excitement. It has plenty of fear, too, but the excited kind of fear like when he turns the handle on his jack in the box or when he’s watching a timer and trying to get all his shapes into place before the table pops and sends them flying. He points at Grant and says, “Tickle monster! Tickle monster!”

Grant growls at him and Malcom giggles loudly. “If you figure out how to get bad guys to confess accidentally,” Grant says, “You be sure to tell me all about it.” He feints toward Malcom, who shrieks and runs his wobbly run my direction, finally hiding behind one of my legs and staring at his father while fighting back giggles but still letting out a few chirping laughs.

“Sorry Mack,” I say as I gently disengage from him. “I have to get the roast in the oven.” Suddenly unprotected, he squeals and runs to the couch, climbing up and turning around to stare at Grant. I head back to the kitchen, shaking my head and laughing. Soon, I’m at the counter again with the knife. I only work for a second before I stop, though. I rush back to the living room. “Grant!” I say, “Now you’ve got me calling him Mack, too!”

Grant laughs and says, “It’s just meant to be, Honey. You can’t fight fate, Mack.” He lunges forward and Malcom shrieks as his father’s fingers get to work. “He’s a Mack. There’s nothing we can do about it.” As Malcom squirms and tries to wiggle away, he starts singing, “Oh the shark, babe, has such teeth, dear, and shows them pearly white...”

I fake an exasperated sigh and get back to the kitchen. It's kind of strange to think of chopping carrots, celery, onions, and potatoes as an act of love. It's really strange to be thankful for how often growing up I end up in the kitchen helping mom prepare dinner even though at the time I think it's the worst possible chore. As I chop, I look at the butcher knife in my hand and hum out under my breath, "Now that Mack is back in town."

I get the big Dutch oven and heat it up on the stove. As Grant and Malcom play, I brown the roast and then the vegetables. I finally get it in the oven and set the timer. As I'm cleaning up, I feel Grant's arms come around me from behind. "Don't get any ideas, Mr. Tickle Monster," I say as I lean against him. "Where's Malcom, not Mack?"

"All tuckered out and down for his nap," Grant says. His hands wander and he says, "And I think I know how to take advantage of the privacy."

"No way, Mister!" I say, "You got that stupid song stuck in my head."

"It's a great song."

"Well, you didn't grow up with the name Mack."

He laughs. "You didn't either. I'm the only one who calls you that."

"That's all that matters," I say. I feel giggly and warm. "Now go away! I have cooking to do."

"Oh, classic suspect ploy, that one," he replies. "You just have to set a timer now. We have plenty of time for my purposes."

"Oh yeah?" I ask.

"Damned right," he says in that growl of his that always makes my knees weak and makes me feel like I'm a quivering heap of nerve endings and not a person.

"Well, what if we don't have time for my purposes?" I ask in the most petulant voice I can manage. I don't do a very good job of it. There are a lot of things I do well. Playing hard to get when it comes to Mack isn't one of them.

He doesn't answer. Instead, he just pivots and a movement from him and a yelp from me later, I'm cradled in his arms and he's carrying me to the bedroom.

Twenty minutes later, I finally push him off and say, "All right, I *really* need to go finish dinner now," I say. "Go bother someone else."

"Who should I bother?" he asks. "There's only the three of us. You don't want me to wake him from his nap, do you?"

"Actually, I kind of do," I say, "If he naps for too long, he won't fall asleep tonight."

I look him up and down and say, "Take a shower first."

He grins and says, "Only if you shower with me."

He lunges for me, but I just manage to scurry out of his grasp and say, "Dinner! I have to stop the oven or dinner will burn!"

"Not as much as my heart burns for you," he says, chasing me out of the room.

He catches me at the foot of the stairs and starts to kiss me. When I finally manage to extricate myself from his arms, I say, "Okay, just let me—" he grabs me and kisses me again and I only manage to pull my lips off him this time. I breathily say, "Let me set the oven to warm. Then I'll come upstairs and join you."

"You better be damn quick," he growls, kissing me behind my ear and down my neck. My nipples harden to bullets and my heart isn't the only part of me that throbs.

I gasp and pull away just before I lose the will to do anything. I say, "All right. I'll be right upstairs."

He lingers and I mischievously allow my ass to sway a little more than normal as I make my way downstairs. I quickly check the roast and determine that I've saved it just in time to keep it from drying out. Just to be safe, I add a little more stock to the pot and set the temperature to the lowest setting, just enough to keep it warm without cooking it further.

Then I join my man upstairs.

By the time we finish showering and dressing, my legs are shaking too much to carry Malcolm, so Grant gets him while I stumble downstairs, giggling at how completely he takes my strength away. I suppose two years isn't all that long of a time, but it surprises me that so much time can pass, and he can still affect me like this.

Then again, he *is* the sexiest man alive.

Over dinner, we take turns playing with Malcolm. He giggles and smiles and laughs and everything he does is just the most precious thing on Earth.

I'm so lucky. I have the most wonderful man who's ever lived, and we have the most wonderful son anyone could ask for. This is the best possible life anyone could ever have and I'm lucky enough to have it.

After dinner, Grant and I put Malcolm down together. Sleeping, his face is calm and adorably serious and looks so much like Grant that I feel a powerful tug in my heart for both of the handsome men in my life.

"God, he looks just like you," Grant says.

I giggle, covering my mouth so I don't wake Malcolm. Grant looks at me and asks, "What's so funny?"

I control myself and say, "I was just thinking that he looks just like you."

"Really?" he says, "I don't see it."

"Well," I say, kissing him on the tip of his nose, "It's a good thing I'm here, then."

He smiles at me, and again, he looks so much like our son that I am overwhelmed with emotion. I throw my arms around him and say, "Thank you."

"For what?" he asks.

"Everything," I say.

He wraps his arms around me and holds me for a long time. We don't say anything, but just hold each other for a long time, basking in the joy of our closeness.

After a while, he bends over, and I yelp when he literally sweeps me off my feet. He laughs and I slap his shoulder and say, “Quiet! You’ll wake the baby!”

“Make a baby?” he says, brow furrowed in exaggerated confusion. “You want to make another baby? I mean, if you insist.”

“Calm down, buster,” I say, as he carries me out of the nursery and down the stairs to the living room. “You already got some. You don’t need more.”

“Ah,” he says, “You see, that’s where you’re wrong. I absolutely need more. I need a lot more. In fact, I need you pretty much constantly. In *fact*,”

He drops me onto the couch, and I yelp again. “I think you should take your clothes off right now and let me have some of what I want before I have to take it.”

I flash him a coy smile and say, “What if I *want* you to take it?”

His eyes narrow and an instant later, I gasp and say, “Wait, wait, let’s go to the bedroom. In case Malcolm wakes up.”

Malcolm doesn’t wake up, which is a good thing because by the time Grant is done with me, I don’t even have the energy to stand anymore. I spend the next hour or so smiling and twitching on the bed while Mack heads downstairs to pour us drinks.

He comes back upstairs with the drinks and ice cream and says, “So what should we watch tonight? Action, Horror, Sci-fi?”

I wrinkle my nose and say, “You know, movies exist that don’t involve men hitting or shooting things, right?”

He wrinkles his nose in a caricature of my own expression and says, “Who the hell wants to watch that?”

“I do,” I say, “We’re watching a romcom.”

“Not a chance,” he says, swiping the remote from my grasp.

“Hey!” I say with a giggle, “No fair! I gave you pussy twice. No, three times!”

“Oh, fine,” he says, rolling his eyes. “Put on your stupid romcom.”

I do, and the particular romcom I choose tells a story of a woman who falls in love with a very manly police officer. I can’t resist teasing him about the similarities between him and the main character.

When the movie is finished, there’s something else I can’t resist and if the first three times don’t put another baby in me, this time definitely does.

## **EXTENDED EPILOGUE**



**F**ourteen Years Later

“Come on old man!” Dad calls, squaring up against Grant and setting his stance to make attacking easy.

“Who you calling old?” Grant says. “You’re old enough to be my father-in-law.”

“Ouch,” Dad says, “Low blow.”

“Hike!” Malcolm calls. Grant lunges forward, twists his body, and avoids Dad’s block. He runs a few feet out, turns around, but the ball never flies his direction. Instead, Malcom hands it to his brother and then steps in front of Dad to keep him from catching Jeremy as he runs as fast as his little legs will take him. I see Mom run in front of Jeremy, and I let out a laugh as she sighs, rolls her eyes, and makes only a show of trying to stop him.

“No fair!” she says to Malcom.

Malcom shrugs and says it’s just strategy. I laugh again at the strategy of giving the five-year-old the football. He’s right, though. Both Dad and Mom would rather let their grandson run for a touchdown than stop him. Marissa, however, has no such restraint. She runs up to her brother, throws her arms around him and lifts him high into the air. He squeals and struggles but immediately plays along when Mack starts off in his sportscaster’s voice. “Oh! It looks like number twelve took a hard hit. We don’t know if he’s injured yet, but we’ll have to hope for the best folks. Vicious tackle by the young rookie Marissa Boogie-Speed Stone.”

Marissa looks proud. Mack says, "I said a vicious tackle." Marissa smiles and he says, "That's right. A tackle, which means Marissa and Jeremy are on the grass and not dancing on the lawn."

Jeremy finally squirms free. He doesn't run for the goal like, though. He falls down dramatically and groans, "What a vicious tackle!" in his adorable five-year-old voice.

"Okay, everyone," Dad says, "Good play. That's a first down."

They line up again and Grant says, "Old men are sitting this one out." He jogs to the barbecue grill and blows me a kiss on the way. I think I blush like I'm a cheerleader in high school or something and he's the star quarterback.

Dad walks up and says, "Hello, princess."

"Hi, Daddy," I say.

He gives me a kiss on the cheek and says, "Wrong princess." I chuckle as he leans down and takes Samantha from my arms and kisses her before handing her back to me. "But hello princess to you, too."

"Hello again, Daddy," I say.

"I better make sure those knuckleheads aren't screwing up the food," he says. He walks past me, and I follow him at a slight distance. My second child, Robert, flips burgers with the kind of serious attention that pretty much characterizes everything he does. I swear that boy will watch the Three Stooges or the Marx Brothers and study their performances and their comedy tactics without the slightest squeak of laughter the whole time. He's thirteen years old and a sophomore in high school. His teachers want to just graduate him next year but neither Grant nor I are ready to let him go to college at fourteen. We're just waiting for him to find an interest that isn't intellectual.

I suppose we'll have to relent and let him take online classes when the time comes. I just can't believe how fast he's growing up! How fast they're all growing up.

I think I understand now why it was so hard for my father to accept me and Grant at first. Oh, I'm sure part of it is his very natural concern that an older man impregnated his eighteen-

year-old daughter, but I think most of it is just difficulty letting go. I'm having a hard enough time with my sons as it is...and they're only fifteen and thirteen!

Grant reaches Robert, claps him on the back, and then kneels at the cooler. He opens it, retrieves a few beers, and tosses one to Dad. I change direction to go sit down at the picnic table with the twins. Gracie and Hannah are busy with their newest creation. Gracie works with a sketchpad and Hannah translates her rough drawings into digital art. Samantha's infant carrier is on the table next to them and I set her down and then slide next to Gracie. "What are you guys working on now?"

"Blathnor the Angry," Hannah says without looking up.

I can't help but laugh. "Blathnor the Angry?" The drawing looks like a combination of a koala bear and a bluebird. It's very good, far better than I can remember being able to draw at nine years old. Hell, it's far better than I can draw now.

"His life's purpose is to avenge the destruction of his home, the Island of Blathnor. It sunk into the sea when Mathering Melvin cast a spell to fight off the armies of Clam Wennwick," Grace says.

"Except," Hannah says, "that's not what happened at all. What really happened is Kelptran Underbrown arranged the Island's destruction and set off the explosives just as Melvin cast the spell."

"Yeah, because he wanted Melvin to be blamed," Grace adds.

"Why did he want to blame Melvin?" I ask with a laugh.

"Because everyone loves Mathering Melvin, and Kelptran got jealous."

They never look up from their drawings as they keep talking about the world they've created. They don't call their conversation about the history of their fantasy world a history or an explanation. They use the word *lore*. So far, they have about seventy-three characters. The main character doesn't have a strange name. The main character is just Roger. He doesn't have a last name because nobody knows who his parents are. I guess that might be revealed in the last volume.

Last volume of the video game, not books. This is all for a video game world they're creating. If they get straight A's this semester, we'll buy them an online programming course so they can learn how to bring the video games to life.

"Are you crude enough to drink right from the bottle?" Grant asks. I look up and he hands me a single serving bottle of white wine.

"Oh, I'm a tramp that way," I say with a laugh. Remarkably, I hear Hannah kind of snort at my comment and Grace giggles.

"Do you girls want a lemon lime soda you can pretend is an energy drink?" he asks. Both of them giggle and for the first time look up from their artwork. They adore him, and I adore that they adore him. He stares at them with an exaggerated show of interest, and they giggle some more. "I'm gonna need an answer," he says, "So press the B button or something."

Hannah stares seriously at him and very slowly and exaggeratedly says, "Ha. Ha. Ha."

Gracie bursts into giggles and a moment later, Hannah joins her. Their giggles turn to squeals when Grant picks both of them up and tickles them mercilessly for several seconds.

"Daddy!" Hannah cries. "Daddy, stop!"

"Never!" he says, "I won't get to do this for much longer. I'm taking advantage of every chance I get."

"Stop!" Gracie calls out, "Or we'll make your character evil and stinky!"

"Hey!" Grant says, setting her down and adopting a hurt expression. "I'm not stinky!"

Gracie puts her hands on her hips and looks at me. "Mom, is Daddy stinky?"

"Very stinky," I confirm.

He shakes his head and says in an exaggerated voice, "No love, no love. I do so much for this family and still, *no love!*"

"I love you, Daddy!" Jeremy pipes up from his grandma's arms.

“Good,” Grant calls, pointing at him. “You are now my favorite child.”

Jeremy grins proudly and sticks his tongue out at Gracie. Gracie shares a look with Hannah and they both grin evilly at Jeremy, raising their hands into claws.

“Tickle monsters!” Jeremy calls, wrenching himself free of my mom and running away squealing while the girls give chase.

I sigh exasperatedly and pick up the notebooks and art supplies they leave on the ground. “Maybe we teach them to pick up after themselves before we get them the programming software,” I say.

“Oh, let them have fun,” Grant says, “It’s Thanksgiving. We’re supposed to be enjoying ourselves.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t enjoying myself,” I say. I lean closer and whisper into his ear, “Although there’s something else I can do that I might enjoy more.”

He grins and reaches for me, but Dad interrupts him. “Grant!” he calls, “Keep your hands off my daughter for five minutes and come watch the game with me. Your son seems to think that Barrett is a better quarterback than Esposito and I want you to enjoy it with me when he’s proven wrong.”

“On my way!” he calls. He turns to me and says, “Sorry, honey. It’s time for Malcolm to learn a lesson about football.”

I grin and say sweetly, “But Barrett *is* a better quarterback. He leads the leagues in touchdowns. Esposito is only third.”

“That’s because Denver’s offensive line is crap!” Grant cries, “I could lead the league in touchdowns if I had the Mooses of Minnesota blocking for me.”

“It’s moose, dear,” I reply, still sweetly. “The plural of moose is moose.”

“Whatever,” he says, “Don’t be a brat.”

I giggle and say, “You wouldn’t love me as much if I wasn’t a brat.”

“You’re lucky that’s true,” he says.

He turns to leave, but not before he swats me playfully on the ass. I yelp and say, “Babe! There’s children here!”

“There’s children everywhere,” he says, “I can’t even keep track anymore. What’s your name again?”

Robert looks up from the barbecue and says—perfectly seriously—“Puddin Tane, and if you ask me again, you need to get your blasted ears checked.”

I giggle as Grant blinks and says, “Blasted? Where did you come up with blasted?”

“It’s in the Western I’m reading,” Robert replies, “Although if you’d prefer, I can say, f—”

“No, blasted is fine,” Grant replies with a wry smile.

“Grant!” Dad calls from the living room. “Get your butt in here! They’re lining up for the kickoff!”

“Coming!” Grant hollers.

He shakes his head at Robert and the ghost of a smile flickers across our son’s face. For Robert, that’s the equivalent of roaring laughter.

Hannah and Gracie are playing happily with Jeremy, so I join my mom on the porch swing. She holds Samantha, who sleeps soundly in her arms.

“I’m so glad they get along now,” I say to Mom.

“Who, your dad and Grant?” she asks. “Honey, they never stopped getting along. Your dad never worried that Grant wouldn’t treat you right. He just had a hard time letting you go.”

Her words echo my earlier sentiments and I say, “That makes sense.”

I watch Robert carefully removing the finished patties from the grill and just as carefully laying hot dogs down. “They grow up so fast, don’t they?” I say wistfully.

“Yes,” Mom says, smiling at me with equal wistfulness. “They certainly do.”

I blush and she breaks the awkward moment by asking, “So how’s work going?”

“Wonderfully,” I say, “I interview Congressman Jenner next week and if all goes well with that, I might get to interview Senator Montrose when he’s in town for his campaign.”

“Senator Montrose?” she echoes, eyes wide. “Oh, honey, that’s incredible!”

I blush a little and say, “Thank you.”

Senator Montrose is running for President next year and unless a natural disaster occurs, he will win. He’s unique among politicians in that he has relatively few skeletons in his closet and none of them are so terrible that they might affect his chances. When I interview him, I will address every single one of those skeletons, and I’m sure that he’ll offer very satisfactory explanations for them.

What he might have trouble with is articulating his position on current policy and his plans to change them. He shares that failing with every politician, and as the local political correspondent for the largest press agency in the world, I have to make sure the public is aware of it.

Well, he has time. If he doesn’t have answers when he’s on the campaign trail six months from now, he’ll never have them, and that’s something that America should know.

God, I really do have a wonderful life. I have the man I love, children I love, a job I love and a great relationship with my parents, who accept Grant as my husband far faster than I expect them to.

It’s crazy how things just work out sometimes. I never would have guessed fourteen years ago that someday not only will all of my dreams have come true, but that my life would be even better than I could possibly hope or dream.

I guess I just got lucky.

Mom and I chat for a few more minutes until Robert announces that dinner is ready. Then we all line up buffet style to get our food. Samantha wakes up and I reach for her, but my mom pulls her away.

“Uh uh,” she says, “You get her all the time. It’s grandma’s turn.”

She smiles brightly at Samantha and brings her inside to eat. At a year old, Samantha can’t eat all of the meat yet, but she loves the mac and cheese Grant makes and—for some reason only God knows—the potato salad Dad makes.

I thank Robert as he very carefully offers me a hot dog with just the right amount of mustard and relish, then head inside to sit next to Grant, who pumps his fist in victory and grins triumphantly at Malcolm, who glares playfully back as Denver celebrates Esposito’s third touchdown pass of the quarter.

Dad and Malcolm tease each other as the game goes on and Grant takes advantage of their distraction to feel up my breast.

I slap his hand away and say, “Grant! Stop! The kids are watching!”

He grins and reaches in between my legs and when trying to push his hand away doesn’t work, I grab a throw pillow and cover my lap, putting my plate on top of it so it looks like I’m using it to eat.

“God, Grant,” I whisper just before a soft gasp escapes my lips. “Not now!”

“Tonight then?” he asks.

“Fine!” I say, gasping again, “Just stop! Seriously!”

He pulls his hand away and at the separation, I gasp again, then glare at him.

“You want another baby?” he asks.

“If we have another baby, then we need another home,” I say, “We barely fit in this one as it is.”

He kisses me softly and says, “Home is wherever you are, my love.”

I roll my eyes, but he knows me well enough to know that that little sentiment just earned him his shot at another baby. I smile at him and kiss him tenderly. “I love you too, baby.”



I snuggle against him and as I watch my happy family enjoy Thanksgiving together, it occurs to me that I really do have so much to be thankful for.

How do those books end again?

Oh yeah.

And we lived happily ever after.

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