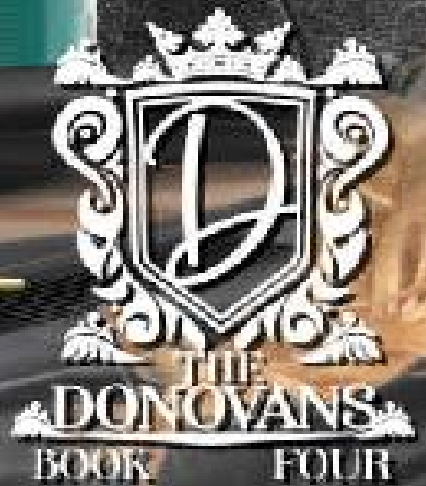


CEE BOWERMAN

CULTURAL

Set up



Curl It Up
The Donovans, Book 4
Cee Bowerman
CLBooks, LLC



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Cee Bowerman Book List

(Quite a few of Cee's series are intertwined. You can find the chronological reading order at www.cebowermanbooks.com)

Texas Knights MC

Home Forever

Forever Family

Lucky Forever

Love Forever

Texas Kings MC

Kale

Sonny

Bird

Grunt

Lout

Smokey

Tucker

Kale & Terra (Novella)

John & Mattie

Bear

Daughtry

Hank

Fain

Grady

Stoffer

Luke

Clem

Conner Brothers Construction

Finn

Angus

Mace

Ronan

Royal

Tavin

Chess

Rojo, TX

Rason & Eliza

Atlas & Addie

Jazmyne & Luc

Kari & Levi

Noah & Tallie

Nick & Cindy

Time Served MC

Boss

Hook

Chef

Preacher

Captain

Bug

Santa

Kitty

Rodeo

Stamp

Coven - COMING DEC 1st, 2022!

The Tempests

Wrath

Creed

Loki

Styx

Thorn

Freya

The Donovans

Drink It Up

Pull It Up

Pretty It Up

Curl It Up

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

I'm glad you're here to check in with the Donovan family. This book is an emotional one and a little longer than I usually write, but the story felt right for Jolie's happily ever after.

Almost everyone I know has that one person from their past that they wonder about occasionally. The 'what if' that comes up when you think about decisions you've made in life or things that have happened. What if I'd done this or what if I'd said that are questions that haunt a lot of people, me included.

Not everyone gets a second chance to right the wrongs they've done, or that have been done to them, but in this book, Jolie and Dante find each other again after years apart and realize that time and distance didn't lessen the love they felt when they were younger.

In the first three books of the Donovan series, I mentioned Jolie's problems with her son's grandparents, and you'll get to know them in this story. You're not going to like them, I can guarantee that. Just know that karma occasionally needs a little nudge from some well-meaning people, and everything works out in the end.

As with all of my books, I touch on a few things that might make some people emotional. As we get older, so do our parents, and sometimes life throws us a curveball and makes us the caregivers for the people who have always taken care of us. This happens in Dante's family, and as hard as it was to write, I tried to show the roller coaster of emotions that comes with that role reversal.

I've known quite a few people who've lived a life similar to Dante's. He made some bad decisions that led him down a dark path, but he's persevered to come out on top as a better man with history and experience under his belt. I've always been a fan of the underdog who works their ass off to better

their life, and I'm a firm believer that a person's past doesn't define who they are, it just enhances who they become.

I hope you fall in love with Dante just like I have and that you enjoy the happily ever after that he and Jolie both deserve.

Happy reading!

Cee

This book does cover some subjects that may be upsetting to some readers. It represents what it might be like to live with someone who suffers from a traumatic brain injury and/or dementia. Dante and Jolie's story also mentions drug abuse, incarceration, and ongoing addiction recovery, and I hope that I represent those struggles well in this book.

PROLOGUE

17 YEARS AGO

JOLIE

I looked up from my book when I heard someone nearby and smiled timidly when Dante, the guy I was waiting for, sat down in the chair next to mine.

“Sorry I’m late,” he whispered so he didn’t annoy any of the others studying around us. “I got caught up in traffic.”

“Traffic? In Marlboro?”

“People on TV use that excuse all the time. I thought it sounded better than the real reason.”

“What’s the real reason?”

“The dog ate my homework?” I shook my head and sighed, but it only made Dante laugh. “Come on, Jolie, you know it would be funny if that happened.”

“You’re always late. Maybe I had something to do, and I’m going to miss it now because you couldn’t be here on time,” I grumbled.

“I had to take my sister Camila to the mall. I went inside to grab something, and it took longer than I thought it would.”

“You’re late because you were *shopping*?”

Dante reached into his backpack and pulled out a red box from the cookie store in the mall food court and slid it toward me with a grin. “Happy birthday, Jolie.” I took one look at the box and promptly burst into tears. “Shit. What’s wrong? You don’t like cookies?”

“You’re the first person that remembered today’s my birthday,” I choked out as I tried to wipe the tears away from my eyes without ruining my makeup. “No one in my family said a thing.”

“Damn. That sucks, babe,” Dante said as he rubbed his hand up and down my back before he pulled me close and kissed my temple. “I’m sorry.”

My emotions were all over the place. I was so sad because I felt like everyone forgot about me and excited because Dante Pardo had put his arm around me and given me a kiss. It was just a kiss on the temple, not a *real* kiss, but it was a kiss all the same.

“Pack your stuff up. Let’s get out of here,” Dante suggested.

“But you’ve got a test on Monday and ...”

“And you’ve got a birthday,” Dante interrupted. “Come on. Time to celebrate.”

“Quinn’s going to be here to pick me up in a little bit. We always have to be home for dinner by 6:30.”

“That means we have almost two hours. Move it!”

“But Quinn ...” I fretted as Dante picked up my backpack and started putting away my books.

“Call and tell him you’ve got a ride home. He’ll be happy he doesn’t have to come get you.”

“You’re right,” I conceded as I pulled my phone from my pocket and called my brother. He was still at practice so he didn’t answer, but I left him a voicemail telling him that I’d be home by dinner and he didn’t have to come get me. “Where are we going?”

“We’re going to take my new car out for a spin and forget about algebra and everything else for a while. Does that sound okay?”

“That sounds perfect.”



DANTE

I couldn’t believe I was riding around in my car with Jolie Donovan. She made me more nervous than any other girl ever

had. When I'd decided to run in and get her a cookie for her birthday, I'd wavered back and forth on what to buy for so long that I was 20 minutes late for our tutoring session.

But when I found out that everyone else had forgotten that today was her special day, I decided that this was the perfect chance to show her exactly how I felt about her. I'd been hesitant to say anything before because she wasn't even 15 yet, but today, that number had changed, and the universe had presented me with an opportunity to show her how much I liked her. I wanted her to know my feelings had nothing to do with her algebra homework help.

We'd spent the last hour driving around and listening to music as we talked and laughed. I'd known of Jolie since the beginning of the school year when I'd seen her walking across the courtyard with my best friend's girl, but I hadn't had a chance to talk to her until she was assigned to be my tutor.

As much as I hated math, I was grateful it had given me the chance to see her twice a week for at least an hour, sometimes two. In the last few months, I'd really come to like Jolie but felt weird about it since she was only 14. There was only a year and a half difference in our age, but I couldn't imagine how I'd feel if some older guy started hitting on my little sister.

But now Jolie was 15. That somehow seemed like the magic number, and I was hoping this was my chance to make her see me as something other than that fuck-up who got confused when you started mixing letters with numbers.

"I had a really good time today, Dante. Thank you for cheering me up," Jolie said as we pulled up in front of her house. "I'll see you on Tuesday at the regular time?"

I dodged her question in an effort to drag out her leaving, "Um, let me get the door for you. Wait right there."

I jumped out and rushed around the hood. I pulled the passenger door open and took Jolie's hand and held it as I walked with her toward the house and then up the steps onto the big porch before I stopped next to her at the front door.

“I hope I made your day better,” I said as I turned to face her, her hand still in mine.

“It was perfect, Dante. Thank you.”

I stared into her deep brown eyes before I murmured, “Happy birthday, Jolie.” She smiled, and I watched her eyes close as my face neared hers. I kissed her softly and then pulled back to stare down into her beautiful face. Her eyes fluttered open just as the front door was yanked open, causing us to jump.

“What the fuck, Dante?” Quinn Donovan growled as he stared at me standing way too close to his sister.

“Shut up, Quinn,” Jolie snapped. “Go back inside.”

Quinn shook his head and told her, “Dinner’s ready.”

I watched Quinn shut the door, and then I looked back at Jolie. “Are you going to be in trouble?”

“No. They pretty much let us do what we want as long as we’re where we’re supposed to be on time. Can you come inside and have dinner with us?”

“Do you want me to?” I asked, squeezing her hand.

“I do,” Jolie said nervously. “I’ve never had a guy ...”

“What? You’ve never had a boyfriend come to your house and meet your family before?”

“A boyfriend?” Jolie squeaked.

I shrugged. “I’d like to be.”

Jolie whispered, “This is the first time in my life that my birthday wish has come true.”

I felt my heart swell as I said, “Let’s go inside so I can meet your parents.”

I reached out and opened the screen door with my free hand, and Jolie pushed the big wooden door open with hers. I heard her gasp as we stepped inside, then we both jumped when at least two dozen people screamed, “Surprise!”

1.

“I don’t know about you kid, but I could use some more coffee.”

Dante

JOLIE

“What in the hell?” I yelled when my heater came on and blasted me in the face with hot air. I pushed the button to turn on the AC and realized it was already on high.

“Mama, it’s so hot!” Zeb complained as he buckled his seatbelt behind me. “Turn on the cold air.”

“It’s not working again,” I told him with a smack on the dashboard. “I hate this thing.”

“Hate is an awfully strong word,” Zeb said, throwing my own words back at me.

“Shit! We’re going to be late,” I said as I pulled my phone out of the cupholder. I called my sister Lana I’d just seen in the hall outside of our apartments. When she answered, I asked, “Can I borrow your car today?”

“I have meetings. Is yours doing that wonky thing with the air again?”

“Yes,” I all but whined. “When I took it in a few months ago, they told me this might happen again if they didn’t replace the part, but I decided to take my chances. Look where that got me. I need to take Zeb to school and drop the stupid car off at the shop to get it fixed, I guess.”

“It’s a gremlin,” Lana said with a laugh as she appeared in front of my car with her daughter by her side and her phone up to her ear. I rolled my window down, and Lana stepped back and waved her hand in front of her face as she got blasted by the heat.

“I should call and see if they’ve got time to look at it today.”

“You should take it to Pardo’s like Dad told you to in the first place,” Lana chided.

“You know I’d rather not do that.”

“So you’re going to take it back to that creepy guy? Ugh.”

I thought about it and then shook my head. “No, I’ll take it to Pardo’s.”

“Good! I’ve got enough time to take the kids to school and then meet you at the garage. I’ll drop you off here and then go to my first meeting.”

“Zeb, hop out and go with Aunt Lana and Marley,” I told my son. “I’m not sure if my car will be finished by the time you get out of school, but someone will be there to pick you up.”

“Love you,” Zeb said as he popped up between the seats. He kissed me on the cheek and then got out of the car to join my sister, his backpack dragging behind him.

“Love you guys!” I called out before I pulled out of my parking spot. I turned the radio up as one of my favorite old songs came on, and a memory of riding in the car with my first boyfriend flashed through my mind.

Dante Pardo had stolen my heart the first time we met, then held it close to his own for more than a year before his family imploded and our lives took a different path. I’d heard rumors about him through the years and hoped that none of them were true, but I didn’t have much time to wonder since I had problems of my own.

My car was fucked up, my son needed new shoes, and in three days, I had to meet my ex-husband’s parents for dinner so they could celebrate Zeb’s birthday and give him some belated gifts that would prove they didn’t know my little boy at all.

Happy. Freaking. Monday.



DANTE

“Dad! Grandpa’s out in the garden in his pajamas again!” my daughter informed me through the baby monitor sitting on my desk.

I groaned and leaned forward to rest my head in my hands, wondering when life was going to get easier. I could kick myself for all the time I wasted as a child wishing I could be a grown-up and do whatever I wanted. Now a full-fledged adult with a million responsibilities, I wished I could go back to a simpler time when my family wasn’t on the verge of meltdown and I wasn’t the one responsible for the hard decisions.

“Dada blue go pinkie toe garbage aloha,” my little girl, Resa, said from the floor on the other side of my desk. At least, that’s what I thought she said. Unfortunately, she hadn’t come with a manual, and I hadn’t found an app that could translate toddler.

I sat for a second and pondered how much money I could make if I was smart enough to invent that.

“Go!”

Finally, she’d said something I *could* understand!

“Come on, kiddo,” I said as I got out of my chair and walked around the desk to pick her up. “Let’s go corral Grandpa before he starts gardening again.”

As I walked through the garage, I called out to my employees and let them know I’d be at my parents’ house for a little bit. I crossed the back parking lot we used for storage and then opened the gate to the grassy area that was my parents’ backyard.

Years ago, my grandfather bought the land here and opened a full-service gas station. When it started making a profit, he bought the house right behind it and raised his family there. Over time, he focused more on fixing the cars rather than gassing them up, and when I was a kid, he closed that part of the business down completely.

Three generations of the men in my family had worked in the garage at the same time until my family had a run of bad luck that lasted for years. First, my grandfather had a heart attack while working under his favorite truck, then my father was injured when a lift malfunctioned. He was in the hospital for months, leaving the garage in my 17-year-old hands.

I'd tried to hold everything together while Mom nursed Dad back to health, but my immaturity made it impossible for me to cope as an adult would have when left to make decisions that would affect our lives for years to come. I dropped out of school and started working full-time to pay the family's bills while helping to raise my younger siblings. The stress I'd been under had led me to alcohol and then drugs, and I'd started running with a bad crowd and making horrible choices. I met a girl who somehow made my life even more stressful, and then I paid for that relationship with my freedom as I spent eight years in prison to atone for my crimes. Somehow, our daughter had survived the lifestyle we created her in and was born healthy in the prison hospital before she was picked up by my mom and brought back to Marlboro to be raised by my already stressed family.

Since then, other things had happened and only a few of them were good, but I had Resa and Nica to care for now and didn't have time to dwell on that.

As if she knew I was thinking about her, Resa started waving her arm toward my father. "Pa pa fish flower truck!" Resa exclaimed when she caught sight of my dad near my mom's prized rose bushes.

"Dad, it's the wrong time of day to be gardening, isn't it?" I called out as we walked closer to him. "You're going to miss your shows."

"I need to get this cleaned up before your mom gets home, son," Dad said as he dropped to one knee and started pulling weeds. "She loves these damn bushes, you know."

"I know she does," I agreed sadly as I put my daughter down on her feet. "I guess I missed a few weeds last night while I was out here."

“Who’s the kid?” Dad asked, glancing over at Resa.

I sighed, realizing that today was going to be one of his bad days since he didn’t recognize my little girl. “That’s my daughter.”

“Really? You’re way too young to start a family, Dante,” Dad said with a frown. “You should focus on school so you can graduate and go to college.”

“I think that ship has sailed, Dad,” I told him with a wry grin.

I looked up when the front door opened and smiled when my daughter Nica appeared on the porch with my nephew, Matt. They were dressed for school and carrying their backpacks, ready for my sister to drop them off on her way to work.

Resa squealed as she toddled toward her big sister. Nica picked her up and propped her on her hip before she turned and watched my sister Camila come down the stairs.

“Dad, I got your tray set up by your chair. You better hurry and go inside. I heard the show announcer say there’s someone from Texas on today!”

“From Marlboro?” Dad asked as he tried to stand. I rushed to help, then let his arm go once he was steady. “I better get in there and make sure they represent us well, huh? Man, I’m tired. It’s good to have a day off work for a change.”

“Amy had to go to school to take a quiz,” Camila explained. “Can you stay with him until she gets here?”

“Sure thing,” I said as I took Resa from Nica. I leaned over and gave my oldest daughter a kiss on the cheek before I said, “Stay out of trouble and pay attention in school, sweetheart. You, too, Matt.”

“Of course,” Nica scoffed. “I’m an angel.”

“Lucifer was an angel at one point, too, you know?” Camila teased as she walked away between the kids. She was almost to her car when she called out, “His breakfast is on the

tray, and I started another pot of coffee. I'll see you this afternoon!"

I waved at the trio, and then we stood on the porch to watch them go as Resa waved her fat little arm back and forth saying goodbye.

"Let's hang out with Grandpa for a bit, and then we'll get started on that engine," I told her as I turned and walked into the house. "I don't know about you, kid, but I could use some more coffee."

2.

**“I’m not usually one for the tattooed bad boy, but
damn.”**

Lana

JOLIE

“Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn’t,” I explained as Manny wrote up my ticket. “This morning it was blowing out air that felt like it was coming straight from hell.”

“That’s not good. It’s gonna be a scorcher today too,” Manny said as he scribbled something on the paper in front of him. “How’s your family?”

“They’re doing well. Quinn got married a few months ago.”

“Really? I hope she’s ... different than ... I hope he’s happy.”

“Kyla is *nothing* like his ex,” I assured him with a laugh. “Thank God.”

“That woman was a piece of work,” Manny agreed. “I hated it when she brought her car into the shop.”

“I hated having to look at her over the dinner table at my parents’ house.”

“You win. At least I only had to see her every few months.” Manny smiled as he reached out and took my keys. “I think I’ve got all the information I need for now. One of us will call you if there are any questions.”

“Thanks for fitting me in today.”

“We’ve been waiting. It’s been a while since your dad came in complaining about the mechanic you took your car to last time,” Manny chided. “I told Dante about ...”

“Dante is back?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No. I thought ... When did he ...?”

“He’s been out for a while but stayed away to keep himself out of trouble. He moved back when the family needed him. Just in time too.”

“Just in time for ...?” I shook my head. “I’m sorry. It’s none of my business.”

“It’s not a secret or anything. Don isn’t doing well, and with Maria gone, it became too much for the girls to take care of him and their own families. When she died, it almost killed Dante, but he’s a strong kid. He’s working his way back to the surface even with the weight of the world on his shoulders.”

“Maria died?” I asked as my eyes filled with tears.

“The doctors said it was a heart attack, but I think it was a broken heart,” I heard a voice I recognized say from somewhere beside me.

I let the tears fall as I slowly turned around to look at the man who’d held my heart in his hands since I was 15.

“Dante,” I whispered as I swiped the tears off my cheeks.

“Hey, pretty girl,” Dante said softly as he walked over to me. “It’s good to see you again.”

“I had no idea you were home. I heard you’d gotten married and were living in East Texas with your family.”

“I did get married. I heard you did too.”

“I’m divorced,” I said with a weak smile. “I have been for a few years. How long have you been home?”

“We moved back six months ago to help take care of Dad.”

“I’m so sorry to hear about your mom. I really liked her.”

“And she liked you,” Dante said with a sad smile

The front door opened, and with a gust of wind, my sister Lana appeared, breathless and apologetic. “I’m sorry it took me so long to get here, Jolie. I had to go back home because Marley forgot her ... Dante?”

“Hi, um, La! Long time, no see,” Dante said with a grin.

“That’s Lana,” I told him and then laughed when he sighed and shook his head. “Don’t feel bad. They’re my sisters and sometimes it’s hard for *me* to tell who’s who.”

“It’s good to see you, Dante. Jolie, we’ve got to go. I have to get to the office before I’m late for my meeting.”

I looked over my shoulder at Manny and asked, “You’ll call when you figure out what’s wrong?”

Manny glanced at Dante and nodded as he said, “One of us will give you a call as soon as we know something.”

“It was good to see you, Dante,” I said as a beautiful younger woman appeared in the doorway that led out into the garage. She had a baby on her hip that looked just like the man in front of me, and I watched his face transform into a smile as he held his arms out for her. My heart skipped a beat when the little girl squealed and dove into his arms before he gave her a kiss on the forehead and settled her on his hip.

Lana grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the door as Dante called out, “Bye, Jolie. It was good to see you two.”

I pulled my hand out of my sister’s the second we stepped outside and then looked at her grumpily as I complained, “Are you trying to dislocate my shoulder?”

“I had to rescue you from the situation. The look on your face when that woman came into the office was heartbreaking,” Lana said as we walked toward her SUV. “Damn. I had no idea Dante and his wife had come back to Marlboro.”

I sighed as I looked over my shoulder at the front door, hoping for one more glimpse of him. I saw him watching me walk away and lifted my hand to say goodbye one more time. “I think I’m going to send one of the guys to pick up my car when it’s done.”

Lana nodded as we got into her car and then agreed, “Yeah, I wouldn’t want to go back there either.” We rode in silence for a few minutes before she said, “He looks *good*.”

“Doesn’t he?”

“I’m not usually one for the tattooed bad boy, but *damn*.”

I blew out a breath and shook my head. “I’ve always had a fondness for them myself.”

“Well, that one’s married, so you’ll have to expand your horizons and find a bad boy of your own. Besides, he broke your heart into a million pieces. Maybe it’s a good thing he’s not single. That might keep you from making a horrible life decision.”

“Dante was ... he’s the one that got away.”

“It’s probably for the best that it stays that way, huh?”

“Why does what’s best for me hurt so much?”

“I don’t know, Jolie. That’s the million dollar question.”



The bustle of the salon did nothing to take my mind off seeing Dante this morning. After a while, my cousins and friends that I worked with noticed my distraction.

“What’s going on, Jolie?” Cesar asked from across the room at his station where he was doing foils for a client.

The room fell silent, and I could feel everyone’s eyes on me as I studied the appointment book I had on my lap. I looked up and shrugged before I lied. “Nothing’s going on. Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been sitting there in the same position staring at the floor for at least 20 minutes,” Rachel explained. “There’s definitely something going on. Is it Tyler?”

“For once, no. It’s not Tyler and his crap weighing on my mind.”

“Then what is?” Helena asked. “Spill it.”

“I ran into an old ... friend this morning. I was just walking down memory lane.”

“An old friend or an old *friend*?” Javin asked with a pointed look.

“He was her high school boyfriend. First crush, first kiss, first everything else,” Lara, my sister, said as she breezed into the room from her boutique next door. “I came to check on you. I just got off the phone with Lana, and she told me about this morning.”

“That’s funny. Jolie was just about to tell *us* about this morning,” Cesar chimed in.

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Yeah, you were,” Cesar retorted sarcastically.

“You’ve talked about Dante before,” Helena reminded me.

I scoffed. “When?”

“The Margarita Meltdown of 2018,” Cesar answered. “I remember it well. Okay, that’s a lie. I remember most of it, but it’s all a little cloudy.”

“It was a tequila haze. Quinn had to call Wes and Max down to carry all of us home. The guy I was seeing at the time was convinced I was cheating on him. We had a huge fight, and I just let him think the worst. At least he knew I had good taste. Wes and Max are gorgeous,” Javin said dreamily.

“Ew,” Avery, Rachel, me, and Lara all said at the same time.

“They aren’t nearly as handsome as the original Donovan boys,” Helena said with a sigh as her eyes fluttered closed. “I’d purr like a kitten for any one of them.”

“No! Do not start that thing where you make cat noises and then purr my dad’s name. It makes me nauseous,” Avery snapped. “I will puke in your direction. I’m not even playing.”

Rachel made a gagging noise and said, “And I’ll join. That’s just gross. You’re talking about our dads.”

Javin blew out a breath and agreed with Helena. “I mean, she does have a point. Yum.”

“I hate all of you,” Lara said as she walked back toward the door of her boutique. “Bunch of damn perverts.”

“I don’t have any thoughts about the original Donovan brothers, but Patrice ... oh, that one revs my engine.”

I threw the pen I was holding at Cesar, and he feigned an injury by putting his hand over his eye. “She got me! Oh, the pain!”

“It didn’t even hit you. Don’t think nasty thoughts about my mom *or* dad. Gross.”

“So tell us about this Dante fellow, and we’ll think nasty thoughts about him instead,” Helena prodded. “Come on. Tell us!”

“I remember him,” Avery said. “It’s been years since I saw him at a family function, so I’m not sure what he looks like now, but my almost 12-year-old self was mesmerized. He had that dark and dangerous bad boy vibe. He showed up at her parents’ house to drop her off, and they walked up to the front door and started making out.”

“One kiss. It was my birthday and my first kiss, and it was interrupted by my brother, thank you very much.”

“You got your first kiss on your birthday? Aww,” Helena said dreamily. “That’s so sweet.”

“And then?” Cesar asked.

“Then what?”

“Lara said he was your first everything.”

“Are we going to sit here and swap virginity stories, Cesar? I’ve got an appointment coming in 10 minutes. Better make it quick.”

“Aren’t all the stories about losing one’s virginity quick?” Javin asked. “At that age, finesse and stamina are overshadowed by the ability to get it up within seconds of ... the final ... you know what I’m saying.”

“Mine was the length of the toothpaste commercial playing on the TV we’d been watching,” Rachel said knowingly.

“Doesn’t even get an honorable mention. Two pump chump.”

I laughed with everyone else but felt myself blushing. That was *not* what my first time with Dante had been like. Not at all.

“She’s blushing!” Cesar crowed. “There’s a story there.”

I slowly shook my head as I tried to hold back a grin. I wasn’t successful, and everyone stared at me in shock when I burst out laughing.

“Let’s just say it wasn’t his first time, and he didn’t have a problem with stamina or recovery,” I said cagily. “That’s all you’re getting from me.”

“At least you have a nice memory to look back on.”

I sighed and thought back to all the times Tyler had left me hanging in the bedroom and I would finish myself off with thoughts of Dante. I wasn’t proud of it, but that’s what seemed to work, still to this day.

“I kind of want to punch her in the face,” Cesar’s customer said in disgust.

The room erupted in laughter and I joined in, not worried about an impending bloody nose. When everyone calmed down, I explained, “It doesn’t matter either way. He’s married with a child. That ship has sailed. It’s all the way out to sea now. Not even a blip on the horizon.”

“He has an illustrious past anyway, doesn’t he? I remember hearing talk when he ... Nevermind.”

I shrugged at Rachel and then shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s not like he’s available, and even if he was, the sparks have long since faded, I’m sure.”

“Did you feel sparks when you saw him this morning?” Helena asked.

My client walked in at just the right time, and I didn’t have to answer that question, which was a good thing because I wasn’t sure I could be convincing when I told them I hadn’t felt a thing.

3.

“I might need to find a new addiction since I’ve already tattooed almost all of my body.”

Dante

DANTE

The morning from hell had flowed right into the afternoon, and by the time my sister Aurelia brought Nica home from school, I was at the end of my rope. I didn’t even have to say anything before Aurelia was pushing me out the front door to take a ride so I could clear my head.

Alone time was scarce these days, so I wasn’t about to argue after the day I’d had.

Before she shut the door behind me, I warned her, “He’s convinced that Mom left him for some guy she met at bingo, and he’s tried to get out of the house to find her at least three times. Keep Resa in the back room because he’s convinced she belongs to the neighbors, and he’s intent on taking her home before they call the cops and accuse him of kidnapping.”

“Shit,” Aurelia moaned.

“And try to get him to eat or drink something. He refused all day because he was sure Amy was trying to drug him.”

“Well, was she?”

I nodded and blew out a breath. “Yeah. We both tried. I finally put some melatonin gummies in one of Resa’s snack packages and left it on the table beside the lamp. He’s finally eaten all four of them, so he should be out soon.”

“Stay out as long as you want, Dante. I’m off tomorrow, so I’ll sleep over in case he gets up and starts roaming around.”

“We’ve got to talk, Aurelia. It’s gotten so bad that we’re about to lose Amy, and if that happens, I don’t know what

we're going to do."

"Amy might quit coming over?"

"We talked today and she said she's afraid we'll keep him home longer than we should if she stays. She's worried he's going to end up getting hurt or hurting someone, and I agree with her. The ... outbursts ... are getting worse and worse. If I have to choose between protecting my daughters or protecting Dad ..."

"He would never hurt the kids, Dante."

"He would never believe that Mom left him for another man either, but that's the joy I dealt with this afternoon."

Aurelia had tears in her eyes when she shut the door, and it was all I could do not to sit down on the front step and cry. Today had been *that* bad. Hell, the last year had been that bad. I didn't know how much more I could take before I started losing my own grip on sanity.

There was something to be said for the freedom my dad had now. After an entire life spent working his ass off, the only worry he had was taking too long to piss during a commercial break and missing one of Judge Judy's zingers.

Hell, if I didn't have a family to raise, bills to pay, and employees that counted on me, I'd be weeding the garden in my pajamas and binge watching tattoo competitions and garage shows until my eyes crossed.

I got my bike out and let my mind roam as I rode aimlessly around town. I had to slow down for some pedestrians who were crossing the street to go into a bar on the corner when I saw a tattoo shop next door. Without even thinking about it, I used the handicap ramp at the corner and rode onto the sidewalk so I could park my bike in front of the salon next to the tattoo shop. Within seconds, I was in a happier place with vivid drawings all over the walls and music playing just loud enough to be heard over the hum of a tattoo gun.

"Not sure if the cops will give you a ticket for parking ... Dante?"

I tilted my head and stared at the man in front of me as I tried to figure out where I knew him from. After a few seconds, I realized it was Jolie's youngest brother, Michael.

"Mike?"

"Man! It's good to see you! I didn't realize you were home already."

"I've been back for a while now."

"Are you back at the garage with your mom and dad?"

"Dad's not working at the garage anymore, and we lost Mom last year."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Are you here to book an appointment? Looks like you might be running out of room."

"I've still got a little open space," I said as I held my arms out and rotated them around. "There's a few places on my chest too. I'm here to see about a consultation."

"I've got time."

"I already know what I want," I said as I followed him behind the partition toward his station. I nodded at another artist who was working on the back of a man's calf and then stopped a few feet from Mike. "I just need another name added."

"I don't usually do names," Mike hedged. "Anything can happen in a relationship and ..."

"It's not a woman's name, man - it's Resa, my daughter's name. She's 2."

"*That* I can do. Do you want to schedule an appointment, or do you have time tonight?"

"I'm ready now if you can swing it."

"Let's see what you want and where you want it, and then I'll draw it up and we'll nail down the placement," Mike suggested.

Less than 30 minutes later, I was laying on the table with my shirt off as Mike gloved up and got everything ready to

give me a tattoo.

“It’s crazy that out of all the places in town I could be, I ended up on your table tonight.”

“Why’s that?”

“I saw your sister today for the first time in ... hell, I guess it’s been at least 12 years. Maybe 13.”

“It was right before you got arrested,” Mike corrected me.

“No, the last time I saw her was about a month after we broke up. I dropped off some of her things at your house. I was just going to leave them on the porch but ...”

“Maybe you don’t remember, but she saw you ... probably a week before you got arrested. It really fucked her up, but Dad talked to her for a while and she was okay after a few days. She met her ex a few weeks later, and then ... Well, shit got rough for her after that, but she pulled through.”

“That’s one of the reasons I resisted coming home after I got released. Stories like that make me cringe. I would guess I either asked her for money, tried to steal something from her, or didn’t recognize her at all. Which one was it?”

Mike cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable as he shook his head. “None of those. It’s all in the past now anyway, man. I’m sure she’s forgotten about it.”

“I’m clean now, in case you were wondering.”

Mike stopped what he was doing and laughed before he said, “If I thought you weren’t, you wouldn’t be on my table.”

“Some people turn around and walk the other way when they see me. I get it, though. I pulled some stupid and horrible shit back then. Prison was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. Now I’ve got my girls and the business to keep me on track.” I admitted, “I go to meetings as often as I can too.”

“I hear that helps some people. I’ve got a cousin that goes to meetings pretty often. He’ll have a shit day and go just to be around people who understand.”

“Exactly.”

“So you’ve got two girls? How long have you been married?”

“My wife passed away when my daughter was born,” I explained simply, only mentioning my wife, Teresa, and leaving out the part about Nica’s mother and *that* shitshow. “I’m single and have been since before I came back to town.”

“Most of us are unattached now. Quinn just got married, though. He’s got two daughters from his first marriage, and Kyla, his new wife, absolutely adores them.”

“I’ve been on a few dates, but when a woman finds out I’m a single dad to an almost-teenager *and* a toddler, they usually run the other way.”

“Kyla embraced it from the start. Jolie’s got a son, and Lana has a little girl. They’re both 6. Quinn’s girls are older. Colbie’s 11 and Quinlee’s 10.”

“Nica’s almost 12. I’m not ready for the teenage years,” I mumbled as Mike started prepping my skin for the transfer.

“Is anyone ever really ready?” Mike asked. “I don’t know how my mom and dad didn’t pull their hair out. For a long time, life in our house was crazy.”

“You were the baby, though. I was the oldest. I watched everything play out from the start.”

“How are your brothers and sisters?”

I sighed and then closed my eyes when the tattoo gun started buzzing. I winced at the first sensation of the needle but focused on our conversation instead of the pain. “Both of my brothers are in prison. My sisters are doing great, though. Aurelia’s a nurse, and Camila’s a teacher.”

“Shit. Sorry to hear that about your brothers. That’s gotta be rough.”

“It was too much for Mom. I figure my bullshit started the process of breaking her heart, and my brothers finished it off.”

“And your dad? I had my car worked on a few months ago and didn’t see either of you at the garage.”

“Dad’s retired. I hang out with him at the house a lot.”

“That’s cool. I chill with my dad too. I like to catch a game with him or just hang out in the den pretending we’re watching whatever’s on television while we nap.”

“Dad and I watch a lot of television when we’re together. That’s our thing.”



I sat straight up in bed when I heard a crash and glanced over at Resa’s crib to make sure it hadn’t woken her up as I jumped out of bed. With her still sleeping soundly, I tiptoed out of the bedroom and pulled the door closed behind me before I rushed down the hall to figure out what all the commotion was about.

“Dad! You’ve got to calm down.”

“He took everything! Everything!”

“Dante didn’t steal from you, Dad. He’s in the bedroom asleep right now.”

I glanced down the hall and saw Nica peeking out of her room. I shook my head and waved my hand in her direction. She nodded before she shut the door. I waited until I heard the lock click before I turned and walked back into the bedroom where I slept with Resa. I grabbed the key and slipped it into the pocket of my basketball shorts and then twisted the lock on the knob before I pulled the door shut again.

This wasn’t the first time Dad had gone on a tear, so we’d established some protocols for when it happened again.

“Dad,” I said firmly as I walked into the kitchen. “I’m right here. I didn’t steal anything this time.”

“Your mom is crying in the bedroom, son. You’ve broken her heart for the last time.”

I looked at the floor and took a deep, calming breath before I looked back up at my dad's tear-stained face. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'll talk to her."

"You'll get the hell out of my house!" Dad roared as he lunged toward me. I put my hands up to grab his shoulders, but I wasn't quick enough to dodge the punch he threw. I saw stars when his fist connected with my nose and felt blood rush down my face and onto my chest. I ignored the blood and the pain and wrapped my arms around my father to subdue him as Aurelia rushed over the cabinet to grab the medicine the doctor had prescribed for occasions just like this. "Please calm down, Dad. I don't want to hurt you."

"That's all you do, you ungrateful bastard," Dad yelled as he tried to squirm out of my arms.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered as tears started streaming down my face. "I'm so sorry I hurt you and Mom. Please forgive me."

"Let me go! Get out of my fucking house!"

I turned our bodies so that Dad couldn't see Aurelia with the syringe in her hand. I squeezed him just a little tighter to get him still and then held him when his body went limp.

"I'm sorry, Dante. I tried to get him to calm down ..."

"It's not your fault, sis. Go get his bed ready, and I'll carry him in," I ordered as I adjusted him so I could slide one arm under his knees. Aurelia rushed off as I hefted him up, still surprised at how much weight he'd lost since he'd retired.

Once we had him settled in bed, I walked down the hall toward the bathroom and grabbed a handful of toilet paper to try and stop my nose from bleeding. I couldn't stop the tears that were streaming down my face and bit back a sob as I sat down on the toilet and leaned forward to rest my elbows on my knees.

"Let me clean you up," I heard Nica say from the doorway.

I sat up with a jolt and looked at my daughter as I brushed the tears from my face. "Nah, baby. You need to get back to

bed. I'm sorry he woke you up."

"He says such horrible things to you, Daddy. I hate him."

"Don't hate him. He doesn't know what he's saying, Nica," I assured her as I checked the tissue to see if my nose had stopped bleeding yet. When I determined it had, I stood and opened the toilet lid and tossed in the tissue. As I watched it swirl down into the pipes, I sighed. "Sometimes he only remembers things from a long time ago. Back then, I deserved everything he could throw at me. I know it's hard for you to hear, but I wasn't a good guy when I was young. I did some really stupid shit."

"With my mom."

I cleared my throat and nodded, then grimaced when I saw my reflection in the mirror. My nose was swollen, and my eyes were already starting to bruise. "He's still got one hell of a punch, doesn't he?"

I heard Resa cry out and sighed.

"I'll get her settled down. You need to clean up so she doesn't get scared."

"I'm sorry you have to see shit like this, sweetheart."

"I'm sorry that the only things Resa will ever remember about him are times like this. At least I remember what he was like before Grandma died," Nica said softly as she turned around to walk down the hall toward my bedroom.

"Hold on. It's locked," I said as I reached into my pocket for the key. She came back and took it out of my hand, grimacing when she saw the blood there. "I love you, sweetheart."

"Love you, too, Daddy."

Aurelia appeared in the doorway as I washed my chest, face, and hands. She'd been crying, and I realized that she had a handprint on her cheek. "He got you too?"

"Yeah. Not as bad as he got you."

I took the ice pack she offered and held it up to my face before I said, “What do you think would have happened to Nica if she’d been in his way this time?”

“He wouldn’t ...”

“He’d never hit his daughter in the face either, right?”

“Dante, I don’t know what to do. We can’t just abandon him. Mom would want ...”

“Mom would want me to protect my children, Aurelia, even if it was from my own father.” I dropped the ice pack and reached out to pull my sister into my arms. She let out a sob and curled into my chest. I held her tight until the worst of it passed. When she finally got herself together and pulled away, I put my hands up and used the towel she’d wrapped around the ice pack to wipe away her tears, making sure I was gentle over the bruise that was forming on her cheek. “I can’t do this anymore, Aurelia. I can’t put my kids through shit like this, and I can’t juggle everything and Dad too.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We’ll sell the house to help pay for the cost of putting him in a home. If we’re not paying Amy to be here, we’ll have that extra money too. The kids and I will live above the garage until we find a place.” I thought about it for a second and then added, “Hell, maybe I should sell the garage too.”

“No! The garage has been in our family longer than the house. It’s your birthright.”

“Honey, I lost any claim to that years ago.”

“No!” Aurelia said firmly as she shook her head. “I won’t agree to the sale of the garage and neither will Camila. I’ll talk to her tomorrow and tell her what happened. It will be hard for her, too, but she’ll understand. Neither one of us can take care of him full-time and we shouldn’t expect you to either.”

“I’m sorry, babe. I tried to make it work.”

“Dante, you’ve turned yourself inside out to make up for what happened years ago. The only way to do that is to move

on with your life and raise happy kids who feel safe and secure in their own home. You can't do that here, and it's not right that we've expected you to. No more. We'll sit down tomorrow and figure everything out. Right now, we all need to get some sleep."

"How is it that you're the baby of the family and the smartest one of us all?"

"That's why I'm the youngest. Mama stopped when she got perfection." Aurelia sniffed and then reached out and touched my chest right next to my new tattoo. "I like it."

"Mike Donovan did it for me tonight."

"Donovan?"

"Yeah. I ran into Jolie at the shop this morning and then ended up in her brother's tattoo shop this evening."

"It's a sign."

I laughed. "It's a sign that I need to spend less time in the office and more time under the hood of a car, and that I might need to find a new addiction since I've already tattooed almost all of my body."

"Everything's going to work out, Dante."

"Yeah, sweetheart, it will. We've just got to survive in the meantime."

4.

“Indolpropriate.”

Zeb

JOLIE

“Are you ready to go?” Kyla asked from the doorway of my apartment. I shook my head and motioned toward the stairwell where we could hear Zeb upstairs throwing a fit. “He’s pissed.”

“You think?” I asked sarcastically. “Shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to snap at you, but I’ve been dealing with that for an hour. I was already on edge when he started.”

“As harsh as it sounds, let’s get that on video,” Kyla said as she walked farther into my apartment, pulling her phone out of her purse when she stopped at the bottom of the stairs.

“I don’t know. It seems ... wrong to video him when he’s that upset.”

“I know, honey, and while we may never have to use it, it’s good to get it just in case. When we go back to court, it could help show the judge how upset Zeb gets and sway him in our favor against visitation.”

I sighed. “Okay. Do it.” I waited at the bottom of the stairs and listened to my son rage in his bedroom while Kyla took a recording from outside his bedroom door. She came back downstairs with tears in her eyes and nodded to let me know she had what she needed. “I’ll go try and calm him down again and see if we can get him out the door this time.”

“I’m going to record today’s visit too,” Kyla warned me. “We’ll be at the park instead of a crowded restaurant, so we should be able to hear what she says to you.”

“Whatever you think will help is fine,” I told my sister-in-law before I trudged up the stairs to get my son. “Let’s get this over with.”



“We’d love for you to come stay at our house, Zeb, but your mom is really mean and won’t let us keep you anymore. Don’t you miss your bedroom at our house?”

My ex-husband’s parents, Susan and Bill, were irritated that I insisted Kyla stay throughout our visit, but within two minutes, I was glad she was there. Even if she couldn’t do anything to help with the custody matter between us, at least she’d be there to take Zeb home after I went apeshit and ended up in jail for killing them with my bare hands.

Zeb glared at his grandmother and shook his head as he told her, “I don’t have a bedroom at your house because I don’t live there.”

“You do have a bedroom. It’s still got all of your toys from when you used to stay with us on the weekends.”

“That was when I was a little kid. I don’t play with toys like that anymore,” Zeb scoffed, as if last year was eons ago. In his eyes, it probably was, but to me, it felt like just yesterday when I had to share my son with these people for days at a time. “Mom, can we go now?”

“We’ve still got 42 minutes,” Bill snapped at Zeb. I took a deep breath to say something and felt Kyla’s hand on my leg underneath the picnic table where we were sitting.

“Come here, Zeb. Let me fix your hair. It’s a mess,” Susan said as she pulled a comb out of her purse. “Does your mom *ever* brush your hair? Jolie, as a beautician, I’d think you’d be able to keep his hair trimmed so he doesn’t look like a vagrant.”

I bit back a retort and then stifled a smile when Zeb hopped off the bench to get away from the comb in her hand.

“And those clothes. Every time I see him, he’s wearing shorts and a t-shirt.”

“Well, Susan, he’s 6. There’s really no need for him to wear business casual all the time. Or ever.”

“Does he even know how to button a shirt? I would think that would be something you’d encourage him to learn. If you were a *good* mother ...”

“My mom is *the best!* You’re ... poop!” Zeb yelled before he took off toward the empty play area.

“He says things like that because he hears you say them at home,” Susan chided.

“Honestly, Susan, we never talk about you at home. It’s as if there’s an unspoken rule that we never mention your names because the thought of visiting you makes him irritable.”

“You’ve done this. You’ve turned him into an ungrateful little shit who doesn’t like us. If I had time alone with him, I’d turn him over my knee and beat some manners into that child,” Bill threatened menacingly as he leaned forward and glared at me.

“When Tyler comes home, he’s going to take care of everything. We’ll make sure he has the best attorney,” Susan said with a glare in Kyla’s direction. “We’ll snatch him right out of your arms and raise him with manners and decorum so he won’t grow up to be trash like you.”

“Speaking of Tyler, how’s prison treating him? Has he made any new friends?” Kyla coughed loudly to interrupt me as she squeezed my leg so hard that it hurt.

“Our lawyer is going to appeal,” Susan said primly.

“Again?”

“He was railroaded. It’s the crooked police here in Marlboro. There was no reason for them to pull him over. If they hadn’t, then he wouldn’t have scuffled with them, and he wouldn’t be where he is today.”

“He bounced off two parked cars before he drove through a fence and crashed into a house, Susan. I’m pretty sure the police had nothing to do with that.”

“His ophthalmologist gave him the wrong prescription, and he couldn’t see. He’s night blind anyway.”

I laughed. “He’s got astigmatism. Other than that, the man has perfect vision, and it wasn’t even at night. He crashed into that house at four in the afternoon right after the kids had come home from school.”

“We’re not here to discuss my son’s unfortunate car accident,” Bill huffed.

I shook my head and looked over at my son who was sitting on the bottom of the slide. He pointed toward his wrist, as if telling me to check the time, then motioned toward Kyla’s SUV. I smiled at him and shook my head, then motioned for him to come back to the table. He shook his head and frowned, so I gave him *the look*. His sigh was evident even from 10 yards away. He made it hard not to smile.

As if he were on a path to the gallows, Zeb walked toward us slowly, dragging his feet the entire way. He stopped at the end of the table and glared at me before he looked over at his grandparents.

“Come here,” Susan snapped as she patted the seat next to her.

“I don’t want to sit there,” Zeb said as he frowned at his grandmother. “You always try to fix my hair or something.”

“Well, you look like an orphan, so I can’t help myself,” Susan snapped. Finally, she did exactly what I expected and lost her temper. “You *will* do what you’re told, Zeb Tyler Frank, or I will spank your ass until you can’t sit down for a week. If your father was here, he’d take you in hand. Don’t look at me like that. You’re lucky I don’t slap that insolent look off your face. I swear, I’ll ...”

“And we’re done here,” Kyla interrupted as she abruptly stood. She grabbed her keys and pushed a button, and I heard her SUV start up at the curb. “Zeb, honey, go get in the car.”

Without a word, Zeb sprinted away.

“Our allotted time is not up, Donovan!” Bill said as he stood up. He pointed his finger at Kyla and yelled, “Our

lawyer will be hearing about this!”

“And so will the court. Your wife threatened bodily harm twice, and you threatened it once. I’m sure they’ll be interested to hear about what the two of you consider discipline for a 6-year-old child.”

“She didn’t say anything at all about that,” Bill blustered.

Kyla picked the phone up from the table and smiled at him. “I guess we can agree to disagree. Jolie, let’s go.”

“The next time we meet, I expect you to have my grandson bathed and presentable, wearing decent clothes, Jolie. Just because you’re a slob doesn’t mean you have to dress my grandson like one,” Susan said snidely.

“He had a shower this morning, and he’s wearing clothes I bought him yesterday,” I told her as I started walking toward the SUV. “Have a safe trip home. We’ll see you in two weeks.”

I blew out a breath as Kyla got into step beside me, resisting the urge to curse and yell in frustration because I knew her phone was still recording. Once I was inside the car, I fastened my seatbelt and rested my head against the back of the seat, waiting for Kyla to get settled so we could go home.

Zeb wasn’t ready for peace and quiet, though. Kyla had just set her phone on the console when Zeb yelled, “I *never* want to talk to them again. They think I’m ugly and dirty. She’s not going to spank me.” Zeb’s voice was softer and more unsure when he asked, “You won’t let them slap my face, will you, Mama?”

“I won’t ever let anyone hurt you, sweetheart.”

“Why is she so mean? I like this shirt. I picked it out myself.”

“And it’s a very nice shirt,” Kyla said cheerfully. “I like that color. It looks really soft too. Is it?”

“Yeah,” Zeb said, distracted now. “Mama got me one with Spider-Man on it too. *And* she let me get web shooters, Aunt Kyla. Web. Shooters.”

“No!” Kyla said dramatically.

“She did! And she said she’d help me set up traps for the guys so I can pop out and shoot them with my webs,” Zeb boasted.

“Maybe the next time we visit your grandparents, you can bring them and show us all how they work,” Kyla suggested. I hated that she was redirecting the conversation to a subject that would upset Zeb, but I knew she had her reasons.

“I won’t let Mama pack any toys to bring anymore. One time when we were visiting, I had an action figure with me, and Grandmother took it away and hid it in her purse.” Zeb sounded forlorn when he added, “She wouldn’t give it back either. She said it was inaprolate. Indopropate. Indoprol ...”

“Inappropriate?” Kyla asked.

“Yeah. Indolpropriate. That’s the word,” Zeb agreed, butchering the word again. “She said it was indolproriate and took it away.”

“But when we left, we went to Target and got three new ones, remember?”

“We never found that same one, Mama.” I scratched my head, promising myself I’d get online this evening and see if I could find the damn thing on Ebay. It had been six months since that incident, and Zeb still talked about the action figure Susan had hijacked as if it was the holy grail of toys. “Why does Grandmother always worry about my hair? I like my hair. Do you like my hair, Kyla?”

“I love it. It’s so shiny.”

“My mom makes me wash it every day when I take a shower. She got me some shampoo that makes me smell good like Grandpa.”

Kyla glanced over at me with her eyebrows raised.

“It’s Old Spice 3-in-1 for hair and body,” I explained.

“She said I can use it as long as I’m careful not to get it into my eyes. I am, you know.”

“That’s good, Zeb. When we get home, you’ll have to let me smell your hair.”

“Okay, Aunt Kyla. You’ll like how I smell so much that you’ll buy Uncle Quinn some just like it.”

“Maybe I will.” Kyla pulled into a gas station and parked in front of the door. “I’m kind of thirsty, Zeb. Why don’t we go inside and get a drink while Mom waits in the truck for us.”

“Can I pick out a candy?”

“Of course,” Kyla assured him. “And I’ll need you to choose some for your cousins and Uncle Quinn too. It might take us a few minutes.”

“Awesome!” Zeb cheered as he scrambled out of his seatbelt.

“We’ll give you a few minutes alone, Jolie,” Kyla said softly as she reached over and patted my arm. “Honk the horn when you’re ready for us to come out.”

“Thank you,” I choked out, on the verge of tears.

I didn’t let them fall until after I watched Zeb hold the door open for Kyla and then follow her into the store. All the emotions I’d held inside throughout the morning while Zeb was having his meltdown and then while we endured those horrible people burst through the dam. I couldn’t hold them in anymore. I sobbed as I leaned forward and put my hands over my face, wondering how long I could take the stress of dealing with them and how I could get my son out of the situation that upset him every other week like clockwork.

It wasn’t good for either of us to have to deal with those people, but the court system didn’t seem to care. I was grateful that the judge had looked at the evidence and changed the visitation from one weekend a month to an hour every other week, but that wasn’t enough to stop them from making my life a living hell.

I had to figure something out soon. I didn’t know how much more we could take.

5.

“We’ve got to start locking our door.”

Kyla

JOLIE

“Kyla told us that today’s visit was even more of a shitshow than usual,” Lana said as she plopped down on the couch next to me.

“After the last visit two weeks ago when Kyla recorded Bill and Susan’s bullshit, the family court judge decided to send an impartial party to accompany us going forward. I guess they didn’t get the memo because they just about lost their damn minds when the woman sat down at the end of the table and introduced herself.”

“Damn. I bet that was a sight. How’d Zeb take it?”

“That boy ... I swear. He’s got the oddest sense of humor. He saw them pitching a fit and started giggling. It was so hard not to chuckle with him. I lost it when he started howling with laughter. The more he laughed, the angrier they got. Bill stomped off to the car just 15 minutes into the visit.”

“It is kind of funny that those adult assholes need a babysitter.”

“He cackled like he does when he watches that show with the bear and lemmings.”

“I love that one. The kid’s got me addicted. Now when I need a quick pick-me-up, I just turn on that show.”

“Which show?” Lake said as she walked through the open door of my apartment.

“The bear with the ...”

“Oh my God, I know! Isn’t that one the best?”

“We should watch it,” Lana said as she reached for the remote on the coffee table in front of us.

“I’ll make popcorn,” Lake said as she walked toward the kitchen. I smiled as I watched her go, remembering how I’d felt so clumsy and out of sorts when I was pregnant with Zeb. I was positive I’d never looked as good as she did for damn sure. “Where’s Lara?”

“She’s on a call with her new online boyfriend,” Lana explained as she ripped open the wrapper of the popcorn package. “She’ll be here in a little bit.”

“We should see what Kyla’s doing,” I said as I glanced toward the door.

“Oh, she and the girls are getting ready for a sleepover. They’ve got a friend from school coming, so they’re making cookies they can decorate with her tonight.”

“Marley wants to know if Zeb can stay over. Clay’s got a movie marathon planned.”

“A movie marathon?” I asked, looking at Lana with one eyebrow raised. “Since when does Clay sit still long enough to watch movies?”

Lana rolled her eyes. “There’s a theme - sports, of course. Apparently, it’s a sin against God that I fell asleep during *Rudy*, and he wants to make sure our daughter’s soul is safe.”

Lake and I laughed at the look of disgust on Lana’s face and then laughed harder when she flipped us off with both hands.

“He can stay over. It will probably be good for him. Me too. I can get some stuff done around here.”

Lake snorted and looked around my apartment. “Get what done, Ms. Overachiever? Everything is always perfect.”

“Whatever. I dropped a pair of socks when I was putting Zeb’s laundry away the other day and realized there’s an entire community of toys living under his bed. It made me wonder if the toys get up and live their lives while we’re not home like they do in those movies.”

“I know, right? I thought I was the only one that got creeped out at the thought of that!” Lana exclaimed. “I’m glad

it's not just me.”

“This is how we spend our Saturday nights now,” Lana said with a sigh as she sat down with the bowl of popcorn in her lap.

“We should do something fun,” Lake suggested.

“Says the woman who can't stay awake past nine,” I teased.

“No! Let's do ... something. Let's go somewhere.”

“Where, Lake? And don't say the bar. Everytime I go down there, I get hit on by some creepy guy who's young enough to be my kid,” Lana complained.

“You're 29 years old, Lana. Geez,” Lake grumbled disgustedly even though she was the same age.

“Cesar has a guy that comes in every Saturday for a shave because he is afraid that the electric razor is going to pluck out his soul.” My sisters looked at me in question and I shrugged. “The boy's 20 and ... he's a boy. Not a man. A boy. Seriously. Kids these days, I swear.”

“You're only 32,” Lana reminded me.

“Let's go prank someone,” Lake suggested. “We haven't done that in ages.”

Lana looked excited, and I groaned. “You're not pulling me into the middle of your shit again, ladies. Nope. Not going to do it.”

“Come on,” Lana whined. “It'll be fun. Who can we hit?”

“If you start a prank war with the guys, and they do something to my apartment, I will kill both of you with my bare hands,” I threatened.

“Wes and Max are out of town with James for the weekend. They went to Austin for some guy's wedding.”

“No, Lana.”

“Come on, you old fart. Join us on the dark side.”

“Let’s do something in their apartments,” Lake said excitedly. “What can we do?”

“We can sit here and stay out of trouble. That sounds like a wonderful idea,” I suggested grumpily.

“Or we could pay them back for all the shit they’ve done to us over the years. Think of all the times they pulled some stunt, and Mom stopped us before we could retaliate. There’s no one to stop us now,” Lake said wickedly. “You know you want to, Jolie.”

I felt myself wavering, so I shook my head again.

“Remember the time James put food coloring on our toothbrushes?”

“My teeth were green for days,” I growled.

“And when he put Sun-In in our hairspray bottle, and we all ended up with orange hair?”

“I remember,” I huffed. Then, angry all over again, I whispered, “Oh, that son of a bitch. I looked like Little Orphan Annie until Mom could get me in to see her lady for color.”

“Mom didn’t let you retaliate, did she?” Lana asked, pushing her agenda.

“No, she didn’t.”

“And remember that time Wes told your crush that you had multiple personalities, and if he made you mad, you’d think you were the Hulk and start smashing things?” Lake asked.

“I did get him back for that,” I remembered with a grin. “I told that one girl Wes had a micropenis so she should avoid intimacy at all costs because he’d cry.”

“What about the time Max set you up with the guy who was picketing outside the bar about immorality and sin?”

I looked up at the ceiling and sighed. “How long do we have? When will they be back?”

“Yes!” Lana cheered as she fist bumped Lake. “Let’s get to work, ladies!”



DANTE

“You can call me anytime, and I’ll come right over to get you, okay?” I reminded my daughter as I turned around to get Resa out of her seatbelt.

“Dad, it’s just a sleepover. She’s really nice, and I know I’m going to have fun.”

I let Resa climb into the front seat as I stared at the bar I’d passed that night a few weeks ago when I came to get my tattoo. It spoke volumes about how upset I’d been that day to know I hadn’t even noticed the name of the bar I’d parked next to.

Donovan’s Pub was obviously owned by one of the family, and it was right next to Mike’s tattoo shop. I saw that Donovan & Co Realty and Restoration was the business at the other end of the street. I let my gaze roam across the road and remembered hearing Jolie or one of her siblings say that the family owned all of the property on this block.

When I’d spoken to Nica’s friend’s mom yesterday, I hadn’t thought to ask her their last name, and when she said that they lived over her husband’s bar, I’d been leery. But while I talked to the woman and heard girls laughing in the background, I relaxed. I mean, how could I judge living arrangements when my daughters and I were about to move into an apartment over a working garage?

“Come on, Dad! I don’t want to be late!”

I smiled at Nica and nodded to let her know it was okay to get out of the car, then pulled Resa closer to me as I checked the mirror to make sure it was safe to open my door. Once I was on the sidewalk, I followed the directions the woman had given me and walked around the end of the building toward a door with a sign that said ‘Employees Only.’ I hit the button to buzz Apartment #1, and within just a second, a little girl’s

excited voice told us to come in. The door made a buzzing sound, and then Nica pulled it open. I walked behind her into a well-lit area and saw a set of stairs to our right. I could hear girls chattering as we walked around to the bottom of the stairs.

“You’re here!” a young girl said excitedly as two of them appeared on the stairs. “Hi!”

“Hello!” I greeted them as Resa squealed and squirmed so I’d put her down. I held on tight as one of the girls took Nica’s hand and encouraged her to come upstairs. I followed the girls to the landing at the top and watched as the smaller one put her finger on the sensor beside the door. The lock whirred, and then the girl opened the door so we could all walk inside.

“This is our apartment,” the girl said as she pointed to an open door. She pointed from one door to the next as she explained, “That’s where Uncle James lives, and that’s Uncle Max and Uncle Wes. That one is Uncle Mike, then Aunt Lake, Aunt Lara, Aunt Lana, and Aunt Jolie.”

“Your whole family lives here?”

The little girl laughed at Nica’s shocked expression and said, “No, silly. Grandma and Grandpa have a house, and a bunch of our cousins live across the street. Our new brother lives at college, but we can’t visit him there because he doesn’t like to clean his room.”

The last was said as the girls led us into the nearest apartment, and the woman standing at the counter added, “He lives in a dorm, and he’s not all about having the whole family show up.” She wiped her hands on a towel and then walked around the counter as Nica was pulled toward the apartment’s stairs by the girls. The lady stuck her hand out when she got closer to me and introduced herself, “I’m Kyla Donovan. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” After I shook her hand, she smiled at Resa and touched her knee. “Hello, little one.” Resa, having never met a stranger she couldn’t charm, angled toward Kyla with her arms out. Kyla looked to me for permission, and

when I nodded and handed Resa over, she grinned. “She’s adorable.”

“Thanks. I’m Dante, that’s Resa, and the one that just disappeared with your daughters is Nica. Thanks for inviting her over.”

“Thanks for letting her come! The girls have been beside themselves all day getting ready for their guests. Do you have time for a cup of coffee, or do you need to go?”

I looked around the apartment and sighed. “I had no idea who your family was when we spoke on the phone. I’m not sure your husband would appreciate having me here.”

Kyla tilted her head and stared at me in question. “Do you and Quinn have a history? If that’s a problem, I can assure you that won’t affect how Nica’s treated.”

“I know it won’t. Quinn was always a great guy. We went to school together, and then I dated one of his sisters for a while,” I explained as Kyla’s eyes got wider with every word.

“Oh, you’re definitely going to have to stay for a drink,” Kyla said as she turned around and walked back toward the kitchen. I didn’t have a choice but to follow considering she was holding my little girl. “Which sister?”

“Jolie. We started dating in high school when she was a freshman and I was a sophomore.”

“Young love, huh?” Kyla asked as she started working on a pot of coffee, undeterred by the toddler on her hip. “I guess breakups can get pretty ugly, but that was years ago. I’m sure Quinn isn’t holding a grudge on Jolie’s behalf.”

“It was a little more intense than a regular breakup,” I hedged. “Nica’s got her phone, so if you need me to come pick her up ...”

“Quinn and the girls have a weekend breakfast tradition, so you can’t come get her until that’s finished. But we were thinking of going to a matinee movie tomorrow, and I’d love it if she could join us.”

“Should you talk to Quinn first?”

“My husband is not the type of man who would blame a kid for something their parents did years ago, Dante. None of his family would do that. But I am curious as to why you think they all hate you.”

“I know they don’t all *hate* me. I got a tattoo from Mike a couple of weeks ago, and he did a great job. I just don’t think Quinn would appreciate me being in his house.”

“It’s my house too,” Kyla said as she pulled a couple of mugs from a cabinet and set them on the counter beside the brewing coffee pot. “Have a seat and tell me why you think he’d be uncomfortable.”

“It was a long time ago and ...”

“Exactly!” Kyla exclaimed. “Now tell me what the Donovans were like in high school. I’ve heard some stories, but they were probably skewed in their favor. Did James really come to school dressed as the principal on Halloween?”

I burst out laughing, remembering *that* drama and how he looked dressed as a middle-aged woman wearing sensible heels. “That was awesome. She was so pissed.”

“Patrice swears she didn’t know what he was doing and mentioned there are pictures somewhere that she’d have to pull out to show me.”

“I think there’s a picture of him like that in the yearbook. That was my junior year, so he would have been a sophomore.”

“You were dating Jolie then?”

“Yeah. I was Gabriel Van Helsing, and she was Anna. There’s a picture of us in the yearbook too. We won the best couple costume.”

“I need some plastic baggies,” I heard a voice say from the doorway. When I turned around, a woman was staring at me in shock.

“Dante?”

“Hi ... La,” I said awkwardly, not sure if this was the same sister I’d seen at the shop a few weeks ago or one of the

others.

“Lake,” she clarified as she walked in. She looked from me to Kyla and then back before she smiled and said, “You’re looking good, Dante. I heard you were back.”

“Mama!” a little girl with braided hair said from the doorway. When Lake turned around, the girl rolled her eyes and said, “You’re not my mama.”

“Your mom is ...”

“Aunt Kyla, can I have some more cookies?” a little boy said as he walked past the girl into the apartment. “Uncle Clay said I was gonna puke, but I promise I won’t.” When he hopped into the chair next to mine, he said, “Hi. I’m Zeb. Who are you?”

“This is Dante, an old friend of ours from school,” Lake explained as she walked around the island toward the cabinets. She opened one as she explained, “Dante, that’s Jolie’s son, Zeb, and Lana’s daughter Marley.”

“I’m Marley June Gold,” the little girl said as she took the chair on my other side. “Maybe if we have just two more ...”

“Four,” the little boy interrupted

“... cookies, we won’t puke.”

“Or maybe you can eat dinner in a little bit and then have cookies before you go to bed,” Kyla suggested as she poured coffee into the mugs she’d gotten out. She held the carafe toward Lake and waited as she pulled out another mug. “How about that plan?”

“Or we could have cookies for dinner,” Zeb suggested.

“Or you could have no cookies at all since you’re pushing it,” Lake retorted.

“Where are the baggies I need?” another woman asked from the doorway.

As I turned around and realized it was another of the triplets, Lake said, “Shit. I got sidetracked.”

“Dante! What are you doing here?” the woman asked.

“That’s my mama,” Marley said with a smile.

“He was dropping his daughter off for a sleepover, and I asked him to stay for a cup of coffee,” Kyla explained. “I just made a fresh pot. Want a cup?”

“Yes! We’ve got a lot of work ahead of us, and I’ll need the energy,” Lana explained. Lake pulled out another mug and filled it before she handed it to her sister. “You might as well make one for Jolie because she ...”

“I need a ladder,” I heard Jolie’s voice say from the hallway before she walked into the room. Distracted, she didn’t even see me at the bar as she looked around. “Or maybe a taller chair. His barstools turn, and I’ll break a hip if I fall.”

One of the girls cleared her throat, and Jolie looked over at us.

“Dante,” Jolie said breathlessly.

“Hi, pretty girl,” I said without even thinking.

“He’s here dropping off his daughter to stay the night with the girls,” Lana explained. “Where’s your wife, Dante?”

I cleared my throat and gave Lana a tight smile. “My wife passed away two years ago.” Lana tilted her head and then looked at my daughter who was still in Kyla’s arms, so I had to explain, “She had an aneurysm while she was giving birth.”

“I’m so sorry,” Lana said with a grimace. “I had no idea. We saw that woman with you at the garage and ...”

“That’s Amy. She’s my brother’s wife. She helps out with Dad during the day while I work and sometimes takes care of Resa for me.”

“Mama, Uncle Clay said I’d puke if I ate any more cookies,” Zeb interrupted the awkward silence.

“And I said you have to eat dinner before you can have more,” Kyla reminded him.

“We should go,” Zeb said with a sigh as he got down off the stool. “Come on, Marley. We’re not getting any more

cookies right now.”

“I don’t like it when they gang up on us like that,” Marley complained as she followed Zeb out into the hallway. “It’s just wrong.”

“Uncle Wes says that they’re bullies,” I heard Zeb say as his voice faded away.

“How many cookies did they eat?” Lana asked.

“At least a dozen between the two of them,” Kyla explained as she opened a container on the counter and handed one to Resa. “But we haven’t decorated them yet so they didn’t get *that* much sugar.” Kyla looked up at me and explained, “The girls want to decorate cookies with Nica, so we baked them ahead of time.”

“She’ll love that. She used to cook with my mom and Teresa, but I’m more of a frozen dinners kind of guy, so she doesn’t really get that opportunity anymore.”

“I should ... I’m going to get the ladder from the bar,” Jolie said as she backed toward the door.

“Why do you need a ladder?” Kyla asked as Lana pulled boxes of baggies out of the cabinet and handed them to Lake. “And why are you taking my baggies?”

“We’re getting James back for all the pranks he’s pulled on us over the years,” Lake explained as she picked up the boxes under one arm and then grabbed her coffee mug and started toward the door.

Resa let out a loud squeal and started squirming, so Kyla put her down. She took off toward the door following Lake, but Jolie caught her before she could get outside. Resa grinned as Jolie set her on her hip, and my heart melted when Jolie smiled down at her.

“She looks just like you,” Jolie said as she studied Resa’s face while she nibbled on the cookie in her hand.

“There’s no doubt that she’s a Pardo, that’s for sure. Her mom was blonde and blue-eyed, but she got all the darker genes from me.”

“So why do you need a ladder?” Kyla asked as Lana followed Lake into the hallway.

“I’m taking the vent covers off, and they’re up near the ceiling. I can’t reach them without help,” Jolie explained.

“And you’re taking the vent covers off because ...” Kyla let her sentence trail off, hoping Jolie would fill her in.

“I’m going to make his house reek,” Jolie said with a sneer.

“We’ve got to start locking our door,” Kyla said under her breath before she took a sip of her coffee.

“What are you using?” I asked.

“I haven’t gotten that far yet.”

“Well, if you want it to be *horrible*, I’ve got a few suggestions.”

“Like what?” Jolie asked as she neared the island.

“Raw shrimp?” Kyla suggested.

“Eww,” Jolie said as she shook her head. “I’m not going *that* far.”

“Vinegar?” I suggested.

“That’s a possibility,” Jolie said thoughtfully as she sat on the stool next to mine. She sat Resa on the bar in front of her and grinned. “What do you think, sweetheart?”

“If she wasn’t already potty trained, I’d give you a couple of her diapers,” I mused as I watched my daughter wipe her mouth with the back of her hand and smear cookie goo from her wrist to her elbow.

“Let’s discuss the vinegar idea,” Jolie said as she reached for the paper towel Kyla held out for her. She wiped my daughter’s arm and then her face, smiled and then kissed the end of the nose. “What are you thinking, Dante?”

I felt my heart constrict in my chest and bit back the urge to tell her exactly what I was thinking. Watching her with my

little girl and seeing how comfortable Resa was with her made me realize just how perfectly she'd fit in my life.

For years, Jolie was the focus of my fantasies as I remembered how good she and I were together as we learned about love and relationships. Once I sobered up and got my head on straight in prison, it was too late to consider reconnecting with her. The fact that I had a lengthy sentence ahead made me realize that nothing would ever come of dreaming about the girl I once knew. Then, when I met Teresa a few months after my release, I found a woman I could love who had more in common with the man I'd become.

Now that Teresa was gone and I was back in Marlboro for good, the man and father I wanted to be was too busy trying to rectify the problems I'd created when I was younger that I'd never even considered finding someone else.

"Aren't you the sweetest thing?" Jolie murmured as she pretended to take a bite of the cookie Resa held out toward her. "I could just eat you up!" Jolie pretended to take another bite and Resa laughed. "Can I take you home and cuddle up with you? Can I? I just want to keep you like this forever. Yes I do!"

I bit my lip as I studied the woman and my daughter, enjoying themselves like they were the only two in the room. I glanced over at Kyla and realized that she wasn't watching Jolie and Resa ... she was watching me. She raised her eyebrows and grinned before she looked over at Jolie, who still wasn't paying attention to anyone but my little girl.

I watched my daughter blossom under Jolie's attention and sighed.

How could I be jealous of my own 2-year-old just because she was the one in Jolie's arms?

6.

“I don’t have a lot of years left, and I hear they don’t give long sentences to the elderly on account of medical costs.”

Victor

JOLIE

I had just settled Dolly underneath one of the dryers when Cesar asked, “When are you going to tell me about this weekend’s visit?”

I sighed. “I’d rather not think about it.”

“Get it off your chest,” Cesar suggested. He leaned down so that his face was next to Lillian’s and grinned at their reflection before he said, “You want to hear all the juicy gossip, don’t you, doll?”

“Of course,” the elderly lady said with a grin of her own. “We love to hear what you young ones get up to.”

“Makes us glad that we’re old and don’t have to worry about all that drama anymore,” Doris said from where she was sitting with her arms resting on the table in front of her.

My cousin Rachel, who was putting a topcoat on Doris’s nails, smiled at her client. “I’ve heard about some of the drama that goes on around here, so I’m not sure you’ve really escaped.”

“How is the love triangle between Tom, Elaine, and Lottie?” Cesar asked. “I’ve been curious how that would play out.”

“They decided he wasn’t worth the trouble and have both moved on,” Doris said primly. “From what I understand, Tom was heartbroken but found someone else in record time.”

Lillian laughed and then winked at Cesar in the mirror. “Tom’s doing just fine.”

I felt my jaw drop as Cesar’s eyes got wide. Rachel laughed and teased, “To the victor go the spoils, right?”

Doris snorted but then whispered, “I think that Elaine and Lottie realized things are better when it’s just the two of them, if you know what I mean.”

I couldn’t seem to shut my mouth as my eyes met Cesar’s. He looked just as shocked as me.

Over the past few years, we’d gotten to know our elderly clients well and had laughed and carried on with them on the good days while we mourned the loss of other residents on bad days. I’d started volunteering when my grandparents lived here and continued after they passed. Cesar, Rachel, and Javin had started coming with me on occasion while we were in school. After I opened the shop and hired them, they agreed to come in with me on Mondays when the shop was closed and perform services for these people who couldn’t always make it in for appointments.

The facility soon hired us to officially come in once a week and take appointments. I knew my friends enjoyed the visits that were more like social hour than work. Now, every Wednesday from 8 to 4, we set up shop at Horizons and caught up with our regulars about what was going on in their lives while they gave us advice on what we had going on in our own.

“I’m anxious to know what happened with those horrible people,” Muriel said as I helped her out of her wheelchair and into my salon chair.

As I unwrapped the towel I’d put on her after her wash, I sighed and shook my head. “As usual, it was upsetting for both of us. The court appointed mediator came again, and they threw a fit just like last time.”

“Such horrid people,” Muriel fussed with a frown. “Your poor son doesn’t need that upset every two weeks.”

“Neither do you,” Dolly chimed in from underneath the dryer. I shook my head when I realized she’d lifted the canopy so she could hear the conversation, and when she saw me looking at her, she grinned and pulled it back down over her head so her hair could dry in the curlers.

“My lawyer said that the longer we go with the mediator attending the visits, the better. She’s getting a firsthand look at how they behave and how it affects Zeb and that can only go in our favor.”

“I’m just glad you don’t have to give him up for weekends and holidays anymore,” Cesar said knowingly. “That was awful for everyone involved.”

“Poor Zeb,” Annabel, the woman who was sitting next to Javin’s chair, chimed in. “I have an intense dislike for those ex-in-laws of yours, just on that poor boy’s behalf.”

“I don’t have a lot of years left, and I hear they don’t give long sentences to the elderly on account of medical costs. Me and some of the boys could try and take care of the problem for you,” Victor, one of the men waiting for his turn in Javin’s chair, offered.

“Just for that, you’re getting a free shave and hot towel treatment, Victor,” Javin promised. “I like how you think.”

“Violence is never the answer,” Muriel said with a pointed look at her husband. “We should just burn their house down so they have to move away.”

“Oh shit,” Cesar said with a snort as he bent over and braced himself on the chair to hold himself up while he laughed.

Javin cracked up and high fived Victor and then Muriel. “I want you two to adopt me.”

“There’s a reason I’ve kept that woman around for 60 years. Sometimes the way her mind works is downright terrifying,” Victor said as he reached out and put his hand on Muriel’s. “But you’re sweet as pie to me, aren’t you, Murie?”

Muriel smiled at her husband and put her other hand on top of his. “I am as long as you behave yourself. We’re going to

have to get Junior to file the adoption papers so Javin can be his brother.”

“Yes! Finally! Parents I can get along with!” Javin cheered as he wiped the tears off his face from laughing.

“I’ll be your fun aunt. We’ll go dancing together and pick up hot men,” Lillian suggested.

“But what about Tom?” Cesar asked.

“There’s no sense in putting all of your eggs in one basket, young man ... especially at our age.”

“Amen to that,” Annabel agreed. “I’d love to go dancing.”

“I don’t know if Marlboro could handle all of us out on the town together,” Javin teased.

“We could talk to our Junior and get him to take your case,” Victor offered.

“I’ve got a great lawyer already,” I assured them. “She’s got a vested interest in our case since she’s married to my brother Quinn. She’s got a good track record, so I trust her advice.”

“Well, good,” Victor said. “But our offer stands. There have got to be some perks for getting on in years, and I think reduced prison sentences is probably one of them.”

“I should know to brace myself before I walk into the salon. You guys never fail to shock me,” Mrs. Rimmel, the facility administrator, said from the doorway. “Everyone is looking flawless as usual, by the way.”

“If you’ll sign in, we’ll get you in the chair as quickly as we can,” Avery offered.

“Not today. I’m giving a family a tour of the grounds.” Mrs. Rimmel motioned for someone to come in behind her as she walked further into the salon, and I was shocked to see Dante with two women I knew had to be his younger sisters. “This is the Pardo family. They’re looking at options for their father.”

The residents greeted them along with my co-workers, but I couldn't say a word or take my eyes off of Dante. The haunted look in his eyes called to me, and it was all I could do not to walk across the room and pull him in for a tight hug.

"Don's moving in here?" I finally asked as Dante walked over to me.

"This seems like the best option so far," Dante hedged. "It's come to the point where it's best that he lives somewhere with full-time care."

"I'm sorry, Dante," I said quietly, wishing I didn't have gloves on and could reach out to touch him.

"We've got enough to get him enrolled somewhere and pay for a few months, and we're going to put the house on the market to help with the costs in the future."

"This is a really nice place. My grandparents lived here."

"I think it's out of our price range, though."

I sighed and shook my head knowingly. Our grandparents had sold their house before they moved in here, but they'd been taken care of so well that I knew it was worth every penny. "You should call my mom. She'd be happy to help you out with the sale. Maybe you'll get enough to bring him here."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't want to bother her," Dante argued.

"She loved your mom and dad, Dante, and she's really good at her job. You should consider it," I urged. "I'll talk to her when I leave here today and have her get in touch with you."

"Thanks, pretty girl. I'd appreciate that. There's so much going on and we're kind of spread a little thin already. If anything, maybe she can at least answer some questions we have about how to proceed," Dante said.

I smiled at him, trying to lighten the mood, if possible. "I'm sure she'd be glad to help."

"You two should exchange numbers so Aunt Patrice knows how to get in touch with him," Avery suggested.

“Can I have your phone number, Jolie?” Dante asked as he looked into my eyes, his focus only on me even though we were surrounded by people.

“Sure,” I said as I pulled off my gloves and then reached down into the cabinet to pull out my purse. I fished a card out of my wallet and handed it to Dante.

Instead of taking it out of my hand, he held his hand there with the card between us while he asked, “Can I call and talk to you sometime, or do you only want me to use this to get Patrice’s number?”

I realized that the room was silent, and when I glanced around I saw that every eye in the room was on us. Cesar, Avery, and Javin were all nodding excitedly, and I couldn’t help but smile. “You can call me to talk if you want to.”

“Thanks. I’ll ... um ... text you so you have my number and then ...”

“I’ll text you back.”

“Sounds good,” Dante said softly before he smiled at me one last time and then walked across the quiet room toward Mrs. Remmel and his sisters.

“It’s good to see you again, Jolie,” Camila, Dante’s sister, called out before she turned around and followed her brother out of the room. With a little wave, Aurelia smiled at me, then she was gone too.

For about 10 seconds, the room was so quiet you could hear a pin drop, then it erupted into chaos.

I had a feeling Dante and I had just become some of the juiciest gossip in the facility.



DANTE

“Today’s been a good day, hasn’t it, Pops?”

My dad glanced up from the carburetor he was working on and shrugged. “Seems like any old day to me. Luckily the work’s never finished and there’s more jobs lined up than I can get done in a month, so we’ll get the bills paid and everybody will have a full belly for a while.”

“Yeah. That too,” I agreed. I leaned back and put my feet up on the bumper of the 1963 convertible Galaxie I’d bought at auction last month before I took another sip of my Dr. Pepper. “I like it when we can sit and talk like this.”

“We’ve had some good conversations out here, haven’t we?”

“We have. I hope we have a few more before all is said and done.”

“Hand me a phillips, son,” Dad ordered. I let my feet drop and stood up to walk over to the tool bench. I selected a few different sized screwdrivers, and grabbed a wrench I knew he’d need, before I walked back over and set them beside the other tools on the tray in front of him. I had just propped my feet back up when Dad asked, “What’s bothering you, Ricky? You seem a little off today. Better get it out before your mom gets a hold of you.”

I ignored the fact that my dad was calling me by my brother’s name and smiled when I remembered how my mom was like a dog with a bone when she was trying to figure out what was wrong with one of her children. After a few more minutes of watching my dad work, I asked, “If something happens where I can’t take care of you by myself anymore, would you hate me for putting you into an assisted living facility?”

“I’d hate you if you didn’t,” Dad mumbled. “I don’t want my kids having to change my damn drawers and help me wash my balls in the shower. Pay someone to do that. I’ve got a little money ratholed for emergencies. Making sure I’m not a burden to my family is what I’d consider an emergency.”

I thought about it for a second and asked, “You’ve got money stashed somewhere?”

“I sure do. Your mom and I always keep some on hand. I’ve got it hidden in a few places so Dante can’t get to it when he’s on a tear, but I trust that you’ll keep it a secret. I know my Maria won’t remember where it is if something happens to me. She’ll worry herself to death trying to figure out how to pay for my casket.”

We had done that exact thing when Mom died, so I knew where he was coming from. “Is it in another bank other than the one we use for business?”

Dad scoffed, “Hell no. If the bank’s got the money, then the IRS insists on their share. Every time I do a job and the customer pays in cash, I slip it into the emergency fund. When the fund gets too big for the can, I bury it.”

“You *bury* it?” I asked, dropping my feet to the floor and leaning forward to stare at my father.

“Well, yeah. The IRS isn’t gonna come dig up your mother’s rose bushes, but they’ll damn sure take every penny they can if I put it on record at a bank.”

“You buried cans full of money under the rose bushes?”

“Yep. Every time I filled one up, I would buy your mom a new bush. She sure does love when they bloom. You know, I think I’ll go get her a new one tomorrow. I’ve got a can up there behind the paint that’s damn near full. It won’t hurt to bury a light one this once. Your mom needs something pretty to distract her since she’s so worried about that brother of yours.”

As Dad started listing all the ways I was an embarrassment to the family, I walked over to the bay door that opened up the back of the shop to the parking area that connected to the backyard of the house where I’d grown up. I stood there in shock for a minute, counting the rose bushes planted around the perimeter of the yard.

I interrupted Dad’s rant and asked, “There’s a can under every rose bush?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it, Ricky? Now, don’t you go telling your brother Dante, or he’ll be out there with a shovel

robbing us blind in the middle of the night.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” I promised as I took a deep breath and tried to calm my racing heart.

“I think it’s time for headache medicine,” Dad said from behind me. I turned and saw that he was pale and using his grease-covered hand to rub his forehead.

“Let me help you into the house, Dad. I’ll clean up out here in a bit,” I said as I set my can down on the tray he’d been using.

“Dante?” Dad asked softly. “When did you get home from school?”

“It’s the weekend, Pop. I had the whole day off,” I lied. “Let’s go inside so you can get cleaned up and take your pills.”

Dad sighed. “Call your mama, son. Just having her around makes everything better.”

“I know it does, but she’s off with Aunt Connie at bingo, so I’ll hang out with you tonight.”

“Your mom and her bingo. I love that woman with my whole heart, but sometimes she can drive a man to drink.”

I laughed as I held his elbow as we made our way across the parking lot. “All the best ones do, don’t they?”

“That sweetheart of yours will make you crazy, but Jolie comes from good stock. She’ll make a good mama to your children.”

“You think so?”

“Jolie is the one for you Dante. Don’t screw it up.”

7.

“Drink up, buttercup.”

Robert

JOLIE

“Mama your phone is dinging,” Zeb said as he came across the patio toward where I was sitting between Colbie and Quinlee. “I tried to look, but the password doesn’t work anymore.”

“Because I changed it, son.”

“Why?” I stared at him long enough for him to get uncomfortable and shift his eyes away. Finally, he turned to go back inside and called out over his shoulder, “I’m going back in with the guys. They’re not mean like you.”

“What did he order this time?”

“A 4000-piece, \$700 collectible Lego set, an ant farm, and a Rubik’s cube,” I said calmly as I looked at my phone. “He tried the passcode so many times that I’m locked out for five minutes.”

“Please tell me you canceled the order before they charged you this time,” my mom said. When I nodded, she blew out a breath. “Life was so much easier back in the day. I didn’t have to worry about y’all doing anything like that.”

“There was that one time Mike signed us up for 30 magazine subscriptions,” I reminded her.

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about that one,” Mom said with a chuckle. “I still blame every piece of junk mail we get on him.”

“He signed up for all of those because of some girl, right? Isn’t that why he ordered so much?”

“Yeah. It was Aurelia Pardo selling them for some fundraiser. God, he had it bad for that girl for years,” Mom

mused with a grin. “I wonder how she’s doing now? Last I heard, she was about to graduate with her teaching degree.”

“I saw her with Dante the other day, but we didn’t speak.” I looked up from what I was doing when everyone got quiet. I sighed and said, “We were at Horizons, and Aurelia came in with Dante and Camila. They were looking at the facility to see if it was the right fit for Mr. Pardo.”

“He’s not much older than us and needs to move into a home?” Mom asked.

I shrugged and looked back down at the flower I was painting on Colbie’s toenail. “I don’t know the whole scoop, but Dante mentioned that taking care of him was too much for him and his sisters to handle.”

“I wonder if it’s because of that incident all those years ago?” Mom pondered.

“What are you talking about?” Kyla asked my mom.

“There was an accident when a lift at his garage malfunctioned. He hit his head and was in a coma for a while, and when he came out of it, he wasn’t the same,” I explained. “Dante broke up with me not long after it happened, so I don’t know if he ever fully recovered.”

“Really?” Kyla asked. “Just teenage stuff? Is that why you broke up?”

I shook my head but didn’t look up, knowing the other women were staring at me with sympathy because they remembered how broken-hearted I was after Dante told me he didn’t want to see me anymore.

“Whatever the reason, it was a long time ago. I saw the look on his face when you walked into the apartment the other day. Whatever reason he had is gone now, and he seemed *very* interested in you.”

“No, Kyla, that’s not a ... No. We can’t be together. It was that bad.”

“He was a total asshole. He informed her he didn’t want to see her anymore completely out of the blue,” Lake started to

explain.

Lana sneered and said, “That wasn’t all. He said she wasn’t the one for him, and that he had aspirations and dreams that he couldn’t fulfill if he had some kid chasing him around like a lost puppy.”

“Dad hated him anyway, so he was probably happy it ended,” Lara surmised. “And then he knocked up some crackhead, and they went to ...”

“Enough,” Kyla snapped, causing us all to look at her in shock. “Colbie, Quinlee, everything that was just said stays here between us, okay?”

“Okay,” they said in unison.

“We won’t say anything to Nica, Mom. I promise,” Colbie assured Kyla.

“Shit,” Lara muttered. “I’m sorry. Girls, that was a horrible thing to say. Please make sure you don’t repeat that to your friend or anyone else.”

“We won’t. I promise,” Quinlee assured her. “I didn’t hear anything. Did you, Colbie?”

“Just sittin’ here gettin’ my toes done, listenin’ to the birds,” Colbie said as she made a show of looking around the backyard.

“I’m finished anyway, Colbie. Why don’t you two go inside and see what the guys are up to? We haven’t heard from Marley in a bit. She probably has them hogtied so she can eat all of the desserts.”

Quinlee and Colbie laughed, but right before Quinlee closed the patio door behind her, she called out, “We won’t be able to hear you anymore, so you can keep trash talking now.”

Lara lamented, “I feel horrible. That little girl who was at your house has to be the one who was born after he went to prison.”

“Maybe. I thought he said his wife died during childbirth. Did she wait for him while he ...”

I shook my head, interrupting Kyla. “He started doing drugs and met a woman who was just as bad off. From what I heard back then, they got busted together, but his sentence was a lot shorter than hers. She’s probably still incarcerated.”

“What did they do?” Kyla asked.

“She robbed a store and shot someone while he waited in the car. He swore he had no idea what was going on, and that’s why he didn’t speed away. The cops caught up to them pretty quickly, and from what I read in the papers, he had them convinced that he had no idea what had happened.”

“And he went to prison anyway?”

“It was his car, and they found drugs in it,” Patrice said. “He was obviously high when they arrested him, and he had shit in his pocket too. The gun she used was his, and he admitted he’d given it to her a few days before.”

“Damn. Talk about a chain reaction that snowballed,” Kyla said softly. “That’s horrible. I guess that’s why the little girl only mentioned her grandma and never her mom.”

“I’ve kept up with the family over the years,” Mom admitted. “I don’t know a lot, but I’ve listened when their names were mentioned. The youngest boy was working on one of our crews when he was arrested. It wasn’t long after that their mother died in her sleep one night. I think it might have been the girls’ new friend who found her.”

“Oh no,” I whispered.

“Did he seem ... okay?” Mom asked Lake before she looked at the rest of us. “What did you see when you spoke to him, Jolie?”

I laughed bitterly. “You ask the ones who were married to addicts first, huh?”

“I only ...”

“I don’t blame you, Mom. Out of all of us, we’re the two that can spot that shit a mile away,” Lake said as I nodded in agreement. “He looked clean. His arms are covered in tattoos, so I couldn’t see ... well, you know. His complexion

was good, and he seemed perfectly alert. Not paranoid or fidgety at all.”

“Smelled like butterscotch candy both times I talked to him,” I told my mom. “His eyes were clear, his clothes were clean, and he looked healthy. He looked more muscular than he used to be, like he works out often.”

“Nica mentioned that they get to play in the church nursery sometimes while her dad is in meetings. I wondered if that meant he was a member who was really involved or ...”

“There’s a church on 10th Street that keeps the nursery staffed in the evenings for people who want to come to an NA or AA meeting but have their kids with them,” I told the women. “I’ve left Zeb with them once or twice when I felt like I needed to attend one.” I saw Kyla’s eyebrows raise and I smiled at her. “They have a support group for family members of addicts too. They really helped when I was trying to figure out life with Tyler.”

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to judge, I just ... okay, yeah, I was a little shocked. I’ll admit it.”

“Avery said that Dante seemed really interested when you gave him your number.” I glared at Lara, and she laughed. “What? We talked while we were in the supply room.”

“Would you be open to giving him another chance, Jolie?” Mom asked.

“I’ve been back and forth, but I don’t know if it’s even an option. He seemed like he wanted to talk to me, but he might just need a friend. Besides, I gave him my card and he hasn’t called or sent a text yet. It’s been three days.”

“Their breakup was horrible, Mom. Don’t you remember how crushed she was?”

“I do. I think there might have been some other ... ” Mom’s voice trailed off before she put her head down and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Jolie, baby, you know that your dad and I love you and would do anything for you, right?”

“Um . . . yeah?”

Mom took a deep breath and blew it out before she looked back toward the house where the men were inside watching a game. “I’m going to bring your dad out here. I think the two of you should talk about Dante.”

“Why? Dad hated Dante. He was relieved when we broke up,” I argued.

Mom scratched her forehead and sighed, never once meeting my eyes. “Just remember, sometimes a parent does things out of love even though they might not seem like the right thing to have done after the fact.”

“What did Dad do?”

“He encouraged Dante to choose your future over his own,” Mom said cryptically before she stood and turned to go inside. “Go out to the garage and get you and your dad a beer. I’ll send him out in a few minutes.”

Mom walked off without another word, and I looked around at my sisters. “What the fuck is happening right now?”

“I don’t know, but it’s big. Mom doesn’t get nervous like that over any little thing,” Lake said as we watched Mom through the window. She walked over to the recliner and put her hand out for Dad. He took it and followed her down the hall toward their bedroom with a concerned look on his face. “She’s freaking Dad out too.”

“Could your dad have had something to do with your breakup?” Kyla asked.

“No,” I scoffed.

“He made it a point to never meddle in our relationships,” Lake assured her. “Even when shit got really horrible with my husband, he managed to keep his distance and let us live our lives.”

“Dad wouldn’t get involved,” Lara agreed. “That’s just not his way. Mom will in a heartbeat, but Dad is usually the one that reins her in before she says too much.”

“I guess I better go out to the garage,” I told the girls as I stood up. “Will y’all watch out for Zeb? I’m sure he won’t

need me but ...”

“We’ve got him,” Kyla assured me.

“You’ve got to promise you’ll tell us what’s going on,” Lake countered.

Lana laughed. “Hell, depending on what Dad has to say, we might be able to hear it from here.”

“We’ll see,” I told them before I took off across the yard toward Dad’s shop. I realized that enough time had passed that I should be able to get back into my phone, so I punched in my passcode before I walked into the garage.

Once I had two beers, I walked over and sat in one of the old recliners Dad kept out here in what he jokingly called his escape room. I put his beer on the table between the two chairs and opened my own before I took a long draw off of it.

I almost choked when I saw the text from an unknown number.

Hey there, pretty girl. It’s Dante. I’m sorry it took so long to get in touch with you, but Nica brought home some sort of weaponized virus and was nice enough to share it with me.

Oh no! The baby didn’t get it, too, did she?

No sign of it yet, but that thing was a creeper. One minute I was fine, the next I was on the bathroom floor, speaking in tongues.

I laughed out loud and took another sip before I replied.

I’m glad you’re better. I’ll give this number to my mom.

Thanks. Does that mean I have to stop talking to you now?

No, I was just letting you know.

How was the rest of your week?

It went by pretty quickly. I did have one major hiccup, but my brothers helped me out.

What happened?

My son went to the park with one of his friends and came home with a pocket full of bugs, some of which lived long enough to escape when he pulled them out to show me.

Oh no.

You're laughing right now, aren't you?

Absolutely not. That's definitely nothing to laugh about. Oh, the horror.

Did your daughter ever bring home bugs when she was his age?

I'm not sure. I didn't get to live with Nica until she was 8. She lived with my mom and dad before that.

I gasped when I remembered that he had been in prison when his daughter was born and then shook my head when I thought about all he had missed. I wasn't sure what to say, but I knew that the three little dots were blinking as if I were writing a novel. I hated to leave him hanging, so I typed the first thing that came to mind.

I guess you can experience all of that fun stuff with the baby as she grows up, and your older daughter can give you tips and tricks along the way.

I sighed when I read the text I'd just sent, then started typing again.

I'm sorry. You know I'm horrible with names. Resa and Nica, right?

You have always sucked at remembering names. Nica is 12 and Resa is 2.

Got it. Now if I forget I can look at this text for reference.

Your boy is Zeb, he's 6, and loves cookies, right? Oh, and bugs.

Show off.

Maybe you and I can keep talking and then I'll have your knowledge and experience to draw from.

I thought about what he'd sent for a second and then frowned. Dante had made it clear years ago that I wasn't his type, yet here I was trying to read more into his text message than he could possibly intend to say. I'd just started to text him back, as *friends*, of course, when my dad walked into the garage and shut the door behind him.

"Jolie," Dad said as he walked over. He flopped down in the other chair and picked up his beer. He finished half of it in the first swig before he stood abruptly and went to the cabinet where he kept a stash of liquor hidden behind the paint supplies.

"Aren't you afraid I'll see your hiding spot?" I asked.

Dad glanced over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. "You kids have been stealing my liquor for years. Quinn and James discovered this stash when they were in high school. They got so drunk that they puked during football tryouts and almost didn't make the team."

"I never ..."

"Don't start lying now," Dad scoffed.

"I was going to say that I never got so drunk that I puked on the football field," I lied.

"Sure you were, but I'd have forgiven you for that lie because I have a few of my own that I need forgiveness for," Dad said as he set a whiskey bottle and two shot glasses on the table between us. "Let's have a drink first."

"You're really freaking me out right now."

"A little liquid courage for me and a little sedative for you, that's all I'm going for here." Dad poured us both a shot and then slid one to me. "Drink up, buttercup."

We took the shots, and he immediately poured us another. I was still catching my breath from the burn of the first one when he held up his second, waiting for me to pick up mine.

"To forgiving an old friend and an old man." Dad took the shot and then poured another before he nodded toward the glass in my hand. "Go ahead."

“That’s a lot of peer pressure after a very cryptic toast.”

Dad laughed softly, but there was no humor in it as he lifted his shot glass and threw the whiskey back with a grimace. I drank mine and then turned the shot glass over on the table.

“That’s enough for me. I’ve already had too much to drive Zeb home as it is.”

“He can stay with us, and one of the other kids can drive you home.”

“I can’t stay with you?”

Dad shook his head and smiled as he looked at his lap. “You’re not gonna want to, sweetheart. I fucked up years ago, but I had your future in mind when I did it. You’re not gonna see it that way, but I assure you that’s where my heart was at the time.”

“What are you talking about, Dad?” A full minute passed, and I couldn’t stand it any longer. “What’s going on?”

“When you and Dante started dating, I had my reservations about the boy. But everything turned out okay, and he proved to be a good kid. He treated you right and made you happy. That was hard for me to take since you were my oldest girl, and I wasn’t nearly ready for you to start dating.” Dad sighed and rested his elbows on his knees and stared at the floor between his boots for a second before he continued. “It scared me that you were so serious about each other while you were still so young, but Patrice always reminded me of how we fell in love and told me to have faith. When you were still together a year later, she looked me dead in the eye and said, ‘I told you they would be okay, Robert.’ Six months later, the two of you weren’t okay, and I let it happen.”

“What do you mean?” I whispered, my heart racing.

“Don was injured right after Christmas. You stayed at the hospital with Dante and his family for the rest of Christmas break. Do you remember that?”

I nodded. “I wanted to do whatever I could to help the family. I really liked Don and Maria, and it broke my heart

when he got hurt. Maria was so scared about what would happen to their family without Don around.”

“Dante stepped up to the plate and took his dad’s place, though, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

“You’d have been by his side every minute if he’d have let you.”

“You’re right. I loved him, and I would have done anything to help him and his family.”

“He loved you, too, Jolie. He loved you so fucking much that he came to me and sat right here in this garage with tears streaming down his face. He wanted to apologize because he was about to break my daughter’s heart.”

“What?”

“You still had a year and a half left in high school and college on the horizon, but he knew you’d give it all up to help him through the shitstorm life had thrown in his family’s direction. He knew that was the only way to get you to accomplish your own goals.”

“He broke up with me to *save me*?” I agonized.

“And now, here we sit, damn near 20 years later, and I’m the one breaking your heart.”

“Why didn’t you tell me if you knew he was going to break up with me?”

“I don’t have a good answer for you, baby.”

“Did Mom know?”

“No, she didn’t know for years. Not until he went to prison. I broke down and told her that I was glad he’d done what he had and saved you from that pain. Then all that shit with Tyler happened, and I thought it had all been for nothing. You had to go through that anyway, but this time with someone you didn’t love nearly as much as you’d loved Dante.”

“You told Dante to break up with me?”

“It was his idea, but I certainly didn’t try to talk him out of it.”

“He said he’d never loved me and he was just using me. He said it had all been a joke and he’d never meant for it to go on so long, but I was so pitiful that he didn’t know how to get rid of me,” I yelled through my sobs. “You let him destroy me, Dad. How could you do that?”

“You were just 16, Jolie. If you had stayed together then, your life would have been so different. You’d have ...”

“You don’t know what my life would be like!” I screamed. “You have no idea what could have been because you let him shatter my heart into pieces!”

“I didn’t know, Jolie. He said he’d make sure you didn’t try and follow him, but he didn’t tell me how he was going to do it.”

“You held me in your arms and let me cry! You rubbed my back and told me I was better off without someone like that in my life, but ... you knew? You let me believe he never loved me! How could you?”

“At the time it ...”

“It seemed like a good idea to watch him rip my heart out?” I screamed. “Why ... Just ...”

“Jolie. You need to calm down, sweetheart,” Mom said from the doorway. I saw that she was openly crying, but I didn’t care.

“You knew, but you let me believe it was me. Both of you have been lying to me for years. I just ... I don’t even know what to think anymore.” I sobbed as I ran my hands through my hair. “I need to go. I can’t be here right now. I need to ...”

“I’ll take you wherever you want to go, Jolie,” I heard my brother Mike offer from the doorway. I walked toward him and brushed past my mom without a word, but Mike stopped me. “Don’t leave it like this, babe.”

“I’ve said all I have to say right now. I just need some time to process ... everything.”

“No matter what, you still love them,” Mike said with his hands on my shoulders as he stared into my eyes. “Say it because you mean it and make sure they hear you, Jolie.” I stubbornly shook my head, and Mike squeezed my shoulders as he whispered, “Don’t leave them like this.”

“I’m going to need some time to process this, but I love you both just as much right now as I did an hour ago,” I said without turning my head. A fresh round of tears started, and I pleaded with my brother, “Get me out of here, Mike. Please.”

“I’ll take you anywhere you want to go.”

8.

“The fucker came out of nowhere!”

Mike

DANTE

“Holy. Shit.” I looked at the empty garage around me and then back down into the coffee can I’d found at the back of the shelf where Dad said it would be. “What the fuck?”

I set the can aside and then arranged the paint cans back the way they’d been and then jumped down and put the chair back where it belonged. Once I’d made sure everything looked the same as it did before, I grabbed the can and my phone and locked the garage up for the night.

I was crossing the alley when I heard a motorcycle on the street behind me but didn’t think anything of it until it turned down the street that ran beside the garage and house. I looked over and was shocked to see Mike and Jolie Donovan, and from the looks on their faces, they were just as shocked to see me. I lifted my hand to wave and watched as they rode past.

“Not your business, Pardo,” I mumbled to myself as I opened the gate to the yard. I had latched the gate and started walking up to the house when the motorcycle neared again. I looked over and saw that Mike was slowing down to drive down the alley behind me, so I stopped walking and went back to the gate.

Once he was parked and the bike was turned off, I greeted them with a smile and said, “What are you guys doing here?”

Mike winced and then bit his lip as he looked at the tank between his legs.

“I hated you almost as much as I loved you, Dante Pardo. You broke my fucking heart.”

My eyes got wide as Jolie spoke, and as I studied her, I realized that she’d been crying for quite some time already.

Her face was red and splotchy, and her eyes were bloodshot as tears continually streamed down her cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, pretty girl,” I told her, knowing somehow that she’d found out the truth. “Everything I did was out of love. As fucked up as that sounds, it’s God’s honest truth.”

“Why didn’t you trust me to help you, Dante?”

I reached up and rubbed my forehead as I tried to figure out what to say. Finally, I ran my hand over my mouth and was honest with the woman I’d loved since I was 16. “I knew without a doubt that you’d give up your life to help me with mine, and I couldn’t let you do that.”

“Can we come in?” Mike asked.

I slowly shook my head as I let out a deep breath. “Not if this is gonna get loud. My little girl is sleeping, and my dad had a busy day and then a meltdown about an hour ago. I finally got him settled, and I don’t want to wake him up and have to fight with him for hours until I can get him calmed down again.”

“I’ve yelled enough that I don’t think I’ve got it in me to yell any more,” Jolie said as she swiped at the tears on her face. It was useless, though. Before she’d even dropped her hand onto her leg, there were already tears dripping from her chin.

“You guys relax, and I’ll go get us something cold to drink.”

“I’ll take a beer if you’ve got one,” Mike said.

“No alcohol in my house. It fucks with Dad’s meds, and I’m not a drinker anymore.”

“Okay,” Mike said with an uncomfortable laugh at my honesty. “Water sounds perfect.”

“I’ll be right out,” I told them. With one last glance at Jolie’s tear-stained face, I turned and hurried up the walk. Once I was inside, I looked at the coffee can, wondering where the best place to stash it might be. Finally, I realized I’d been standing there for a while and decided to keep it with me. I

was almost afraid it would disappear into thin air. The dream of finding a treasure trove of money was turning into a nightmare that had my ex-girlfriend sobbing on my back porch next to her little brother who looked just as confused as I felt right now. “Fuck me. The hits just keep coming, don’t they?”

I grabbed three bottles of water and the box of tissues that we kept on the bar before I rushed outside.

Mike and Jolie were standing at the bottom of the steps, and I walked toward them. “Let’s sit down.”

“I don’t know that I need to be here for this,” Mike said uncomfortably.

“I don’t want Jolie to feel like she’s trapped here, and I can’t leave to take her somewhere if she wants to go,” I explained. “I guess ... um ... do you want to go inside and watch TV while we talk?”

Mike looked at Jolie, and when she nodded, he did too. “Yeah. Would that be okay?”

“Not a problem. Their bedroom doors are closed, so it shouldn’t bother my dad or the baby. Nica is staying at my sister’s tonight.”

“I’ll keep it low enough so it doesn’t bother them but loud enough that I’m not privy to this ... whole ... *thing*.”

“Thank you, Mike,” Jolie said softly before her brother reached out and pulled her into his arms for a tight hug. I heard him mumble something before Jolie said, “I’ll be okay. Love you too.”

As Mike passed me, I handed him a water bottle and then offered one to Jolie. Once I heard the screen door shut, I asked, “Do you want to sit down with me?”

“Sure,” Jolie said softly as she wiped her face again. I thrust the box of tissues her way, and she laughed as she took them out of my hands. “Are you going to offer me the coffee too?”

I looked down at the coffee can and then laughed. “I can make some if you want, but no, this isn’t for you.”

“The water’s fine,” Jolie said as we walked up the steps. When we got onto the porch, I motioned toward the swing at the end and Jolie nodded. I followed behind and waited for her to sit before I joined her.

“I don’t know what to say,” I admitted. “I never imagined that you’d find out what I did so I’ve never let myself consider how I’d explain it.”

“I feel betrayed, and somehow that’s worse than how you made me feel all those years ago.” I nodded in understanding and waited for Jolie to continue. After a few tense seconds, she said, “I’ve been riding around with my brother for a few hours, so I’ve had some time to think.”

“That’s good. You’re still really upset, though, and I think that’s normal.” I added, “You were always one to think about something so much that by the time you were ready to talk, you weren’t as upset as you had been when whatever first happened. I always admired that. I’m not a thinker when I’m mad. I’m more of an open my mouth and let shit spew out kind of angry person.”

“I’m angry, but I’m more hurt than anything. I feel like my parents have been letting me live a lie for half my life, and I don’t know how to deal with that.”

“That’s understandable, Jolie, but it’s not all on them. I begged your dad to promise that he’d help me keep you ... safe. That sounds like such a weird word choice, but it’s the only one that really fits. I wanted you safe from all the shit going on in my life. I wanted you safe from an uncertain future, and that’s all I saw ahead of me. My dad was back and forth, you know? One day, it would seem like he was getting better, and the next day, they were rushing him to surgery and drilling holes in his fucking head to relieve the pressure on his brain. Three days later, he’d be rolling along and then his blood pressure would tank and all the alarms would start sounding.”

“I remember that.”

“I came home to change clothes one evening after being at the hospital all day. I’d just dropped you off and made you

promise to get a good night's sleep and stay with your family the next day ... “

“I remember that night.”

“It had to be close to 10 o'clock by the time I got home. I was standing at the kitchen window getting a drink of water before I went to take a shower and realized that the garage was still wide open. The lights were on and the back door over there was open all the way. No one thought to check it or to turn off the lights and lock up. It's a miracle someone didn't come by and rob us blind.”

“Who ... How could they ...”

“Dad was the one in charge,” I said simply. “None of the employees had ever been given the task to lock up, and none of them had the alarm codes. They worked through the day and then went home like they always did, but Dad wasn't there to make sure everything was locked down for the night. The office was a mess from where they'd had customers and didn't know what to do with the tickets, there was still money in the drawer ... it was just chaos without my dad around to run shit and my mom to take care of the office.”

“So you locked up and then what?”

“ I got in the shower and cried until the water was ice cold.”

“I'm sorry, Dante.”

“I went back up to the hospital and didn't say a word to Mom about it, and she never thought to ask. The kids were there and hadn't even had dinner yet. Anthony and Aurelia were curled up in their chairs asleep, and the other two were so tired that they were almost zombies. I tried to get Mom to come home and get some rest but she refused, so I gathered up my siblings and brought them home. The next morning, I let them sleep in and walked over to open the garage for the employees. I was in the office trying to sort things out but couldn't get anything done because the phone was ringing off the hook. The guys all had questions about what had happened the day before. By lunchtime, I was so fucking

exhausted and stressed out, I could barely think and realized that this was going to be my life until ... well, forever. They'd already told us that Dad wouldn't ever be the same and would need constant care if he got to come home."

"I never even considered the shop," Jolie remarked.

"I was the only one that did, and that was a problem because the shop was how we paid our bills and kept food on the table. Mom was ..." I sighed and thought back to how my mom acted in the days after Dad's accident. Finally, I continued, "I hate to speak ill of the dead, and I know that later on she got her shit together, but for weeks, she wasn't even available to comfort us, let alone take care of us, so I did. School was going to start back up that next Monday, and I knew things would get even more hectic, wrangling my brothers and sisters. I wouldn't be able to just leave the shop to go to shit all day while I was in school, so I decided to quit."

"I remember you were so busy, you couldn't even talk on the phone. That night, I asked you over and over again if there was anything I could do to help, but you never would answer me."

"Because if I had, you would have jumped in with both feet and done whatever needed to be done."

"That's what someone who loves you is supposed to do," Jolie argued.

"Or someone who loves you lets you go so you can have the life they know they'll never have."

"But we could have had a life together! You could have ..."

"After I got the garage closed and my brothers and sisters fed and in bed for the night, I could have studied for my GED," I said as I slowly nodded, listing everything out easily because it had been my life for months. "Then, after I got my GED, if I'd juggled, scrimped, saved, and pleaded, I might have been able to take *one class* at the community college. One. Each semester."

“But if I’d been helping you ...”

“You would never have had a minute to study between cleaning the house and tending to the younger kids and probably would have barely scraped by with a diploma, all the while worrying about me working too many hours at the garage and begging my mom to eat so she didn’t pass out in the hall outside my father’s hospital room again.”

“You really did it to save me from that,” Jolie whispered.

I nodded slowly. “I didn’t want the girl I loved to live the hell I knew was coming. Instead, I wanted her to graduate and walk the stage with her friends. I wanted her to have a senior trip and go somewhere fun. I wanted her to get excited about starting her freshman year of college and go to football games and keg parties and spend spring break floating the river. I wanted her to have the life I’d planned to have with her.”

“But I wanted to do all that with you, Dante. If I couldn’t be with you, I didn’t want to do any of it,” Jolie argued.

“But you did it, pretty girl. You did all of it. You graduated with honors, you got a scholarship, you went to college and got a degree in business management *while* you were going to cosmetology school. Then you had a wedding with a poofy white dress where your father walked you down the aisle and gave you away.”

“I had all that, but it wasn’t with you,” Jolie sobbed.

“I know. I hated it, but it’s what I knew needed to happen, Jolie. I’m so sorry it didn’t work out the way we wanted it to, but you’ve got an awesome little boy to show for it. You own a business that you love surrounded by friends who adore you, and you’ve had your family beside you through it all. It’s not the dream you expected, but it’s enough of a dream come true that I can smile and tell myself I helped by letting you go.”

“And you’ve got your daughters.”

“I do. I can’t go back and change the way Nica was born, but ...”

“In prison?”

“Yeah. Her mom didn’t even know she was pregnant until she’d already been arrested. By the time they figured out she was carrying, she’d gone through withdrawals the hard way. Luckily, Nica’s okay. So she’ll have that quirky little story to tell someday. Then she came home to live with my mom who was thrust back into all the shit I tried my hardest to get away from.”

“That’s why you started in on the drugs?”

“At first, it was just drinking. I was miserable, so I’d open my first beer as I closed up the shop. After the kids were taken care of for the night, I’d sit here on this porch and get tanked. But waking up the next morning to open the shop *sucked* until one of the mechanics offered me some blow to pep me up. It worked like a charm. I got drunk that night and did the same thing the next morning. And the next. And the next. Then I’d start to get tired around lunch, so I’d take a bump, then maybe another after I closed so I could get some shit done at home. But then I was so wired that I couldn’t sleep, so I’d smoke a little and drink a lot and do it all again the next day.”

“Damn.”

“By then, Dad was home but Mom was so busy getting him back and forth to appointments and therapy that it didn’t make much difference in the pattern me and the kids had established. We just kept on keeping on until one day, what I was doing wasn’t enough, so I asked the mechanic to get me something stronger with a little more pep, so to speak. Within six months, I was selling anything I could find, stealing from my friends and family. That only ended when I pulled up outside a convenience store and sat in the car while my new girlfriend robbed a man at gunpoint and ended up shooting him dead.”

“Oh, Dante,” Jolie whispered.

“My addiction and downward spiral was eye-opening for my mom. She had to take care of everything again with no help at all. Unfortunately, because they’d seen me do it, the boys were more susceptible to getting lost in drugs and

alcohol. My mom had so much on her plate that she didn't even recognize the signs until it was too late for them too. They didn't go to the extreme that I did, at least at first. Ricky married a girl during one of his sober periods but then lapsed. He sucked her into the vortex with him but went to prison in time for her to find her way out. She's now patiently waiting for him to finish his sentence and come back to her."

"The woman I saw that first day?"

"Yep. That was Amy, my sister-in-law. She travels six hours each way every other week so she can talk to my brother through a glass partition. I pay her to take care of Dad during the day while I'm working, and she goes to school in the evenings. It's not the life I'd choose for the woman I love, but she's okay with it, and Ricky ... well, he fucked up and went to prison, so he doesn't get a vote anymore."

"What about Anthony? He's what ... 23 now?"

"He's 25. He went in about two months before Mom died."

"Drugs?"

"Oh, yeah," I said sarcastically. "He was quite the overachiever compared to me and Ricky. He's not going to get out until he's old enough for retirement, if he even lives that long."

"Holy shit."

"Ricky's got three years left if nothing happens in the meantime. If all goes according to plan, he'll get out in time for he and Amy's 10th anniversary."

"Damn."

"The girls did well, though. Camila had a baby young, but she worked her ass off and works as a registered nurse at the hospital. Aurelia graduated a few years ago and teaches seventh grade science at that private school on the other side of town."

"I could have been like Amy," Jolie muttered. "I don't think I could do that."

“Or you could have been like Lisa, Nica’s mom. Imagine how that would have affected your family, and it would have been all my fault.”

“What did my dad say when you went to him?”

“He sat and thought on it for a bit, then told me he’d help me out however he could so you could stay in school. After a few minutes of arguing, he realized I was right because he knows you better than almost anyone. As a dad myself, I imagine that he saw your entire life flash before his eyes with half a dozen different scenarios that absolutely sucked in the long run but one that would only suck for a little while. He chose the right one and promised he’d take care of you. He assured me he understood that I wasn’t the horrible person I was going to make you believe I’d become.”

“Why did that matter?”

“I respect your parents, Jolie. I always have. I think I just wanted at least one member of your family to know that I wasn’t really that worthless son of a bitch who broke your heart for no reason at all and never looked back.”

“But you had a happy life when you got out of prison, right? Before you came here?”

“I did, at least for a little bit. I met Teresa at the compound for parolees where I lived. She’d just gotten out of prison herself and was also an addict, so she understood the ups and downs more than most people would. We bought a house close to some of the friends we’d made, transferred Nica from school here to the one a block away from our new home, and started living our life. Then Resa came along, and we were excited together. But the past caught up with Teresa when we least expected it. She’d done a lot of damage to her body over the years. Some of it was visible, but some of it was just lurking in the wings waiting to strike. She died before Resa took her first breath. One second, I was on top of the world, ready to raise my daughter with her mother by my side and then boom! It was all gone in an instant, and I was back at square one, but this time, I had two of my own kids to raise

while I figured out how to juggle life, bills, and responsibilities.”

“And then your mom died.”

“Yeah. She begged me to come home, so I packed the kids up and came back to Marlboro. I had a secure job waiting for me in the garage, and I could stay with Mom and Dad until I got on my feet. One morning, Nica went into Mom’s room to see if she’d make pancakes for breakfast, and my mom wouldn’t wake up. She was gone.”

“And then you had all the responsibilities again.”

I laughed bitterly as I nodded in agreement. After a few seconds, I chuckled again, but when Jolie looked at me in confusion, I realized just how manic I sounded. “I’m sorry. You know, you shovel shit for years and years and think you’ve caught a break only to realize that you’re just gonna have to keep shoveling. You know how it is. It finally seems like there might be a light at the end of the tunnel, and you squint to make sure it’s real, then blink a few times to see if it disappears. When it doesn’t, you start to believe that things might work out, right?”

“Sure.”

“But after dealing with shit for that long, it’s really hard to let go of the shovel and believe, you know what I mean?”

Jolie cleared her throat and shook her head. “No, Dante, I guess I don’t.”

“Open up that coffee can I was holding earlier. I want to watch your reaction and see if it’s real or if I’ve officially cracked and this is all a hallucination I’m having in a padded room somewhere.”

Jolie looked at me with concern for a second before she picked the can up from the table where I’d set it down in front of us. She leaned back with it in her lap and then hesitantly put her hand over the lid. “Is something gonna jump out at me?”

“I don’t fucking know at this point. Shovels. Light. Padded room. Remember?”

Jolie bit her lip and pried up the edge of the lid and then sat still for a few seconds, waiting for something to happen. She pulled the lid the rest of the way off and looked down into the can. “What the fuck, Dante?”

“Is it a severed head? No, the can’s not big enough for that. It’s a hand, isn’t it? That would make sense with the size and all. I had a hallucination that it was full of money, so I carried it around for an hour.”

Jolie laughed and then said, “It’s not a hand or a head. It’s actually full of cash.”

“What does it mean when two people have the same hallucination?”

“I think that means it’s reality,” Jolie said uncertainly as she looked out over the yard. “Am I being Punk’d?”

“Wouldn’t that be fucking ironic?”

“Where did you find a can of money? Is someone going to be looking for this?”

“My dad has advanced dementia on top of the traumatic brain injury he suffered in the accident. You know that, right?”

“I do.”

“I’d say that at least 99% of the time, he’s living in a time that happened years ago or one his mind has dreamed up. About a month ago, he was sure my mom had left him for a man she met at bingo, and that’s why she wasn’t home in time to cook dinner. When I talked to him a few hours ago, he was having one of his fairly lucid days. He thought I was my brother, but that’s not all that weird, right? He started talking about how he’d hide cash that the customers gave him so he didn’t have to pay the IRS. He sounded so serious that it made it really seem possible, but I had my doubts.”

“Of course.”

“He told me all the places he’d hidden it. You can’t see them, you have to know where to look. But there was this one hiding place out in the open. He told me about it and then said

he was ready for bed, so I took him inside. I didn't really think about it until one of my friends called to check in. I mentioned it in passing to him and his old lady. We had a good laugh, but then they asked if it might be true since he was still with it every now and then. It made me wonder, so I went to check that one hiding spot and found a can full of money."

"How much is in here?" Jolie asked as she shook the can, jostling the bundles inside.

"I have no idea, but it terrifies me to consider it."

"Why? You need a way to pay for your dad to go into Horizons. If there's more hidden somewhere, that would certainly take the load off."

"It costs about six thousand dollars a month. My dad is 60. If he lives to 80 like his dad did, that's 20 years of assisted living fees. That will put us at almost 1.5 million dollars. There's no way the can you're holding and the other ones he's got stashed will come anywhere near that amount."

"How many cans are out there?"

"I have no idea, but the garage did *not* make that much spare change in the last 40 years."

"Divide that amount by 40 years and then by 12 months a year. If he put back four grand a month, he'd pay for his assisted living facility fees with some left over."

I thought about how often customers paid with cash and my eyes grew wide. I knew that over the years some of the plants had died off from bugs or disease and not been replaced instantly. When I was in middle school, the entire state went through a horrible drought and all of Mom's roses died. Dad steadily replaced them, one by one, and now there were 31 bushes in the yard.

"Holy shit," I whispered.

"Maybe it's time for something good to happen, Dante."

I studied Jolie's face and realized it felt like I could breathe for the first time in years. I could look at her without feeling

the crushing weight of the lie I'd told resting on my shoulders. I could imagine her smiling over at me when we were old and gray and snuggling up beside her in bed for the next 50 years.

"I fell in love with you the first time I heard you laugh. Did you know that?"

"What?"

"You were standing at the desk in the library when I walked in. You had on a blue sweater, faded jeans, and a red pair of Quinn's old wrestling shoes. Your hair was longer then, and it was pulled back into a braid. When you laughed, you threw your head back, and your hair swung from side to side in front of your ass. You reached up and pulled your braid over your shoulder before you touched the necklace you were wearing. When you realized the clasp was in the front, you closed your eyes and made a wish before you kissed it and moved it to the back."

"That was *years* ago, Dante."

"I vividly remember that day and realizing I was head over heels in love with Jolie Donovan ... and wondering if I'd find the balls to tell her someday."

"You told me over and over again."

"I did, and I meant it every single time."

"So much has happened since then, Dante. So much."

"Did you ever stop loving me?"

Jolie looked down at the floor and smiled before she looked back up at me and shook her head. "On my wedding day, I wore the earrings you gave me for my 16th birthday. I told myself that they were perfect because they were my something old. Tyler touched one while we were dancing at the reception and asked if I wore them because I was holding the keys to his heart. I laughed and said no because the only heart that had ever truly mattered to me was yours."

"What are we going to do, Jolie? We're totally different people now than we were all those years ago. I've still got all these responsibilities, and you've got your own. We've got the

kids to think of now, and your family probably fucking hates me for what I did to you. My dad's a bomb ready to go off at any time, sometimes over and over again, and ..."

"I know exactly what to do, Dante."

"What?"

"Pick up the shovel and get to work. We'll meet in the middle this time and then stand there at the ready, watching out for each other so nothing else can sneak up and ruin our happiness again."

"Get the fuck out of my house!"

"What the fuck?" Jolie yelled as we jumped off the swing and headed for the door.

"Maria! Call the cops!"

"Oh shit!" Mike yelled right before I heard a loud thump.

I yanked the door open and sprinted through the house to the living room. Mike was standing there with his eyes and mouth wide open in shock. I looked at my dad, who was unconscious on the floor, and it took a second or two for what I'd just seen to register in my brain. My eyes snapped back to Mike's stomach, and I realized he wasn't just clutching his hands together because he was nervous, they were covered in blood and wrapped around the knife that was sticking out of him.

"The fucker came out of nowhere," Mike said woozily. I looked up at his face just in time to see his eyes roll up into his head before he fell backwards onto the recliner.

Jolie let out an ear-piercing scream, and seconds later, I heard my daughter screaming from our bedroom.

And to think, not five minutes ago I'd thought my luck was changing.

9.

“I’d punch a nun for a good cup of coffee right now.”

Damaris

JOLIE

By the time the paramedics got to Dante’s, followed closely by the police, I had already determined that Mike’s wound wasn’t life-threatening. I was more worried about Don, who hadn’t even stirred as Dante stood just a few feet away with his screaming daughter in his arms. The police officer who walked into the house instantly targeted Dante as the aggressor.

Dante’s face was angry, but he didn’t argue. He turned his head to look at me and Mike, who was already awake, before he leaned forward to set his daughter on her feet.

“What in the fuck are you thinking?” I barked as I jumped up from the floor where I’d been kneeling with my brother. By the time I got across the room, Dante’s hands were behind his head, and Resa was clutching at his legs, screaming in distress.

“Get back, ma’am!”

“You get back!” I snapped as I picked the toddler up and held her close to my chest. I spun around and screamed at the police officer, “He didn’t do anything!”

“Take Resa with you,” Dante ordered a split second before the cop pushed past me to get to him. I stumbled but righted myself and hurried back across the room to stand next to Mike, who was yelling at the cop to leave Dante alone. By the time I turned around, Dante was facedown over the kitchen table, and the cop was cuffing his hands behind his back.

Another police officer appeared in the doorway and looked around the room in confusion.

“We need the paramedics,” I told him as I pointed to Mike and then Don. To simplify, I clutched Resa to my chest with one arm and pointed at Don before I said, “He’s got dementia and stabbed my brother,” as my arm swung over and pointed at Mike before I gestured at Dante. “And he wasn’t even in the room when it happened.”

“I’ve dealt with this one before,” the cop boasted as he pressed Dante down with one hand. I realized that Dante was staying perfectly still with his eyes squeezed closed as if he were trying to wake up from the nightmare that had exploded in his house.

“He didn’t fucking do anything, asshole! I’m bleeding over here!” Mike yelled as he raised his bloody hands. “The old man stabbed me, not Dante. Fucking moron!”

The officer at the door sighed and waved the paramedics in. Over his shoulder, I saw Amy running across the grass outside.

“He has dementia. He’s been unconscious for ... I don’t know how long,” I explained as one cop went toward Mike and the other knelt beside Don.

Amy stopped next to the police officer just inside the door and took in the chaos with wide eyes. She was out of breath from running but said, “There’s no telling how he’ll behave when he wakes up. He may not seem like he’d be very strong, but he can hurt you. He’ll be confused, and he might act out.” Amy looked at me pleadingly and said, “I don’t know what to do!”

“You stay with Don, no matter what. I’ll take Resa and go with my brother. Dante, I’ll take care of this,” I said as the police officer pulled him up and marched him toward the front door.

“Just take care of the baby, Jolie!” Dante yelled, right before the cop pushed him outside.

“That other cop’s a fucking moron,” Mike growled through the pain as he glared at the police officer in front of him. “I was inside while Dante and Jolie talked on the porch. The old

man came out of his room and thought I was an intruder. He stabbed me, and I knocked him out. That's when Dante and Jolie came running inside."

"Why are they arresting Dante?" Amy sobbed.

"Because they woke up this morning and chose a lawsuit," I snarled as I watched another paramedic wheel in a gurney for Michael. While they got my brother situated, I took the backpack that Amy thrust in my direction and hooked it over my shoulder. As I started to follow the gurney out of the house, I saw the coffee can on the ground not far from Don. I leaned down and picked it up, carrying it under the arm that held the backpack. As I got to the front door, I saw the key rings hanging on hooks beside the door. I reached for the one I thought would belong to Dante's SUV and pulled it off the hook. I hit the unlock button and saw the SUV's lights blink, so I hurried outside, weighed down by the squirming little girl and the heavy diaper bag. I paused in the yard and saw Dante's stricken face as he watched me from the back of the patrol car. Hoping he could understand me, I mouthed, "It's okay. I've got this." When he nodded, I rushed over to his SUV and strapped Resa into her carseat before I ran around and got behind the wheel.

I hit the button to call my sister-in-law, then heard it start to ring through the speaker before I dropped it into the cup holder and backed out of the driveway to follow the ambulance that was pulling away from the curb.

"Jolie?" Kyla's sleep-roughened voice croaked.

"Wake up, Kyla. I need you."

"What's wrong?" Kyla asked. I heard my brother's voice in the background asking if I was okay, but Kyla shushed him and said, "Talk to me, Jolie."

I explained what had happened, trying to keep my voice level so I didn't freak out the little girl who was taking everything in with wide eyes.

"Quinn's going to call your parents. I'll call Damaris and get her involved on Dante and his dad's behalf, then see you at

the hospital.”

“Mike’s going to be okay. He was yelling at the cops before they took him outside,” I explained. “I don’t know why they’re taking Dante. He didn’t do anything.”

“My guess is that the officer recognized him from ... before. I’m sure he instantly thought the worst because of Dante’s history. We’ll get it worked out, Jolie. I promise.”

“Who’s got Zeb?”

“He’s staying at Lana’s with Marley. I’ll call and let her know what’s going on. Clay can stay here with all the kids if we need him to.”

“Okay,” I said around the lump in my throat as I tried to force back the tears. “It was just chaos, Kyla. They put him in handcuffs without even letting him talk.”

“Honey, that’s not fair, and it’s not how things are supposed to happen, but ... shit. I’ve got nothing. There’s no excuse, I know, but ... Let me call Damaris. Shit. I’ll see you at the hospital.”

I laughed through my tears and asked, “Can you say shit at least one more time?”

“Oh, fuck you,” Kyla growled, but I could hear the laughter in her voice. “I’ll see you in a minute, sweetheart. Stay strong, okay?”

“I will.”

“You’re *the shit*, and don’t you forget it,” Kyla added before she hung up.

From the back seat, I heard the sweetest little voice whisper, “Shit!” This time, when I laughed, the tears that rolled down my cheeks weren’t from stress or fear. I kept laughing as Resa chanted, “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

“You’ve got it right, little one. That’s the best description for this entire fiasco.”

“Shit!”



DANTE

“I’m going to make sure that the bill I charge for coming out in the middle of the night for this farce of an arrest is included in the lawsuit that I’m dying to bring against the department and officer that arrested my client.”

I lifted my head and stared at the door, curious about which client had *that* ball-breaker of a lawyer and wondered if there was enough cash in the coffee can to hire her for myself.

“If you haven’t read him his Miranda Rights at least six times by now, there will be hell to pay!”

I felt my eyebrows rise up nearly to my hairline when the door opened and a stunningly gorgeous woman stomped in breathing fire with murder in her eyes. “Did they read you your rights, Dante, or have you been sitting here alone wondering what the fuck was going on?”

“Ma’am, I’ve told you he’s not under arrest,” the officer explained, a terrified look on his face.

“*Then why is he handcuffed to the table?*” the woman yelled, inches from the officer’s face. In a much calmer voice, so low that I could barely hear her, she whispered, “Get the cuffs off my client and hold the door open for us so I can take him to see his daughter, who is *traumatized* after that officer ripped her father away when she needed his comfort the most.”

“But, ma’am, Officer ...”

“Arrest him or get the fuck out of my way,” the woman growled menacingly. “You don’t have a single thing to charge him with but I’m racking up more lawsuits the longer I stand here.”

The police officer jumped to do the woman’s bidding, holding the door open as she motioned for me to get up and walk out ahead of her. I didn’t say a word, just stood up and walked past her out into the hall and then turned left to go back through the maze of hallways that would spit us out into the booking area and then onto the street.

No one tried to stop us or even said a word as we walked past them, and I finally let out the breath I was holding when the automatic door whisked closed behind us. There was a truck running at the curb, and I realized it was Jolie's brother Wes driving just as the woman nudged me to get into the back seat.

She shut the door behind me and then got into the front passenger seat before she let out a long sigh and said, "I'd punch a nun for a good cup of coffee right now."

"You know how I feel about nuns, D," Wes said as he pulled away from the curb. We were almost to the end of the block before Wes turned around and grinned at me. "Hey, Dante. It's been a while. How ya doin'?"

"I'm thoroughly confused, and it goes against my Catholic upbringing, but if you don't find her a cup of coffee, I'm going to have to go kidnap a nun. I'm fairly positive that's a violation of my parole."

"He gets me," the woman said primly.

"Dante, meet Damaris, your new lawyer."

"Find the woman coffee," I said in response before I rested my head against the back of the seat and sighed. "Do either of you know what happened to my dad or where my daughter might be right now?"

Damaris twisted around in her seat and looked at me, before she explained, "They took your dad to the hospital via ambulance because he was groggy and confused when they finally roused him. He had a moment of panic, and they had to sedate him. That's all I know about his situation as of now. Your daughter is somewhere in the midst of the Donovan clan. I'd assume that one of them took her home or she's sleeping comfortably in someone's arms at the hospital."

"And Mike?"

"He's gonna milk this shit for all it's worth," Wes complained.

"He got stabbed in my fucking living room!"

Wes laughed. “That sounds so dramatic. It’s not like your dad ran him through with a broadsword. It was a three-inch paring knife. They cleaned the wound in the emergency room before they released him with a prescription for antibiotics and some heavy-duty Tylenol.”

“He didn’t even get any stitches,” Damaris said as she bit back a grin.

“He’s gonna be more sore from the punch Jolie threw than he is from the wound your dad gave him,” Wes said through his laughter. “She was so fucking pissed.”

“She hit his arm so hard that I heard the thump out in the hallway,” Damaris explained.

“Why did Jolie hit him?”

“She was pissed because she thought he was dying. That’s how we found out he passed out,” Wes choked out through his laughter. “She told him next time he felt lightheaded, he needed to loosen his corset and get over himself.”

“I thought your parents were going to choke to death holding in their laughter,” Damaris cackled. She reached up and wiped her eyes before she started laughing again. “Then that baby started screaming cuss words at the top of her lungs, and they both lost it.”

“Oh God,” Wes chortled. “That was awesome.”

“The baby was cussing? *My* baby?”

“I guess so. I didn’t recognize her from any of the Donovan get-togethers, so that must have been your daughter,” Damaris explained.

“What was she saying?” I asked.

Wes and Damaris both started cackling again as they chanted, “Fuck! Shit! Fuck! Shit!”

I sighed and let my head fall back again as I listened to them cackle. I was relieved that Mike was going to be okay and knew that after I’d recovered from tonight’s excitement, I’d likely join everyone else in giving him mountains of shit for passing out. But right now, I just wanted to hold my

daughter for a few hours while I thought about my earlier conversation with Jolie.

“I thought they didn’t admit your brother to the hospital,” I said when I realized Mike was pulling up in front of Marlboro General.

“They didn’t,” Wes said as he pulled into a parking spot not far from the door.

“Then why is your family still here?” I asked.

Wes turned around and looked at me in confusion before he explained, “They’re here waiting for news about your dad.”

“Why?”

Wes frowned, all humor gone from his voice now as he said, “We all heard the fight between our dad and Jolie. When she left with Mike, we had questions. Dad told us what you did and ...” Wes sighed and looked away before he continued. “We had no idea, Dante. You were our friend, and we believed the worst of you. I’m sorry about that, man.”

“I had to do what was best for Jolie. I never expected any of you to be okay with me after that. Y’all were just kids then, but I’ll admit that I was surprised when Mike greeted me the way he did that night when I showed up at his shop.”

“For what it’s worth, I hated how things ended with you and Jolie, and I’d like to get to know you now that we’re all adults. I know we must have annoyed the hell out of you back then, but you were always cool to me and Mike. We appreciated that a lot.”

“You both had a lot going on then. It was the least I could do to throw a ball around in the yard with you every now and then.”

“Well, I’m a lot better at it nowadays if you ever get the urge again.”

I smiled at his offer and then glanced at the hospital before I asked, “They’re really all here for my dad?”

Damaris took off her seat belt and twisted around to look at me. “I haven’t known the family for very long, Dante, but

in the short time I have, I've learned that they take the notion of family very seriously. Whether they adopt you at birth or take you in as an adult, they're the kind of people who stick by your side no matter what."

"And Dad's kicking himself for not doing that years ago," Wes explained. "I think it's been eating at him all this time."

"Tell him that's not something he should have worried about. He had a family of his own to raise and support; it wasn't his responsibility to help me with mine."

"You can tell him that until you're blue in the face, but he's never going to agree with you."

"I will when I see him," I promised.

"Well, there's no time like the present, huh?"

Wes looked out the window over my shoulder, and I twisted around in my seat to see what was going on. Robert Donovan was standing at the back of the truck with my daughter in his arms. She was asleep with her head on his shoulder, her limbs hanging loosely as she relaxed against the man who'd helped me out when I needed him most, whether he realized it or not.

"Let's go inside," Damaris ordered. "It's been a long night, and we don't have to deal with everything at once."

"She's right. I'll talk to Dad, and we'll meet you in the waiting room near your dad's room," Wes said before he opened his door.

"But my daughter ..."

Wes laughed. "Even you're not big enough to take a sleeping baby out of my dad's arms, Pardo. Those are the kind of kids he likes the most."

10.

“It’s a wild and crazy place but we call it home.”

Jolie

DANTE

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re saying. His doctors ...”

“He hasn’t had an MRI in more than five years,” the neurosurgeon explained as I rubbed my eyes. I’d been up for almost 36 hours now, and I was fading fast. “I know that doesn’t seem like a long time, but when you consider how quickly medical technology is advancing, it’s an eternity.”

“They never said he needed one,” I told him.

“He’s been going to a general practitioner, Mr. Pardo. As long as he’s in good health, there’s really not much a GP is going to do for him. He’s had the regular tests and exams a man his age should have, but after he was released by his neurologist following his initial injury, there wasn’t any follow-up.”

“So he’s been in pain this whole time?”

“That’s a possibility, but this could be a recent development. There’s really no way to tell how long the inflammation has been there. Unfortunately, after an injury like the one your dad sustained, we can’t predict the exact steps of recovery; we can only work through them over time.”

I felt Jolie come up to stand beside me and jolted when she took my hand. As she squeezed it gently, I looked at the floor to gather my thoughts, glad for the gentle and quiet support she was giving me. She’d left hours ago to go and get some sleep, but she’d come back just in time, as if she somehow knew I’d needed her. “What do we do now?”

“I’ve consulted with a neurologist who specializes in TBI, and he’s helped me set up a treatment plan for your father.

Right now, he's conscious, but sedated enough that it's unlikely he'll be aware of his surroundings enough to get upset. If necessary, we can up the dosage of that medication, and the nurses have that directive. We've started him on an anti-inflammatory and a steroid that will help kick-start the healing process."

"Okay. Then what? When will he get to go home?"

"That's something else we need to discuss, Mr. Pardo. Your father needs long-term care. Even if we reduce the inflammation, he's going to need constant medical attention to watch for complications or other brain events."

"We've been looking at facilities for some time now but can't decide which one would be best for him."

"That's not something we need to decide this minute, but we will need to have that conversation sooner rather than later. I'll help you with the decision as much as I can ..."

"Have you ever heard of Horizons?" Jolie interrupted.

The doctor smiled. "My wife is the administrator there."

"Mrs. Remmel is your wife? I adore her!" Jolie exclaimed with a smile. "She's the best!"

"What connection do you have with Horizons?"

"When my grandparents were there, I started volunteering. Now my staff and I come in once a week and open the salon for the ..."

"Jolie Donovan. I've heard of you! My wife has told me more than once how happy the residents are after their salon visits. She considers what you do for them a form of therapy, even if it's not recognized as a medical treatment."

"She's the best."

"I truly think Horizons is the best option for Mr. Pardo."

I shook my head and told him, "There's a waiting list and ..."

The doctor tilted his head and winked at Jolie before he said, "I've got an in with the director, so I'll have to see about

that.”

“We’re going to sell my parents’ house to help pay, but I’ve got the money now to secure his spot if a unit becomes available,” I assured the doctor.

“It’s settled then. I know that must relieve some of the pressure you’re feeling, Mr. Pardo. Rest assured that I’ll keep an eye on his treatment once he moves from the hospital to the Horizons facility. I’m there twice a week and always check in with the staff during my visits.”

“You make house calls?”

“My brother has lived at Horizons for more than a decade. He’ll be in the same ward as your father.” The doctor cleared his throat and then smiled uncomfortably before he explained, “He’s the reason I chose this field of study, so cases like your fathers are very personal for me.”

“Thank you,” I whispered as I fought back tears. “I’ll talk to my sisters and let them know it’s settled.”

“Do that. In the meantime, I’m going to look in on your dad one more time before I leave for the day, but I’ll be back tomorrow for rounds if you have any more questions for me.”

“Thank you, Dr. Remmel,” Jolie said softly since I couldn’t catch my breath to speak. The doctor nodded at Jolie and then at me before he turned around and walked back into my father’s room. “You know what that means, Dante?”

“It means me and my sisters can start to live our own lives again,” I uttered in shock.

Jolie squeezed my hand and smiled. I smiled back as I stared into her gorgeous brown eyes. “Can I be part of that, you think?”

“That’s the only thing that could possibly make my life any better.”



Jolie had convinced me to come back to her apartment and take a nap while she and her siblings watched my daughters.

My sister had brought Nica with her when she came, and Quinn and Kyla had insisted that she and Resa go home with them so I could focus on my father.

I was so exhausted that it didn't take much convincing, and I *needed* to see my girls. This was the first time I'd been away from Resa for more than a few hours, and it was eating away at me. I'd wondered if she was as antsy about it as I was, but Jolie had assured me that her family would do everything they could to keep her happy and content.

Still, I needed to see them with my own eyes before I was able to close them.

Jolie was in her own vehicle now and let me know that mine was parked in the private lot at her apartment complex as she drove us to her place. I walked through the door behind Jolie and then followed her up the stairs in a daze, focused only on putting one foot in front of the other to get to my daughters.

The first thing I heard when Jolie opened the door to the private floor of the building was my daughter's happy voice squealing, "Go! Go! Go! Go!"

I was instantly relieved and had to shake my head to clear out the wave of exhaustion that started to close in on me.

"Kids these days, I swear," Jolie pretended to grumble as we walked through the door, but her smile gave her away.

"Go left! Go left!" James Donovan yelled right before Quinn's youngest daughter ran him into the wall. "Your other left, Quinlee!"

Nica squealed with excitement as Wes Donovan, who was sitting on the skateboard in front of her as she held his shoulders to push him along, reached out and tried to knock Quinn off the skateboard his daughter Colbie was pushing.

Resa was cheering the racers on from the other end of the hallway, perched on the shoulders of one of the biggest men I'd ever seen. His booming laugh joined Resa's when Quinn fell off his skateboard and dragged Wes onto the floor with him.

“Go, Marley!” One of the triplets squealed as the little girl I’d met the day I dropped Nica off for her sleepover maneuvered another man around the wrestling men who had pulled my daughter and the other girl into their scuffle.

A man I didn’t recognize was being pushed by Jolie’s son, and they were neck and neck with another girl who was navigating the skateboard on her own, using her hands to push herself closer to the finish line.

“Welcome to Club Donovan,” Jolie said through her laughter as her hand swept out toward the crowd of people who were getting closer to the other end of the hall. “It’s a wild and crazy place, but we call it home.”

“I bet the kids sleep really well every night,” I mused as I walked beside Jolie. She paused in front of Quinn and Kyla’s door and waved at the women sitting at the bar, then started walking again. She stopped in front of another open door and leaned in through the doorway.

I looked over her shoulder and saw Mike relaxing on the couch with an ice pack on his stomach. Jolie teased, “How’s our princess feeling?”

Mike flipped her off and then lifted his chin at me before he looked back toward the television.

“Mine’s at the end on the left,” Jolie said as she started walking again. As we passed Quinn, James, and Wes, who were sitting on the floor now as the kids who’d been pushing them scooted on the skateboards down the hallway. Jolie thumped James on the top of the head before she scurried off, laughing loudly when he howled in pain. Once we were almost to the end of the hallway, she stopped in front of the last open door on the left. “This is my place.”

I looked into the apartment and then at the man who was still holding my little girl on his shoulders. She was going wild, clapping her hands and bouncing on his shoulders. I hated to interrupt her, but felt like I should take her off his hands.

“Are you her dad?” the man called out.

“Yeah. I’m Dante.”

“Clay,” the man said with a chin lift. “She’s good. I’ll send her over when we’re done.”

“Come on,” Jolie said as she grabbed my hand and tugged me into her apartment. “Let her play some more. There’s always plenty of people around to watch out for the kids, and they take care of each other too.”

“All of you just leave your doors open and ...”

Jolie laughed when my voice trailed off. “Yeah. The only time we lock our doors is when we’ve got something going on inside that we wouldn’t want the kids to walk in on or we just want some privacy for a while.”

“And the doors at either end stay locked?”

“Yes. Those have a biometric scanner that recognizes our fingerprints. That stops people from getting in who don’t have any business being up here. Zeb and Marley can get out into the stairwell if they need to, but they have to work at it. The door knobs are set high enough that little ones can’t just come and go as they please.”

“They have plenty of room to roam here.”

“Yeah. There’s not a yard, but if they need to burn off energy, there’s almost always someone who’s up for taking them to the park down the street.”

“Or they have skateboard races in the hallway.”

“Exactly,” Jolie agreed. “Welcome, Dante. Now let’s get you in bed before you fall asleep standing there.”

“I need a shower, but I don’t have any clothes with me,” I said as I ran my hand through my hair.

Jolie led me across the living room and into a sunlit bedroom. She stopped beside the bed and pointed toward another door, and when I glanced inside, I saw it was the en suite bathroom. “Go take a shower. The towels are under the sink, and there are extra toothbrushes in the medicine chest. By the time you get out, I’ll have some clothes waiting for you on the bed. You can plug your phone into the cord on the

nightstand, and with the door shut, you shouldn't hear anything while you're sleeping."

"I really need to take the girls ..."

"You really need some sleep. As you saw out there, the girls are doing just fine. I'll let them hang out with my family, feed them dinner, and put them to bed when it's time. You sleep."

"I don't feel right asking you to take care ..."

"You denied me the opportunity to help you all those years ago, and I'm beginning to accept your reasons why. Right now, you need my help and I'm more than able to give it to you. You've got no choice but to take it."

"Are you ever going to forgive me?" I blurted.

Jolie stepped closer and put her hand up on my cheek. She stared up into my eyes, and I watched a slow smile curve her lips. Finally, as she rubbed her thumb back and forth across my cheekbone, she said, "I already have, Dante. You did what you thought was right, and in doing that, you gave me the chance to have a life I love and a son I adore. Now you've got two daughters you wouldn't have if you'd chosen a different path for us."

"It hurt so much to give you up," I admitted.

"Then make sure you never do it again," Jolie whispered before she got up on her tiptoes and wrapped her arms around my neck. I let my arms go around her waist and sighed with contentment at the feel of her body against mine. She held me like that for a minute and then pulled back and stepped out of my arms. "We have the rest of our lives to hash this out, Dante. I'm not in any hurry, and you shouldn't be either. Get some sleep knowing that I've got everything covered for now, okay?"

"Okay."

"I'll bring in some clothes while you shower and then leave you alone until you wake up."

“Where will *you* sleep?” I asked. Jolie glanced toward the bed and then back at me. “When you get tired, come sleep beside me.”

“We never got to spend an entire night together.”

“No, we didn’t. But things are different now, right?”

“I’ll come in once I get the kids settled.”

“You’re my dream come true, Jolie.”

Jolie smiled and tears filled her eyes. “I love you, too, Dante.”

11.

“It’s Blueberry Buckle! Your very favorite!”

Wes

JOLIE

Since Dante was sleeping, I took Lake up on her offer of dinner at her apartment and brought Resa with me to hang out for a while. Quinn, Kyla, Lana, and Clay had taken all the kids to a restaurant in town that has an arcade, and they’d invited Nica to come along.

Before they left, we’d decided to let Nica sleep over at Quinn’s, and Lana and Clay volunteered to keep Zeb so I could take care of Resa while Dante slept.

“Found it!” James said as he walked into Lake’s apartment carrying Zeb’s old high chair. “It was right where you said it would be.”

“We brought down a few other things you might need too,” Wes said as he carried in the portable crib Lana and I had shared when the kids were small. There was also a tub full of toys underneath his other arm. When Resa spotted them through the clear container, she squealed loudly. “I guess it pays to be a pack rat.”

“It’s also awesome to have a clothing boutique downstairs,” I told them as I watched Resa start digging through the toys in the bin. “Lara went on a spree as soon as she found out her size.”

“I was with Lara when she went down to pick out clothes for her. Did you see the hair bows she chose to match the pajamas? Who does that?”

“Someone who doesn’t have kids,” I mumbled as I walked into the kitchen to get some cleaner and paper towels. “I’ll get this cleaned up while y’all decide what’s for dinner.”

“Chinese.”

“Italian.”

“Tacos.”

“I’m down for any of those,” I said with a laugh after all three of my siblings spoke at the same time. “Lake’s the pregnant one. Let her decide.”

“I’d like spicy chicken lo mein and an order of crab rangoons with a taco on the side and tiramisu for dessert,” Lake said definitively as she sat down at the bar. I laughed at the blank look that came over my brothers’ faces and then laughed even harder when Lake sounded just like our mother when she snapped, “Well?”

“Shit,” Wes grumbled. “I guess we’ll be back in a little while.”

“Text me *exactly* what y’all want. I’m not ready to be on the receiving end of another pregnant meltdown,” James whined.

“How hard is it to check the bag *before* you leave the drive-thru, James?”

“That’s a trick question,” I heard Wes whisper as he followed our other brother out the door.

Lake picked up her phone and sent a text, probably to Mark, asking if he wanted food, then looked up at me. “What do you think baby girl would like to eat?”

I glanced over at Resa who was sitting on the floor with a book in her lap, jabbering away as she read the story to the toys around her. I shrugged and said, “I have no idea.”

“You’ll figure it out and be like Mom where you know exactly what each of your kids likes and can order for the whole family from memory,” Lake said as her phone dinged with a response. “I think Mark’s just happy he’s not the one doing the food run tonight. Sometimes I start to feel sorry for him, then I remember that I can’t fit into my jeans and have to fight the urge to strangle him with a shoe string.”

“Wow, Lizzie Borden, dial it back a notch,” I teased.

“When you were pregnant, did you ever wonder if you were losing it?”

I stared at her blankly and asked, “Was that supposed to go away?” Lake looked terrified, so I hurried to explain, “It’s completely normal with the hormones and the worry. You’re under a lot of stress with things changing so fast that life is a blur ... Just all the things going on, you know?”

“Oh, I know,” Lake muttered. “All the things.”

“I’m gonna be honest with you. That flood of emotions doesn’t ever go away. Ever.”

“No?” Lake asked.

“They change. Here’s a good example of the roller coaster ride: You’ve survived midnight feedings and colic, right? Kiddo’s crawling and into everything, but you’ve adjusted. *Then* he starts pulling up on anything that will stay still long enough for him to take hold. Okay, we’re adjusting again. It’s all good. You’re amazed at the wonder of this new gift, and it brings tears to your eyes when he takes his first steps. But *then* he starts walking *all the time*, and everywhere you look you see sharp corners close to his soft little head. He’s obsessed with going up and down the stairs, and there’s so much stuff that he can reach all of a sudden. He’s there one second and then you turn around to pull the clothes out of the dryer and he’s suddenly gone.”

Lake was staring at me with wide eyes. She sat there blinking with a shocked expression while I took a moment after my little jaunt down memory lane and worried that I’d broken her.

“But, yeah, it’s good. It’s great. You’ll love it,” I assured her. “It’s fine.”

“You should never try to be inspirational, Jolie,” Lake said before she closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I think I saw my life flash before my eyes.”

I laughed. “It’s really not that bad.”

“That took a dramatic turn, and we still don’t know what to feed Resa.”

“I’ve never met a kid who doesn’t love spaghetti.”

“Perfect!” Lake said, picking her phone up again. “And you want the chicken parm, right?”

“Look at you, Mom! You’ve already started.”

Lake grinned proudly. “I’ll get one for Dante, too, in case he’s hungry when he wakes up.”

When Lake was finished texting our brother, she set up the portable crib and inspected it, then sat down with Resa while I finished cleaning the high chair. I was washing my hands at the sink when I heard Lake laugh, so I turned around to see what was going on.

“She’ll play with a toy for about five seconds and then go put it in the crib,” Lake explained as Resa walked over and tossed another toy over the side. I sat down on a stool and watched Resa entertain herself. I smiled when she grabbed the edge of the crib and tried to shake it before she said, “Up peeeeeeeze!”

“Nope! Dump the toys out, but don’t let her get in and play or you’ll start a war we can’t win,” I warned. I turned the crib onto its side so Resa could get the toys out. As I walked past her, I held my hand out and helped Lake up off the floor.

Resa was content with the change I’d made and plopped down beside the crib to explore the toys again. I got back onto my stool and watched her as Lake pattered around the kitchen.

“What’s happening between you and Dante?”

I leaned against the back of the stool and let my head fall back to stare at the ceiling before I answered, “I don’t know. Every scenario I can imagine has been playing out in my mind since we talked on the porch last night. Before he went to sleep, he told me that it hurt to give me up back then, and he wanted me to come and crawl into bed with him when I got tired.”

“Are you going to?”

“The only reason I’m not there right now is because I promised to watch Resa.”

“You don’t think I’m qualified to do that?”

“The man’s exhausted. He was up for God knows how long dealing with the stress of what happened with his dad, getting arrested, and then the doctors and the test results at the hospital. It’s a lot. The guy needs to sleep.”

“There are other ways to take his mind off his troubles, too, Jolie. Hint, hint.”

“What are we talking about?” Mike asked as he walked through the open front door.

“Hey, gangster,” Lake said with a grin.

“Gangster?”

“Dude, you got stabbed. Your street cred went up at least 20 points,” Lake teased.

“That shit hurt,” Mike grumbled as he sat down on the stool closest to the end.

“I’m sorry I hit you,” I mumbled.

Mike winced and rubbed his arm. “Good.”

“You scared the shit out of me. There I was thinking the knife was long enough to do fatal damage to your vital organs and possibly even sever your spinal cord and it was ...” Lake interrupted me by slamming a paring knife down on the bar before she burst out laughing. “... that.”

“You can still do damage with that knife,” Mike argued.

“To peas. Or grapes. Maybe even a small orange,” Lake argued. “I just think it’s funny that you fainted.”

“I. Got. Stabbed.”

Lake and I both started giggling, and Mike glared at us. “Remember the time you and Wes were pretending to be knights and your bicycles were horses? Remember that?”

“Yes, Lake, I remember.”

“And you were using sticks from the burn pile as your swords ... ring a bell?” Mike sighed, but Lake wasn’t finished yet. “And you *stabbed* Wes? Remember that?”

“I remember, Lake. Jeez.”

“Y’all were what - 11 or 12?” I asked.

“We were 11, and it was y’all’s fault anyway.”

“How is it our fault?” Lake screeched.

“You were all *obsessed* with Heath Ledger, and you watched that stupid movie a million times.”

“You’re blaming stabbing our brother on a *movie*?” Lake asked, incredulous.

“Man, that was insane. I was in the kitchen with Mom when Wes ran inside screaming bloody murder with a stick coming out of his gut. She lost her fucking mind. The ambulance came and took him away with it still sticking out of his belly. It was chaos.”

“It was,” Lake agreed. “But through all of that, you know what never happened?”

“What?” Mike asked with a sigh.

“Wes didn’t pass out.”

“Fuck you,” Mike hissed. I lost the battle and burst out laughing at the same time as Lake. Mike let his chin fall to his chest in shame but couldn’t stop himself from laughing. He held his hand over his belly and cracked up, then moaned. “Stop it. That hurts.”

“Get the smelling salts!” Lake chortled. “Don’t let him fall off the chair.”

“Timber!” I called out, pretending to lunge toward Mike as if I were trying to catch him.

“What are you lunatics laughing about?” Wes asked as he walked in with a big bag of takeout in each hand.

“The time Mike stabbed you,” I explained.

“You mean the time I got stabbed and didn’t pass out?”
Wes teased.

“Found this one in the hallway,” James called out as he walked through the door with Resa in his arms.

“Oh shit!” Lake and I exclaimed at the same time.

“I totally forgot we were in charge of a kid,” Lake said with wide eyes.

“Damn. I’m so out of practice.”

“Shit! Shit! Shit!” Resa squealed as she bounced on James’ hip.

“And I’ve got to quit swearing,” I grumbled as I jumped off the stool and took her into my arms. “You’re gonna have to retrain me, sweetheart. I’m not used to having a little one around anymore.”

“I’ve got to get better at this,” Lake whispered, terror in her eyes. Then in a much stronger voice, she exclaimed, “We lost a kid and didn’t even realize it!”

“Let’s keep this little secret between us, okay?” I said as I set Resa in the high chair. “How about that?”

“I won’t tell Dante that you lost track of his kid if you’ll quit giving me crap about passing out,” Mike offered.

“Yeah, bud, that’s all well and good,” James said as he started pulling food out of the bags. He gave an exaggerated wince and continued, “But even if she quits, you’ve still got the rest of us to contend with.”

“You’re all adopted, and your parents don’t even love you,” Mike snapped. “There better be something in there for me. It’s time for my pain pill, and I’m supposed to take it with food.”

“Yep. Stopped by the store and got you some jars of baby food,” Wes teased. “It’s Blueberry Buckle! Your very favorite!”

“No, it wasn’t Mike that ate all the jars of that when Marley and Zeb were little. That was James,” I corrected.

“My bad.” Wes shrugged as James laughed.

“Mike liked Hawaiian Delight,” I added with a grin. “Do you need me to go get you some, Mikey?”

“I’ve never wished I was an only child more than I do right now.”



Once I was sure Resa was settled in the portable crib, I pulled the cover over it and zipped it in place, remembering how my parents had searched high and low for this model when Zeb was a baby. He’d been an explorer from the second he learned to crawl. When he had stayed with my parents or my siblings, they’d been afraid to sleep because he might wake up and get into something during the night.

After hanging out with Resa for the last few hours, I had no doubt that she’d be into everything the second she realized there wasn’t an adult in the room to stop her. It had been fun getting to know the little girl this evening. Since she’d spent almost two days here with my family while Dante was at the police station and then the hospital, they’d all fallen head over heels for her.

I hadn’t spent nearly as much time with Nica, but the few interactions I’d had with her so far were enlightening. She was such a serious child at times, studying the people around her before she jumped into the conversations. But once she got started, there was no holding her back.

She and I had talked about Resa for almost an hour this evening, and she told me all the little girl’s favorite things - from cheesy scrambled eggs to her hatred of Elmo. She’d talked like a proud big sister, but there was an edge of cautious caretaker there, too, and I respected that. I didn’t know all the details of her life so far, but I understood that Nica had lived through more loss than most adults could handle, yet she was still smiling.

With one last glance over my shoulder to check on Resa, I slipped into my bedroom where Dante was still sleeping. He'd been down for five hours and was deeply asleep, if his steady breathing was any indication.

He'd left the bathroom light on, and it shined over the bed at the perfect angle to let me study the sleeping man. I stopped at the foot of the bed and looked my fill. He was almost covered in tattoos, from the phoenix that covered the front of his neck down into the waistband of the basketball shorts. At some point he'd kicked the covers off one leg, and I saw tattoos from just above his knee down to the top of his foot. Most of the tattoos were black with shades of gray, but there were several in color also.

The largest tattoo spread from his left hip across his abdomen with wisps of smoke coming up from flames. When I got closer, I realized it was a burning car, and as I got a better look, I gasped. It was the car he owned when we were in high school, the one he'd restored with his father and grandfather for most of his childhood. He'd cherished that car and spent hours every week working on one thing or another. He kept it so clean and shiny that you could see your reflection in it. The tattoo depicted the car in an entirely different light, though. It was dented and dull with flames engulfing the cab and engine. Even the flattened tires were on fire with scorched earth depicted underneath them.

I followed the wisps of smoke that scrolled up into a decorative pattern that formed words and shapes here and there. I couldn't see all the details, but I promised myself I'd study them at some point, knowing they would tell a story of their own.

Resa and Nica's name were over his heart in beautiful scrollwork, and I realized that must have been the tattoo Mike had done on him a few weeks ago.

As if he could feel my eyes on him, Dante started to shift. His hand came up and scratched right above his belly button before he sighed and rolled over, giving me an unobstructed view of his back. There were skulls there, some menacing and others covered with flowers and hearts like the sugar skulls

that seemed to be everywhere. One of the skulls had a crown, and another was set in front of a pair of handcuffs, while another was the colors of the Texas flag.

After I looked my fill, I pulled one of my sleepshirts out of the drawer and made my way into the bathroom to go through my nightly routine. When I was finished in the bathroom, I pulled the door almost closed, leaving just enough light for Dante to see his way around the room. I peeked into the living room to check on Resa and saw that she was still sleeping in the same position she'd been in when I left her, then I adjusted the covers over Dante and crawled into bed beside him.

Dante stirred, and I saw his eyes flutter open. He gave me a sleepy smile and then mumbled, "Pretty girl," before he put his arm around my waist and pulled me closer.

In the time we'd spent together, we'd been intimate as often as we could sneak away, but we'd never once slept beside each other in bed.

Until I had Zeb, I liked my space while I was sleeping. After he was born, I'd loved to snuggle with him during his nap time and had let him crawl into bed with me during the night to sleep. Since my divorce, I'd had a few trysts that ended with me sleeping in bed with a man, but I'd always maintained my distance telling myself it was so I could sleep comfortably.

Now, with Dante's body molded to mine, I realized that I didn't mind him crowding my space at all. Instead of trying to gently move away without waking him, I relaxed, loving the feel of his arm across my stomach as his thumb occasionally brushed back and forth close to my hip.

With one final yawn, I closed my eyes and let sleep take me under. I was warm and content in a place I never imagined I'd ever get to be.

12.

“Ladies, the phoenix has landed.”

Kyla

DANTE

I came awake slowly and wondered how Resa had gotten out of her crib to crawl into bed with me. I took a deep breath and tried to make myself fall asleep, then my eyes popped open when a smooth leg moved up my thigh and rested its weight there as the woman next to me sighed in her sleep. I looked down and realized it was Jolie pressed against me with her arm across my stomach as her head rested on my shoulder.

My heart started racing as I remembered the events of the past few days, and I had a moment of panic when I realized that I didn't know where my girls were sleeping. I took a deep breath and stared at the ceiling as I tried to calm down, knowing they were more than fine in the care of whichever Donovan had taken them in for the night.

With that worry gone, I could focus on the woman pressed against me. I moved my face closer to hers so I could drop a soft kiss on her forehead. She'd told me last night before I laid down that she'd join me in bed and waking up next to her was like a dream come true. I couldn't resist resting my hand on her knee. I rubbed my thumb against the soft skin there as I thought of everything that had happened recently.

I'd been horrified when I realized that my dad had stabbed Mike but felt better when I got to the hospital and saw for myself that he was going to be okay. Then the tests they did on Dad gave us hope for the first time in years. I had a good feeling about his placement at that facility my sisters and I had liked the most.

There was a really good possibility that my backyard was full of cash, but the real treasure was right here in my arms.

As if she knew I was thinking of her, Jolie's fingers twitched on my chest. Then she flattened her hand out and pressed on my skin for a split second before her eyes shot open just an inch or two from mine.

"Mornin'," I whispered with a smile.

Jolie's eyes got wide, and she immediately mumbled an apology. "I'm sorry. Shit. I'm not usually a cuddler."

She tried to move her leg off mine where her knee rested against my hip, but I hooked my fingers behind her knee and held it there. "I'm usually not either, but I like this."

"Me too," Jolie admitted quietly

"As much as I want you against me, I feel like I should warn you that if you stay there, things might happen we're not ready for."

"Can you read my mind all of a sudden?"

I rubbed my thumb back and forth over her knee before I shifted just a fraction and my hard cock rubbed against it. "You wouldn't know this because you've never woken up in bed with me before, but I do my best work before dawn."

Jolie laughed softly and then circled my nipple with the tip of her finger.

"You said you're not ready for this," Jolie reminded me.

"Not because I don't want it with every cell in my body. I just don't want you to regret making love so soon after we've reconnected."

"Since I first met you, you've been the only one I think about every time I touch myself." My heart stopped and then started again, so fast I was afraid it might jump out of my chest. "Did you ever think of me?"

"Every day, pretty girl."

"Show me what you were thinking about all these years," Jolie murmured before she lifted her head and kissed me. "Love me, Dante."

I groaned when she deepened the kiss, her tongue touching mine. I pulled her leg farther across me until my cock nestled beneath the crook of her knee, and then she pulled her mouth away and pushed up so that her body slid across mine and my cock was beneath the heat of her pussy. “Fuck, I’ve dreamed of this so many times that I’m afraid I’m still asleep. If I wake up and you’re not here with me, I don’t think I’ll be able to take it.”

“I’m right here,” Jolie whispered as she pushed up using her hands on my chest. While she was straddling me, she pulled her shirt off and tossed it aside, leaving her chest bare for my gaze. I devoured every inch of skin with my eyes for a few long seconds before I reached up and cupped her breasts with my hands. Jolie rested her hands over mine and threw her head back with a sigh as she ground her pussy against my cock. I pushed my hips up, cursing the clothes between us, and Jolie seemed to read my mind.

She leaned to one side and stretched her underwear as she lifted her leg and pulled them off, then leaned the other way and pulled them off the other leg. She tossed them to the side as she leaned forward and kissed me, rubbing her bare pussy on my cock, now with less material between us.

As we kissed, I ran my hands up and down her back, finally going farther down to cup her ass cheeks in my hand and press her against me even harder. I realized that the timid girl I’d known years ago was gone when she reached between us and pulled my shorts down, letting my cock spring free. When she wrapped her cold hand around it, I almost came up off the bed, causing her to laugh softly into my mouth.

She pulled back a fraction and whispered, “Sorry.”

“Fuck no. Don’t apologize,” I growled as she slowly stroked me, using the perfect amount of pressure before she ran her thumb over the tip, catching the precum that was already leaking. When she pulled her hand up between us and licked the fluid off her thumb, I moaned.

With her hand out of the way, I let mine move down to cup her heat, pressing the heel of my hand against her clit as I

slowly stroked her entrance with the tips of my fingers. Jolie squirmed, and with a low chuckle, I entered her with one finger. She was already so wet that it took all I had not to notch my cock at her entrance and push up, but I held back, eager to stoke the fire inside her until she was begging for me.

Jolie's body had always been responsive to my touch, and I realized that hadn't changed when I felt her muscles contract around my finger as she moaned into my mouth. I pushed another finger inside her, and Jolie shivered before she ground down on my palm, forcing my fingers deeper.

"Do you like that, pretty girl?"

"More, Dante," Jolie whispered. "I need you."

"What do you want, Jolie?"

"You. Please," Jolie begged as I curled my fingers and rubbed against the front wall of her pussy, feeling the rough spot that always caused her to come. "Oh. Oh God. Dante."

"Found it," I murmured, mostly to myself since Jolie couldn't hear me over her whispered chants and pleading words. I gently rubbed the pads of my fingers back and forth until Jolie was writhing on my hand, her entire body tense as she started to come apart. I knew from experience that she could only take so much, so I pulled my hand away and rested it on her hip as Jolie caught her breath.

"Dante," Jolie whispered, out of breath. She reached down and lifted my weeping cock up until it was at just the right angle, then slowly took me inside, inch by inch, until she was stretched around me. I clenched my teeth together, ready to come deep inside her, but wanting to make this good for her too. Once she had adjusted to my length, she started to move her hips as her lips locked with mine in a long kiss.

I knew I wouldn't last long with her moving above me, so I wrapped my arms around her and sat up, changing the angle of my cock inside her as she let her legs move so that they were wrapped around my hips. I held her close to me as I changed our position again, coming to rest above her now. I thrust myself deep inside her over and over again until I knew

I couldn't take anymore. I pulled my cock out and moved down the bed until my body rested between her splayed legs. In the next second, I pressed my tongue against her clit.

"Oh shit," Jolie whispered as she lifted her head and looked down her body at me. I held her eyes as I devoured her, my hands pressing her thighs wide so I could lap at her pussy, licking around her clit before I sucked at it with my lips. Jolie squirmed beneath me, begging for my cock and then finally let go with a muffled shout as she came again.

That was all I needed. I surged up her body, slamming my cock inside her so I could feel her body clutch at mine while I filled her over and over again. Her legs wrapped around my hips, and when I tried to pull out, she squeezed her legs tighter.

"I'm gonna come, Jolie," I ground out as my hips stuttered, pushing deep inside her, trying to hold myself back.

"Yes, Dante," Jolie whispered, squeezing me with her muscles until I couldn't take it anymore and let myself go. I came deep inside her for the first time ever, and it was so fantastic that I felt lightheaded and weak when I was done.

I rested my weight on my arms so I didn't crush her and tried to catch my breath as Jolie ran her hands up and down my back.

"I dreamed of that," Jolie whispered. "I dreamed that I could feel you inside me, and now here you are."

I lifted my head from where my forehead was pressed against the pillow beside her head and looked down into her eyes.

"I love you, Jolie, and I always have."

"I love you too." Jolie squeezed my softening cock inside her, and I moaned as I felt it start to harden again. I could never get enough of this woman when we were younger, and that hadn't changed either, but I knew that a baby was the last thing we needed right now. As if she could read my mind, she said, "I'm on birth controll, Dante."

I groaned as I pulled my hips back, letting my cock slide almost all the way out of her body and then slammed back into her with a grunt. Jolie laughed softly as she rested her hand on the back of my head and clutched the short hair there so she could direct my mouth to hers.

“I’ll never get enough of you, pretty girl,” I said between kisses as I started moving inside her.

Jolie smiled as she stared into my eyes. “I hope not, Dante, because I’m never letting you go again.”

That was exactly what I wanted to hear, and I let her know that as I worshipped her body with my own.



JOLIE

I stretched my arms above my head and winced at the tenderness between my legs. Dante and I had explored each other in the shower after our adventures in bed and then christened my bathroom vanity when we should have been sleeping. Now reality was knocking, and I knew I needed to get out of bed and try to function like an adult instead of a lovestruck teenager with her head in the clouds.

Just as I reached out to touch Dante where he had collapsed beside me after we changed the sheets, I heard my niece Colbie’s laughter from the living room.

“Oh shit!” I whispered as I sat straight up and stared at the bedroom door. I scrambled out of bed and yanked on the shirt I’d borrowed from Mike for Dante to wear. I yanked on a pair of yoga pants that were folded in the basket beside my bed as I hopped toward the door.

I opened the door and found Nica and my oldest nieces in the kitchen with Dante while Resa sat in her high chair with yogurt and blueberries all over her face.

“Good morning, pretty girl,” Dante said with a grin from the other side of the bar.

“You’re not supposed to be awake yet!” Quinlee wailed. “We were going to make you breakfast in bed!”

“Breakfast?” I repeated as I walked across the living room, my eyes on the shirtless man standing between my nieces.

Nica was perched on the counter behind them. She scrolled through Dante’s phone before she put it up to her ear and said, “Hi! Are you awake yet?”

“Nica’s calling her uncle so he can give us the recipe for his pancakes,” Colbie explained.

“Her uncle?” I asked, realizing I was starting to sound like a parrot repeating everything. I was confused since I knew Dante’s brothers were in prison.

“I promise we won’t tell *anyone* your secret recipe,” Nica pleaded with the man on the phone. She bounced up and down with excitement and then pulled the phone away from her face and touched the screen. “He’s going to show us on video chat!”

Dante walked around the counter and pulled me into his arms when I stopped in front of him. “It’s a friend I met when I got out of prison. He lived next door to me for a while, and we’ve kept in touch. He’s one hell of a cook.”

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod!” Colbie squealed as Quinlee stood next to her with her eyes wide in absolute shock.

“He’s a little bit famous for it.” I raised my eyebrows and watched my nieces giggle as the man on the phone introduced himself. “He hosts a TV show.”

I slowly turned and stared at Dante. “You know Gordon Ramsey?”

Dante laughed. “Okay, he’s not *that* popular, but he’s pretty well-known.” Quinlee sprinted across the apartment squealing the entire way. My guess was she was going to get Kyla to tell her she’d just met someone famous. “I can’t imagine how they’re going to freak when they meet the woman who’s trying to teach Nica how to do her makeup so she doesn’t look like Mimi from *The Drew Carey Show*.”

“If you say Bailey ...”

“No, not her, but Nica loves to watch her videos too.”

Quinlee came rushing back into the apartment and skidded to a halt beside Nica, who was holding the phone in front of her, showing the man on the screen the contents of my fridge. I looked at the apartment door when Dante said, “Good morning, Kyla. Quinn.”

My brother stopped in the doorway with his eyebrows so high that they were at risk of joining his hairline, and Kyla elbowed him in the stomach as she smiled at Dante. “Good morning to you.” She pushed the button for the intercom that was wired to all of my siblings’ apartments, then calmly said, “Ladies, the phoenix has landed.” I glared at her, and Kyla smiled sheepishly. “What? I just won 50 bucks. They need to pay up.”

Dante looked from me to Kyla and then back to me in confusion. I let my head fall forward and rest on Dante’s chest with a sigh.

“What does that mean?” Dante whispered.

“Kyla just announced to my sisters that you and I slept together, and now we’re about to be invaded.”



DANTE

I pulled the bedroom door closed, then smiled at the trio at the bar as I walked toward them.

“She finally got to sleep,” I said as I sat in the chair next to Jolie.

“Dante, I am in love with your daughters,” Patrice Donovan announced. “I hope you don’t mind that the girls convinced Nica to call me Grandma.”

“Not at all. She could use one of those. A grandpa too,” I said as she looked at Robert.

Robert shook his head as he stared at the counter in front of him. “I’m not sure I’m worthy of that title as far as either of your daughters are concerned.”

“I put you in a bad spot, Robert. I shouldn’t have asked you to lie for me, and I apologize.”

“No, Dante. I could see that you were drowning, and rather than stepping in and offering you my family’s support, I let you go. I’m the one who needs to apologize.”

“Dad ...”

“Let me have my say, Jolie,” Robert continued. “Dante respected me enough to come to me to ask for help. I should have supported him but not with the solution he’d devised. If I had told Patrice what was going on, she’d have jumped in with both feet, just like Dante was afraid *you* would do. The difference is, we were grown-ups and knew how to juggle work, home, and

a big family. Rather than do that, I let Dante flounder, trying to fill his parents’ roles at home and the garage. I’m ashamed of myself. If I had it to do all over again, I’d ...”

I interrupted Robert, “We can’t go back now ... we have to look at this like the gift it is. I wouldn’t trade the life I’ve led for anything because even though the road was hard, it led me to where we are right now, with one daughter asleep upstairs and the other one just across the room. I know Jolie feels the same way. She had her ups and downs, and I don’t know all the details yet, but she’s got that awesome little boy she’d do anything for, including give me up, I’m sure.”

Jolie smiled uncomfortably but reached out and took her dad’s hand from where it rested on the counter. “I was angry. You saw that firsthand, and Mike was right to take me away before I said something I couldn’t ever take back.”

“You have every right to be angry with me, Jolie. I let you down by lying all these years, and I let Dante down when I

didn't reach out and help him with a mountain of responsibilities that could crush a grown man."

"So everything is out on the table now. I hope the wounds aren't too fresh for me to speak what's in my heart, but I'm going to take a chance. Robert, I'm in love with your daughter and want to spend the rest of my life taking care of her and our children in a way that I hope will make you proud." I heard Jolie gasp and then sniff right along with Patrice, but I held it together by locking my eyes with Robert's. "I love her, maybe more now than I did then, and I want to marry her. I know it's archaic to some, but considering our shared history, my addiction, and my time in prison, I feel like it's important to have your blessing. I'm not perfect by any means and recovery is a slippery slope, but I fight the good fight every day. I know that if something happens and I lose that fight, Jolie will have her family to fall back on."

"We will be here for your daughters too," Robert assured me. "I'd be proud to have you and your children join our family, Dante. We'll work to help you in any way we can."

I reached out and brushed the tears off Jolie's cheek with my thumb as I held her face in my hand. "I love you, Jolie. I don't have a ring to put on your finger yet, but I'd be honored if you'd become my wife and the mother of my children."

"Dante," Jolie sobbed with a round of fresh tears streaming down her face. "I never dreamed I'd hear those words, but yes! Yes, I want to spend the rest of my life making up for lost time and making new memories together. I don't need a ring to know that with all of my heart."

"You'll get one," I assured her. "We've got all the time in the world, and we can get to know each other again while I figure out what's going on with my dad and the house and ... the, um, coffee cans."

"Mom can help," Jolie said, looking at Patrice with a smile. "We talked about it at the hospital. I told her you wanted to sell your dad's house, and she said that she'd get to work on that as soon as you're ready."

“I can have our inspector come out tomorrow morning to see what needs to be repaired before we put the house on the market. Once we have that list, the family will help you with the work and stage the house for photos to hook interested buyers.”

I looked down at the table as my thoughts raced. I needed to dig in the yard but didn't want to have to worry about the kids inside alone while I worked. I was also a little paranoid about someone seeing me pass out in the yard with a coffee can full of cash in my hand and then go on a shoveling spree and rob us blind.

“I don't know where to start,” I mumbled. I ran my hand over my mouth as I looked at the people around me, then the realization struck that I didn't have to do all of this by myself. The Donovans *always* put their everything into supporting those they loved, and after the conversation we had, I knew they'd help me however they could. “I know I can trust your family. But I've got a ... thing ... I need to figure out before some stranger starts nosing around my parents' house.”

Jolie nodded as she chewed on her bottom lip. “It might be nothing but it might be ... something.”

Robert and Patrice were staring at us with wide eyes, anticipating God knows what.

“Sometimes my dad has lucid moments ... Well, he's not really in the present, but ... Fuck. It sounds crazy, considering that when he was talking to me, he thought I was my brother, but my dad said he'd been burying money in our backyard since he and Mom moved into the house almost 40 years ago.” Robert tilted his head in question, and Patrice just stared at me, never blinking as she studied my face. “It seems crazy that I'd believe him, but there was proof that he was *possibly* ...”

Jolie jumped off the stool and walked into the kitchen. She opened the cabinet and tiptoed up to reach the coffee can on the top shelf. Once she had it in hand, she turned around and walked back over to the bar without a word. She pulled the lid off the can and dumped the contents onto the bar.

Robert and Patrice both gasped when bundled bills hit the countertop and rolled around, one of them falling onto the floor.

“He said there was one hidden in the garage that wasn’t full enough to bury yet. After I got him settled into bed, I went back out and found that can. I didn’t have time to count it before Jolie and Mike showed up, then shit hit the fan, and here we are.”

Robert picked up a bundle and studied it for a second before his eyes shot up to mine. “There are more of these?”

“My mom loved roses, and Dad would buy her a new bush every now and again to plant it in the yard. I counted 31 bushes around the perimeter, but I know there have been more than that over time. Occasionally, a couple of them would die, and one year when there was a drought, she lost all of them. Over time he replaced them all for her.”

Patrice picked up a bundle and studied it as she asked, “But where did he get the money?”

“He said that when a customer paid in cash, he would hide it from the IRS by burying it in the yard.”

“Holy shit,” Robert said before his mouth dropped open in shock. He looked over at his wife and blinked a few times before he asked, “Remember when me and Roger bought that car at auction and then figured out it needed a new transmission? Don did that work, and we paid him in cash. It was a couple thousand dollars by the time it was all said and done.”

“Yeah, that’s what he was talking about. I need to see if there really is money buried in our yard, because if there is, I’m going to use it to pay for Dad to move into Horizons when he gets released.”

“And if there isn’t any money there?”

“I’ll have to come up with another plan,” I said simply. “Either way, we’ll need to sell the house and ...”

“Or you could find a couple mil in the yard and keep the house,” Robert suggested.

I shook my head. “It’s hard enough living there now with all the history and memories. I think it would be better for all of us to just sell it. I’m going to move me and the girls into the apartment above the garage until I can find a place and ...”

“I’ve been in that apartment,” Jolie said, remembering more than one time that we snuck up there to be alone. “You can’t move there with the girls. Just ... no. Absolutely ... no, Dante.”

“It would just be for a little while until we get Dad settled, and I get some money ...”

“You’ll stay here with me and Zeb,” Jolie said firmly. “Nica is of an age where she needs her privacy, and she’ll never have that living above the garage with you and Resa. And it won’t be good for Resa either. She won’t have *any* room at all to run and play, and that’s important at her age. She needs space and ... No, Dante. Absolutely not.”

I tilted my head and studied Jolie’s stubborn expression as my heart soared and a smile took over my face. “You’re already acting like ...”

“It’s not acting. You said 10 minutes ago that you want to make a life with me and raise our children together. I hope you meant it because that starts now. If we’re together ... hell, even if we’re not, I’m going to look out for them first, just like I will for Zeb.”

“Word of warning, son, she gets that look on her face and her stubborn ways from her mother. We’ve been together forever, and I’ve never once won an argument that included that look or tone of voice,” Robert said as he slowly shook his head. “Don’t even try when she gets that way. Just roll with it.”

“You make it sound like I’m a tyrant,” Patrice complained.

“You’re just firm in your beliefs, sweetheart. Nothing wrong with that,” Robert said as he reached for her hand. She was still holding a bundle of money, and he plucked it out of

her hand and held it up. “We should count this. See if we can get some projection on what we’re looking at.”

“And then I’ll just tear up the backyard looking for buried treasure?”

“No,” Patrice said firmly. “I’ve been by your parents’ house a million times over the years, buying and selling in that neighborhood. It’s a corner lot and one of the few that still has a short chain link fence around it. In this market, that’s only going to bring the value down. People appreciate their privacy, and don’t want every person who drives by to see what they’re doing in their yard. I’ll go over with James tomorrow and take some measurements so he can get a crew to put up a privacy fence.”

“Then when I start digging, no one will be able to see what I’m doing.”

“No, son, when *we* start digging,” Robert corrected me. “We’ll get Lake involved to see how we can save the plants, and once we’ve found everything, we’ll completely renovate the yard. Installing a sprinkler system and new sod won’t be a stretch since we’ll have already gotten started on the digging.”

“I’m going to get Lake and James,” Patrice said as she slid off the stool. She stopped walking and turned around abruptly, looking at me in question. “That’s if it’s okay with you that they know your secret.”

“You can tell them. I trust your family.”

“In that case, I will get all of them, or at least the ones that are around. You’re not going to dig up that yard by yourself. We’ve got plenty of strong backs in this family who know how to use a shovel.” Patrice then walked to the panel beside the door that Kyla had used earlier. She pushed the button and announced, “Family meeting in Jolie’s apartment, please.”

“I guess I should get used to this family invasion thing, huh?” I asked Jolie as I reached for her hand. She gripped mine and nodded in answer before I asked, “Will we get to invade them sometimes?”

Jolie laughed as she nodded again. “Welcome to Club Donovan, Dante. There’s never a dull moment. I hope you don’t mind having people around all the time invading your privacy.”

With a pointed look, I reminded her, “I’ve had a little more than eight years practice at that, pretty girl, but I’m sure this will be a much easier adjustment.”

13.

“I hope you got laid this weekend and it was so subpar that you fell asleep before it was over.”

Cesar

DANTE

“Why don’t we just go in and ... you know ... instead of paying to have a fence installed?” Aurelia asked.

I glanced over at Resa who was pushing her baby doll around the lot in a little pink stroller and then looked back at the yard where Jolie’s brother, James, was manning a post hole digger under the watchful eyes of Wes and Lake.

“To sell the house, we’ll need that fence anyway. If we put it up first, we can take our time with ... the thing,” I said as I glanced over her shoulder at the men working in the garage. “It will help the resale value and give us some privacy at the same time.”

“After what happened with Jolie, are you sure you can trust her family? I thought they hated you.”

“I’m not sure they know how to hate, Aurelia.” I blew out a breath, remembering that she didn’t know about my deal with Robert. “New information has come to light about our breakup, and Jolie’s family understands that I’m not the man they thought I was for years.” Aurelia raised one eyebrow in question. “I’m not talking about my time in prison or my addiction, sis. I’m talking about why I broke up with Jolie.”

“Why *did* you break up with her? You’ve never talked about it. Back then, you were a bear to live with, and we knew it had something to do with her but never got any details.”

“I told her that I’d been using her and only stayed with her because I pitied her,” I said simply.

Aurelia’s eyes got wide with horror, and she immediately pinched me on the underside of my arm, causing me to shout

as I jumped away from her. “You fucking asshole!”

“I didn’t mean it, I just ...”

“I don’t give a shit how you rationalized that, Dante. You should *never* treat a woman that way unless you want to guarantee that she’ll hate you for the ... You did it on purpose, didn’t you?”

I nodded. “I wanted her to live the best life, and I knew that would be impossible if she was with me.”

“Because of us,” Aurelia mumbled with tears in her eyes.

“No,” I argued as I turned my arm to see a bruise forming where she pinched me. “It’s already purple, Aurelia! Shit!”

“I always knew you’d given up your life to take care of us, but I didn’t know you’d given her up to take care of her too.”

I sighed and then admitted, “I wanted her to be happy and carefree like a young woman her age was supposed to be. If she’d stayed with me, she would have lost that time and had to grow up way too fast.”

“Like you did.”

“Mom always said I was an old soul,” I commented.

“Because she made you that way,” Aurelia whispered as she glanced over at Resa. She smiled at my daughter and then looked back up at me. “If she had been our mom first and Dad’s caretaker second, your life would be completely different.”

“We don’t know that,” I argued.

Aurelia scoffed, “I know that. If I hadn’t had Camila in my corner after you got addicted, my life would be so different now.”

“Sorry you had to see that, sweetheart.”

“I’m sorry Mom didn’t see it happening in time to get you some help. She didn’t see it when the boys followed down the same path either. Camila couldn’t fix them, but she was on me like white on rice. I couldn’t get shit past her.”

“Because she saw everything we did,” I said with a laugh.

“She answered the phone one evening, and it was a boy calling me. The next day, she showed up at school and checked me out to take me to the doctor for birth control. I swore to her I wasn’t going to do anything with him, that it was just a crush. She just pointed at her bump and glared at me.”

“She was pregnant with Matt then?”

“Very pregnant. She had him about two weeks later. Let me just say that the birth control was unnecessary after I watched her deliver our nephew,” Aurelia said with a dramatic shiver. “I’m still traumatized.”

I laughed as Aurelia gagged and shivered again. “It’s not that horrible. I was there during the first part of Resa’s birth. I got to see the top of Resa’s head right before ... well, yeah, you know.”

Aurelia frowned as she reached for my hand. She leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder with a sigh and stayed there as I remembered my wife.

Teresa and I had met about two months after I got out of prison. We’d become friends instantly and sought each other out to attend NA meetings. We’d occasionally grab a burger afterward if we weren’t feeling too raw and emotional.

After a few weeks, I asked her out on a date, and she said yes over the protests of both of our sponsors. We had a great time together and went out again the next evening and then the next and the next. Before long, we fell into bed together and then into love.

Teresa was great. She was sarcastic and funny, always quick with a smile or a few words of encouragement, and there for anyone who needed it, whether friend or foe. When I was preparing to bring Nica to live with me, Teresa helped me get her room set up and decorated the house. It was just natural for her to move in with us. Soon, we were planning our wedding, a small gathering in our friend’s backyard, and not long after that, we found out she was pregnant with Resa.

Teresa went to all the regular checkups and had an easy pregnancy according to the women around us who had children of their own. She never had morning sickness, her cravings weren't extreme, and she was the same cheerful woman I'd fallen in love with the entire time.

We'd been so excited about the baby that we were walking on air as we experienced all the milestones of her pregnancy together. We wanted to be surprised, so we decided not to find out the gender of the baby beforehand. She and I picked out names for boys and girls and argued about them good-naturedly all the time. We were still debating on the way to the hospital after her water broke.

Teresa's labor progressed just like we'd read it would in all of the pregnancy books. The doctors and nurses told her they wished all women were as pleasant and easygoing. It finally came time to push, and I held one of Teresa's legs while a nurse held the other. I told her over and over again how proud I was of her and that she was doing great. I had tears of joy running down my face at the first sight of our daughter's black curls.

But then, in an instant, everything went wrong. The monitors started screaming, and the nurses pushed me out of the way as the doctor worked to save the baby. I stood against the wall and watched the chaos unfold, terrified when a nurse climbed up on the bed and started chest compressions while the doctor pulled the baby out. As soon as he got her free, she was whisked away, and I was pushed outside into the hall. Confused and horror-stricken, I wasn't sure whether I should stay with my wife or go with my daughter.

In the end, I chose our little girl, knowing that's what her mother would want. As I watched the nurses clean her up with tears in their eyes, I knew that I'd lost my best friend, just like I'd already lost so much in life.

I promised myself I'd do whatever it took to give Nica and Resa a life that Teresa would approve of. I realized now that I hadn't fulfilled that promise by coming home to Marlboro and putting the girls through the drama and danger that enveloped

the entire house while we lived with my dad's erratic behavior.

But now, with the future ahead of us filled with the love and support of Jolie and the rest of the Donovans, I was sure I was on a path that Teresa would appreciate. I was ready to give the daughter Teresa had been so excited for as well as the one that she'd come to love as her own the best childhood possible in a nurturing, happy home surrounded by people who loved them.

"I'm going to marry Jolie Donovan, and she's going to help me raise my girls to be happy and carefree. I'm going to teach her little boy how to be strong and gentle and show him how a woman should be treated by the man she loves."

There were a few seconds of silence, and then Aurelia, her voice choked with emotion, said, "You're gonna do great, big brother."

"If I don't, those guys over there might use some of their fancy equipment to bury me somewhere."

"And I'll help."

"Are you ready for the big drawing?" I asked.

Aurelia sighed. "You know they absolutely hate you for this, don't you?"

I laughed as I leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, then pulled away from her to gather up my daughter to take her back into the shop. "I put my name on the list just like they do."

"Keeps you honest, huh?"

"You forget that the first time I tried cocaine was when I snorted it off a hubcap over there in the corner. I don't want anyone else to get the bright idea that I think that's okay."

"When I was young, I thought Vanna White had the coolest job. I wanted to stand up in front of the crowd in a beautiful gown while my adoring crowd waited for me to show them the letters so they could win *all* the money. But when you make me dig through the little scraps of paper in

that fishbowl and announce the winners of this episode of Pardo's Random Drug Test, I don't feel sexy or elegant at all."

"Ain't nothing sexy about a drug habit, sweetheart. I'm living proof of that."



JOLIE

When Cesar walked through the door Tuesday morning, he had the look of a man on a mission. The woman being dragged across the salon by him had her usual smile for me.

"Annabelle!" I shouted as I rushed around the partition that separated the shampoo area from the workstations. "It's so good to see you!"

I embraced my friend, and we stood with our arms around each other's waists as we greeted each other.

"You look fantastic!" Annabelle said with a grin. "I came up here to get the scoop because I knew it would take Cesar *hours* to get to the nitty gritty details when he told me tonight."

"Ugh, I know! He can make a three-minute story into a miniseries with all his added commentary. Makes me nuts!"

"You should live with the man," Annabelle teased. "I've been dealing with him for *years*."

"What are you doing?" I heard Avery ask after the bell over the door rang.

I glanced over and saw Cesar relaxed in the chair at his station, legs crossed with his head tilted to the side as he studied me and his wife.

"I'm wondering why the thought of them making out isn't completely disgusting to me."

"Because you have a penis and Hollywood has lied to men for ages about sleepovers and half-naked pillow fights," Avery

said simply. She sat down at her station and mimicked Cesar's pose before she concluded, "It would be kind of hot, though."

"We could leave the men here and run away together," Annabelle offered seductively.

I gasped as if that was the best idea ever and then put my hand on her cheek as I stared lovingly into her eyes. "Oh, Annabelle, you feel it too?"

"I always have, my love," Annabelle said as we leaned closer together. "I've wanted to do this for years."

"Holy shit," I heard Cesar whisper before he swallowed audibly.

"You'll pick your own laundry up off the floor?" I whispered, my voice raspy and suggestive.

Annabelle answered with the same breathless voice. "I'll never let it touch the floor in the first place, angel. Will you rinse your dishes?"

"Always. And then I'll put them in the dishwasher."

"But if it's already full?"

"I'll add detergent and run it."

"And then what?" Annabelle asked, practically panting.

"I'll unload it," I purred.

"Oh God," Annabelle sighed, her mouth inching closer to mine.

"I'll clean the kitchen after you cook."

"And I'll do the same thing for you, Jolie."

"I promise to never bitch when you order things online." I lifted my other hand and cupped Annabelle's face, tilting my head to go in for a kiss as I whispered, "And I'll always rinse the sink when I'm finished brushing my teeth."

"You say the sexiest things," Annabelle whispered as she closed her eyes and puckered her lips for a kiss.

"Fuck yeah," Cesar groaned.

Annabelle lost it first, and I couldn't hold in my laugh when her lips twitched and her shoulders started shaking. Within seconds, we were holding each other up as we laughed while Cesar cussed and grumbled about us teasing him.

"That's gonna go viral," I heard Avery say as she studied her phone. "It's like a 1-900-number sex chat for fed-up women everywhere."

"I hope you got laid this weekend and it was so subpar that you fell asleep before it was over," Cesar grumbled. "And you, woman, well ... we'll talk about this when I come home for lunch."

"I'll be at the airport picking up my mother," Annabelle told him with a grin.

"Oh God. Somebody shoot me," Cesar groaned as he let his head fall back. "Why does the universe hate me?"

"Because you don't rinse the sink after you brush your teeth *or* trim your beard," Annabelle retorted as she sat down in Rachel's chair. "Now tell me all about this Dante person."

I sighed and flopped into my own chair. "He's wonderful. While I cooked dinner last night, he picked up the house and unloaded the dishwasher."

"He didn't!" Annabelle whispered dramatically.

"And then ..." I leaned forward and smiled dreamily. "He took the laundry out of the dryer ... folded it ... and put it away."

"I don't like either one of you right now," Cesar said with a sniff before he walked toward the breakroom for his first cup of coffee.

"Did he really do all those things?" Annabelle asked conspiratorially. When I nodded, she sighed. "Did you reward him for a job well done?"

"Of course," I boasted. "Twice. The first time was in the laundry room, and the second was in bed before we went to sleep."

“Your standards are shockingly low,” Avery said as she messed with her phone. “I can’t imagine what either of you would do if a man cleaned the bathroom.”

“Unspeakable things,” Annabelle.

“Total filth. I’m talking about the kind of dirty fun you usually only see on paid websites. It would take him *days* to recover.”

Annabelle sighed dramatically. “And if he did it without being asked first? *Really* naughty things.”

“I can hear everything you’re saying, you know!” Cesar yelled.

“But is he going to go home and clean the bathroom? No,” Annabelle grumbled with an eye roll.

“Did I miss the memo declaring that today was Pick on Cesar Day?” Cesar asked as he came out of the breakroom with his favorite mug and another for his wife. He handed it to her and then bent to give her a quick kiss after she thanked him. He walked over and sat back down in his chair. “Now enough bullshit. Give us the scoop, Jolie. My day is fully booked, and I won’t have time to talk.”

Avery and I started laughing, and Cesar glared at us as he sipped his coffee.

Avery pointed out, “That’s all you do! Everything else is just something to keep your hands busy *while* you talk.”

“Did all of you sync up or something? Jeez.”

“Of all the ...”

Annabelle scowled. “He’ll pay for that one later, Avery. But I need the scoop since I have to leave in a few minutes. I’m going to the deli to get my mom’s favorite meats and cheeses for a charcuterie board. That’ll be our snack while we catch up after I get her settled in at our house.”

Cesar groaned again, and when I looked over, I saw that he was staring at the floor with a forlorn expression. Since Annabelle was all that was sweet and good, the fact that her

mother was a tyrant was confusing to everyone that met the two.

“How long is she staying this time?” Avery asked.

“Just a month,” Annabelle said with a wave of her hand. Cesar’s head snapped up, and he stared at his wife with wide eyes until finally she let her serious expression drop and laughed again. “Just kidding. She’s just here on a long layover. I’ll take her back to the airport for the last flight out, and my sister will pick her up in Dallas late tonight.”

Cesar’s shoulders dropped, and he let his head fall back with a sigh. “Thank you, God.”

“And if my husband is really careful not to set her off while she’s here, he’ll be rewarded generously, clean sink or not.”

Cesar lifted his head and grinned at his wife, his day made now with the promise of some good loving tonight.

“So Jolie, start talking before we’re interrupted and have to start our day,” Cesar ordered. “On a scale of 1 to 10, how good was the *reunion*, if you know what I mean.”

I laughed as Cesar wiggled his eyebrows, then gave them all the high points and didn’t leave out any of the good details. By the time I was finished, Helena, Rachel, and Javin had arrived, and everyone in the room was oohing and ahing over my exciting weekend.

“You forgot to tell them the best part,” Lara scolded from the doorway that led into her boutique. When I looked up at her, she grinned, “Mom spilled last night when I was there for dinner.”

“Spilled what?” Cesar asked, turning back to me. “Someone better start talking.”

“We’re going to get his dad’s house ready for sale, and he and the girls are moving in with me.”

The room exploded with cheers and questions with everyone talking over each other excitedly. Lara put her fingers up to her mouth and let out a shrill whistle. Everyone

in the room looked at her, and she grinned. “That’s not even the big news.”

“You’re not already pregnant are you?” Cesar asked.

“How did we have children together and you still ask questions like that?” Annabelle groaned.

“Well? What is it?” Javin asked excitedly.

“He told my dad that he never stopped loving me and wants to spend the rest of his life with me. *I’m getting married!*” I screamed as I leaned forward with a grin.

Cesar and Helena smiled, and Javin didn’t show his usual exuberant joy, but my cousins and Annabelle were just as excited as I was.

Lara announced, “I think I might already have the perfect dress!” Rachel, Annabelle, and Avery hurried over to see the dress, and my sister called out over her shoulder, “Come look, Jolie! It is *so* you!”

“Give me just a minute,” I said with a half-hearted smile as I watched her disappear into the boutique. I looked back at my friends, and my smile faded as I said, “You look like I just stole your lunch money.”

Cesar was the first to speak. “You’re happy, sweetheart, and I love that, but this is all really ... sudden.”

At the same time, Javin said, “Insane!” and Helena added, “Rushed.”

“I’m not getting married next weekend,” I asserted. “I thought you guys were all for me exploring things with Dante.”

“Exploring is different than committing, honey,” Helena said as she sat and crossed her legs. She sighed and then shook her head. Knowing my friend as well as I did, I knew she was trying to choose her words carefully so that she didn’t hurt my feelings. “It’s just that we remember what it was like for you when you were married to Tyler and ...”

“We worry,” Javin finished for her.

“I know Dante has his life together now, but what if he slips back into addiction? What then? You’ll be married to *another* man who puts his habits ahead of your needs, but this time you’ll have more children to help through the fallout.”

“You just reconnected and ...”

I interrupted Helena and reminded her, “He was my first love. I know our worlds are different now, but that love hasn’t ever faded. It’s changed ... I’ll admit that. My priorities have shifted. When we were together before, Dante was my *life*. Now Zeb is the center of my world and Dante’s girls will be too. But I want this, you guys. I want him ... forever.”

“During the margarita meltdown, you told us what he said to you. I can’t get past that,” Cesar admitted. “When I thought this was just a fling, I wrote all that off as teenage asshole drama. But the way he hurt you ... how easily he hurt you ... I just don’t know, Jolie.”

“If he did it once, then he can do it again. Right now, he needs you and not in a good way. He needs a mother for his kids and a place to live. He needs someone to help him, but what happens when he gets on his feet? Will he ...”

“There’s more to the story than any of us knew,” I interrupted. “He *planned* to hurt me badly enough that I’d never try to talk him out of breaking up with me. And ...” I stopped and shook my head, still trying to come to terms with the situation. “My dad encouraged him to do it that way.”

“Robert?” Javin gasped.

“We’re almost out of time. Check your planners,” I said as I spun my chair around and picked up my own. “When do we all have an opening today?”

They picked up their books and studied them, spitting out times and suggestions until we found a spot in our day where we could sit down and talk again.

“I know it’s going to kill the three of you to go all day without answers, but ...” The bell over the door chimed, and I saw Cesar’s first client of the day coming in with Javin’s client not far behind. “Just know that by the time I finish telling you

about *the rest* of my weekend, you're going to be just as in love with him as I am."

"We'll see," Cesar said as he put his planner down on his station and turned to greet his client.

I walked toward the boutique so I could see the dress Lara had for me and couldn't resist one more parting shot that would get their minds off my new romance and have them begging for details about something completely different.

"One more thing," I said as I paused in the doorway of the boutique. They looked over at me in question, and I called out, "Mike got stabbed."

I laughed as they instantly started sputtering questions and then went in search of my sister and the perfect wedding dress.

14.

“I bow to your excellence, your majesty.”

Dante

DANTE

“How long have you been at it?” I asked Camila as I walked into my parents’ bedroom.

Camila sniffed and used the tissue she was holding to dry her eyes. “I came back after I dropped Matt and Nica off at science camp.”

She was sitting on the floor beside the bed with stacks of albums around her and a shoebox full of photos in her lap. She picked one up and showed it to me before she sniffed again.

“That was your ... Shit. How many candles are on that cake?”

“Sixteen. Look at how happy we were.”

“We were so young. Look at Anthony’s haircut. That’s blackmail material right there.”

“Everything changed just a few months after that. I remember the ambulance sirens waking me up, and I ran outside barefoot and wearing Mom’s robe that I grabbed off the back of the bathroom door. I didn’t realize my feet were almost numb from standing on the cold garage floor until I tried to run back inside to get dressed so I could follow the ambulance to the hospital.”

“Fuck, that was a horrible day,” I mumbled as I reached for the stack of pictures. “What are we gonna do with all this stuff?”

“I talked to one of the ladies at work who used to work at a nursing home. She said it would be comforting to Dad to have some of his furniture and personal effects in his room, so I

thought I'd go through this stuff and get some things together for him."

I held up another photo, and Camila smiled as she studied it for a second before she looked around the room. "Does it feel like we're mourning Dad to you?"

"We lost him the day of the accident. The man that took his place isn't the same one who helped raise us. I think we've all been mourning him for years, but now that things are changing, it's more intense."

Camila sniffed once more and then shook her head before she pushed her shoulders back and blew out a breath. "Okay. Enough sad stuff. Let's make a plan and move forward."

"It's not a bad thing to let someone else take the reins while you watch after yourself, Cam," I chided.

She smiled but it didn't reach her eyes. "Okay. You first."

"You're such a little shit."

"Shut up and find me some boxes for these albums. I could spend days looking through everything and picking and choosing what to keep and what to let go. Instead, since you and the girls have had a change in plans, I'm going to use that space above the garage for storage. We'll put stuff like this up there and then go through it when our world isn't in such a state of chaos."

"So what you're saying is that years from now, when we're all dead and gone, our kids are going to have to clean the apartment out."

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

"Not furniture and stuff, just things like this?" I asked as I motioned toward the photo albums. "Maybe some special trinkets?"

"We'll make a box for each of us with special mementos and store these pictures and albums in some airtight tubs. We can go through them on special occasions or when we just need to revisit the good times."

“Sounds good to me.” I headed out of the bedroom to fetch the boxes as Camila requested, and just to be an ass, I called out over my shoulder, “Just because you have one good idea doesn’t mean you’re not still a shit.”

“Someday when you have *one* good idea, you’ll still be an ass.”



“Are you ready to tackle this craziness?” I asked my daughter as we walked down the hall together.

“Are you?”

I sighed as I walked into her room and got a good look at the chaos. “How does a girl who is small enough to fit in my pocket have so much stuff?”

“In my defense, I don’t have a job and can’t buy my own stuff, so this is really all your fault.”

“We haven’t even been here two years! How ... Where ... Do you have a portal to another world where you go to explore and bring back ...” I picked up a basket and asked, “Who needs this many hair brushes? Do you have one for each strand on your head?”

Nica laughed before she shrugged and said, “Maybe.”

“And this! When did you start painting?” I asked as I studied a row of jars holding brushes of all sizes. There were at least two dozen, and I couldn’t imagine why one person would need that many of anything. “Are you going to paint a mural? What are all these brushes for?”

“They’re makeup brushes, Dad.”

“What’s this?” I asked as I nudged a jar with my finger. “No food or drinks in your bedroom, remember?”

“That’s my brush cleaner, Dad. I put them on this and then spin them in the water to clean them and ...”

“What’s wrong with the sink?”

“You have no idea what it takes to be this beautiful,” Nica huffed, rolling her eyes as she batted my hand away from her desk and nudged me toward the door.

“It doesn’t take shit for you to be beautiful! You look like a movie star without any makeup at all,” I protested as I grudgingly walked away from the desk and sat on the edge of the bed. “Where are you getting all this stuff?”

“Are you going to help me pack or what?” Nica asked.

“I say we torch the place and start fresh.”

“Haven’t we already done that a few times?”

“I’ve done a lot of things in my life, babe, but I’ve never committed arson.”

“No. I mean start fresh. I moved with you and Teresa to a new town for a clean slate, then we moved here and that was a step backward with grandpa’s condition. But we’re moving in with Jolie now, and I think that’s the best fresh start we’ve ever had.”

“You know, when we talked about moving in over the garage, you took it pretty well. I assure you that if I didn’t think moving in with Jolie and Zeb was a good idea, we’d be carrying boxes across the alley right now. What I didn’t consider was your feelings. I’m sorry about that.”

“If Jolie was a bad person, you wouldn’t let her be around us, Dad. I like her place too. There’s always someone to talk to or something to do, and you don’t even have to lock your doors. It’s like a giant house full of people who are all really nice.”

“I know it’s been hard on you living with Grandpa, Nica, and I’m sorry it’s lasted as long as it has.”

“It’s time for a new beginning, Dad. I’m going to like it there, and it’s going to be good for Resa to grow up in a home like that. She hasn’t learned how to hide on command, and living there, she won’t ever have to learn that.”

“How to hide? You mean from Grandpa?”

“Yeah. It hasn’t happened since we moved back, but I remember having to hide when I was little.”

“I’m so sorry I wasn’t here for you, Nica,” I whispered as I pulled her into my arms.

“You’ve told me that a bunch of times already, Dad, and I promise it’s okay. You’re here now and not going anywhere. And it’s gonna be cool to have Colbie and Quinlee around all the time. Jolie’s sisters and her mom are really nice too.”

“And you’re okay moving into her apartment?”

“I am,” Nica said simply. “I think ... I feel like ... I hope we’ll get to stay there. Permanently. I really want that.”

I felt like shit, realizing that my daughter yearned for some stability and knowing I’d let her down. But I knew that Jolie and her family would draw Nica in and make her forget what life was like before she had them. I know that when I was part of them before, I’d taken having all of those people I could count on for granted. Now I’d hold on with everything I had to make sure my kids got to experience that too.

“I have a thing, Dad,” Nica said uncomfortably.

“A thing?”

“Zeb’s gonna be my brother now, right?”

“Yeah. I’m going to marry Jolie someday, and he’s gonna be one of my kids just like you’ll be hers.”

“If that’s the case, then you’ve got some work to do.”

“Oh really? Is Zeb not okay with ...”

“He’s stoked. It’s not that at all. But it will be your job to protect him like you protect us, right?”

“Of course.”

“He’s got another family that makes him uncomfortable, and they make Jolie cry when she sees them. Did you know that?”

“I’m sure that’s his dad’s family. Jolie and I haven’t really discussed them, I just know that she has to take Zeb to see

them every other weekend.”

“He said they’re mean. I told him I’d see if you could help.”

“As proud as it makes me to know you have that much faith in me, I’m not sure there’s anything I can do, sweetheart.”

“Will you try?”

“Of course. I’ll talk to Jolie and see what I can do to make it better. As a big sister, I guess you’ll ...”

“I’ve already told him that when he comes home after the next visit, I’ll hang out and watch a movie with him. He’s still deciding which one he wants to watch, but I’m pushing for a little wizardry, if you know what I mean.”

I couldn’t hold back the sigh of relief after hearing she’d found another victim to torture with her wizard movie marathons. “That’s good, Nica. I hope he’s interested.”

“I think I’m going to try and convince him to be Harry for Halloween. I want to be Hermione, and I think Resa would make a perfect Dobbie.”

“Good grief.”

“The whole family could dress up! We could have a new theme every year. You could be ... hmm ... Oh! We could do a different house every year! If we ...”

“This is Jolie territory, sweetheart. Why don’t you pack up all this ... stuff while you think about it, and then you can talk to her about it later?”

“Okay. I’ll write down my ideas. Maybe Colbie and Quinlee can do it with us! That would be *awesome!*”

“Try to downsize while you’re packing, okay?”

“There’s a lot of stuff involved in being a woman, Dad. You wouldn’t understand. You own a comb. Like, really, that’s all. There’s way more involved here.”

“Okay, okay, I get it. I’m a caveman. Pack your stuff, girl. You’re making my skin itch and my hair fall out just

looking at all this crap.”

“Then you won’t even need the comb, will you?”

“Your sass level is here,” I said as I put my hand even with my nose. I moved my finger and thumb close together and squinted at her through the gap as I said, “I need it here.”

“You’re so dramatic,” Nica said, rolling her eyes and pushing me toward the door. “Go do something somewhere else, and I’ll take care of this.”

I pretended to resist and made her grunt and groan as she pushed me out of the room and then I grinned at her when she slammed the door in my face. With a laugh, I called out, “I love you, Nica!”

“Whatever, goob!” Nica retorted. Then, just loud enough for me to hear through the door, she said, “I love you too.”

I walked into the kitchen and was surprised to see Patrice Donovan sitting at the kitchen table with Aurelia.

“Patrice! I didn’t know you were coming over this afternoon.”

“I had an epiphany while I was driving back from an appointment and came straight over to talk to you.”

“An epiphany?”

“This house is paid for, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not going to sell the house, Dante.”

“Why not?”

“You’re going to become a landlord.”

“I don’t know the first thing about how to ...”

“Oh but I do,” Patrice said with a knowing smile. “I’ve already got my assistant drafting the lease agreement you’ll need. We’ll go over the fine print, and as soon as we do a few

upgrades to the house, we'll put out an ad. You'll have applications within 24 hours and someone ready to move in by the end of the month."

"I don't know, Patrice."

"Your father is in good health, right?"

"Mostly, yeah."

"He's my age, and I'd like to think I've at least got a good 20 years left in me. With the market how it is in this neighborhood, you'll make the same amount in eight years that you'd get for the sale, and you'll keep on making income throughout his life."

"I'm not much of a businessman, Patrice," I argued, unsure of her plan.

Patrice stared at me with a blank expression for a few seconds and then started laughing. "Says the man who kept a business afloat *while* he raised a family at 18. Oh, that's cute."

"She was showing me her calculations, and I think she's right," Aurelia told me. "That's *if* we find more cans in the yard."

"Okay. You're right."

"How much was in that first one?" Patrice asked. She looked over at Aurelia and explained, "They were going to count it after the kids went to bed."

"\$11,500."

Patrice gasped. "You're kidding."

"I tried to ask Dad about them when I went to see him this morning, but he wasn't having a good day."

Aurelia sighed. "He recognized Dante and had a meltdown."

"The nurses asked me to leave," I explained sadly. "Now that he's being taken care of, it might be better for me to just stay away for good."

Aurelia didn't disagree, and I found that telling. After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Patrice said, "Why don't you guys just let it play out. Maybe when Don gets settled into Horizons he might be a little more ... receptive."

"Maybe," I agreed with doubt in my voice. "Until then, we've got an excavation to plan."

"I've already got everything worked out," Patrice said as she flipped through the binder in front of her to a piece of graph paper with what looked like a map drawn on it. She slid it over to me and pointed with the tip of her pencil as she began, "We'll till these areas in preparation for uprooting the plants. Plants are Lake's specialty, and she's going to treat the soil with some sort of magical potion that will help the bushes thrive in their new locations around the sides and front of the house. They'll add value by giving the place more curb appeal, and the thorny bushes are a good deterrent for thieves and Peeping Toms," Patrice explained. "Lake has some other ideas for the new beds, but I didn't ask for any details."

"She'll make it beautiful, I'm sure."

Aurelia smiled, "I like that Mom's rose bushes won't just be destroyed in all this."

"Me too. I wondered if there was a way we could salvage them."

"They might not all make it, but Lake will do her best, I'm sure."

"And when are we going to do this?" I asked. "I'll have to see if Nica can watch Resa for me and ..."

"Lana and Clay will keep all the kids at their house for the evening," Patrice interrupted.

"That's a lot to ask. I'd hate to ..."

Patrice interrupted again, "Get in the way of my well-laid plans?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"When you take the boxes of clothes to the apartment this afternoon, you can leave the girls there with Lana and bring

Jolie back with you. The kids will trickle in as they get finished with work, and Robert is going to pick up dinner on his way over this evening. By the time he gets here, I think we'll have made quite a bit of progress."

"Jolie was right. Once you sink your teeth into something, you're all in."

"Robert has jokingly called me a general before. But with so many kids in our family, someone had to keep on top of things or it would have been chaos. That skill flowed over into my everyday life and just comes naturally now."

"I bow to your excellence, your majesty."

Patrice smiled at me as she reached over and patted my arm. "With flattery like that, you'll become my favorite in no time."

15.

“No matter what the question is, chocolate is always the answer.”

Jolie

JOLIE

“Zeb’s counselor agrees that this is adversely affecting Zeb’s mental health. He gets so agitated at just the thought of having to visit with them that I don’t feel comfortable forcing him to go. I don’t understand why the judge is so insistent on visitation,” Carmen, the caseworker assigned to supervise Tyler’s parents’ visitations, said before she blew out a long breath. “I just can’t figure it out.”

“He belongs to the same country club as the Franks and occasionally golfs with Bill,” I explained simply. “He doesn’t have Zeb’s best interests at heart at all. I was pleasantly surprised he appointed someone to go with us, but I don’t have any illusions that he’ll listen if you tell him this all needs to stop.”

“That’s a conflict of interest. Has your lawyer ...”

“He denied that would affect the case either way and threw out Kyla’s motion for a change of venue.”

“And she’s working to figure out another path?”

“Of course, but there’s really only so much she can do. I’ve written to Tyler over and over again asking for his help, but he’s not answering me. Even if he wasn’t behind bars, he wouldn’t do anything to change the situation. I’ve never known him to go against his parents.”

“That’s unfortunate.” Carmen sighed and closed the folder in front of her. “As it stands, there’s nothing we can do but keep up with the scheduled visitations. However, after talking to the counselor and seeing firsthand how Mr. and Mrs. Frank

act toward you and your son, I'm going to call an end to the visitation each time they say something toxic in front of Zeb."

I laughed as I leaned back in my chair and shook my head. "You think you can train them to behave."

"If they'd like to have any long-term and meaningful interactions with their grandson, then they will need to follow the rules I'll set at the beginning of this week's meeting."

"Oh, that's gonna go over like a lead balloon. I'd suggest recording the encounter so your department can use it as a learning tool on how to deal with narcissists. I'm going to be recording it myself for Kyla in case we ever need it."

"I don't think that's a bad idea at all," Carmen agreed. The door opened behind me and before I could turn around, Carmen greeted my son. "Hello, Zeb! It's good to see you again."

"Hi, Ms. Carmen," Zeb said cheerfully as he appeared beside my chair and leaned his head against my shoulder. I cupped his cheek as I rested my own on top of his head. "We got to draw pictures today."

"This is the one he's most proud of," Eloise, his therapist, said as she handed me a colorful drawing. "We discussed his emotions about this weekend's visit, and he also told me some exciting news about the changes going on at home."

I looked from Eloise's smiling face to the paper in my hand and felt my heart start to race. Zeb had drawn big clouds with the sun shining down on ... all of us.

"That's you, Mama. Then there's me, Resa, Nica, and Dante. I drew ..."

"I drew the picture," I corrected without even thinking about it.

"I *drew* us all together in our house. And in this one ..." Zeb paused as he pulled another piece of paper out from behind the first. "... you're kissing Dante because we got married to him and now he's my dad too."

I had a moment of terror when I realized how vested Zeb already was in my relationship with Dante. We had moved so fast without considering what would happen to our children if things didn't work out. I had been so excited to have Dante in my life that I hadn't considered a future without him.

"Mama, are you okay?" Zeb asked. "Why are you crying? Didn't I do a good job?"

"You did very well. It's beautiful, Zebbie," I whispered as I swiped at the tears on my cheeks.

"Hey, Zeb, let's go show Marlena your drawings. I bet she's got some candy hidden in her desk drawer, and if you smile and ask nicely, she'll share," Carmen said as she took Zeb's hand.

"But ..."

I smiled through my tears and whispered in his ear, "Smile really big and see if you can get a piece of candy for me too."

"I didn't mean to make you cry," Zeb whispered back.

"Have you ever cried because you're happy?"

Zeb scoffed, "Uh, no."

"It must be a mom thing."

"Must be," Zeb said as he reached for Carmen's hand. "I'll go get some candy while you get yourself together."

"Thanks, buddy," I said as he walked out.

She turned around and whispered, "Take your time," before she closed the door behind her.

"Is everything okay, Jolie?"

"Things are moving at the speed of light, and I was okay with that ... I *am* okay with that, but I had a moment of doubt when I saw that picture."

"I assumed you and ... Dante?" When I nodded she continued, "I assumed you and Dante had been dating for some time and was surprised Zeb hadn't mentioned it before."

“We were in love a long time ago and recently got reacquainted. He’s got two daughters that he adores, and they’re moving into my apartment as we speak.”

“And why does that scare you?”

“I haven’t seriously dated anyone since I divorced Tyler. I guess I never really thought I’d find someone to make a life with. It’s just been me and Zeb, and it hit me that now our two has become five almost overnight.”

“That’s a big change.”

“We haven’t even had an argument yet.”

“When you were together before, did you argue very often?”

I thought about it for a second and then answered, “Three times in a year and a half.”

“Did he do something then that makes you wonder how he’ll behave now?”

“Oh no,” I told her, and this time the laugh that followed was softer and less frantic as I let my mind drift back to when Dante and I were young and in love. “The biggest argument we had was because I did something dangerous and scared the hell out of him. He was so pissed, but he never even raised his voice.”

“So he’s not a yeller, at least that you know of.”

“He’s not,” I said firmly. “If you could see how he acts with his daughters, you’d probably give him a medal. Nica’s nearly a teenager, and she’s got some sass, believe me, but when she starts to get out of line, he reels her in with a firm tone and this look.”

“She’s not afraid of him at all?”

“Oh, gosh, no. And Resa is a typical 2-year old who’s into everything with the occasional tantrum thrown in for good measure. He handles it like a pro even though you can tell he’s ready to throw his hands up in defeat.”

“I have a 2-year-old. I get that.”

“It just struck me that I never even considered how this might affect Zeb.” I burst into tears and wailed, “I’m a horrible mother.”

“I’ve known the two of you for a few months now, and I can attest to the fact that you’re a wonderful parent to Zeb. If you treat Dante’s daughters the same way, you’ll be a wonderful stepparent.”

“But if we break up, it’s not just my heart that will be broken. The kids will have to deal with that too.”

“But if you stay together in a loving relationship, the kids will learn from that, don’t you think?”

“Like my parents. I’ve learned a lot from their relationship. I know that for sure.”

“Let’s look at worst case scenarios here. What would it take for you to end it with Dante?”

“I can’t imagine anything coming between us, but if I felt like it was best for Zeb, then I would end it.”

“From what little you’ve told me about Dante and all the praise I heard from your son during our session, I think *he* might be what’s best for Zeb.” Eloise leaned forward in her chair and took my hand. “Dating when you have children is hard, Jolie, but you’ve got to trust your instincts. I believe you’ve got your head in the right place about this, and it’s perfectly normal to worry. If you need to take a step back, talk to Dante. This might be a good litmus test for the future.”

I thought about what she’d said as she let go of my hand and grabbed a few tissues from the box on the desk before holding them out to me. “I don’t want to imagine my life without Dante in it.”

“Then I’d say you have your answer, wouldn’t you?”

“Thank you, Eloise.”

“Anytime you need someone to talk to, Jolie, I’m here for you, too, not just Zeb, okay?”

I nodded and sniffed again. “I’ll remember that.”

“Now let’s go see how much candy he’s charmed out of Marlana,” Eloise said as she stood up and smiled. “She keeps some really good chocolate hidden in her bottom drawer in case we need it. I think a piece or two might get us back on track.”

“You’re right. No matter what the question is, chocolate is always the answer.”



“Zeb told me you cried today,” Dante said as he looked over his shoulder to watch for traffic. After a car passed, he pulled out onto the street and looked at me. “Everything okay?”

“I’m okay now. I just had a few minutes of ... not panic, really, just doubt. Maybe that’s not the right word either.”

“In reference to what?”

“How fast we’re moving.”

“We can hold off for a while, Jolie. If that’s what you want to do, me and the girls can ...”

“No, I don’t want to wait. It just hit me that everything is changing, and I had a minor meltdown. You know how I am.”

“I do, and that’s why I’m saying we can pump the brakes. We’ll explain to the kids that we’re going to slow down and ...”

I put my hand on Dante’s arm and slid it down to take his hand as I interrupted, “No. This feels right, Dante. It would probably be a little weird if I didn’t feel a little nervous. This is a huge change not just for us, but the kids too. We’re going to learn how to be a family together. There will be plenty of bumps in the road, but we’ll worry about that when we get there.”

“Together.”

“Yes, together,” I agreed.

“I love you, Jolie, and we talked about this before. I’m an addict, and I always will be. I’m on the straight and narrow now, and as much as I’d love to promise you I’ll never slip, I can’t do that. Every day is one more day of sobriety, and I want to spend the rest of my life in the win column, but I ...”

“I promise that I’ll do whatever it takes to protect the kids first and help you second,” I assured him.

“I know you will. I haven’t talked to Nica about it yet because I know it’s too soon, but I’d like for you to legally adopt my girls. If I do fuck up, I know you’ll take care of them, and if they’re already yours on paper, that will make life much easier.”

“If she’s not okay with it, I’m sure there’s something that Kyla can draw up that will give you some security as far as they’re concerned.”

“We’ll shelve that discussion and come back to it in a few months when things are settled.”

“We’re doing this.”

“Are you saying that to reassure yourself or to reassure me?”

“There’s no reassurance about it. We. You and me. Are doing this.”

“Explain *this*.”

“Loving each other and spending the rest of our days together with our little family.”

“And your big family.”

“Yes.”

We pulled up to the stop sign across the street from Pardo’s Garage, and Dante studied my face for a second before he reached up and hooked his hand behind my neck. He pulled me toward him and laid a kiss on me that was so hot and intense, my toes curled as heat filled my belly.

Dante kept his hand on my neck as he pulled back just far enough to stare into my eyes.

“I love you, Jolie. I’m gonna love your boy as much as I love my daughters, and I’m gonna raise the kids we’ve got now and any more we’re blessed with by your side through the ups and downs, the good and bad.”

“I love you too.”

“I love you so much I can’t explain it in words. And I love you enough to wait if that’s what you want. I’m not gonna put up an argument because when I say I’m in this to make you happy, that starts right now. If it would make you feel better to take our time then that’s what we’ll do. If you’d rather me and the girls find a place for a while, we’ll do that. I’m here for you, babe.”

“I had some doubts, Dante, but what you just said reinforces that what we’re doing is right. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I want to start that today.”

“Good, because me and your brothers already put a shit ton of boxes in your apartment.”

“*Our* apartment.”

Dante grinned. “I like that.”

“I like *you*.”

“Are you ready to get dirty?”

“With you? Always,” I all but purred. The mood was broken when someone behind us honked.

Dante gave me another quick peck on the lips and then let me go so he could drive the short distance to his parents’ house. “As much as I’d rather turn this boat around and go back to *our* apartment for some naked alone time, I was talking about actual dirt. If it’s too much, you can sit on the porch and supervise.”

“Too much?”

Dante reached for my hand and lifted it up to kiss each of my fingertips. “My girl’s hands aren’t made for manual labor. You’ve got me for the heavy lifting now - and the digging too.”

As Dante parked behind the garage, I ran my fingers over his palm, feeling the callouses from years of hard work. “I’ll borrow some gloves from my sister, but I want in on the action. It’s not every day a person gets to dig for buried treasure.”

“If this doesn’t take too long, we could go home and play pirates while I plunder *your* treasure.”

“Honey, I’m sure you’re the only one around who can make an eye patch sexy.”

“Arrgh!” Dante growled, doing a horrible pirate impression.

I was still laughing as I slid out of the SUV. Lara opened the gate of the new fence my brothers had built on the Pardo property and called out, “It’s about time! Mom wouldn’t let us start without you two!”

I waited for Dante to join me, then took his hand and walked across the alley to my sister. We were almost there when he asked, “Your mom’s got this whole thing organized, huh?”

“Like a general going into battle,” Lara answered. “Hurry up! I’m excited. But I do have one request, oh, future brother-in-law of mine.”

“What’s that?” Dante asked

“Once we have a big pile of money, can I roll around in it? You always see that on television, and I think it would be awesome.”

“Honey, if we find enough money in the yard to make a pile, you feel free to roll around to your heart’s content. What I’m going to do with it after that is what worries me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I can’t exactly deposit it. That would open us up to questions. I’m going to have to hide it under the couch or something.”

“And then every time I come over to your place, I’ll be sitting on a big pile of money!” Lara said with a grin. “I like

that.”

“Alright, Scrooge McDuck,” I teased.

“You’re here!” Mom said from the doorway as we walked up the sidewalk. “Come in! Quick family meeting, and then we’ll get to work.”

“She is a general,” Dante whispered as he held the door for me and my sister.

“You have no idea.”

16.

“One thing you’ll find about everyone in this family, Dante, is that we might get old but we never really grow up.”

Patrice

DANTE

I felt like I was on stage somewhere with thousands of people watching my every move rather than shoveling dirt into a wheelbarrow in the backyard of the house where I grew up.

“Okay, the roots are clear,” Lake said from behind me. I stopped and left my foot on the shovel as Robert and Mark picked up the rose bush and set it into another wheelbarrow. Lake led them toward the gate and held it open as the bush was wheeled to the side of the house for replanting.

“Okay,” Patrice said, motioning toward the hole. “Boys, get in there and help him.”

Quinn and Wes stepped up beside me with shovels of their own, and we started digging. Wes had just stepped on his shovel when we heard a distinct thump, and all three of us stopped moving and stared at the ground.

After a few seconds of shocked silence, I dropped onto my knees and started moving dirt with my bare hands. I gasped when I realized he’d just hit a mason jar. I pulled it out of the dirt and held it with both hands as I stared at the bills inside.

“Holy shit. This is really happening,” I whispered in astonishment. It took some effort, but I finally got the lid off and reached into the jar. I pulled out a bill and read the series date on it and then looked up at Jolie. “It’s from 1982.”

“This is crazy,” Jolie murmured.

“How much is in there?” Lara asked.

“We’ll focus on that later when we’re not out in the open,” Patrice said. “Dante, seal it up and I’ll put it away. Everyone else, assigned stations.” Patrice clapped her hands twice, and it was like a starting gun. All of her kids and my sisters started moving. “Let’s get to work.”

“Are you okay, man?” Quinn asked as I handed the jar to Patrice. He held his hand out to help me up, and I took it. Once I was on my feet, I had to take a step back and shake my head. “I’m serious ... Are you okay?”

“Please pass out, please pass out,” I heard Mike say from somewhere behind me. I held my hand up and flipped Mike the bird over my shoulder and heard him and a few others laugh.

“I’ll admit, the earth was tilting there for a second,” I said as I leaned forward and rested my hands on my knees. “What the hell? This can’t be real.”

I felt Jolie’s hand rubbing up and down my back reassuringly. “There might not be ...”

“Found one!” I heard Max say from across the yard at the same time Mike shouted the same thing.

“Oh my God,” I mumbled as I started to get lightheaded.

“In through your nose and out through your mouth,” Jolie whispered as she stood in front of me. “Breathe with me, Dante. It’s going to be okay.”

I took a few deep breaths, following Jolie’s lead, and felt a little more steady.

“Okay?” I croaked right before my sister let out a shout from somewhere behind me. “This is so much better than just okay!”

Jolie was grinning at me when she asked, “How about fantastic? Excellent. Mind-blowing!”

“All of those,” I said with a smile as I wrapped my arms around her and picked her up. She squealed as I spun her around, and I heard our siblings laughing as they watched us. “You’re my lucky charm, Jolie!”

Once our initial excitement was over, we got back to work, digging up the next three rose bushes and finding five jars of money that we added to Patrice's growing collection. Patrice had consulted with Jolie's cousin, an accountant who graduated with Quinn, and he was going to meet us at Jolie's apartment when we were finished.

"You got it in my hair, asshole!" Lara shouted.

There was a thump, and then Quinn yelled, "What the hell, Lara?"

"Don't you dare!" Lara threatened.

"Oh, hell no," I heard Mike growl as I turned around to see what the commotion was about.

Lara and Quinn were covered in dirt. As I stared at them in shock, Mike shook himself like a dog and dirt flew from him, pelting James, Mark, and Wes. Kyla picked up a handful of dirt and threw it at Mike right before the shovel full of dirt Quinn aimed at Lara missed its mark and hit James square in the face.

James started spitting the dirt out of his mouth as he shoveled dirt up into the air so that it landed on the fighting brothers and sister, causing all of them to dive into the fray too. Within seconds the backyard was in chaos with clods of dirt flying everywhere. A spray of it hit Jolie in the face, and then she was in it, too, throwing a handful at Max right before he dumped a shovel full on Lara's head.

Lake, Patrice, and Robert were sitting on the top step of the porch, and I scurried through the melee to join them. I laughed when my sister Camila got a face full and then picked up a handful and sprinkled it onto Aurelia's head.

"Remember that time we took the kids on a ski trip, and they turned the resort into their own personal battle ground?" Robert asked as we watched the fight.

Patrice sighed. "They asked us to leave even though we had two more days booked."

"What did they do?" I asked.

“Quinn pushed James into a snow bank beside the ski trail, and he got stuck there. When he finally climbed out, it seemed like everything was okay until we went down the mountain on another pass and James pushed Quinn into one. Quinn didn’t go down easily and took Mike and Wes with him. After that, the war was on.”

“Skiing became a full-contact sport for the rest of the day,” Robert said through his laughter.

“My favorite part was when James attempted to take Jolie out by tackling her from behind, but she heard him coming and widened her stance. He slid right between her skis,” Patrice explained as she used her hands to show what had happened. “Rather than let him pass through, Jolie sat on his back and they slid down the mountain together until they crashed into Quinn, and all three crashed to the side.”

“The people at the resort didn’t understand that sometimes kids get rowdy?” I asked.

Robert shook his head. “That trip was less than 10 years ago, so there weren’t any *kids* involved.”

“Since the ski resort banned us, we went to a beach resort on our next trip,” Lake explained.

Patrice rolled her eyes and said, “We’re not allowed back there either.”

“The boys had it coming,” Lake mumbled.

“What happened?”

Lake glared as she looked out over the yard. “We all fell asleep tanning on the beach ...”

“Sleeping off their hangovers because they closed the bar down the night before,” Patrice interrupted.

Lake agreed with a grimace, “Man that was bad. So bad.”

“What did the guys do?”

“They got sunscreen and wrote on our backs while we were sleeping. For the next month, I had a *huge* dick and balls across my shoulders,” Lake said with a huff. “So childish.”

“The girls got them back, though. Jolie used the resort’s business center to print fliers with the guys’ pictures and advertised their hourly rates and sexual preferences,” Robert recalled with a smirk.

“We folded them up nicely and slipped one under the door of every hotel room,” Lake said proudly.

“And they put them up in every bathroom they went to for the next few days,” Patrice said with a tortured sigh. “Imagine my surprise when Robert and I went out for a romantic evening, and I went to the bathroom only to see my sons’ pictures lined up on the wall with more than half the tabs at the bottom ripped off where women had taken their phone numbers.”

“She brought them back to the hotel, and we tallied up who had the most hits and then ordered a plaque that said MVP - Most Valuable Prostitute.”

“Who won?”

Patrice sighed. “James.”

“The guys thought they were such studs because they had both women *and men* hitting on them right and left,” Robert said with a laugh. “They eventually had to turn their phones off because they were getting so many calls.”

“You got dirt in my mouth!” Jole shouted before she pushed Max down and jumped on top of him. “It’s *in my mouth!*”

“We’re going to have to hose them off before we leave, or they’re going to trail dirt everywhere,” Patrice said as we watched Jolie and Max wrestle. Lara had Wes in a headlock while Quinn and Mark rubbed dirt in his hair as Kyla snuck up behind James and put a handful of dirt down the back of his shorts. “That’s gonna chafe.”

“We don’t have to do shit because none of them are getting in our truck or going to our house,” Robert pointed out.

“Oh, the joys of parenting adults,” Patrice mused with a smile.

Wes escaped from Lara's grasp and went after her, causing her to let out a loud screech as she took off toward us.

"Nope!" Patrice shouted as she put her hand up to stop her daughter from coming any closer. "Keep it in the yard!"

Lara took a wide turn and hid behind Kyla who let out a scream when she saw Wes coming straight for her with dirt in both hands.

"I think we should get them back on track," Lake said with a grimace as she watched Wes put dirt in Kyla and Lara's hair.

Patrice let out a shrill whistle and all motion in the yard stopped as everyone looked her way. "Back to work! We're losing daylight, people!"

"How many containers do we have so far?" I asked as I looked toward the boxes behind Patrice.

"47," Patrice answered with a big smile.

"And the front yard and sides of the house are sporting some beautiful rose bushes. I have a crew scheduled to come over tomorrow to do some landscaping and add some other plants while another crew is back here installing the sprinkler system," Lake explained. "We'll get the sod put down the day after."

"Wow," I whispered.

"I think they've done all the digging they can. Dante, come help me get the tillers off the trailer so we can get started before it gets too late."

"The tillers?" I asked Robert.

"We're going to turn over all the dirt and level it out to make sure we haven't missed anything."

"How much money do you think we've found?" I asked Patrice as I stood up.

"You said your dad told you that the coffee can you got out of the garage didn't have quite enough in it to be buried yet, and that one had over eleven thousand in it. If we assume he buried them at fifteen thousand, then that means you have ... "

Patrice paused while she did the math. “Half a million dollars in cash.”

I felt lightheaded again and leaned forward to rest my hands on my knees. “Oh, holy shit.”

“He’s gonna fall!” I heard Mike yell from somewhere in the yard.

“Leave him alone, princess!” Jolie yelled back. I felt her walk up beside me and rest her hand on my back like she’d done earlier. “If he does fall out, at least *he’d* have a good reason, *Michael!*”

I straightened up as Robert started laughing, and when I looked at Jolie, I saw why. She was *covered* in dirt, from the top of her head to her sneakers. Out of habit, she reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear, dislodging some dirt that fell out of her hair and sprinkled across her face. She squeezed her eyes shut before she shook her head vigorously, causing dirt to scatter around her. She pulled the hem of her shirt up and wiped her mouth, before she looked up at me again. “Sorry. My brother’s a total diva. I’m not sure where he gets it.”

“From your mom,” Robert explained, then let out an ‘oof’ after Patrice poked him in the stomach.

Patrice studied her oldest daughter and then slowly shook her head. “You didn’t get the princess genes.”

I grinned as I took in Jolie’s state. “And to think, I was worried about you getting your hands dirty.”

“I can be a princess,” Jolie said primly before she took the water bottle out of my hand and unscrewed the lid. She swished some around her mouth for a second before she turned her head and spit. “Okay. You can kiss me now

I laughed as I pulled her into my arms. “I’m not sure how you can be so adorable covered in dirt, but you are.”

“It might be that he’s still giddy from hearing that number Mom threw out,” Lake suggested. “The man is obviously in shock.”

Jolie flipped her sister off and then tiptoed up to touch her lips to mine. “I love you, Dante. Rich or poor.”

“And I love you, Jolie, even when you’re ...” I leaned back and swiped my hand over my mouth to wipe off some dirt and then scowled when I felt some grit in my mouth. Jolie handed me the water bottle, and I took a swig before I spit it off to the side. “I just love you. Let’s leave it at that.”

“Come on, son. Leave the children to play in the yard while we get to work,” Robert said as he started down the sidewalk. When Quinn raised a handful of dirt, Robert growled, “Don’t get any bright ideas, boy. I’ll bury you in this yard and tell the girls you ran away.”

Quinn shrugged and threw the dirt anyway, and the fight was on again. Jolie slipped out of my arms and went to join the melee, and I laughed as I sat back down next to Lake.

“It’s just like when we were kids,” I said as I watched Jolie and Lara try to drag their dad down into the dirt with them while the guys tossed clod after clod of dirt at the trio.

“One thing you’ll find about everyone in this family, Dante, is that we might get old but we never really grow up.” I couldn’t resist anymore and jumped up to join the fun. Right before I tackled James, I heard Patrice say, “Looks like he’ll fit right in.”

Unfortunately, I ended up with a mouth full of dirt because I was still smiling when the Donovans attacked.

17.

“If I was a religious person, I’d have had to go to confession and admit I caught myself praying that she’d die.”

Jolie

DANTE

I was still towel drying my hair when I walked into the living room and found Jolie sitting at the bar with Harper Donovan and a woman I didn’t recognize.

Harper stood and smiled as he held out his hand. “Dante. It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s been a while,” I said as I smiled at Jolie’s cousin and shook his hand. He slapped me on the shoulder and then turned around and motioned toward the woman he’d been sitting next to. “This is our cousin, Tawny. She and I took over the firm a few years ago when Uncle Charlie decided to retire.”

“Oh! I remember you!” I said to Tawny as I shook her hand.

“I was sorry to hear about Ricky,” Tawny said with a sad smile. “And your mom. She was always great to me.”

“I forgot you two already knew each other,” Jolie said as I sat down beside her.

Tawny looked over at Harper and reminded him, “I dated Dante’s brother when we were in high school.”

“Ah, yes, the Marlboro Mustangs dating pool was never very big, was it?” Harper asked as he picked up a pencil and tapped it on the tablet in front of him. “So I hear you’ve come into some money, Dante.”

“I have. I’m not sure how much yet, though.”

“Good! You didn’t start without us!” Lana said as she and Lara walked into the apartment. “Clay’s passed out on the couch with all the kids camping out on the floor after their Toy Story marathon, so I’m at your service to count and sort.”

“And you know why I’m here,” Lara said as she walked over and lifted a mason jar out of one of the boxes the guys had helped me carry up. “I can still roll around on the money pile, right?”

I laughed at the look of disgust on Jolie’s face and laughed even harder when she asked, “Do you know what kind of germs are on money? You might as well lick the door handle in a truck stop bathroom.”

“That’s just nasty,” Tawny complained.

“Unless there’s some sort of alien microorganism that can withstand the apocalypse, that money’s probably the cleanest thing in this room, and we *know* how you are about a clean house,” Lara said smugly.

“How do you figure?” Lake said as she looked at the money in the jar she’d just picked up.

“It’s been in a sealed container for *years*. If there had been a germ on it, it would be dead by now.”

Tawny argued, “That can’t be right.”

“Google it, ho,” Lara said with a wave of her hand. “I’m rolling around on money, and I don’t care if I get stripper booty crack germs on me.”

“I always seem to walk in at the wrong time,” Kyla said with a grimace as she stopped a few feet inside the door.

Quinn came in right behind her and asked, “Why are we talking about butt cracks?”

“Your sister is certifiably insane,” Jolie told him.

“She’s not my sister when she’s acting crazy,” Quinn argued.

“That’s rude,” Lara snapped.

We walked in with a bucket of beer in each hand, and Mark followed behind him with two more. Both of the men were grinning at the argument they knew was brewing and started chuckling when Lake jumped into the mix.

“Maybe you’re the crazy one, Quinn,” Lake said as she nudged her brother out of her way rather than walking around him. She was holding a pint of ice cream and waving a spoon around as she glared at him. “You can’t say we’re crazy when you’re the one that made us that way.”

“I think you were all that way when Mom stole you from the zoo,” he deadpanned. “I said I wanted a puppy and what did I get? Three high-maintenance screech owls who haven’t shut up since you got here.”

“I’m pretty sure I asked for a cat,” Jolie added. “We got three drama queens instead.”

“I think you should complain to management,” I told her with a grin.

Jolie rolled her eyes and said, “I did. Multiple times. She refused to return them for store credit.”

“Eww!” Tawny said from her seat as she studied the phone in her hand. “Did you know that eyeglasses are a breeding ground for germs? They can live on the plastic parts for three days and on the lenses for five!”

“Yuck,” Lara said with a disgusted look on her face. “But there’s probably no germs on this money, is there?”

“Speaking of money,” Harper interrupted. “Everyone grab a jar, and let’s get started. We’ll sort the money by denomination, then go from there.”

“Yay!” Lake said as she carried two jars over to the bar. Lara followed her with two more, while I picked up the box closest to me and started unloading it onto the counter.

“Oh hell no,” Tawny whispered. “There can be as many as 1.2 million bacteria on a toothbrush.”

I glanced around the room and saw everyone looking disgusted at the thought. I couldn’t help but laugh at their

collective expressions.

“Put the phone down before Jolie starts dousing us with bleach,” Harper told his cousin. “I can see her twitching already.”

“An hour ago I was covered in dirt, Harper. I think I can resist.”

“So you’re telling me that after we sort through all this money, you’re not going to scour every surface in this kitchen with whatever toxic chemicals you happen to have on hand, then get up in the morning and do it all again.”

“Do you know what kind of germs ...”

“Found it!” Tawny yelled excitedly. “Paper money can carry more germs than a toilet, but other than the flu virus, which can live for up to 17 days, viruses and bacteria can only live on most surfaces for about 48 hours.”

“Dante,” Harper said from beside me. “You might think they’re having an off day, but I’m here to tell you that this is normal for them. Run now before they suck you into the vortex where there’s no escape.”

“Yep,” Mark agreed, “Save yourself, brother.”

“You forget that less than two hours ago, I watched you help hold down your best friend while his siblings tried to bury him in my parents’ backyard.”

“They sucked me in when I was too young to know I could fight back,” Mark said with a shrug. “I’m a lifer now.”

“Damn right you are,” Lake said as she grinned at him from across the bar.

Mark smiled as he walked around the bar to wrap his arms around Lake and rest them on her bump. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.”

I started opening jars and passing them out as I asked Harper, “Have you figured out how I’m going to explain all this cash?”

“There’s no need. Patrice mentioned that you needed a safe place to store it, and I’ve got the perfect solution. We have a walk-in vault at the office where you can keep it. Tawny and I are the only ones with access. I’ll keep a record of how much you have and your expenses. We will also take care of making sure that the assisted living facility is paid on time every month.”

“And I’ve found a way to invest the majority of it so it grows rather than sits in a vault collecting dust,” Tawny explained. “If you’ll come by the office tomorrow, I’ll go over your options and we can show you where we’ll keep the cash.”

“Good,” I said, relieved. “I’m okay now, but I’m not sure having easy access to this much money is a good idea, if you know what I mean.”

Everyone was focusing on the money in their hands as they sorted it into the piles Harper had started in the middle of the table, but I realized that Jolie’s attention was on me as she studied my face. She mouthed, “Are you okay?” When I nodded, she winked at me and looked back down.

“You know, with this much money, we could hire a hitman to get rid of Bill and Susan so you don’t have to take Zeb to meet with them on Saturday,” Lake suggested.

“Good plan,” Lana agreed. “How would we go about finding one, though?”

“I doubt they advertise,” Quinn said. “If they did, I might have hired one when we were having trouble with Karen.”

“I wonder how much it would cost,” Jolie pondered as she stared at the growing piles in front of her. “But I couldn’t do that. It’s immoral.”

“The way they treat you and Zeb is immoral,” Kyla argued. “Although, as your lawyer, I’d suggest that you not seek out a hitman.”

“Well, duh,” Wes said. “She’s not gonna tell you about it beforehand because she’ll want you to represent her when she gets caught.”

“She’s not gonna get caught,” Tawny argued. “I mean, really, a successful hitman can only be considered a success if he’s never caught.”

“I wonder if Louie knows someone,” Kyla muttered before she picked up her phone. She put it back down immediately and whispered, “Nope. Bad idea. Bad, bad, horrible idea.”

“They’re bad enough that *all* of you are considering hiring someone to off them?” I asked.

“When Zeb was 5, Susan convinced him he was fat and insisted he go on a diet,” Lake informed me.

Lana chimed in, “She took him to get his first haircut without Jolie’s permission, and when she brought him back, all of his curls were gone.”

“I thought Mom was gonna go on a killing spree over that one,” Quinn said with a laugh. “Dad said he had to hide her phone and car keys so she wouldn’t do something stupid.”

“Susan tells Jolie all the time that she’s the reason Tyler drank so much,” Wes explained.

“Yeah,” Jolie agreed. “She said that I drove him to drink and he wouldn’t be in prison if I’d been a better wife.”

“I almost lost it when she took Zeb to get a DNA test because he looks more like you than Tyler,” Mark chimed in. “What a bitch.”

“She pretty much called Jolie a whore to her face,” Lake said. “I want to punch that hag every time I see her.”

“God, so do I,” Kyla complained. “And Bill. Ugh. What a pompous asshole.”

“She tried to get my parents blacklisted at the country club,” Harper told the group. “Said they were immoral.”

“What a hateful woman,” I grumbled. “The hitman is looking better and better the more I learn.”

“And now, you’re gonna have to start dealing with them,” Lara pointed out.

“Oh, they’re gonna *love* Dante,” Mark said with a grin. “I went with Jolie to pick Zeb up one time, and Susan went apeshit over my tattoos. Said I was a criminal, and she was afraid for Zeb’s safety.”

“She got so mad that she choked on her own spit,” Jolie said with a laugh. “If I was a religious person, I’d have had to go to confession and admit I caught myself praying that she’d die.”

“I think it’s safe to say we all have at one time or another,” Lana admitted.

“One of these days, the moon is gonna align with Jupiter or some shit, and Mom’s gonna catch one of them in the crosswalk. We’ll end up visiting her in prison because you can’t pretend it was an accident if you back over them to make sure they’re dead.”

We all laughed along with Quinn, and then I had to ask, “So this is a constant thing with them?”

“They were horrible to Jolie when she and Tyler were married but then it amped up after the divorce,” Lake explained. “They tried to say that she was an unfit mother because she was on antidepressants for postpartum depression after he was born.”

“They tried to sue me for full custody, but the judge granted them Tyler’s visitation instead,” Jolie explained. “It all came to a head when Zeb came home with belt marks on his butt and legs.”

“That time, it was Dad that had to be restrained,” Wes added. “Hell, we were *all* ready to storm their house and beat the piss out of them, but Kyla reigned us in.”

“I got the authorities involved, and the judge didn’t have a choice but to change things to supervised visitation,” Kyla said. “We tried to get the visits terminated, but the family court judge is in their pocket. He only added the restriction because he *knew* he was on thin ice if he didn’t.”

“So even though they’re horrible, there’s nothing you can do about it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” Jolie said as she shook her head. She shrugged and said, “It’s either a hitman or Zeb’s gonna have to put up with them until he’s 18.”

“I think Tyler ended up the way he did because of how he was raised. He’s an only child to rich parents who think you can solve anything if you throw enough money at it,” Quinn explained. “Susan’s the worst, and now that she can’t hover over Tyler, she’s picked Zeb as her next target.”

“She’s not going to turn him into his father, that’s for damn sure,” Wes insisted.

“She won’t have the option,” Lana said firmly. “He’s got us in his corner, and we’ll fight tooth and nail to make sure he doesn’t turn out like that.”

“God, Zeb hates visiting with them,” Kyla said sadly. “He gets so upset at the thought that he almost makes himself sick.”

“It will start tomorrow evening before bed,” Jolie lamented. “He’ll realize he’s got to see them on Saturday and won’t sleep well. When he wakes up Saturday morning, he’ll be a holy terror and I can’t say I really blame him. Just the thought of having to sit there and listen to all the bullshit they spout makes my own stomach hurt.”

“Poor kid,” Harper and Tawny said at the same time.

“We try to do something fun on Saturday evenings after their scheduled visitation. Clay and I promised to take him to the arcade, and he and Marley have been making a plan of attack so they can pool their tickets and get some crappy toy that’s not worth nearly as much as we’re gonna spend on tokens.”

Quinn laughed and said, “You and Clay are gonna spend a hundred dollars and walk out of that place with two bouncy balls, spider rings, and some erasers that don’t work.”

“I know,” Lana said with a dramatic eye roll. “Isn’t that how it always ends up?”

“My Nica’s a shark. The last time I offered to take her to the arcade, she suggested that I take her shopping and spend

the money on something she actually wants. I took her up on it, and we went to the mall for an hour, then ordered a pizza and played *Call of Duty* until our hands started cramping.”

Quinn looked at me in awe and whispered, “That’s genius.”

“I am going to suggest that idea the next time the girls want to go to that pizza place,” Kyla said as she took the rubber band off another bundle of money.

“I hate eating there,” Lana said with an exaggerated shiver. “Their pizza is shit.”

“Good salad bar, though,” Lake added.

“This is the last jar,” Harper said as he unscrewed the lid.

As I unwrapped another bundle of cash, I stared at what we’d amassed on the table. Jolie, Wes, and Quinn started organizing one of the piles, and I watched in awe as the stack of hundred dollar bills steadily grew.

“Holy shit, that’s a lot of money,” I mumbled in shock.

“Looks like Don’s going to be just fine at Horizons after all,” Jolie said with a big smile.

“I trust that all of you will keep this between us,” Harper said, sounding very much like the business professional he’d become. There were agreements from all around the table before he hopped out of his chair and picked up a box that was sitting by the couch. “Now I know it’s not the same as rolling around in piles of money, but who wants to play with the money counting machine?”

Lara jumped up and down with her hand in the air, “Pick me! Pick me!”

I looked around the table at the people who were excited for me and what I could do for my dad and felt my heart swell. When I glanced over at Jolie, she mouthed, “I love you!” For the first time since I could remember, I felt at peace with my life.

Jolie Donovan was my lucky charm, and I was going to spend the rest of my life thanking God for bringing her back to

me.

18.

“I always knew you and Jolie would make a beautiful family.”

Don

JOLIE

I looked around the room and felt proud of the progress we'd made so far today. Mark was standing on a chair by the window with Lara assisting, holding the screws and tools he needed to hang the curtain rod we'd brought from Don and Maria's bedroom. Camila and Aurelia sat on the bed and sorted through snapshots to put in the plastic frames Mrs. Remmel had suggested we use, rather than frames with sharp corners and breakable glass. I could hear my dad in the hallway talking to some of the residents while he waited on my brothers to bring in the rest of the furniture they'd hauled over in the back of his truck.

Zeb was with Marley and Clay at the high school, probably throwing the football around with a few of Clay's new students before today's practice. Lake and Lana had taken Resa, Nica, and Quinn's girls on a shopping trip for summer clothes. From the pictures and videos I'd seen on social media, they were having a blast modeling outfits and pretending they were on a catwalk.

I heard my brothers' voices in the hall and moved out of the way as they rolled Don's dresser into the room on a furniture dolly with my dad not far behind.

“This dresser is heavier than a car,” James complained. “Did you unload it first?”

“Of course,” I scoffed. “Maybe you need to work out more, little brother.”

Wes and Max laughed as James flipped me off, and when I reached out to squeeze his bicep, he glared at me. Once they had the dresser in place, they went back out to the truck for the

bookshelves and boxes of clothes Dante's sisters had packed for their father.

"It looks like things are coming right along," Mrs. Remmel said as she breezed through the door. "I just spoke to my husband, and he said that Mr. Pardo and Dante are having a good visit, and today seems like a good day to get him moved over here."

"That's great!" I said, excited now.

In the last week, Dante had been to visit his dad twice a day, once before he opened the garage in the morning and again before he came home for dinner. The new medication that Dr. Remmel had prescribed for Don seemed to make him more lucid and less prone to violent outbursts, even though he still seemed to live in either the past or a world his mind had created.

Dante had happily told me about some of the conversations he'd had with his father, and when I asked Aurelia and Camila how their visits had gone, they were ecstatic with their father's progress. The Pardo siblings knew that moving Don into Horizons was the best way to go, but I sensed that they still felt guilty about not taking care of him themselves.

As for the family that Dante and I had created when we moved in together, we'd been adjusting to our new living arrangements and had spent the majority of the week unpacking. Nica loved her new bedroom. I'd spent hours decorating it with her along with a lot of help from Lana and my other sisters. Resa had been restless the first few nights, and Dante worried that she wasn't acclimating well. I'd tried all the usual tricks and then realized she was used to sleeping next to Dante's bed every night and probably missed his snoring. I got a white noise machine, and it worked so well that she hadn't made a peep since we started using it. Zeb was soaking up the attention Dante showed him, and they'd made plans for Zeb to accompany Dante to the garage a few days each week so he could get his hands dirty while they worked together.

Dante had experienced Zeb's mood swings that happened both before and after his visits with Bill and Susan and had weathered them like a champ. He'd laughed when Zeb and I described the look on their faces when Zeb told them about our new life with the Pardos in our home and jokingly suggested he come with us to the park for the next visitation.

Even Zeb knew that was a bad idea, but he'd encouraged it anyway until he finally admitted that he didn't want to have to listen to his grandmother freak out about all of Dante's tattoos.

"I've got some paperwork for Dante to fill out when they get here," Ms. Remmel continued. "I know that Mr. Pardo will have Dante and his sisters listed as emergency contacts, but I'd like to encourage him to add you and a few others in case we run into any problems."

"I'll get him to add my parents at least," I assured her. "My mom can find a person or solution for just about anything, so she'd be a lot of help."

"I like what you guys are doing with the room," Mrs. Remmel said as she walked closer to the bed so she could include Aurelia and Camila in our conversation. "It's got a very homey feel that I'm sure Mr. Pardo will appreciate as he adjusts to living here with us."

"We have all these pictures but can't decide which ones would be best to put up," Aurelia complained. "Some days, he recognizes everyone, but other days, it just confuses him."

"Let me go grab some stickers from my office that I have just for this instance. You can label each person in the photos so that if he's confused, one of us can help him or he can figure out who it is himself."

"That's a genius idea," Camila said in awe as she sifted through the stack of photos in her hand and started arranging them on the bed. "I love that!"

"I've got some extra frames in my office, too, if you need them. They're the safest bet when we decorate around here."

“Gotcha,” Aurelia said with a nod. “No nails, sharp corners, or glass.”

“The health and safety of our residents is our main concern.”

“Oh, I understand completely,” Aurelia assured her. “Believe me, we’ve all developed a fear of sharp objects in the last few years.”

Mrs. Remmel reached out and rested her hand on Aurelia’s shoulder as she gave her a calming smile. “That’s our worry now. You just come in and enjoy your time with your father and leave the rest to us.”

“I know this is the best thing for him,” Aurelia said as she fought back tears. Finally, she let go with a sob, “But why do I feel like I’m abandoning him?”

I had no idea what to say or do to help Aurelia but saw that Mrs. Remmel had it handled, having probably dealt with these same emotions with countless other families in her career. I let Aurelia and Camila have their space and walked over to the window to talk to Lara and Mark who were standing next to each other, studying something outside.

“What’s going on out there?”

“I was just thinking that he’s got one hell of a view,” Mark said without looking my way. “Trees, plants, lush grass, the works. Hell, there’s even a few rose bushes out there.”

“I think we’re done,” Lara said as she reached up and adjusted the fold of the curtains they’d just hung. “Can you think of anything else we can help with?”

“No,” I said as I looked around the room. “Once the guys get the rest of the stuff in here, I think we should go so Aurelia and Camila can have some time alone to unpack Don’s things.”

Lara glanced over my shoulder at Dante’s sisters and bit her lip. “I don’t know what to say that might help them.”

“I think helping them move is just about all we can do,” Mark said softly. “Come on, L3, let’s go find your sisters at

the store and drag them out. I promised the girls a snow cone and don't want to let them down."

"Oh, Nica and Resa are with them. I can pick them up and ..."

"They're girls," Mark said with an angry look. "You think I'm gonna leave them out?"

I smiled at his cranky expression and shook my head. "I should have known better, huh?"

"Duh," Lara said as she nudged me with her shoulder. "Oh, I almost forgot! I found the cutest outfit for Resa. I've got it at my place, so I'll bring it down sometime this evening."

"That sounds good. I'm going to go over and help in the salon until Dante gets here," I said as we walked toward my brothers who were stacking boxes of Don's things against the wall. "I need to catch up on the tea and see what I missed this week."

Once we'd said our goodbyes to Camila and Aurelia, I walked my siblings to the front of the building and then headed toward the salon. I knew Dante was having a difficult time just like his sisters, and I wanted to be nearby when he got here with Don, just in case he needed my support.

I greeted the residents I knew as I walked past them and smiled at the ones I didn't, wondering how Don would get used to being around so many people.

It seemed like everyone in Dante's family was working through major life changes. I was glad that I could be there to help him and the girls adjust. Just like I'd be there for him for the rest of our lives. After all, it wasn't often a person got a second chance at the love that slipped away. I was going to hold on as tight as I could.



DANTE

“Is your mom still at the garage?” Dad asked as he looked through the window at the courtyard of the complex. “I need to get out there and prune that bush. It’s starting to tilt to one side for some reason.”

“Do you like your room, Dad?” Aurelia asked.

“It’s not the best hotel I’ve ever stayed at, but it’s definitely not the worst either,” Dad mused as he looked around. He walked over to the wall where my sisters had hung a group of pictures and smiled. He reached up and put his hand on the picture of him and Mom standing on the front porch of our house and smiled softly as he ran his finger over her face. “I wish Maria could be here with me. I miss her so much.”

“We do too,” I said as I watched him study the other photos.

“Who is Matt?” Dad asked when he read the name on the sticker at the edge of my nephew’s school picture.

I saw Camila wince before she pasted a smile on and replied, “That’s my son, Dad.”

Dad turned around and glared at my sister. “I told you if you kept running around with that boy, he’d get you in trouble.”

Camila laughed. “As usual, you were right, but it all worked out in the end. I’m married now.”

“To him?”

“No!”

“Well, at least you were smart enough not to do that,” Dad grumbled. He touched Resa’s picture and tilted his head. “Who’s this one belong to?”

“That’s my youngest daughter, Resa,” I explained.

“I always knew you and Jolie would make a beautiful family,” Dad said with a smile as he walked over to the bed. “It’s about time for my show, so you kids go play. Your mom will be home shortly, and she’ll want all three of you washed up and at the table when dinner’s ready.”

“Yessir,” I said as I picked up the remote from the bedside table. “Do you need anything before we go?”

“Some peace and quiet,” Dad snapped as he took the remote out of my hand. “Get on outside and ride your skateboard, Dante. Take Ricky and Anthony with you.”

I looked over at Jolie who was leaning against the doorframe and gave her a tight smile as I waited for my sisters to gather up their bags so we could leave. Once we were in the hallway with the door shut behind us, I let out a sigh of relief.

“That went better than I expected,” Camila admitted.

Aurelia put her hand up to her mouth as tears filled her eyes. “Now we just leave him here?”

I pulled my sister into my arms and hugged her tightly and wasn’t surprised when Camila tugged on my arm and stepped into my embrace too. After a few minutes, the girls pulled away, and Aurelia wiped her eyes.

“I’m not going to know what to do with myself,” Aurelia said softly as she looked back toward Dad’s door.

“It’s going to be an adjustment for all of us,” I assured her. “We’ll get through it, though.”

“We always said we should take one of those painting classes at the college,” Camila suggested. “We could see if Amy wants to enroll with us.”

“That might be fun,” Aurelia agreed, but I could tell her heart wasn’t in it. “Jolie, would you like to take a class with us?”

“I’d love that,” Jolie readily accepted. “Just let me know the details.”

“We’re not off the hook yet. It might take him some time to adjust, so we’ll have to be ready to come up here if they call.”

Camila nodded. “Dante’s right. Let’s go to the house and putter around for a bit until I have to pick up Matt.”

“Okay,” Aurelia agreed with a sniff. “That sounds good.”

“One of the Donovan crews is there working on the gutters,” I reminded them. “Don’t lift anything heavy or try to slide shit around either. Either ask one of the men working there or wait for me and I’ll do it.”

“You do realize we’ve been taking care of ourselves for a long time, right?” Aurelia asked.

“Well, it’s my turn now. I’ve got some lost years to make up for, and I’ll be doing the heavy lifting from now on.”

“I love you, Dante,” Aurelia said before she gave me another hug. Camila waited until Aurelia had moved to give me another one too.

“Love y’all. I’ll call you if I hear anything from Horizons.”

As Aurelia and Camila walked toward their cars, I felt my shoulders droop with relief. I looked at my phone to check the time and told Jolie, “I need to ... go somewhere for a little bit.”

“I’ll come with you.”

I sighed and shook my head. “No. Not ... I feel like a meeting might help me chill out a little bit.”

“Then let’s go find a meeting,” Jolie said firmly as she walked toward my truck. “I’ll drive.”

“I don’t really want you to go in with me,” I explained honestly. “I just ... I don’t know. Maybe we should just go home.”

“No. This is what you need, and I’m here to help. I’ll drop you off, get myself a coffee, and read while I wait.”

“Are you sure?”

Jolie turned around and ran her hands up my chest before she wrapped them around my neck. “You’ve got your ways to decompress, and I’ve got mine.”

“Okay. And you’ve got something to read?”

“I’ve always got my tablet with me. I can dive into a book and get lost for five minutes or five hours. I’m good for however long it takes you to feel a little more balanced.”

“Have I told you today how perfect you are?”

“You have not but feel free to demonstrate how perfect you think I am when we get home later.”

“Right now, I’m not sure about a lot of things, but that is something I know I can handle.”

“I just downloaded a new book one of my sisters recommended. From what she said, you might not be able to handle me by the time I finish it.”

“I’ll look forward to the challenge.”

19.

“I might need to borrow some money for a hit man after all.”

Jolie

JOLIE

“How did Resa handle her first day of daycare?” Helena asked from her station.

I couldn’t help but smile. “She handled it better than Dante did, that’s for sure.”

“Annabelle did better than I did when our kids started daycare,” Cesar admitted. “Dante’s been with that baby day and night since she was born. I don’t blame him for being upset.”

“Oh, neither do I. The look on his face when he put her down and she ran off without a backward glance was heartbreaking. Then he wanted to sit outside in the truck for an hour just to make sure he was close in case she needed him. He was sure that she’d realize he was gone and lose it.”

“Did she?”

“No, and even though that’s awesome, poor Dante didn’t know what to think.”

“Oh, that’s sweet but sad at the same time,” Avery said with an exaggerated frown.

“Jolie, he’s going to be the exact same way when you have a baby of your own,” Helena said with a grin. “You won’t know what to do with yourself having a solid partner by your side every step of the way.”

“Oh, I don’t know about a baby.”

Javin tilted his head and studied my face. “You don’t want more now?”

“You’ve always wanted a houseful just like your parents,” Cesar reminded me. “Has that changed?”

“Maybe not a *houseful*, but I’ve always said I wanted four,” I clarified.

“There’s three between you now, so that leaves room for one more.”

I glanced up from my client’s hair and shrugged. “I don’t know. We haven’t even talked about that.”

“You guys have been moving pretty quickly, so that’s understandable. His dad’s only been living here for a week, and Dante and the girls just moved in a month ago,” Helena reminded me.

“Well, sweetheart, you’re not getting any younger, so you might want to talk about it soon,” Javin said honestly. “You don’t want to be those parents who are at their kid’s high school graduation with walkers and canes.”

“Hey! I’m only 33, asshole,” I snapped, causing the woman in my chair to laugh.

“Do the math. If you have a kid next year and they go to college and get a four-year degree, you’ll be eligible for AARP when the kid walks the stage. Dante’s older, isn’t he?”

“Just a year and a half or so.”

“And if you have a baby soon, it will grow up with Lake and Lana’s kids,” Avery added.

I looked at my client’s reflection and raised my eyebrows. “Do you hear them planning out my life? Is that normal?”

She laughed as did the other clients seated in our chairs.

“You’ve got to have someone prodding you in the right direction, Jolie.”

“Cesar’s right. What would you do without us?” Javin asked. “Oh goodness, look at that.”

I followed Javin’s gaze and saw Dante backing up his motorcycle against the curb in front of the shop. There was silence in the salon as we watched him get off the bike and

stretch his arms above his head causing his t-shirt to show skin above his belt.

“If you don’t have his babies, I will,” the middle-aged woman in Cesar’s chair mumbled.

Dante looked into the salon and smiled when he caught my eye which caused gasps and sighs to erupt around the room. He walked the length of the windows and then pulled open the front door and walked inside. He nodded uncomfortably at all the people watching him and came straight over to me for a quick kiss.

“Hey, baby,” Dante drawled. He looked around and smiled at the people I worked with and said, “Hey, guys. How’re things?”

“Stunning,” Javin purred.

“You’re good for my ego,” Dante said, not upset at all by my friend’s wide-eyed, appreciative perusal. “I thought I’d see if you had time for a quick lunch before I go to the garage.”

“Give me half an hour,” I told him. “You can sit right over there and be pretty while you wait.”

Dante laughed as he walked over and sat in one of the chairs against the wall. “I can do that.”

“Tell him to take his shirt off,” Javin whispered as he waved toward Dante.

I glanced over at Dante to see his reaction, and my eyes went wide as he reached up behind his head and pulled his t-shirt off.

“Sweet baby Jesus,” the woman in my chair gasped.

“If you bring in the living art full-time, you’ll have a line out the door,” Cesar’s client said as she studied Dante’s chest. “Good lord, if I were 30 years younger, I’d give you a run for your money, Jolie.”

Dante winked at the woman, and she blushed before she started fanning her face with her hand.

I put my hands on either side of my client's head to turn her back towards the mirror and met resistance. Instead of trying again, I turned the chair so she could watch Dante while I finished.

Dante, not bothered at all by people staring at him, leaned back and propped his ankle on his knee. He scratched right beneath his pec and then put his arm behind his head, flexing his abs as he grinned at me.

"You're a distraction," I told him as I shook my head.

Cesar, never one to mind his own business when it was easier to mind ours, said, "We were just discussing how long it would take for you to knock Jolie up."

Without missing a beat, Dante let his arm drop to his lap and said, "I'm doing my best."

"I have an IUD," I blurted out.

"Want me to google how to take it out?" Dante asked.

"That requires a doctor's appointment."

"I'll give you a ride over there if you want."

"Right now?"

"When you get done with your client."

"I think my hair looks fine as it is," my client said without even looking in the mirror as she touched the side of her head.

"Looks beautiful," Dante said with a wink. "Jolie, are you ready to go?"

I looked at him and practically screeched, "I have to make an appointment!" The woman in my chair lifted her phone out of her lap and tried to hand it to me. I pushed her hand back down and asked, "Don't you think we should discuss this?"

"Sure."

"Alone!"

"What for?" Dante asked. "Might as well do it here because we both know you're going to give them all the details tomorrow anyway."

“Valid point,” Cesar agreed. “Carry on.”

“Who’s your doctor?” my client asked as she fiddled with her phone.

“Meeks at Women’s Health,” I said absentmindedly.

“Got it!” the woman said right before the phone started ringing on speaker. She held it up again, and I took it from her with a sigh. Once I’d booked the appointment with the receptionist, I handed the phone back to her. “There you go. Now the rest is up to you.”

“I’ll get right on that,” Dante assured her with a grin.

“Dante!”

“You better make an honest man of me first, don’t you think?” Dante asked.

“Well ... What do ... Maybe we should ...”

“Nope, you already made the appointment,” Javin said firmly. “Now, give Uncle Javin a baby to play with, wedding ring or not.”

“Do you want the white poofy dress again?”

“No! I am *not* planning another big wedding.”

“Since she’s not wearing a big dress, can you get married shirtless?” Javin asked.

“Are you a boxers or briefs man?” the woman in Avery’s chair asked. I turned my head and stared at her, and she shrugged. “Let the man be comfortable during the ceremony.”

“Clothes are highly overrated,” Rachel’s client said cheerfully. “Are your legs tattooed too?”

Dante leaned forward as if he was about to stand up and strip, and I snapped, “Do *not* take your clothes off in my salon!”

“Customer service is important in this industry,” Javin argued.

“If the man wants to strip, let him strip,” the elderly lady in Helena’s chair said. She looked at Dante with a sweet smile

and said, “Honey, if you want to take your clothes off, you go right ahead.”

“Thank you ma’am, but I need to keep my girl happy. If she says no, that’s just how it is,” Dante said with a shrug.

All eyes turned to me, and I scowled at Dante. “Way to throw me under the bus!”

Dante laughed loudly, his head tilted back as the muscles in his stomach rippled. Helena helped her client out of the chair, and the woman walked over and patted Dante on the arm. “I’m here every Thursday if you’d like to come back and visit.”

Dante grinned and nodded. “I’ll keep that in mind, ma’am.”

“Why are you naked?” Lara asked from the doorway as Helena flopped onto her chair. “I can’t look at you like that. It’s not fair.”

“He’s not naked, just shirtless,” Javin said.

At the same time, I asked, “Why isn’t it fair?”

Lara leaned her head back. “The man’s my brother-in-law. The eye candy that’s married into this family is downright disturbing. We’ve got Clay in all his glory, and now Mark doesn’t look like Mark anymore because he’s all smiley and sexy, and here’s Dante with all those muscles and your name tattooed on his chest ...”

“My name isn’t tattooed on his chest,” I argued.

Lara dropped her head down and frowned at me, “I know how to read, Jolie.”

Dante pointed to one of the wisps of smoke that came from the flaming car on his hip. “It’s right here.”

“How do you not know that? You see the man naked all the time,” Lara pointed out.

I waved my hand in Dante’s direction and said, “That’s a lot to take in all at once. Excuse me if I haven’t studied him like a science experiment.”

“In her defense, she’s usually ... distracted when we’re that close and without clothes.”

Javin chuckled before he cheered, “Hell yeah, she is.”

“How did you not know?” Lara asked again.

“Mike saw it right away,” Dante told me.

“That’s what he meant when he said he knew something I didn’t!”

“What?”

I looked at my sister. “That day on the porch when I threatened to tattle about the helmet. He said he knew something about me ...”

“Oh I remember that!”

“When did you get that?” I asked Dante.

“It was my first tattoo. I got it about three months after we broke up.”

“You’ve had my name on you all these years?” I whispered.

Dante nodded.

I turned my chair around and looked at my client in the reflection of the mirror. “Are you happy with your hair today?” When she nodded, I smiled and said, “Okay then. If you don’t mind, we’ll just settle up the bill next time you’re here.”

“Go on then,” she said with a laugh, waving toward Dante. “I don’t blame you at all.”

“Are we going to lunch now?” Dante asked as he stood up.

“You!” I said as I pointed at him before I pointed at the ceiling and barked, “Upstairs. Now.”

There was widespread snickering as Dante grinned. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll be back in ...”

“Oh, girl, take your time!” Javin encouraged. “We got this.”

I snatched Dante’s shirt out of his hand and tossed it at Javin who let out an excited whoop before I grabbed Dante’s hand and dragged him toward the back of the salon where there was a door that led into the hallway and to the stairs that led to our apartments. Dante didn’t say a word as I power walked in front of him, his hand clutched tightly in mine.

Within just a minute, we were upstairs in the hallway. I walked right past my brother-in-law, Clay, without a word and heard him laughing as Dante shut the apartment door behind him.

I was on him in the next second, my arms around his neck as our mouths met in a passionate kiss. Dante spun us around so that my back was to the door and then dropped down to his knees in front of me. He slid his hands underneath the long summer dress I was wearing and hooked his fingers into the sides of my panties before he tugged them down my legs. He lifted my left leg up over his shoulder and had his mouth on me within the next second. I let out a shout when he pushed two fingers deep inside.

“Oh God,” I whispered as Dante worked at me with his tongue. “I need you, Dante. Please.”

As he stood up, he let my leg fall down his arm until he hooked his elbow under my knee. With one hard thrust, he was deep inside me, and I couldn’t help the moan that escaped. The noise of our bodies coming together filled the living room and somehow made what we were doing even hotter.

“I’m so close,” I whispered as Dante started to slow down. “Keep going.”

“Hurry,” Dante hissed before he slammed his cock into me and held it there. He ground his body against mine, touching a spot inside me I’d never felt before as he rubbed against my clit. He kept at it for a few seconds until I exploded, and then he let out a roar as his cock started twitching deep inside me. We stayed locked together for a minute as we tried to catch our

breath until Dante finally whispered, “You need to wear dresses like this every day. No panties, though.”

I laughed softly, and he groaned when my muscles squeezed his softening cock. “We’re not even married yet, and you’re already trying to boss me around.”

“Let’s get married tomorrow.”

“How about if we get married a year from today instead?”

“A year?”

“Just in case you get cold feet.”

“I’m not going to ever have that problem,” Dante said as he slowly lowered my leg and let his cock slip free. “Are you?”

“I can’t think of anything that would stop me from marrying you.” I thought about it for a second, then added, “Okay, there are one or two things, but I’d probably say fuck it and marry you anyway.”

Dante tugged on my hand and pulled me toward the bathroom so we could clean up as he said, “Falling off the wagon is one of those things, I’m sure. What are the others?”

“That’s probably it, but if you got help and I knew you were serious about it, I’d still marry you.”

Dante turned the faucet on and soaked a washcloth. Once he had it wrung out, he handed it to me and then soaped up his hands. He asked, “Did you talk to Kyla about the girls?”

“She’s drawing up the paperwork for us. She’s going to do the power of attorney thing for the kids and draw up a will for each of us too.”

“That’s good,” Dante agreed as he leaned against the vanity while I tossed the washcloth in the hamper. Once I was finished washing my hands, he pulled me into his arms. “If anything happens to me, I want someone from your family in charge of the money to take care of my dad.”

“Why not one of your sisters?”

Dante shrugged and looked over my shoulder as he gathered his thoughts. He explained, "When Ricky gets out, he might not stay out. The odds are low."

"You did it."

"Still, looking at the percentage of drug users who fall back into the life and end up *back* in prison, the odds aren't in his favor. The girls might want to use some of the money to help him, and that's not what it's for. It's Dad's money, and it's for his care. I know he wouldn't use any of it on something we did to ourselves."

"Are you sure? I don't know if you're right about that. He loved you guys fiercely," I argued.

"He has ... had no compassion for someone who made the same mistakes over and over again. He needs to be taken care of - not me or Ricky or even the girls. We can make our own way. He can't do that, so the money needs to stay in a fund for his care. No exceptions."

"Okay. Who do you want me to talk to?"

"I think Harper would be the best option. If he won't do it, maybe Mark?"

"Mark or Harper? Really? Why those two?"

"Neither one of them would bend if they knew what I wanted. Harper and Mark are outspoken enough to just tell whoever was begging for money to fuck off. I need someone like that in charge if something happens to me and I can't do it."

"Okay," I said as I stared into his eyes. "You seem agitated. Is something going on?"

"Zeb talked to me this morning when I was dropping him off at daycare," Dante said with a sigh. "He wants me to come with you guys this weekend to visit with his grandparents."

"I don't know if that's a good idea," I said truthfully as I considered how Bill and Susan would react.

"I get where you're coming from, babe, but you can't hide me from them forever. He's already told them about me, so

it's not like I'm a secret."

"It's not that, it's just that they're gonna be ugly to you, and I don't want Zeb to have to hear it."

"He wants me to come," Dante said simply. "How about we compromise? Resa and I will ride to the park with you and Zeb. I'll take her over to the playground while Zeb has his visit. When they leave, you can join us. Technically, I'll be there like Zeb asked, but I won't interfere with their time."

"That sounds ... okay," I agreed hesitantly. I knew that the second the Franks saw Dante, they would lose their ever-loving minds. "I'll call his case worker, Carmen, and let her know."

"That would be a good idea," Dante said before he leaned forward and kissed me on the end of the nose. "But that might open up a can of worms I'm not sure either of us are ready to face."

"What?"

"I've got a record, Jolie. Nothing violent, but there were several charges and I spent time in prison. That might be something they can use against you."

"You're right," I agreed as I leaned forward and let my forehead rest against his collarbone. "I might need to borrow some of that money for a hit man after all."

"Be honest with Carmen. Don't pull any punches. Give her my name and tell her to look me up. I'll go talk to her if she wants, and I'll even submit to random drug testing if that makes a difference."

"Surely she won't ..."

"I'll do whatever it takes to keep the peace for you and Zeb, babe."

"Okay," I whispered.

"I want to protect my family, and I'm willing to sacrifice whatever I have to so I can make sure you're all taken care of and happy."

“Thank you.”

“Love you, pretty girl.”

“I love you too.”

20.

“They might have the judge in their pocket, but they have no idea who I’ve got in mine.”

Dante

DANTE

“It’s okay, sweetheart. Don’t cry, baby,” I whispered as I held Resa close to my chest. “Zeb’s just having a bad day. It happens to all ...”

“Noooo! I’m not gonna talk to them! You can’t make me!” Zeb screamed from upstairs. Jolie was standing on the bottom step looking up at her son. I could tell how tense his outburst was making her.

“Zeb, baby, I know ...”

“I hate them, and I hate you!” Zeb yelled. I heard his footsteps pounding down the hallway, and then his bedroom door slammed shut.

“Goddammit,” Jolie hissed before she took a breath and started up the stairs.

“Jolie, babe, let me try,” I suggested as I walked across the living room. When I got to the bottom of the stairs, I squeezed her shoulder gently. “Hang out with Resa while I go talk to little man.”

“I hate this,” Jolie whispered with tears in her eyes.

“I know you do, pretty girl.” She smiled weakly and took Resa out of my arms.

“I’m sorry Zeb upset you, sweetheart,” Jolie cooed as Resa threw her arms around Jolie’s neck and laid her head down on her chest. “It’s okay, baby.”

“Give me a minute to talk to him, and then we’ll come down, okay?”

“Okay,” Jolie nodded. I smiled at her, and she sniffed back her tears before she gave me another watery smile. “Good luck. He’s a stubborn one.”

“Hmm, wonder where he gets that?”

Jolie laughed softly as I walked around her and started up the stairs. I was halfway up when I heard her say, “Let’s snuggle on the couch while Daddy talks to your big brother, okay?”

Big brother. Holy shit. I hadn’t ever thought of it that way, but Jolie was right. By blending our family, I’d given Zeb a big sister to love and Resa a big brother to look up to. And someday, when we had kids, there’d be others that looked up to all of them.

I thought about the appointment I’d accompanied Jolie to yesterday and smiled. The IUD was no more. We were going to let nature take its course. Jolie and I talked about it before the appointment and decided that we wouldn’t do anything specific to make sure she conceived, but we wouldn’t try and stop it either. The doctor seemed to think that at Jolie’s age, it might not be as easy to get pregnant as we thought but hadn’t ruled out the possibility before she’d given Jolie a clean bill of health and the all clear to try.

In a year, at our wedding, we might have a baby with us or at least on the way. If we didn’t, that was fine, too, but if we did, I knew I’d be over the moon with excitement just like Jolie would be.

Once I was upstairs, I tapped on Zeb’s door and called out, “Little man, it’s me. Can I come in?”

“No!”

“Well, that request was really just a formality,” I said as I turned the knob and let the door swing open. “I need to talk to you man to man, Zeb.”

“Why?” Zeb snapped.

“Because of that look on your face and the tone of your voice.” Zeb rolled his eyes but didn’t argue when I walked into his room and shut the door behind me. I sat on the edge of the bed beside him before I started, “I know this whole situation is shit, buddy, but yelling at your mom and telling her you hate her isn’t going to change anything. It’s just gonna

make her cry. You're both still going to have to go visit your grandparents even if you're upset."

"I don't want to go!"

"She doesn't want to either. Hell, I've never even met these people, and I don't wanna go."

"But you'll come with us?"

"I will. You know you've got to go no matter how upset you are or you wouldn't be so worried about whether or not I'm coming."

"They're so mean. They don't even like me."

I blew out a breath. "I'm sure they like you ..."

"They don't like my hair, my clothes, the way I talk, they think I'm fat ..."

"Jesus, I don't like these people," I mumbled. "Do *you* like your hair?"

"Yes."

"Do you like your clothes?"

"Yeah."

"That's all that matters then. If you like you, the rest of the world can piss off, and that includes your grandparents. As for how you talk, I'd kind of have to agree with them if you're as disrespectful to them as you were to your mom a few minutes ago."

"They're mean to her. I'm not going to be nice to someone who's mean to my mom!"

"Okay, you got me on that one," I conceded. "I'm not sure I could be nice to someone who upset my mom either."

"Exactly."

"You know what, though? I used to upset my mom all the time, but she loved me anyway. She wanted what was best for me even if I couldn't see it. I didn't think of her feelings when I made some of my decisions, and I regret that I hurt her, just

like you probably regret yelling at your mom and telling her you hate her.”

“It just came out. I didn’t mean it,” Zeb whispered.

“I know you didn’t, and so does she.” Zeb and I sat there in silence until I asked, “Have you ever been sick?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you have to take some nasty medicine to make you feel better?”

“Yeah.” Zeb nodded as he curled his lips and made a disgusted face. “It was gross.”

“But you did it. Even though you didn’t want to, you took the medicine. After a few minutes, the taste went away, and you didn’t think about it again until the next time you had to take it, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Look at today’s visit like nasty medicine. Get it over with and don’t think about it again until the next time you have to go.”

“I don’t like those people, Dante.”

“I’m trying to do the mature thing and figure out how to sugar coat it all and tell you that they love you even though they don’t know how to show it, but I bet you’ve heard that before, huh?”

“Yeah.”

I shook my head. “There’s really nothing I can say that can make it better. I’m sure they miss their son but treating you and your mom badly isn’t going to make him come back. All they’re doing is making it worse on you and missing out on what a great kid you are in the process.”

“My dad’s in prison. They said my mom got him sent there because she’s a bad person.”

“That’s just not true,” I argued. “I went to prison. Did you know that?” Zeb shrugged and then nodded. “It was no one’s fault but my own.”

“Then why do they say that about my mom?”

“The only reason they’d say that is because they’re assholes.” Zeb snickered and couldn’t help but smile when I explained, “The responsible adult in me says I shouldn’t tell you that, but we’re having a man-to-man chat, and I think it’s important that we’re honest with each other.”

“Will you be my dad now?”

“Is that what you want?”

“I think so. I’ve never really had one,” Zeb explained. “I mean, I guess I did, but I don’t remember it.”

“I was in prison when Nica was little, so she didn’t know me either. When I got out, I made sure that she understood I had never wanted to be away from her, but I’d made some bad decisions that I wouldn’t make again. Maybe your dad will do that too.”

“But right now, he’s not here and you *are*. You’re gonna live with us forever. Mom told me you’re going to get married and we’re gonna be a family.”

“That’s the plan.”

“So I want you to be my dad now. When ... that other man ... gets out of prison, maybe he and I can be friends since I’ll already have you.” I nodded slowly, and Zeb studied my face before he asked, “Will that be okay?”

“Zeb, my man, I think that sounds awesome,” I said as I rested my arm over his shoulders. He leaned into my side, and we sat like that for a minute before I said, “Now are we gonna do this or not?”

“I don’t want to.”

“It’s like taking medicine, remember? The sooner we get there, the sooner it will be over. Once it’s done, you’ll feel better, and then you don’t have to think about it for another two weeks. When it’s time for another dose, I’ll sit right here beside you while you psych yourself up again.”

“Okay.”

I squeezed him and then leaned down and kissed the top of his head. “I like your hair and the way you talk, and I think you’re a healthy boy who eats just enough vegetables to stay that way. I think your clothes are cool as hell, and you’re a great kid who’s fun to hang out with.”

“You’re pretty awesome, too, Dante.”

“I think you should go downstairs and apologize to your mom and promise you’ll never talk to her like that again.”

“Okay,” Zeb said as he stood up. He turned around and looked at me with a sad expression before he held his hand out toward me. I took it, and he grunted and groaned as I pretended to let him pull me up. When I was finally beside him, he kept holding my hand and asked, “You’ll really help me next time too?”

“Every time. As long as you need me, I’ll be right there beside you, bud.”

“Thanks, Dante.”

“Not a problem, son. That’s not a problem at all.”



JOLIE

I wasn’t sure what Dante said to Zeb, but the boy that came downstairs and apologized to me had an entirely different demeanor than the angry child I’d dealt with for the last few hours.

I had no idea why Zeb muttered ‘medicine’ every time Susan tried to get him to move closer to her side or Bill growled some veiled threat, but it seemed to help him stay calm and I wasn’t going to knock it. I could tell that even Carmen was impressed with Zeb’s restraint.

Bill and Susan, however, were oblivious to the gift they’d been given and kept pushing and pushing until I was ready to start screaming like Zeb usually did.

“You know that vile man your mother is shacking up with isn’t your father, don’t you, Zeb?” Susan asked.

“Mama, what does vile mean?”

I closed my eyes and sighed, but before I could come up with an explanation, Susan answered Zeb’s question in her usual bitter way. “It means that he’s a tattooed scumbag who’s a known criminal and is probably going to kill you in your sleep.”

“Okay, that’s enough,” Carmen snapped. “Control yourself, Ms. Frank, or I’ll call an end to today’s scheduled visit.”

“It’s all true. I had a friend look into his background after Zeb mentioned him last time. He’s been in prison. Did you know that?” Bill asked.

“I’m aware of Dante’s history,” Carmen answered.

Susan scoffed. “Look at him. He’s covered in tattoos, dressed like a vagrant, and that kid of his ...”

“Shut your fucking mouth, Susan,” I snarled.

“What did you say?” Bill roared.

I rubbed my forehead. “Okay, that was a little much. I’m sorry I snapped, but I’m not going to let your venom anywhere near that little girl. I don’t have a choice about you spewing your hate of me and now Dante to my son, but you’re not going to pull that baby into your bullshit.”

“He’s a known drug abuser, Jolie, and it’s telling that you think it’s okay to have him around my grandson.”

“Bill, if your son were here right now, you’d expect him to be sitting right next to Zeb, and he went to prison for things he did while under the influence of alcohol.”

“That’s not the same. Alcohol isn’t illegal. That man did *drugs*.”

“So did Tyler.”

“I’m glad you’re with that thug,” Susan said snidely. “Our lawyer said it’s going to make it easier to win custody of our

grandson because you can't keep your legs together."

"And we're done here," Carmen said as she stood abruptly. "Zeb, go over and hang out with Dante, alright?"

"We have 40 minutes left!" Bill yelled as he stood up too. He pointed at Carmen, and with a glare, he threatened, "I'll have your job before all this is over, woman. No one gets between me and what's mine, and that boy is my grandson."

"This meeting is finished," Carmen said calmly. "If you have a problem, you're more than welcome to call my superiors."

"Oh, our lawyer will be calling them Monday morning right before he goes to the courthouse to file for full custody. We'll get it, too, now that Jolie has moved a known criminal into that shithole apartment where she and my grandson live."

I couldn't even speak because my heart was racing so fast. This was my biggest fear, and the thought of the Franks getting custody of Zeb had just become a real threat. The fact that they had the judge in their pocket and I'd given them the ammunition to bring the custody case back to court terrified me.

"If you don't leave, I'm going to call the police," Carmen threatened.

"Call them!" Susan shrieked. "When they get here, they'll arrest that criminal. He's probably not supposed to be this close to a park anyway!"

Bill took a step closer to Carmen, and I saw her eyes widen. I grabbed my phone from the table and aimed it in their direction, glancing at the screen to make sure it was still recording.

"Listen, you uppity bitch, *no one* gets between me and my family!" Bill yelled as he poked Carmen in the chest. "I'll kill anyone that tries. My son's not here to protect his boy, so that's my job now."

Susan had the presence of mind to hop up and grab Bill's arm, but it was too late. He flattened his hand and shoved, causing Carmen to go flying backwards into the grass.

I jumped up from my seat as Carmen scrambled to her feet and looked toward the playground when I heard Zeb scream. Dante was running toward us, but I held my hand up and shook my head at him. I waved him away and yelled, “Dante, call 9-1-1! Zeb, take Resa to the truck and lock the doors!”

Dante came to a halt in the grass and pulled out his phone as he watched Carmen square off with Bill as Susan screamed at him to stop. I glanced down at my phone to make sure the melee was still recording and then looked up at Carmen when I saw her hand down at her side. She lifted it up a fraction and seemed to motion for me to stay away, so I stepped back a few feet and kept recording.

“Get in the car, Bill!” Susan screamed as she pulled her husband away. I could hear sirens in the distance, and when I looked back at Dante, I realized he was still on the phone. Past him, I could see Zeb lifting Resa into the truck before he got in himself and pulled the door shut behind him. “Bill, hurry! We need to go!”

“This isn’t over!” Bill yelled before he turned and glared at me. When he realized I was filming, his eyes narrowed into slits. He shook his wife off, causing her to stumble and fall, and started toward me with his hand raised.

“Don’t touch me, Bill!” I sensed movement behind me and knew Dante was there, but I shook my head. “Dante, stay back.”

Two police cruisers pulled up to the curb, and I felt Dante tense behind me.

“I’m Carmen Lopez from DCFS,” Carmen said as the officers jogged our way. “I need help. This man assaulted me and threatened my life.”

Bill was just a few feet away from me when he stopped and turned around to hiss, “This isn’t over, Jolie.”

“Oh, it’s so fucking over,” Dante said from behind me as he put his arm around my waist.

The next few minutes were a blur as the officers bent Bill over the picnic table and read him his rights. Susan was

hysterical, screaming about police brutality and making threats of her own.

“Dante, go sit with the kids, please,” I whispered over my shoulder. “I’ll be there in just a minute.”

“Keep recording. I sent a text, and someone’s gonna be here to take care of them any second now.”

Carmen walked and stood beside me as she took some deep breaths to calm herself.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“I’m not as young as I used to be, and bouncing on the grass hurts a little more than I remember.”

“Do you need to sit down?” Dante asked her.

“I’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t help. I didn’t know what to do,” I lamented.

“Getting between us would have made things even worse, Jolie. You did the right thing.”

“I’m still recording.”

Carmen nodded, and I looked back at my phone to make sure the video was still going and then glanced over at Susan who was on her knees with both hands over her mouth as tears rolled down her face. I thought about going to see if she needed my help but shook off the thought as quickly as it came.

She wouldn’t have stopped Bill from hurting me. She probably would have encouraged it.

“What’s going to happen now?” I asked Carmen.

She started to say something, but Susan wailed, “He didn’t mean to touch her. He’s been drinking and just lost his balance.”

Carmen turned and looked at me with her eyes wide and her mouth hanging open in shock. She leaned a little closer

and looked at the video on my screen and then put her hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Holy shit,” I heard Dante whisper close to my ear. Then, in a regular tone, he said, “The cavalry has arrived.”

I looked over my shoulder and saw Wes and Max standing next to my SUV. Wes had Zeb in his arms, and Max was holding Resa with his phone up to his ear. Dante’s phone rang, and I heard him say, “Take the kids in Jolie’s truck and leave the keys in yours. We’ll be home as soon as we can.”

I looked back at the scene in front of me and wondered how Bill and Susan were going to spin this to be my fault. Even though I had almost the entire incident on video, I knew that they had enough money and clout to keep Bill from seeing a single day of jail time for assaulting Carmen.

As an officer put Bill into the back of a patrol car, another walked over and helped Susan to her feet. Carmen said, “You can quit recording now, Jolie.”

I hit the button to stop the video and then slipped my phone into my pocket. “What’s going to happen now?”

“I’ll press charges against Mr. Frank for assault.”

“You know he’ll get out of it somehow, Carmen.”

“The video you have and the arrest that will be on his record will go far in helping make sure the court is able to make the fair and right decision going forward. I’ll be removed from your case, but rest assured that whoever takes over will have every detail of what’s transpired.”

“What about Susan?”

“I don’t know, Jolie,” Carmen said apologetically. “She didn’t physically do anything, so, as far as protocols go, this doesn’t affect their visitation schedule. Until we get the case in front of a judge ... and even after we do, there’s no guarantee that things will change.”

“Fuck,” I heard Dante whisper as he squeezed my hip.

“I’m going to call Eloise as soon as we’re done here. I think it would be a good idea for you to bring Zeb in to talk

things over with her as soon as possible.”

“Okay.”

“You two stay put while I talk to the officers. I’m sure they’ll have questions for you.”

“We’ll be here,” Dante assured Carmen before she walked off. As soon as she was a few feet away, Dante turned me around so that I was facing him. He wrapped his arms around me and hugged me tightly before he asked, “Are you okay, pretty girl?”

“I’m fine. He didn’t get to me.”

“Do you know how hard it was to stop when you told me to?”

“Thank you,” I said as I looked into his eyes. “I know it was hard, but the last thing we need is for you to get involved in a scuffle with Bill and end up in jail.”

“That’s the only reason I stopped.”

“I know.”

“I’m not going to let anyone hurt my family, Jolie.”

“There’s nothing we can do, Dante. Our hands are tied. They’re loaded and know all the judges in this town. Even with Carmen and her people behind us, we’re always going to have to deal with the Franks unless something drastic happens.”

“Maybe not,” Dante said menacingly. “They might have the judge in their pocket, but they have no idea who I’ve got in mine.”

21.

“There are too many ovaries in this room already.”

Zeb

JOLIE

“Dad!” I winced when Nica yelled from upstairs but decided to pick my battle when she finished with, “Answer your phone! Uncle Denny needs to talk to you!”

“Uncle Denny?” I asked as Dante pulled his phone from his pocket.

“Shit,” Dante muttered. “I guess Resa turned my ringer down when I let her play with my phone earlier.” He held the phone in front of his face as he pushed something on the screen. As the phone started ringing on speaker, he explained, “He’s a friend of mine I made when I first got out of prison. You’ll meet him someday, I’m sure.”

“Dante, my friend,” a man’s voice said through the phone. “Is Nica your personal secretary now or what?”

“No,” Dante said with a bark of laughter. “Resa was watching a video on my phone earlier, and I think she turned the ringer down.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear you aren’t avoiding me.”

“Never, man. You’re on speaker, by the way. Jolie’s sitting here with me, and our two youngest are not far away, if you know what I mean.”

“Gotcha. Hi there, Jolie.”

“Hi!” I chimed in.

“I’ll have to take a road trip and come meet the woman who’s stolen my friend’s heart.”

“You’re welcome anytime,” I assured him.

“Does she know where you met me, Dante?” Denny asked.

“I’m assuming you met him at the place he lived when he got out of prison,” I replied, interrupting whatever Dante was about to say. “And I’d still like for you to come visit.”

“How does she know I’m not a card-carrying psychopath?” Denny asked.

“Well, you are, so there’s that,” Dante teased.

I couldn’t help but laugh when the man on the phone started singing an old song by Puddle of Mudd and was shocked when Dante started singing the lyrics right along with him.

“You’re the man, Dante. No one else gets me like you.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Dante teased. “Did you just call to serenade my fiancée or ...”

“Fiancée? Well, look at you putting a ring on it. Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I said cheerfully. “Will you come to the wedding?”

“Hell yeah. I’ll be there with bells on. All the guys will. Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“I’ll get your address from Dante when we get all the details figured out.”

“I’ll hold you to that, sweetheart,” Denny said before his voice got more serious and he continued, “One of the guys told me what you were looking for, and I took care of it for you.”

“Awesome. Is that door still open if I need to use it again?”

“Sure is. Got a lifer in your corner, man. Can’t beat that when push comes to shove.”

I tilted my head and studied Dante’s smiling face as I tried to decode their cryptic conversation. He winked at me before he picked his phone up and walked toward the bedroom for

privacy, I assumed. I was still staring at the closed bedroom door when Lake waddled into my apartment.

“God, you look miserable,” I said with a grimace as she sat on a stool a few feet away.

“I’ve still got a month. I’m not sure I’m gonna make it,” Lake complained. She let out a whimper when she tried to lean forward to rest her head on her arms on the bar but couldn’t because her belly got in the way. She sighed with her head hanging forward. “Mark’s at work, and I’m bored. I thought I should be nesting by now.”

“You’re not?”

“No. Is that weird?”

“Everything about your pregnancy has been weird, babe,” I said as I hopped off the stool and went to the refrigerator. “Have you eaten? I’ve got leftovers.”

“Mark and I had dinner before he went to work.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean you’re not hungry again. That giant baby is pushing everything up, so your stomach’s not able to hold very much at once anymore.”

“I feel like a whale,” Lake complained.

“Ransome brought me a cheesecake to pay for his haircut today,” I told her with a grin. “I know you love ...”

“Okay, one piece,” Lake interrupted. “Did you tell Lana you’ve got cheesecake?”

“Not yet.”

“She’ll kill us all if we don’t share. She was complaining of cramps earlier, so I bet she’d appreciate a slice too,” Lake hinted.

I laughed as I set the cheesecake on the counter and then walked toward the intercom on the wall. I announced, “Attention Donovan women. I have cheesecake from Ransome’s bakery if you’re interested.”

“Did you feel that?” Lake asked as I walked back into the kitchen to grab plates and forks.

“What?”

“Every woman in the building perked up and looked at the intercom at the same time.”

I was still laughing when Kyla, Quinlee, and Colbie appeared in the doorway. Kyla walked toward us as her daughters headed toward the stairs. “I’m here for cheesecake but they’re here for Nica.”

“Can I go see Uncle Wes?” Zeb asked from the couch. “There are too many ovaries in this room already.”

“Zeb Frank!” I snapped. “Where the hell did you hear that?”

Zeb leaned back so he was looking at me upside down over the arm of the couch. “What’s an ovary?”

“If you don’t know what a word means, then you shouldn’t repeat it.”

“Yes, ma’am. Can I go see Wes?”

“Make sure there aren’t any shoes in the hall first,” I ordered. Zeb hopped off the couch and ran to the door. He took a peek into the hall and then leaned back and shot me a thumbs up before he disappeared.

“Whoa,” I heard Lana say right before she walked through the door. “I almost got flattened by a freight train in a Spider-Man shirt. Where’s he headed?”

“He said there were too many ovaries in here, so he’s going over to hang out with Wes and Max,” Lake explained before she took a huge bite of the cheesecake slice I’d just slid in front of her. She let out a long moan and then mumbled, “It’s like heaven in my mouth.”

Kyla swallowed a bite and asked, “How is that man single?”

“Have you ever had a conversation with him?” Lana asked as she sat between Lake and Kyla.

“No. I’ve seen him at the bakery and family functions, but I’ve never sat down and had a conversation with him. I

usually just talk to Holly when I go in for coffee.”

“There’s a reason she’s in charge of the front and Ransome rarely comes out of the kitchen,” I explained. “He’s not exactly a people person.”

“But the man can bake,” Lana said before she put a bite in her mouth and closed her eyes. “If he wasn’t my cousin and I didn’t have Clay, I’d snatch the man up in a hot minute.”

“I had to run down to the bar for some pretzels,” Lara said as she breezed through the door. She stopped at the couch and leaned down to give Resa a quick kiss before she let her grab a handful of pretzels from the container she was carrying.

“You are so weird,” Lake said as Lara sat beside her.

“Don’t knock it ‘til you try it,” Lara countered as she dipped into Lake’s cheesecake with a pretzel. She moaned as she chewed and then pulled out a handful of pretzels when I slid a plate across the bar toward her. “Remember how pissed Ransome got the first time he saw me do this?”

“I thought he was going to spontaneously combust,” I said with a giggle.

“Once he tried it, he realized it was delicious and serves it at the bakery now.”

“Still weird,” Lake mumbled before she took another bite.

“Where’s Dante?” Kyla asked between bites.

“He’s in the bedroom on the phone with an old friend,” I explained.

“An old friend?” Kyla asked as she looked at me with raised eyebrows.

I laughed. “Down, girl. It’s a guy named Denny.” After I thought about it for a second, I mused, “It is weird that he went into the bedroom and shut the door, though.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Lake said as she pushed her half-empty plate away. “I have to stop for now. I need to wait a few minutes for my food to digest so I can eat some more.”

“Any word from Bill and Susan?” Lara asked.

Lana nodded as she looked over at me. “Yeah. What’s the status there?”

I sighed before I explained, “Bill was formally charged but bailed out within minutes, so he’s out until the trial.”

“If it goes to trial,” Kyla mumbled.

“Exactly. We got a new caseworker, and while he seems like a good guy, he informed me that we still have to show up at the park for the next scheduled visit.”

“They gave you a guy this time, huh?” Lana asked. “That’s good. I hope he punches Bill in the nuts the first time he raises his voice.”

I laughed as I got a vision of Bill curled up in the fetal position on the grass. “That would be so awesome.”

“How’s Mr. Pardo doing at Horizons?”

I smiled at Lana and said, “He’s doing great, knock on wood. He’s only had one major episode in the last two weeks. They’ve got his medications adjusted, and it really seems to be helping him.”

“That’s great,” Lana said with a smile. The other women agreed and then turned to look at Dante when the bedroom door opened.

“Good Lord, that man is pretty,” I heard Lara whisper, and then Kyla agreed.

“Everything okay?” I asked.

Dante walked up and wrapped his arms around my shoulders from behind. I leaned back into his chest as he said, “Everything worked out just the way I’d hoped it would.”

“That sounds very Machiavellian,” Kyla said with a bark of laughter. “Is this one of those ‘don’t ask any questions and I won’t tell you any lies’ situations?”

“Possibly,” Dante said as he laughed with her. “It’s a need to know thing, how about that?”

“Still sounds a little ... nefarious,” I speculated.

Dante leaned down and whispered in my ear, “I’m just a man taking care of my family the best way I know how.” I turned so we were nose to nose and stared into his eyes. “Do you trust me, pretty girl?”

“I do.”

Dante winked before he said, “That’s what I like to hear. Keep practicing those words because as soon as you’re ready, you’re gonna be saying them in front of everyone we know.”

“Including your mysterious friend?”

“There’s nothing mysterious about that man,” Dante said with a chuckle. “He wears his crazy like a badge and will sing a song about it if you let him.”

“Is he single?” Lara asked. When we all looked at her, she shrugged and asked, “What? I’m sick of being the only single woman in the family.”

“He might be a little ... much. You know what I mean?”

“No. I don’t know,” Lara argued.

“Trust me, La ... Lana?”

“Lara,” my sister said with a dramatic eye roll. “You can’t marry our sister until you can tell us apart.”

“Good luck with that,” Lana complained. “Lake came over to borrow a maternity shirt from me for a date she had planned with Mark. Next thing I know, Lake let out an ear-piercing scream. When I came out of the bedroom, Clay was sputtering apologies as if he’d just dropped the f-bomb in church, and Lake’s face was beet red.”

“He slapped me on the ass so hard that I had a handprint for hours. Imagine explaining *that* to Mark.”

“I can guarantee I’ll never slap *any* of you on the ass,” Dante said with a grin. He leaned down and mumbled in my ear, “But I’ll spank you, pretty girl, if you’re into that sort of thing.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to that at all,” I whispered as I tilted my head to the side so he could have better access to my

neck.

“It doesn’t get any easier,” Lana complained.

“What?” I asked.

“Remember that time we walked in on you?” Lake asked.

Lara shuddered. “I’m still scarred for life.”

Kyla laughed at the triplets’ disgust and asked, “What happened?”

“It’s not my fault! They were supposed to be at the pool!” I said as I felt my face go up in flames. Dante was chuckling behind me, and I elbowed him in the ribs. “We were supposed to be alone all day!”

“You still owe us for keeping your secret all these years,” Lake reminded me.

“We walked in on her and Dante going at it on the couch,” Lara explained with a shudder. “Traumatizing.”

“How old were you?” Kyla asked.

“Fifteen,” all three women said in unison. As if they rehearsed it, they shivered before Lake said, “It was gross.”

“It still freaks me out when they do that,” Dante whispered.

I nodded. “You’ll get used to it.”

“I’m taking this home with me,” Lake said as she picked up her plate. She licked her fork clean and set it back on the counter as she slid off her stool. “I’m going to sit on the couch and fold laundry.”

“I’ll come with you,” Lake said as she, too, got up. “Thanks for the cheesecake.”

“I’ve got some baby clothes for both of you,” Lara said as she picked up their forks and put them in the sink with her and Lake’s plates.

Kyla glanced toward the stairs and then at the clock on the oven, and I grinned at her. “Is Quinn at work?”

“No.”

“Give me a shout when you get finished molesting my big brother. We’ll keep the girls entertained until then.”

“So gross!” Lara said as she walked out into the hallway.

“Let me ...” Kyla said as she picked up her plate.

“Just go, Kyla,” I told her. Dante and I laughed when she sprinted toward the door and laughed even harder when we heard her door slam a few seconds later. I spun around in Dante’s hold and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Want some cheesecake?”

“Can I eat it off your naked body?”

“Not right now, but I’ll save a piece for later if that’s what you’ve got in mind.”

“I’ll wait then.”

“Why are you being so mysterious about that call?”

“Got you worried, don’t I?”

“A little bit.”

“I had some friends do me a favor, and Denny was calling with an update.”

“What kind of favor?” I tilted my head and stared into his eyes when I asked, “Is it something illegal?”

“Yep,” Dante said firmly, never breaking eye contact. “Highly. But nothing that’s going to get any of us in trouble.”

“Why won’t you tell me?”

“Because I want to make sure it has the expected results before I say anything.”

“Okay.”

“Do you trust me, Jolie?”

“Obviously,” I said with a soft smile. “I better if I’m gonna spend the rest of my life with you.”

“That’s what I like to hear.”

22.

“Innaprodriate.”

Zeb

DANTE

“It’s almost time to go,” Jolie said from the doorway.

Zeb frowned and let out a sigh. I patted his shoulder before I called out, “We’ll be right there.”

Zeb sighed again, and I knew Max saw it when his eyes got hard and he frowned at Zeb’s back. “Hey, big guy, I’m not quite finished with this. Do you think anyone would mind if we left it here and came back to it this afternoon?”

Zeb’s eyes lit up as he turned around to look at the ramp Max was working on. “We can play later?”

“Yeah. As long as your mom doesn’t have anything else planned,” I answered as I got up off the floor. “Why don’t you go ask her?”

“Awesome!” Zeb shouted as he took off for our apartment.

I looked at the mess we’d made in the hall while trying to take Zeb’s mind off the meeting with his grandparents today. He and I had hauled his bucket of Hot Wheels out into the hallway so we could build a ramp, and then Mike came out and saw what we were doing. He got involved, then Max and Wes joined us before James jumped in too.

“Are you sure we can’t just hang out somewhere nearby in case you need us?” Wes asked.

“If it will make you feel better, you can. I’ll call you in again if we need you, but I don’t think there will be a problem today.”

“Don’t discount those fuckers,” James growled from his spot on the floor. “They probably have more than one trick up their sleeve.”

I smiled and shrugged. “Maybe I do too.”

Mike tilted his head and stared at me with a smile. “Did you do something?”

“Me? I didn’t do anything. Why do you ask?”

“If that’s your innocent act, it’s no wonder you ended up in prison,” James said as he stared at me. “Really. What’s up?”

I licked my lips and took a deep breath, wondering how much I could say without tipping my hand. Finally, I smiled and said, “I think that if someone fucks with my family, I should fuck with theirs.”

“Tyler?”

“I’ve never met Tyler,” I reminded them.

“But ...” James trailed off. “You did something.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Let the man be,” Max said as he studied my face. “He’s got something up his sleeve that I’ll bet is way better than anything the Franks can come up with.”

“We’ll see.”

“Mom said we could play as soon as we get done at the park!” Zeb shouted from the apartment door. “Will y’all still be here?”

“Max glanced over at me and then at Wes before he said, “We’ve got an errand to run, but we’ll be back a few minutes after you get here. I promise.”

“Thanks, Uncle Max.” Zeb ran back into the apartment, talking excitedly about what he had planned with me and his uncles, and I watched as they all smiled at the joy in his voice.

“There’s a cross street just north of the swing set. We’ll be there,” Wes told me.

James stood and wiped his hands on the front of his pants before he said, “Let me put on my shoes.”

“I’ll meet y’all downstairs,” Mike said before he walked into his own apartment.

“He’s just one old man, guys,” I said as I started walking down the hall. “I think I can take him.”

Wes smiled mysteriously before he shrugged his shoulders. “Just in case you need any help, all those shovels we used at your dad’s are still in the back of my truck.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I reached out and bumped knuckles with him. “If it comes down to that, I know some people who can help us out, no shovels required.”

Max grinned. “That’s good to know.”

“Okay, I’m ready. Let’s go so we can come back home,” Zeb said as he walked out of the apartment holding Resa’s hand.

Nica was right behind him and explained, “Me and Resa are going to hang out with Aunt Kyla while you’re gone, okay?”

I glanced over Nica’s shoulder, and Jolie nodded. “Sounds good, sweetheart. Watch out for your sister. We’ll be home in an hour or so.”

Nica gave me a side hug and then leaned over to pick up her sister. “Love y’all. Keep your chin up, Zebster.”

“Will do, Nicaroni,” Zeb said with a grin. “Come on, Mom! Let’s go! I want to get this over with. Uncle James said he might be able to figure out how we can do a loop on our track.”

“That’s gonna require us to move to the stairwell,” James said as he walked out of his apartment with a bottle of water in hand.

“I’m down for that,” Max said as he followed James toward the door at the end of the hall. “Wes?”

“Sounds good.”

“This is gonna be so freakin’ *awesome!*” Zeb shouted as he bounced toward the door next to Jolie. I peeked into Quinn and Kyla’s and saw that Resa was settled on the couch between Lake and Lana, cuddling Lake’s little dogs. I rushed to catch up with Zeb and Jolie.

“Thanks for helping make this easier, Dante,” Jolie whispered as I held the door for her.

“I’ll do anything for my family, pretty girl.”

“I know. That’s what scares me,” Jolie admitted before she tiptoed up to give me a kiss.

“Come on, Mom!” Zeb called up from the bottom of the staircase. “Let’s go!”

“The boy’s in a hurry, woman. Get moving,” I said as I slapped Jolie on the ass.

“Do that again,” Jolie whispered as she walked past me.

“Oh, I’ll do that again,” I mumbled. “Later tonight.”

“It’s a date.”



“Are you sure you don’t want to wait in the truck?” Jolie asked as I walked beside her toward the picnic bench where the Franks were waiting with the new caseworker. “I don’t want them to say anything that might upset you.”

“What if they say something that upsets you?”

“I’m used to that.”

“So am I,” Zeb said sadly. His mood had changed the closer we got to the park, and by the time I opened the door for him to get out, he was almost in tears. “I want to go home.”

“Don’t forget, buddy, we’re gonna go hang out with the guys as soon as we’re done.”

Zeb let out a little laugh, but I could tell it was forced. “I remember.”

The caseworker stood up when Jolie introduced me. “Dante, this is Drew Benjamin. Drew, this is my fiancé, Dante Pardo.”

Drew shook my hand and then motioned for us to sit beside him as he greeted Zeb. “Hey, Zeb. It’s good to see you again. I like that shirt.”

“My Uncle Mike got it for me at a tattoo show,” Zeb said proudly. “I can’t wear it to school because it’s indopropriated.”

“Inappropriate,” Jolie corrected.

“That’s what I said,” Zeb said with a nod. “Innaprodriate.”

Drew laughed. “I gotcha, man.” He looked at his watch and then at Jolie. Once she started today’s recording, he nodded at Bill and Susan, who had been suspiciously quiet as they looked everywhere but at me or Jolie. “Let’s go ahead and get started. Zeb, what’s going on with you? Has anything fun happened lately?”

“No,” Zeb said softly as he looked down at the table.

“Tell them about the racetrack we’re building with your uncles,” I suggested.

“A racetrack?” Drew asked, trying to draw Zeb out.

Zeb started to get excited about what we’d been building, but when I looked across the table, I caught Mr. and Mrs. Frank staring at me instead of him. I raised my eyebrows in question, and they quickly looked away rather than say anything to me. Jolie saw the interaction, and her eyes got wide before Zeb asked her a question.

“If your father was here, he’d buy you a racetrack instead of making you build your own,” Mrs. Frank said haughtily. “I can buy you one today, as a matter of fact.”

“No sense in making something out of trash when they sell the damn things,” Mr. Frank chimed in.

“We’re not making it out of trash!” Zeb argued. “My uncles can build *anything!*”

Mr. Frank snorted, and I saw his wife look at me with fear in her eyes. I wiped my hands over my mouth before I picked my phone up and started texting. “Don’t mind me. I just need to send a message to a friend of mine.”

Mrs. Frank’s eyes shot to her husband, and I saw Mr. Frank visibly gulp and then look down at the table.

Drew asked Zeb a question, and he started talking animatedly again. I held Mrs. Franks' eyes for a second and then looked back down at my phone. "How's your son doing? I understand he's down there where they're having all that rain, isn't he?"

"He is," Mrs. Frank whispered. She cleared her throat and then glanced at Jolie before she looked back at me. "He's doing better today from what I understand."

I scratched the back of my neck when Jolie asked, "Did something happen to Tyler?"

Mrs. Frank ignored her and interrupted Zeb and Drew's conversation. "Zeb, we're going down to South Texas to visit your father. Would you like me to tell him anything while we're there?"

"No," Zeb answered. "I don't know him, so I don't have anything to say."

Mr. Frank reached up and adjusted his glasses. "I think we might ..." He cleared his throat when his voice broke, and I watched him fidget uncomfortably before he looked up and addressed Jolie. "We're going to buy a house closer to where they're holding Tyler, so we won't be able to make these visits anymore."

"Really?" Jolie and Zeb asked at the same time.

"I think it's in the best interests of the boy to get settled in with your family, but we'll be available if he ever wants to get in touch with us or Tyler," Mr. Frank said as he looked from me to Jolie and then back again, never once looking at Zeb. "I'd like to apologize for my behavior. I'm sorry if I scared you. It will never happen again."

"Okay," Jolie whispered, obviously in shock.

"I realize we've treated you horribly, Jolie, and ... um ... I'd like to apologize for that," Mrs. Frank choked out. "I was trying to replace Tyler's place in our family with Zeb, and I understand now that was a horrible idea. It would be best if we ..." Mrs. Frank stopped talking and looked at her husband for help.

“We’d like to live closer to Tyler so we can visit him when he’s ... better.”

“Better?” Jolie asked.

Mr. Frank cleared his throat again and then stood up. Mrs. Frank stood up beside him and grabbed her purse. “We’ll be dropping the custody case as soon as our lawyer gets to his office Monday, and we’ll make sure that the child support payments will be deposited to your account out of Tyler’s trust fund each month.”

I glanced over at Jolie and saw that she was completely speechless as she stared at them in shock. I nudged her arm, and she snapped her mouth closed before she croaked, “Thank you?”

“I don’t have to do this anymore?” Zeb asked.

“No,” Mr. Frank said, finally glancing toward his grandson. “I’ve spoken to your father, and he wants us to back off without pursuing visitation or custody.”

Jolie was stunned into a stupor as she stared unblinking at the people who’d made her life hell for years.

“It’s been a pleasure visiting with you, Zeb. Jolie. Mr. Pardo,” Mrs. Frank said before she looked at the caseworker who was in nearly as much shock as Jolie. “Mr. Benjamin, if you could note in your records that my wife and I were mistaken about most ...”

“All! We were mistaken about all of the things,” Mrs. Frank interrupted.

“I’d like to withdraw all of our complaints we’ve lodged with your office.”

“We were upset that Tyler got in trouble, and we took it out on Jolie and Zeb. We won’t be doing that again, I assure you.”

Mr. Frank nodded in agreement and said, “We realize now that we can’t replace Tyler with Zeb because that’s not good for anyone. So if you can drop the charges, we’d appreciate it.”

“I’ll need you to sign some paperwork,” Drew said as he studied the couple’s uncomfortable demeanor. “If you’d like to come to my office on Monday ...”

“Is nine o’clock okay?” Mr. Frank asked.

“Sure,” Drew answered before he glanced over at Jolie and then back at the Franks. “I’ll pencil you in. Give me a call if you can’t ...”

“We’ll be there,” Mrs. Frank confirmed. She looked over at Zeb before she said, “We’re going to go now.”

Mr. Frank took his wife’s arm to escort her across the grass to the car. We sat in silence as we watched them drive away.

“What the fuck just happened?” Zeb asked as he leaned around Drew and stared at his mom in shock.

“You’re not allowed to say that word until you’re old enough to vote,” Jolie said without looking at her son. “We’ve talked about that.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Zeb whispered. “Can I play on the swings?”

“Sure,” I told him.

“Do you want to come see what I can do?” Zeb asked Drew. “I can jump like Spider-Man!”

“That sounds awesome! You go ahead. I’ll be there in just a second.” Zeb ran off, and Drew stood up and faced us. “That couple is *nothing* like Carmen described.”

“I’m not sure who those people were,” Jolie mumbled. She picked her phone up and pushed the button to end the recording and then stared at it blankly. “I think I’m going to have to listen to that recording a few hundred times before it sinks in.”

“I have no idea what just happened here, but ... congratulations, I guess,” Drew said as he shrugged. “I was gearing up for World War III, and it turns out that it was ...”

“Perfect,” Jolie muttered as she turned and studied my face. “I’ve dreamed of this day.”

“Mr. Drew! Come watch!” Zeb yelled.

Drew blew out a surprised breath and said, “I guess we’re done here?”

“Looks like it,” I agreed.

As he walked away, Drew started laughing, and within a few seconds, Jolie was laughing too. She started laughing so hard that she had tears running down her face.

“You okay, pretty girl?”

“Is this a dream?”

I reached over and pinched her arm, not enough to hurt but enough to get her attention. “You flinched, so I guess not.”

“What the fuck just happened, Dante?”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t look a gift horse in the mouth,” I suggested.

“Did you ... do something?”

“I’ve never even talked to those people before, babe.”

“To Tyler. Did you do something to Tyler?”

“I’ve never met Tyler either,” I said honestly.

“They said they want to visit him when he’s better. Did he get hurt in prison?”

“Lots of shit happens in prison, Jolie. There’s really no telling what’s going on in his life right now, but his parents apparently think it would be better if they moved closer to him. I don’t see a problem with that. Do you?”

“No!”

“Okay then.”

Jolie threw her arms around my neck and whispered, “I know this was because of you, and I can’t thank you enough, Dante.”

“No thanks needed, pretty girl. I’ll do whatever I have to do to protect my family. I think the Franks realize that they need to do whatever they have to do to protect theirs.”

“I won’t know how to live without their threats hanging over my head,” Jolie admitted.

“I can tell you how we’re going to live, Jolie - happy and together. All of us. From now on.”

“I love you, Dante.”

“I love you, too, pretty girl.” I stare into her eyes. “I’ll do anything to make you happy, sweetheart. I hope you know that.”

“I do.”

“Those are two words I love to hear you say.”

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

DANTE

I leaned down and gave Nica a kiss and then did the same to Resa before I let their hands go so they could walk up the steps to take their places. I watched them go to their assigned spots before I walked up the steps and waited on the other side of the stage with the men I'd chosen to stand with me today.

I'd grown close to Denny and Jude since getting out of prison, and they had been instrumental in helping me stop Zeb's grandparents from terrorizing him and Jolie. The other men standing with me today would be escorting the women of their family down the aisle before they joined me on the stage.

I looked out over the crowd here to watch the ceremony and smiled nervously. I got a return smile from Jolie's dad and bit my lip to stop myself from laughing as I watched Patrice dab at the tears running down her face. The woman had a will of steel but the softest heart of anyone I'd ever met, and it showed when she got emotional.

As I watched, Robert put his arm around her and squeezed her to his side. Resa, seeing her grandma's distress, hopped up from where she'd been told to sit on the bottom step and ran over to get into Patrice's lap where she settled in for the duration.

Jolie's side of the church was almost full, and I recognized people I'd met in the year since we got back together. Several of Jolie's elderly clients from Horizons had come today, and I saw that Mrs. Remmel was sitting among them with her husband, my father's doctor. Other people I didn't recognize and assumed were clients or friends of the family were scattered around behind the front pews that were full of Donovans - cousins, aunts, uncles, and their spouses and children.

On the other side of the aisle, my sisters sat with their husbands. My brother Ricky, who'd come home years earlier

than we'd expected and had joined me in managing the garage, was sitting with his wife, Amy. Behind them were men we worked with at the garage, friends I'd made since I came back to Marlboro, and men and women I'd become close to as I was learning to live my life as a free man again.

The song Jolie had chosen for the attendants' entrance started to play, and I watched as Max and Mark, who were acting as our ushers, opened the doors at the back of the church.

Kyla and Quinn were the first to appear, and they walked toward me with big smiles. When they got to the middle of the church, Lara and Mike started up the aisle followed by Lake and Wes. The next two through the door were Lana and James.

As each couple got to the stage, they split with the men coming to my side and the women taking their places on the opposite side.

The music ended as everyone settled at the front of the church, and then Zeb appeared in the doorway right before the wedding march started. He stood proudly in his tuxedo and waved at me excitedly before he settled and got serious again.

When Jolie appeared beside him and took his hand, my breath froze and my heart stopped for a second until she looked to the front of the church and smiled at me.

It took all I had to stand still. I took a deep breath as I resisted the urge to jog down the aisle and pick up my woman so I could carry her back to the front with me. As she and Zeb walked up the aisle, her free hand rested on her bump. My heart swelled when I thought of the baby that would join us soon.

As I watched them make their way through our friends and family, my mind flashed back to the first time I saw her, laughing and fiddling with her necklace, then to the look on her face when we shared our first kiss, then I flashed to the shocked smile on her face when I asked her father for his blessing.

Now, standing here in church, surrounded by the people who mean the most to me, I was about to join my life with the woman I'd loved since we were innocent kids. We were going to raise our family and grow old together.

We'd weathered some harsh storms over the years, both together and apart, but now, we were a team, ready to face anything life decided to throw at us.

Jolie and Zeb stopped at the bottom of the steps, and I walked down to stand in front of them as the preacher asked, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

Zeb answered proudly, in a voice loud enough to be heard all the way at the back of the church, "Me and my sisters!"

Jolie bent down at the same time Zeb stood on his tiptoes and touched foreheads for a second before Jolie kissed our son on the cheek. He smiled at me before he placed her hand in mine, then jogged up the stairs to stand on the spot he'd chosen during practice last night.

"Pretty girl," I whispered as I looked down into Jolie's eyes. "Did you ever think we'd end up here?"

"It's everything I've ever dreamed of."

I rested my hand over hers and felt our son kick. With tears in my eyes, I whispered, "I don't have to dream anymore because now I have everything I've ever wanted with you."



"How's our girl?" my father-in-law asked as he walked up to stand beside me.

I glanced over at him and then back at my son who was resting under the light in the hospital nursery.

"She's sleeping. When they came to take him to the nursery for shift change, she told me to come watch him and promised she'd get some rest."

"Good."

"What are you doing up here so late?"

“I couldn’t sleep thinking about you two,” Robert admitted. “I drove around for a while and then thought I’d come look in on you guys before I went home and tried again.”

“You can go home and get some rest, Robert. I’ll take care of them.”

“I know you will, son.”

“We decided on a name.”

“If you tell me before Patrice finds out, I’m gonna be in the doghouse.”

“When she finds out, you can pretend to be surprised.”

“She can read me like a book,” Robert said with a laugh. “In all our years together, I’ve rarely been able to get anything past her.”

“Jolie’s like that.”

“The only time I’ve ever been able to hide anything from her was the one time I shouldn’t have because she’d have known how to fix it.”

I glanced over at him in question, and he looked away from my son and sighed when he caught my eye. “I regret letting you leave my garage that night, Dante. I’ve regretted it since it happened. If I could, I’d ...”

“I wouldn’t change a thing, Robert. My decision brought us to where we are today. You’ve gotta stop beating yourself up about it and realize that we had to go through everything we did so we could understand just how lucky we are right now.”

“You’re a good man, Dante, and I’m proud to call you my son.”

“I’ll raise Donovan to be a good man too,” I said with a smile.

“You’re naming him Donovan?”

I nodded slowly as I looked back at my son, giving Robert a chance to choke back his tears. “We’re going to call him

Don't like my dad, but his full first name is Donovan.”

“Donovan Pardo. The perfect mixture of you and my girl.”

“Exactly.”

“I'm proud of the man you've become, Dante, and I know that if your dad ... well, he'd feel the same way.”

“You think so?”

“I can guarantee he would.”

THE END

Please take just a few minutes to leave a review of this book on Amazon and feel free to share the link with your friends. I enjoy discussing my books and characters and would love to hear from you. Check out Cee Bowerman on Facebook. You can also find information about the author and her books on www.cebowermanbooks.com.

COMING SOON

Time Served In New York

Time Served MC, Book 11

Coming December 1st, 2022!

You are cordially invited to the wedding festivities of Santa and Frankie in New York City. Join the Time Served MC family as they travel out of their comfort zone, across the country, and into the wilds of NYC. Surely nothing too crazy will happen since their time will be filled with dress fittings, tux alterations, a bridal shower, and a few formal dinners, right?

Buckle your seatbelts and catch up with the couples you've come to love as they prepare for the wedding of the century in one of Manhattan's fanciest hotels.

They'll fit right in, don't you think?

(This book is the 11th installment in the Time Served MC series and will reintroduce you to characters that will appear in Cee Bowerman's upcoming Four Families mafia series.)

About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over 50 published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

You can find her on Facebook @ceebowerman or online at www.ceebowermanbooks.com.

Look for more fun romances in this series in the coming months and get updates on the Facebook page for more information on characters and stories that are in progress.