

A man with dark hair and a beard, wearing a white button-down shirt that is open at the chest, looking directly at the camera. The background is dark with colorful bokeh lights in shades of red, yellow, green, and blue.

*All the  
Jingle  
Ladies*

BOOK 2

*Feliz*  
**NAVI-DAD**

ERIN ST. CHARLES

# **Feliz Navi-Dad**

**A Small-Town, Accidental Pregnancy, Holiday Romance**

**All The Jingle Ladies Christmas Romance Series**

**Book 2: Sasha and Jacob**

**By Erin St. Charles**

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# Dedication

The *All the Jingle Ladies* Christmas series is dedicated to my daughter.

*Mija*, I wish for you...

A heart that loves with passion and kindness,

A mind that ponders both ideas and emotions,

A soul that turns to God but doesn't forget mankind.

Love you,

*Mom*

# Prologue

## *Homecoming, Center City High*

The football stadium was brightly lit against the nearby soybean fields. The orange sunset was streaked with purple twilight and Sasha Norwood, band mom, could see a tall, skinny kid running up the sidelines taking photos of the players on the field, the cheerleaders on the sidelines, and the attendees in the stands. She'd seen the kid before on a number of occasions, including on her living room couch and a couple of times at her dining table when he and her daughter hung out. The kid was Jason "Jay" Romero, a friend of Madison's from school. Apparently, this was his first time taking yearbook photos at a football game. She'd have to look at the photos next time Jay was over. The stunning sunset must make for a gorgeous backdrop for Jay's photos.

Silently chiding herself, Sasha scanned the crowd for Mr. Romero, Jay's dad and her personal eye candy. She didn't see him there, damnit. Not that she'd do anything about it if he was. Nope, Jacob Romero was definitely off-limits.

The scoreboard read Home: 21 Visitor: 3. Whoever set this game up, they made sure the Center City Fightin' Farmers got a not-so-great opponent for their homecoming game. It was going to be a sad, sad after-game for the opposing team.

It was halftime, and time for the show. The band strutted out, Madison stepping smartly in formation and looking more than a little uncomfortable in the stiff polyester of her white and gold uniform. She played the clarinet, had since sixth grade,

and was pretty good at it. Sasha silently patted herself on the back for having stuck out the many hours it took for Maddie to learn the instrument. The first couple of months after she'd gotten it, she could produce only sounds resembling a donkey braying, until one day she suddenly began to produce music. Sasha's heart swelled with pride as it always did when she thought about how she managed to raise such an awesome kid as the primary parent, and mostly on her own.

She stood, raised her binoculars, and zoomed in on her child. Maddie made the dorky uniform look good, the gold brim of the tall, white hat a startling contrast to her daughter's pecan-colored skin. Her face appeared calm and focused; her lips pursed as she played.

“Woohoo! Yay, Maddie!”

Sasha watched Holly Oleander, one of her best friends from college, lose her ever-loving mind over her goddaughter's near-anonymous performance in the Center City High marching band from the hard folding seat next to her. Holly sported a “Band God-Mom” t-shirt layered over a long-sleeved Henley shirt. In the seat next to Holly was Tor, her husband. Their nine-month-old son Bo sat in Tor's lap, bright blue eyes wide and light-brown cheeks ruddy from the October chill. The little boy wore a knit cap in the deep orange and royal blue school colors, and he watched the action as if he actually knew what was going on.

“Calm down, woman!” Sasha said, glaring indulgently at her friend. “Whose daughter is she, anyway?”

Spectators had turned to look at whoever was making the kerfuffle. Bo caught the eye of a woman who had turned to see



who had been making the noise, and she smiled. He cooed and flashed a winning smile back at his new friend.

“She’s always been *all* our daughter,” said Holly, not at all admonished by her over-the-top display of support for Maddie. “Camille and I had many tea parties with that girl.”

It was true, and Sasha had always been grateful to her closest college friends for helping her raise her daughter. Sasha became a mother at seventeen, the summer after her senior year of high school. She lived with her parents while she took classes at the local community college to get her veterinary technician degree. She worked at a vet practice in town as she completed a joint BS and DVM degree in five years, while living in one of the houses near the university, which were often rented to students. Her roommates were the then Holly Flowers and Camille White. Sasha had been looking for a housing situation that didn’t involve bros who left sludge in the bottom of the bathtub, bongos on the living room coffee table, and had a parade of women through the house. She found two upper-class women who were very serious, driven students, one of whom had been raised by a single mother, and the other who had been twenty going on thirty-five. They had been to almost as many elementary school events as Sasha’s parents, and definitely more than Maddie’s father, who lived in Chicago.

More than a decade had passed and Holly, Camille and Sasha were still the best of friends. They treated Maddie as a cross between a god-daughter and a favorite niece. Holly lived in St. Louis with her husband and son, and Camille lived in Chicago. Or at least she used to, before her fiancé cheated on her and she ran away, leaving the lying bastard in the janitor’s closet

with his tuxedo pants around his ankles, and his dick in some skank's cooch. After she ran out on the guy, she went on a spirit quest, quitting her high-paying job and roaming the land with the cat she found at the wedding. Then when she was tired of driving around the contiguous United States, she'd breezed through Center City to drop off her cat, Fat Joey, before taking off again to travel Asia.

The postcards and selfies from various state capitals and tourist attractions were gradually replaced by care packages from exotic locales and selfies taken in front of temples in Bangkok.

The band finished their number, and the field set up for the presentation of the homecoming court and the crowning of the homecoming queen. Sasha sat again, then made "gimme" hands at Tor.

"My turn to hold him," Sasha said, smiling at the adorable little boy. He smiled back at her, drooling with pleasure, and held his hands out to her.

She held the baby on her lap and bounced him on her knees. Then she held him up so he could stand on her thighs and look at the world from a new vantage point. He was momentarily dumbstruck and expressed a blank expression as he took in his surroundings.

"Have you heard anything from Camille?" Sasha asked, still watching Bo watching the crowd.

"Nope," Holly said. "Well, other than the selfies she sent from the Saigon Hard Rock Café last week."

“For some reason, she doesn’t post photos of her food on social media, like a normal person,” Sasha said. “I mean, I don’t use my social media that much, but I would if I was thousands of miles away from friends.”

“You’re thousands of miles away from one of your best friends, yet you don’t post your lunch for her benefit,” Holly pointed out.

“She’s already had Lean Cuisine frozen dinners,” Sasha said. “There’s no reason to put that...crap out there for the whole world to see.”

She narrowly avoided saying the word “shit” in front of the baby. Bo blinked innocently at Sasha, totally unaware that his god-mother was on the verge of corrupting him.

With a lull in the action, numerous people got up to visit the concession stand, use the restroom, or stretch their legs.

“Hold the baby up and make him do tricks,” Holly said. She took out her phone and held it up to capture his image.

Sasha held the baby up and away from her, smiling and making goofy faces at him, until he giggled and babbled and drooled fetchingly. She made airplane noises and made the baby dive-bomb Tor, who cowered dramatically and made sounds of dismay. This made Bo laugh maniacally and deliver a massive drool bubble that landed in Tor’s beard.

“Oops!” Sasha said, retracting the baby. Tor swiped his beard with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. “Sorry about that!” Sasha cringed.

“No sweat,” he said. “Being drooled on by this kid isn’t even close to the worst encounter I’ve had with his bodily fluids.

Isn't that right?"

Tor, normally reticent and quiet, lapsed into the type of foolish baby talk almost no one could avoid engaging in when there was a jolly infant around willing to giggle at your antics. Holly kept the phone camera rolling throughout.

This went on for a bit until the homecoming red carpet and thrones had been set up near the sidelines. Jay stood off to the side, camera ready, as the homecoming court glided serenely in a line, in a manner suggesting these kids knew they were at the top of the high school social ladder, and they were supremely happy about it. Still, Sasha thought the girls looked adorable in their grown-up dresses, and the boys in their rented suits.

The principal announced the king and queen, and the court. Someone had hustled up a karaoke machine with a pretty impressive subwoofer so the announcements could be heard beyond the first few rows.

*Audio-visual club for the win!* Sasha thought to herself.

There were whistles and catcalls as the girls were introduced, and woofing sounds as the boys' names were read. Photos were taken on the field before the smiling court filed off the field and the game resumed.

Sasha barely paid attention to the rest of the game. Football had never been her thing. However, she did make liberal use of her binoculars, telling herself all the while that she had no interest in catching a glimpse of Jacob Romero. It didn't matter, because the dude was apparently not there to see his son photograph the game. She decided that was a good enough reason to scratch him off her list of crushes.

*I don't have time for men, anyway,* she told herself firmly.

Maddie was an honor student who'd been taking AP classes since she was a sophomore. She had a 4.3 GPA and was an Eagle Scout. She was applying to Northwestern early decision and had an excellent chance of getting in. Her backup schools were the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan and, oddly, Rice University in Houston.

Since the moment she found out she was pregnant at sixteen, Sasha had focused on the single-minded purpose of raising her child, educating her child, and doing everything she could to give Madison a good life. She knew from the beginning that people who didn't know her didn't think she could raise a child on her own. When she was a student, the administration at this very school tried to dissuade Sasha from marching at her own graduation, but she had refused. Sasha had spent her adult life showing the world that being a teen mom didn't mean she should give up all her ambitions. Now Sasha was on the verge of being an empty nester, and she couldn't wait.

She'd had flings here and there, but put her ambitions—and her daughter—first. She had never had a romantic interest around her daughter and she'd do the same thing again. Sasha had her own cat veterinarian practice, her daughter had a bright future ahead of her, and it was all due to putting first things first.

Bo reached for the binoculars with spread fingers, batting at the glasses with the palm of his hand. Sasha held them to his eyes, but he clearly didn't get how to use them because instead of looking through the lenses, he opened his mouth and attempted to cram the eye cup into his sloppy wet maw.

“Oh, no, kiddo,” Sasha laughed and held the binoculars away from the little boy, who soon focused on the game once again.

“My boy is going to play football in a few years,” Tor said, taking the baby.

“Not if I have anything to say about it,” Holly said tartly. “I didn’t carry him for nine months and endure eighteen hours of labor for someone to come along and scramble those brains of his.”

Sasha rolled her eyes.

“Give me those binoculars,” Holly said, grabbing them before Sasha could protest. “What the hell are you looking at, anyway? You hate football.”

“I’m not looking at anything,” Sasha said, starch in her tone. She crossed her legs, then threaded her fingers together, placing her hands on her top knee.

“Is it a boy?” Holly whispered close to Sasha’s ear. Holly was being uncharacteristically nosy, but at least she wasn’t broadcasting Sasha’s business for all to hear. “Are you looking for that teacher?”

Sasha scowled, then furrowed her brows.

“Excuse me?” Sasha demanded.

“I know all about this guy,” Holly confided. “History teacher, tall, hot. Nice eyebrows?”

Sasha had to admit to herself that Jacob Romero did have excellent eyebrows. “Where do you think you’re getting this information?”

“From Madison, who should know,” Holly said, scanning the crowd with the binoculars.

Sasha didn't know how Madison would have any idea that she found Jacob Romero, uh, hot. She could only imagine that information went over like a lead balloon. She had tried dating before, when Madison was little, and either the guy wasn't interested in being a friend to her daughter or her daughter didn't like the guy. In the end, it seemed like too much work and hassle, so she contented herself with the occasional hookup and figured she'd start dating later. Like when Maddie was out of the house.

“What did she say about him?” Sasha asked.

“Not much,” Holly shrugged. “She just said you make a funny face when you see him. Maybe you should ask him out.”

“I don't think so,” Sasha said.

When the game ended, Sasha, Holly, Tor, and Bo met at the sidelines to take photos with Madison in her band uniform. They were soon joined by Richard, Madison's father, and Jay.

“What are you two up to this weekend?” Sasha asked her daughter. Jay was going up to Chicago with Maddie to stay at Richard's condo for the long weekend. Sasha would ordinarily not allow Madison to stay overnight with a boy, but she had a pretty good idea that Jay wasn't into girls.

“Probably boring stuff like the Art Institute.” Madison rolled her eyes. “For my artsy-fartsy friend here.”

“Hey, it's a world-renowned art museum,” Jay protested.

“And we've been there so many times!” Madison protested right back.

“Whatever you do, stay out of trouble, but enjoy yourselves,” Sasha said.

One of the weekends Sasha had gone to the city with her friends as a teen, she turned up pregnant a few weeks later. That wouldn’t happen to Madison because her daughter had been getting birth control shots since the moment she entered high school. Sasha was determined that Madison not have to put any of her dreams to the side in order to have a baby.

The group was soon joined by Jacob Romero, and Sasha self-consciously tried to avoid eye contact. The man gave his son a chummy man-hug around the shoulders.

“Did you get some good pics?” Jacob grinned, obviously proud of his son.

“Dad...” he said, blushing in manly fashion.

Sasha snuck a sidelong look at Jacob, taking in his gleaming olive complexion, sultry brown eyes, and, yes, thick, expressive eyebrows. He had gleaming white teeth, and Lord help her—dimples. This was probably the closest she’d ever been to him. Was she imagining things, or could she actually feel his body heat?

“So, what are the parents going to do with the kids out of town?” Holly said, elbowing Sasha gently in the ribs.

“Grading papers—” Jacob answered.

“Clinic stuff—” Sasha said.

They spoke at the same time, and Sasha found herself smiling despite herself.



There was a lull in the conversation, and Sasha found herself not knowing what to do with her hands.

“So, your stuff is in the car, isn’t it?” Sasha smiled at her daughter.

“Yeah, I’m gonna change, and we’ll be on our way,” Madison said.

“Aren’t you going to the dance?” Holly asked.

“We’ll make an appearance, then we’re taking off,” Madison said with a smile.

“Too cool for the dance, huh?” Jacob asked. He had a slight accent, Sasha realized. Not exactly Southern. Maybe Texas? It was sexy as hell.

“Homecoming dance is all about the after-party these days,” Sasha informed the group.

The stadium started to clear out as everyone departed for their evening activities. At her car, Sasha gave Madison her overnight bag, and she disappeared into the locker room for a quick shower and to get dolled up for the dance. Madison was not a prissy girl and would be ready for the dance in under twenty minutes. Sasha hugged Tor and Holly, then kissed the baby on the forehead. Bo rubbed his drooping eyelids and yawned.

“He’ll be asleep before we leave the parking lot,” Tor said, taking the baby and placing him in the car seat in their truck.

Holly grabbed Sasha by the elbow and walked her a few steps away from the cars.

“Girl, you better go talk to that man,” Holly hissed. “He’s cute, so cute. Those dimples!” She rolled her eyes and grinned.

“I heard that,” Tor’s deep voice called out from the extended cab of his truck.

“I’m just making a point, baby,” she called out in a sing-songy tone.

“You guys have a safe drive back,” Sasha said, hugging Holly.

She watched as her friends and their baby joined the slow-moving procession of cars leaving the stadium parking lot.

Sasha leaned against the driver’s side door of her Honda CRV and pulled out her phone and stared at the screen. She had a new message from Camille with a photo attachment. It was a photo of a fish that had been pan-fried. The fish’s eyes, fins, and skin were all intact.

*Sasha: Ew. Did they at least gut it before they fried it?*

*Camille: Don’t know. Didn’t get that far.*

*Sasha: Enjoy!*

*Camille: Holly sent me some pic with a good-looking guy with dimples.*

Camille sent the photo through. It was a candid shot, one Holly must have taken on the sly, because Sasha didn’t even realize it had been taken. She frowned at the screen; a bit annoyed.

*Sasha: What time is it there? Shouldn’t you be in bed?*

*Camille: It’s exactly 12 hours into the future. I don’t need bed. Try not to change the subject.*

She smiled at the screen. She missed her friend.

**Sasha:** *When are you back stateside?*

There was a pause, then three gray dots as Camille composed her response.

**Camille:** *X-mas.*

**Sasha:** 😊

“Sasha—right?”

Sasha startled and dropped her phone. It landed face-down on the pavement, and when she scrambled to pick it up, her hand collided with another one, sending sizzling sensations similar to electricity up her arm. Jacob Romero got to the phone first and held it up to her. The screen glowed in the dark, miraculously unbroken.

“Yeah, Sasha,” she smiled nervously. “Thanks.”

It was Jacob Romero, in the flesh. He looked smashing in a dark brown bomber jacket over his orange and blue spirit wear, his dimpled smile gleaming in the dusk.

“We meet at last,” he said, putting a hand out to shake. She took it, allowing his large hand to engulf hers. His palm was dry and warm, and he smelled like buttered popcorn and a spicy cologne. He wore no wedding ring, but of course, this was far from conclusive when determining whether someone was single. Not that *she* cared. Not really.

“Looks like it,” she said. “You just started at the high school, didn’t you?”

“Yes...I took over for Mr. Newton,” he said. “You know, he had a triple bypass and decided to retire early.”

“History, right?” Sasha said, inappropriately. “I mean, yeah, it’s terrible that he had the bypass. But I hear good things about you.”

Jacob had his hands in his jacket pockets.

“U.S. History,” he said. “Jay and I just moved here from Texas. Houston.”

“You were teaching in Houston?” she asked, aware that she sounded lame. She felt like she was grinning idiotically. When she wasn’t saying the wrong thing, she was saying the stupid thing.

His smile faltered, but only fractionally. He recovered, and the smile once again shone like a beacon in the dark.

“That’s right,” he said. “I taught for fifteen years in Houston, then we moved here.”

He looked around the parking lot, as if looking for Jay. Sasha followed his lead and glanced around the parking lot as if looking for Madison. She saw nothing but the slightly damp blacktop and the red of retreating tail lights. Richard leaned against his white BMW, poking at his phone screen like a monkey examining a shiny object.

“What brought you up here?” she asked.

“I needed to be closer to family,” he said. “My mother worked for the university and lives in town. Jay wanted to go to the university here. He’s taking courses at the community college already. They have a feeder program for kids who study at the affiliated community college.”

The man left a fifteen-year career to take care of his mom and provide for his son’s education. If she was going to have a

relationship with someone, it would be someone like Jacob Romero.

Richard, Madison's father, chose to amble over from his car at that moment.

"How much longer do you think she'll be?" Richard asked, looking Jacob up and down.

"Your guess is as good as mine," she told him. "Richard, this is Jacob, Jay's dad. He teaches history."

"The kids will be in separate bedrooms," Richard stated without being asked.

Sasha gave the ex of her youth a bemused look. Richard may not have any gaydar at all, and he'd never been great at appropriate small talk. There was an awkward silence, then Richard excused himself to wait for the kids in his car. Sasha wondered whether Richard had considered the fact that the kids would be going to the dance for at least a couple of hours before heading north to Chicago. He would have a couple or three hours to kill until the kids would be ready to head north, but Sasha decided that wasn't her problem.

"So...grading papers?" Sasha said. "Is there a Mrs. Romero to help you fill the weekend?"

She inwardly cringed at her blatant attempt to fish for information.

"No Mrs. Romero," he said. He pursed his lips speculatively, his dark eyes pinning her in place. "How about you?"

"No Mrs. Romero for me, either," she laughed at her own lame joke.

He frowned.

“I’m single,” she finally said. “No Mr. or Mrs. for me. Or live-in partner. Or anything like that.”

Yep, she was just saying the first thing that came to mind. It didn’t even have to make sense. Cats were so much easier to talk to than people.

“I mean, I have a daughter,” she babbled on, waving a hand as if that explained everything. “And my cats. Those things keep me busy.”

He kept a thoughtful expression on his face as she talked. She finished talking about nothing, and she closed her mouth, then picked a spot over his shoulder and pretended to find something truly interesting floating around in the air there.

“Well, if you’re not too busy, we should get coffee,” he said. “This weekend we seem to be child-free. We should take advantage of that. What do you think?”

She said nothing. She just looked at him and blinked. “Um, maybe?”

He gave her a funny look, turned away and walked toward his own car, making her wonder what exactly had just happened. Had he just asked her for a date?

He sat in his Ford Explorer, his phone screen illuminating his face. Sasha sighed, wishing she was smoother with the opposite sex.

“Mom!” Madison reappeared with Jay. They were both dolled up for the dance, and Sasha’s daughter thrust her band uniform and flute case at her.

The kids said goodbye, repeated the farewell at Jacob's car, then headed for Richard's car, overnight bags slung over their shoulders.

Sasha started her car and joined the line of vehicles leaving the parking lot.

Half an hour later, she sat on her living room couch, watching a marathon of House Hunters and snuggling with one of her foster cats, when her video doorbell sounded. On the television, an image of the person at her door appeared in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. Puzzled, she squinted at the image.

Jacob Romero.

She paused the show, got off the couch, and went to the door.

"You never did tell me if you'd have coffee with me," he said.

# Chapter One

## *Sasha*

“You know the best part about walking out on your fiancé on your wedding day?” Camille White asked, looking around the table at the other women seated there.

Sasha didn't know if this was Camille trying to put up a brave front, or if she was really ready to talk about the humiliation that was her wedding day back in June.

Camille did a shot of tequila in the time-honored tradition. She licked salt off her hand, tossed back the shot, then sucked on a lime wedge. Then she made the sourpuss expression of someone who has just done a tequila shot.

Camille reached for another shot, but Sasha moved it away from her friend. Camille seriously needed to slow her roll with the tequila shots.

“You get to keep the gifts, but you don't have to pick up your husband's dirty underwear and socks?” asked Holly Oleander.

“I returned all the gifts,” Camille said. “Though I still have the wedding dress. Haven't figured out what I want to do with it.”

“Actually, her mother and I returned the gifts,” Sasha informed the group. “While our runaway bride was off making good her escape, Mama White and I were left to pick up the pieces...”

“Hey now,” Camille said, throwing a balled-up napkin at her former maid of honor. “I seem to remember you were not on board with my marriage to Darren.”



Moonbeam Upshaw, a world traveler Camille befriended in Asia, spoke up then, wanting to know more about the story of Camille dumping her ex-fiancé.

Moon was a petite woman with a bronze complexion, large green eyes, and a headful of red corkscrew curls, and she was devouring nachos like it was going out of style. She wore jeans, a flowy top, and Birkenstock sandals with socks in the winter. She was clearly a hippie and so different from the girls they had hung out with in college that Sasha couldn't help but wonder how they had managed to become friends in the first place.

“You might not have to tell Moon,” Holly put in. “But I’ve been dying to hear the whole story about you and Darren. I mean, I didn’t think you should marry him either, from what all you’ve told me, but I’m not nosy enough to have found out what really went down.”

“Darren thought we should wait until after marriage to have sex,” Camille said in a rush. “He handed over our wedding prep to his mother, and we wound up with, like, 200 people at the wedding, most of whom I had never met before. We were supposed to pray before the ceremony, but instead, I found him getting it on with some floozy in a utility closet. I grabbed my luggage and ran away in my limo with a fat, orange cat.”

The story spilled out in one long rush of words. Sasha, who already knew the sordid details, helped herself to more nachos and a shot of tequila. Holly frowned and availed herself of her first serving of nachos, chewing thoughtfully. Moon pursed her lips.

“You ran away with a fat, orange cat?” Moon echoed.

Camille blinked at Moon. “That’s the detail you latch onto?”

Moon shrugged. “Adultery is nothing new,” she pointed out. “Running away in a limo with a cat is what *really* makes the story.”

Holly fixated on a different aspect of the story. “You were with Darren...three years?”

“Mm...hmmm...” Camille confirmed.

“And you were totally celibate that whole time?” Holly asked.

“Yep,” Camille said, reaching for the shot of tequila she had earlier been denied.

Moon, Holly, and Sasha all exchanged meaningful looks.

“So...when did you break your sex fast?” Sasha asked. She had no idea Camille had gone that long without sex, and she realized she and her friend had grown apart in recent years. Sasha frowned as she considered her friend might not have felt comfortable telling her what was really going on with her relationship with Darren.

“I haven’t gotten around to that yet,” Camille admitted with a shrug. “I was too busy quitting my soul-sucking job. Globetrotting. Making new friends.” She smiled at Moon.

The server stopped by their table to check on them. When she moved on to her next table, Sasha spoke up.

“Well, obviously, we’ll need to rectify that while you’re in town for the holidays,” Sasha said.

“Absolutely,” said Holly. “Your cherry needs a good re-popping.”

“You need a good dicking-down,” Moonbeam agreed. “I’m surprised you didn’t take care of that when you were on the road.”

*I wouldn’t mind a good dicking-down myself*, Sasha mused. She thought wistfully of Jacob Romero and the night of the homecoming game. It had been two months since that night, when Jacob had made her scream until her throat was raw. She’d sucked on throat lozenges for the rest of that weekend.

As her mind drifted back to that night, Sasha missed part of the conversation. She blinked herself back to attention and focused..

“Fat Joey?” Holly was saying.

“The fat, orange cat,” Sasha supplied, thinking of the often-annoying cat who had moved into her cat menagerie and tormented her foster cats with his bossy behavior.

“I traveled the country with Fat Joey for a couple of months, but when that didn’t scratch my itch, I brought him here for Sasha to take care of,” Camille said. “If you ever need someone to take care of a pet, Sasha is your girl.”

Sasha’s mind wandered to homecoming game night again, but snapped back to the conversation when she heard, “fuck-it.”

“Phuket?” Holly asked, pulling out her iPhone to look it up. After a moment, she said, “That’s not exactly the way I thought that would be spelled.” Sasha clued in quickly that they were discussing a region in Thailand, one of the places Moon and Camille had traveled.

“How did you think it would be spelled?” Moon wanted to know.

“I mean, it makes sense that it would be spelled P-H-U-K-E-T, but I want to pronounce it ‘fuck-it,’” Holly said with a shrug, poking at the screen of her phone. “There’s even a subreddit of people who want to pronounce it ‘fuck-it.’ Imagine that.”

Sasha coughed at the absurdity of the conversation, then felt a piece of spicy nacho get sucked into her sinuses. Her eyes watered and she gulped water to collect herself.

Camille grabbed Holly’s phone, and all four women peered at the screen.

“There are pages and pages of Reddit comments,” Sasha laughed, amazed that people spent time on such things. “These are obviously people who need real hobbies. People who need to spend less time on the internet, it seems.”

The women continued to drink and chat as the jukebox played and conversations swirled around them. Camille had taken off on an extended travel quest after the disaster that was Darren’s betrayal back in June. It was now just a few weeks until Christmas, and Camille had decided to spend the time in Center City with her new gal pal Moonbeam Upshaw. Sasha was happy to see Camille bouncing back from the ill-fated engagement.

“So, girlfriend, what’s next for you?” Sasha asked Camille, giving her a shoulder check to get her attention.

“I don’t really know yet,” said Camille. “I walked out on Darren, quit that horrible job, and went on this long travel quest, thinking it would give me some clarity, but I’m not sure what I want to do next, honestly. And by the way, circling back on our last conversation, the best part about walking out on your fiancé on your wedding day is the ability to go to

places like ‘fuck-it’ without having to argue with someone else about it.”

“Well, first things first,” Sasha said. “Obviously, you need to get laid.”

“Obviously is right,” Holly said. “And guess what? I know of a couple of prospects. My awesome hubby and designated driver Tor is meeting with a couple of new business associates this evening before we go back to St. Louis.”

“I don’t need to be fixed up on some blind date,” Camille frowned, putting up a hand in a ‘not today, Satan’ gesture.

“Who said anything about dating?” Holly said. “You know Travis Beckett? He runs Adventure Goat Ranch just outside of town? He’s meeting with Tor tonight, and I’m pretty sure he’s single. And he’s hot as hell.”

“A townie? No thanks.” Camille gave a dismissive wave of her hand. “I’m planning to hang out around here for a couple of weeks. I feel like I need to stay away from the hustle and bustle of the city for a while, at least for the next few weeks. I’m going up to Chicago to pick up my car at my mom’s place, then coming back here. And guess where I’m staying? The goat ranch. I don’t want to sleep with my landlord.”

Undaunted, Holly continued with her sales pitch.

“The other guy I’ve only heard about, but I know he’s a little older, but very successful,” Holly said. “I think Tor said his name was Andrew...something. He lives in Chicago. They’ll all be here soon. They are out at the ranch planning how they will add cabins to the property.”

Camille seemed to be considering this. Sasha didn't want to miss the rest of the conversation, so she said, "Hold that thought. I'm going to check out the jukebox."

All the talk about getting her friend set up with someone made Sasha think of Jacob. What had started as a crush was now threatening to turn into an obsession. The time they'd spent together the night of homecoming had done nothing to make her magically smooth around the guy. So, for the most part, she had avoided crossing paths with him. It wasn't easy in a town where respective jobs kept them in front of many people in the course of the day. She was the town's cat doctor, after all, and he was the AP History teacher at the high school.

Whenever she saw him, she startled like any of her patients would, only without the hissing and puffy fur. She just went the other direction, and quickly.

Except when she didn't see the guy coming.

When a strong hand touched her elbow as she made her selections at the jukebox, she knew before he even opened his mouth that she had, at last, been caught.

His deep baritone made her skin vibrate, and she went all gooey inside. "Hello, *querida*. Fancy meeting you here."

## Chapter Two

### *Jacob*

“Hello, *querida*,” Jacob said, taking pleasure in how Sasha’s eyes went wide with surprise and her skin flushed when she saw him.

Then she apparently remembered she was avoiding him and scowled before looking around furtively.

“They won’t let Madison in here,” he told her. “She’s under twenty-one. You can say hi to me in public without bursting into flames.”

She sighed. “It’s not like that,” she said, shrugging his hand off and turning her back to him. It was hard to find fault with her doing this since he was treated to the incomparable sight of her attractively rounded backside in her skinny jeans.

“Then what is it like?” he asked.

He already knew what she was going to say. It’s what she’d been saying ever since he’d appeared on her doorstep the night of homecoming, when she’d laid down the terms of their relationship: booty call, and nothing more. At the time, it had been easy to agree with her. That was before he’d actually gotten horizontal with her, and now he was obsessed with her. Just enough to look for excuses to cross paths with her, not enough that she’d take out an order of protection against him.

Jacob tried to focus on what she said to him at the moment. She was so hot when she had that stern, businesslike expression on her face...

“Madison is almost ready to leave the nest,” Sasha said. “I don’t want her to feel like she isn’t the most important thing in my life. I’m sorry if you can’t live with that, but we’ve already discussed this.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and rocked on his heels. She made a show of selecting songs on the jukebox, then she turned around to confront him again.

“Look, I’m not in the market for a relationship at the moment,” she said. “Madison—”

“Is a grown woman who knows her mother deserves companionship,” he interrupted. “And I do not think Madison is the true reason why you keep avoiding me. I think maybe you’re out of practice and afraid to try again.”

“I think you should just move onto someone else,” Sasha said forcefully, but her bottom lip trembled.

“Why would I do that when I find you so intriguing?” he asked, unable to keep the humor out of his voice.

Her eyes made another quick sweep of the room, settling momentarily on a group of women at a booth across the room. One of the women in the group nudged another one, then nodded at Sasha and Jacob, then gave Sasha a thumbs-up and grinned.

“Are those your girls?” he asked.

“Two of them are,” she said. “The other one is someone Camille picked up in Vietnam.”

“Camille...your friend who ran out on her wedding?” he asked.



“I told you about her?” she blinked, looking truly perplexed.

“We covered a lot of ground that night,” Jacob said, the pitch of his voice dropping, the words coming out more than a little gritty.

Sasha blushed again, involuntarily chewing her bottom lip and looking away. She was so pretty and sweet that he wanted nothing more than to pull her into his arms and kiss the hell out of those soft, wet lips.

“If you opened yourself up to me, we could cover even more ground,” he said, watching her eyes dart around nervously.

“Look at me, *querida*.”

Her big, doe-like eyes stared up into his. Sasha seldom wore more than a little bronzer, clear lip gloss, and mascara. He imagined her work as a veterinarian led to a no-frills personal style, and he didn't mind it one bit. Her nose and cheeks were dusted with pinprick freckles.

They stood there looking at each other. There was heat and a little anger in her bottomless dark eyes, and that turned him on. His dick swelled in his jeans, and he had to admit this was one of the reasons he went out of his way to talk to her when he was able to sneak up on her.

He put a hand on her sweater-clad arm and squeezed. Her breath caught in her throat. He could tell she was as affected by his presence as he was by hers. He understood her reluctance to get involved with someone and the need to put her child first. As the single father of a college-bound high school junior, he himself was in the same boat. In the years since he'd been divorced from Jason's mother, he'd put his child's needs first. Hell, he put his whole family first in his

life, and it was only when he met Sasha that he considered truly getting involved with a woman again.

He decided he'd done enough to keep himself top of mind with Sasha for the evening. She was at Pookie's with her girls, and he should avoid interrupting time with friends. He would see her again around town. He just had to be patient. He left her to finish at the jukebox after saying a polite good night to Sasha and chin lift of acknowledgement to her girls.

Jay was out with friends that Friday evening. The teen had been socializing more since he joined the yearbook staff. Jacob was glad his son had found it so easy to make friends after moving to a new town hundreds of miles away from where he'd been born and raised.

This left Jacob at loose ends for the evening, not something that happened often to a single father. There was no practice to take Jay to, no assembly to attend, no last-minute project requiring poster boards and duct tape. They had moved into an apartment over the summer, and Jacob hadn't yet purchased a home. As a result, he had no home improvement projects to attend to. He was an anomaly among his teaching peers: a single father under forty. Jacob wasn't as outgoing as his boy, so he hadn't really made a lot of friends in town yet.

He decided to stop by his mother's house on his way home. When he pulled up in front of her little blue bungalow, there was a light on in the living room and the blue glow of the television coming through the windows. He knocked on the door, but when there was no answer, he pushed it open and walked in.

Cecelia Romero sat on the living room couch; the television tuned to Dancing with the Stars. Her good friend Marla sat next to her. There was a small bowl of chips on the coffee table in front of them. Cecelia's eyes lit up when she saw her son.

“*Jacobo! Mijo!*” she cried, hopping up and hurrying over to him. She gave him a hard hug, her tiny, birdlike arm bones poking him. “What are you doing here?”

Jacob embraced her and looked down at her fondly, bemused but extremely pleased by the greeting. His mother always made him feel as if she'd been waiting all day to see him. Like she hadn't seen him in a year, even though it had only been a few days ago when he'd taken her to Sunday Mass.

“*Hola, Mamá,*” he said, then he nodded at Marla, a tall black woman who had been one of his mother's best friends for years. “I just came by to say hello.”

He realized the fact that he was hanging with his mother on a Friday night made him a mama's boy, but he was okay with that.

“Good, you can come in and look at the garbage disposal,” Cecelia said brightly. He followed her into the kitchen.

“Tell me why you're here tonight, rather than with a girl,” his mother asked, getting straight to the point. She opened the sink cabinet and pointed to it in a gesture that said, *get to work*.

He took out his phone and turned on his flashlight app to figure out what was going on under there. As his mother looked on, he removed all the cleaning items, including the mega-sized jug of Fabuloso, a pair of yellow rubber gloves, a

box of Brillo pads, and assorted rags made from worn bath towels stuffed in a dollar-store bucket. All were fixtures of his childhood.

“Turn on the disposal,” he said.

Flipping the switch produced a humming noise, but nothing else happened. She flipped the switch off again.

“See what I mean?” she said, looking frustrated. “It’s been like that since yesterday.”

Jacob hit the tiny red “reset” button on the side of the disposal unit. “Try it again,” he said.

She flipped the switch on again. When nothing happened, she switched it off again.

Jacob ducked into the garage and came back with a wooden broom. He used the handle to poke around in the disposal, trying to determine whether the impeller was stuck.

“So, answer the question, boy,” his mother said. “You’ve been here since the summer. When are you going to get a girlfriend?”

Jacob struggled for the right words. Should he tell his mother that he’d been semi-obsessed with the town’s cat doctor since he’d first seen her during parent’s night back in August? That the time they spent together on Homecoming night in October had been the most exciting he’d ever experienced? But that he’d since been unsuccessful in his attempts to get her to date him?

“I’m busy, *mamá*,” he hedged. “I have a son to raise. You know that.”

“Your son is a big boy,” she said. “He has his own life. He doesn’t need you hovering over him all the time.”

Jacob moved the broom handle around the disposal and could not feel anything like an obstruction.

“Your mom is right,” said another female voice from the kitchen doorway. “You need a girl.”

It was Marla.

Great. Two meddling females trying to run his life. They were both retired and had time to nose into others’ business. His mother had no other children in town, and he was the only of her four children who did not have a life partner. He could feel his face grow hot under Marla and Cecelia’s scrutiny.

Realizing the broom handle trick wasn’t going to work, Jacob stopped what he was doing and pulled up a Wikihow article on how to fix a garbage disposal.

“I’m going to check the breakers in the basement,” he grumbled.

In the basement, he dawdled over the breaker box, taking his time finding the correct switch, turning it off, and waiting several minutes to turn it back on. He could hear the women upstairs, no doubt chatting about him.

Finally, he could linger no more and trudged up the steps to the kitchen. Both women watched him expectantly as he flipped the switch and the disposal started to whir with purpose.

Cecelia smiled. “You’ll make a good husband someday,” she said. “Good looking, smart, a great father, and you can fix anything!”

“I wish I knew someone to fix you up with,” said Marla.

“I was a husband before,” he reminded her. “It didn’t work out so well.”

Jacob had married his ex while he was in college, after she got pregnant with Jay. A shotgun marriage, doomed from the start, though Jacob didn’t regret a moment of it. He wasn’t sure that his ex-wife felt the same. They’d gotten divorced when Jay was five and his ex had signed over full custody to Jacob. She hadn’t been ready to give up her youth for her child, and Jacob tried to be okay with that. It wasn’t like he had any choice in the matter.

“You were both so young,” Marla pointed out. “It was a starter marriage.”

Jacob supposed that was a valid point.

“I’ve only been here a few months,” he said. “If it was meant to happen, it would happen.”

Jacob put everything back under the sink and ran the disposal again with running water to verify everything functioned properly. Then he picked up the old broom and went to put it in the garage.

As he prepared to turn off the light, he heard the sound of crying coming from a corner of the garage. Frowning, he went to investigate, moving a bag of lawn weed and feed out of the way to see better. There, he found a small black cat shivering on the concrete floor. When the cat saw him, it let out a piteous whine. Jacob knelt down and offered the tiny kitten his fingers to sniff. The cat first hissed at the intrusion, then rubbed its nose against Jacob’s hand.

“Poor little guy,” Jacob said, his voice soothing. “How did you get in here?”

The kitten meowed again and blinked up at Jacob. The eyes were pale green and the needle-sharp fangs were bared in a show of bravado more than aggression. Jacob rubbed the side of the kitten’s neck, then stroked the fur along its back. The poor thing was nothing but skin and bones.

“Will you let me pick you up?” Jacob asked.

The kitten meowed again, almost as if it understood the question. Jacob slipped a hand under the kitten’s belly and lifted it up. The kitten was light as a feather, trembling in his hands. He checked it for fleas and was surprised there were none, although the kitten was pretty dirty.

Jacob held the kitten close to his chest and took the stairs up to the kitchen.

“Whoa!” Marla exclaimed.

“Where did you get that?” Cecelia asked.

“This isn’t your cat?” Jacob joked.

“You know Marla is allergic to cats,” Cecelia admonished her son.

“I was just kidding,” he said, continuing to scratch the kitten’s neck. The kitten purred like an outboard motor. “You must have some covert entry point in your garage somewhere. You should check it out when it’s daylight. You don’t want raccoons or rats waltzing into the garage.”

“What are you going to do with that cat?” his mother asked.

Jacob sighed. It had been a couple of years since he and Jay had had a pet, and it hadn't been on his mind. His landlord didn't mind tenants having pets, so long as there was a deposit for any damage the animal might do.

"I don't know," Jacob said, still rubbing the cat and thinking 'Bones' might be a good name for it. "I'll take it home with me tonight. Get it some food and some kind of litter pan until I can find a rescue or something."

His mother looked at him skeptically. "Really?"

He met his mother's eyes, dark and hooded like his own, and fessed up.

"Probably not, at least for the short term," he said. "It's the weekend, and this little guy needs some TLC. Food, a bath, and...cuddles."

Marla beamed at him. "You're a good man, Jacob," she said. "When I come over to visit, I'll be sure to take my Benadryl first."

The two women sent Jacob on his way with a shoebox to hold the kitten in and a can of tuna.

Jacob had never before had a cat. He and Jay were mostly dog people, but this cat was pretty cute.

*Bones needs me*, he told himself as he placed the shoebox on the seat next to him in his Explorer. Bones needed love and care, and the two Romero men were well equipped to provide both.

Plus, as a responsible cat owner, he'd have to take the little thing in for a vet appointment as soon as possible.



It was a good thing he happened to know a vet who worked exclusively with cats.

## Chapter Three

### *Sasha*

The next morning, Sasha picked up Camille and Moon at the A-frame at the goat ranch. The three of them had breakfast with Holly at Cookie's, the diner across the street from the dive bar, Pookie's. Sasha hadn't been all that interested in getting drunk the night before, so she had no real hangover, but she enjoyed catching up with Holly and Camille, as well as Camille's new friend, Moon. Camille needed to retrieve her car from the parking lot at her mother's in Chicago. She had planned to take the train, but was miserably hung over. The girls managed to talk Camille out of taking the train, afraid their friend might nod off to the swaying motion of the train and risk getting rolled by some Amtrak hobo.

Andrew Huxley, the hot investor dude who they'd met the night before, would be taking Camille home instead. Andrew was a business partner to Holly's husband, Tor. Andrew lived in Chicago and, taken with Camille the night before, had invaded their girls' breakfast, brandishing a Bloody Mary and volunteering to drive Camille home. Andrew had a gorgeous Cadillac Escalade, big and imposing and worthy of any successful rap artist. Camille had protested taking the ride from Andrew, but had acquiesced in the end. Sasha had given her friend her overnight bag and bid her adieu before heading to work.

Feline Friends, Sasha's vet practice, kept short hours on Saturdays, nine to noon. Sasha arrived a bit after the posted opening, her trusted vet tech Noah having opened the practice

for her. Her first patient had not yet arrived, so she busied herself with checking on an emergency case that had come in a few days earlier, a Siamese that had slipped out of the family's home and run into the street, then been hit by a car. Luckily, the car hadn't been moving very fast, and the cat suffered only one broken hind leg. It had been touch and go whether she would keep her leg, but since the cat had been brought in right after the accident happened, Sasha was able to avoid amputation. Hershey should make a full recovery, although she might wind up with a limp. The cat was staying at the vet in order to keep her sedated and let the leg heal a bit before going home to a houseful of pets.

Sasha spent the morning doing checkups, treating one cat for a urinary tract infection, tending to a pregnant calico, and doing paperwork. She let Noah go at eleven thirty, since she didn't have any more appointments scheduled, and she was sure she could hold down the fort for half an hour by herself.

As Sasha sat behind the tall reception desk and flipped through the latest issue of *Pet Medicine Today*, the bell over the door sounded, announcing a new arrival. She put a smile on her face for her late-arriving walk-in—a smile that quickly faded when she saw the familiar sexy face of the man who had plagued her dreams for weeks. He looked even better than she remembered in faded jeans, a dark red sweater, and a scarred brown bomber jacket that had obviously been worn for years.

She blinked with annoyance, wondering whether he had shown up at her place of work to pester her for a date. She was finding it more difficult to resist his charms. She imagined him standing in front of a classroom of teenagers, wearing a dress shirt, tie, and well-fitting dress trousers, and also the tortoise-

shell framed glasses she had occasionally seen him wear, delivering a lively lecture on the Louisiana Purchase or whatever, with that slight Texas drawl. She had heard he was a popular teacher, and she was sure many of his students had fantasies about him, just as she did.

She opened her mouth to ream him out for not taking “no” for an answer when he gave her a very sincere, pleading look and said, “I need your help.”

He placed a cardboard box on the counter and nodded at it, as if that explained everything. She sighed and reached for the box, pausing when she heard a soft rustling sound coming from inside. Brows furrowed, she picked it up, opened the lid, and found a small black kitten inside.

Sasha had been a vet for more than a decade and should no longer be impressed or moved by any cat to cross her path. For the most part, she wasn't, except she had a ridiculously mushy soft spot for black cats.

“Oh my God, he's so tiny!” she exclaimed, slipping a hand under the kitten's belly and gently lifting it out of the box. She did a quick gender check and discovered it was a male.

“Where did you get him?”

“It's a boy? He was in my mother's garage,” Jacob said, his voice husky and deep, sending shivers over her body. Thank goodness she still wore her lab coat, because she could feel her headlights come on inside her padded bra cups.

“He's a stray, huh?” she asked, cupping the tiny critter in her hands. “Must have gotten separated from mama or something. I'm surprised he made it this far. I'm guessing he was the runt of the litter.”

She walked over to the door, locked it, and headed for the exam room without saying a word to Jacob, who simply followed without being asked. She placed the kitten on the metal examination table and picked up her stethoscope to try to listen to his heart. He began to spit and hiss at her, as if they hadn't just made friends.

“Spicy, huh?” she chuckled. “You’re a little firecracker, aren’t you?”

“Sorry about that.” Jacob’s sexy, deep voice behind her caused her to jump and spin around.

“I forgot you were there,” she laughed nervously. “He’s a little moody, isn’t he?”

“I can hold him, if that helps,” he suggested. He stood close enough to her that his spicy, masculine scent was making her head spin.

“Uh, okay,” she said, stepping aside to allow him access to the exam table.

She watched as he gently picked the little guy up and held him against his broad chest. The kitten snuggled into his chest and began to purr, looking at Sasha with big, green eyes. He was a truly pretty cat.

“Hm,” she said, touching his abdomen and feeling his tiny ribs. Then she gently raised his upper lip to examine his canines. “He’s small for his age, but he’s healthy as far as I can tell.”

“How old do you think he is?” he asked.

“Most likely, seven or eight weeks, though he’s the size of a four- or five-week-old,” she said.

“How can you tell?” he asked.

“He has all his milk teeth, he’s steady on his feet, and he has his adult eye color,” she said. “Are you going to keep him?”

“I’ve never had a cat before,” he shrugged, looking uncertain.

“Cats are great companions,” Sasha said, smiling at him. “But you know, I’m a cat doctor for a reason. When did you find him?”

“Last night,” he said, stroking the kitten’s neck with a broad thumb.

She gently stroked the kitten, feeling his steady purr under her fingertips

“So...you kept him last night? Sounds like you’re going to keep him...forever?” she smiled.

When she smiled, she saw his reaction in his eyes. His entire face lit with pleasure, and for just a moment, she wondered what it would be like to have a man in her life who would look at her like that all the time. What would it be like to wake up to this man, his chocolate eyes, his full lips, and the sweetness that would compel him to take in a stray cat?

“Uh, what are you calling him?” she asked, biting her lower lip.

“Bones,” he said with a sheepish smile. “I had to call him something. He kept yowling all night long, and it got to be weird to just keep calling him ‘cat’.”

She giggled.

“Bones is a good name,” she said. “Bones Romero. It has a nice ring to it.”

“I’m more of a dog person,” he confided. “I never expected a cat to whine all night. That’s what puppies do.”

“He was probably scared,” she said. “New environment, not sure what was happening, he was agitated. Did you get him a litter box?”

“I stopped at Wal-Mart and got a few essentials for him,” he said. “He ate pretty well and seemed to know how to use the litter box. I was surprised. I’m used to potty training puppies.”

“Well, that sounds good,” she said. “So far, so good, right?”

“Until he started whining in the middle of the night,” he admitted.

“What did you do?” she asked. The kitten, still purring against Jacob’s chest, gave her a wary look but allowed her to rub him.

“I wound up bringing him into my bedroom, litter box and all,” Jacob said. “I have an en suite bath, and I put the whole works in there.”

“How did he like that?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“He yelled at me from the bathroom,” Jacob said. “He stuck his tiny little hand under the bathroom door. Why, I do not know. Did he think he was going to catch me walking by? My son finally got out of bed and demanded I let the cat out of the bathroom. Which I did.”

“And did that work?” she asked, guessing where the story was headed.

“I let him out of the bathroom, and he climbed up the side of my bed and parked himself on the pillow next to me,” he

sighed.

“I’m not sure exactly how to tell you this, but I’m pretty sure you just adopted a cat,” she said. She chuckled when she saw the look of consternation on his face.

Sasha left the room to retrieve vaccines for the kitten. They were kept in a refrigerator in the back of the clinic. It took her a few minutes to prepare the shots and grab a paper vaccine record so that she could start a patient file for Bones.

When she returned, Bones was looking up at his new person with unabashed love, purring loudly.

“I’m going to need you to hold him still,” she said.

Jacob eyed her suspiciously. “Why?”

“I need to give him his first round of vaccines,” she said.

Sasha gave the kitten his shots in his hindquarters while Bones growled and hissed at her.

“Still spicy!” she laughed.

“You seem to be okay with his bad attitude,” he said.

“Oh, he just doesn’t know me,” she assured him. “I’ve dealt with a lot worse, believe me. I coordinate a cat rescue group, and I’ve provided care for ferals for years. I have a pair of special gloves I used to handle them. They look like oversized oven mitts.”

“You have your own practice, and you run an animal rescue?” he asked.

“I sure do,” she said. “And to be specific, I don’t run the animal rescue, I just coordinate it. Most of the fosters in the



area operate independently. I help by providing free care and giving them a place to bring their cats for adoption events. “

“That’s a lot,” he remarked. “It’s commendable.”

“Let’s see if we can weigh him,” she said. She walked over to the scale and Jacob followed her, placing the kitten on the scale.

“Hm...he’s pretty small,” she said. “About 500 grams.”

“Is that bad?” he asked worriedly.

“Well, I wouldn’t call it good,” she said. “He should weigh about three times that. He’s dehydrated and undernourished. His mother may have been a feral who decided as the runt of the litter he wouldn’t survive.”

Cats were remarkably unsentimental about their offspring. It was common that a mother cat would abandon a kitten she didn’t think would survive.

Jacob’s dark brows drew together in concern.

“What can I do?” he asked. He picked Bones up and protectively cradled him to his chest again.

“You’re sure you want to keep this cat?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow. “You didn’t seem so sure a little while ago.”

“It sounds like he needs me,” Jacob conceded. “At least, for the time being.”

“Alright then,” she said. “I can’t predict outcomes, but he seems healthy to me, just small and underweight. I think if you take care of him, feed and water him, and most of all, give him love, he’ll be just fine.”

Jacob sighed with relief. “That’s good news.”

“You’ll probably want to let him sleep with you for the time being,” she said. “And get your son involved with his care. Jay seems like a caring, considerate boy. He might actually enjoy helping out.”

“He might,” Jacob said. “So long as it doesn’t interfere with his social life.”

“Tell me about it,” Sasha said, resuming her petting of the kitten. “Madison and I used to do everything together. Not so much these days.”

“Ah, but it’s good for her to have her own life, isn’t it?” he asked. “Does she spend much time with her father?”

Sasha felt relaxed around Jacob. Seeing this softer side of him definitely had her guard down. She didn’t feel as if she needed to protect herself from this man.

“She didn’t for years,” Sasha admitted. “That was his choice, not mine. He used to live in Rochester, New York. When Maddie started high school, he got a job based in Chicago, and that’s only a two-hour drive. She goes to see him about once a month for a weekend.”

Jacob’s voice was husky as he asked, “Like homecoming night?”

Sasha, who had been focused on stroking Bones, looked up at Jacob, startled. “I don’t think that’s something we need to discuss.”

“Do you mean your daughter going to Chicago or homecoming night?” he asked, his dark brown eyes boring into hers.

“Homecoming night...” she trailed off. “Look, didn’t we already discuss this? I think I made myself clear. Madison is about to go off to college, and I need to stay focused on providing for her and setting her up for success at college. I can’t afford to have any distractions. Maybe we can talk about it when she’s off to college.”

Sasha said all this with a lump in her throat. Jacob had so many exceptional qualities, things she’d want in a man if she were inclined to have one in her life.

“You mean next fall?” He looked incredulous. “Are you sure you won’t have another excuse then?”

“Maybe you should look for someone who is a little more... available,” she suggested, turning away from him, not able to look into his eyes any longer. She barely knew the guy, and yet here she was, getting emotional over a very rational decision.

“But I want you,” he said, placing a hand on her arm.

She pulled away, heading for the front desk at a brisk pace. She pulled out a file folder and the vaccination record for Bones. She focused on filling in the dates for the vaccinations and putting a sticky note on the file so Noah could make it official when he came in on Tuesday. Jacob followed her, still holding Bones. He stood on the other side of the reception desk, obviously trying not to crowd her.

“You might want to look into kitten food, if you haven’t already,” she said, keeping her eyes on her paperwork. “And there are these tubes of cat treats you can get for Bones. It’s extra calories that he needs.”

She reached under the desk and opened a drawer full of food samples.

“Food tubes, kitten formula, and kitten chow,” she said, placing each item on the desk next to the cardboard shoebox. “You may want to look into an actual animal carrier. You won’t be able to contain him in a shoebox for long.”

Jacob gazed at her with disappointed eyes. “Thanks,” he said, pocketing the samples.

She managed a feeble smile. “He really is darling,” she said. “Everything about him is completely black. Even his little nose and his toe pads.”

Jacob said nothing more as he placed Bones in the box and prepared to leave. Sasha walked him to the door so she could lock it behind him.

“Good luck!” she said with false cheer.

Jacob put the box down on one of the waiting chairs and pulled her into his arms, ignoring her protests.

He smelled wonderful. Like his own male musk, his spicy cologne, and the worn leather of his bomber jacket. His hug was warm and familiar, and she felt safe in his arms. She found herself laying her cheek on his broad chest for no good reason.

“*Querida*,” he said, making her wonder what that word meant. She hadn’t wanted to look it up, since it would mean she cared too much, wanted too much.

“We are good together,” he told her. His words whispered against her ear, rumbling from deep in his chest. He stroked her back, and she sighed.

“Jacob,” she began to protest anew, trying to pull away from him.

“You will soon realize this, and it will be before Maddie leaves for college,” he said, sounding way too confident for Sasha’s liking. “Then you’ll come looking for me. And I’ll be there.”

He broke the embrace, tilted her face up to his, and looked into her eyes. “Thank you, *querida*,” he said. “You have a good heart.”

Taking the box, Jacob walked through the door, leaving Sasha to stare after him.

# Chapter Four

## *Jacob*

“Dad! Come get your cat!”

Jacob was awakened by the annoyed protestations of his son, Jay. The kid was on the other side of the apartment and had a loud, adult male’s voice, capable of snatching Jacob out of a peaceful sleep highlighted by dreams of Sasha and her luscious lips. In his dream, he was in bed, flat on his back with Sasha crouched between his spread legs. Her dark hair was loose and wild, and she was completely naked, gazing at him with animal lust as she slowly lowered those bee-stung lips to take him in her—

“Dad!” his annoying son called out urgently.

Jacob stretched and looked down his body at the woody he sported. The damned thing stood up at a ninety-degree angle and was so hard it nearly pulsed with need.

“What?” Jacob yelled back.

“Come get this cat!” Jay yelled.

Jacob thought about the fact that his son, though only sixteen, was close to 200 pounds, built like a tank, and would normally take shit from no one. Yet, he was afraid to do what was necessary to take care of an animal that didn’t even weigh a pound. Jay had been avoiding the cat for the past week. Jacob glanced at his bedroom door, noted it was slightly ajar, and realized Bones must have gone exploring and wound up in Jay’s room.

Jacob went to use the bathroom, willing his dick to go down in the process.

“No Sasha for you, buddy,” he said to no one in particular. Jacob normally slept in the nude, but had to pull on a pair of pajama pants before seeing to his son and the kitten that was apparently terrorizing him.

In Jay’s room, he found the kitten sitting like a loaf of bread on the empty pillow next to his son’s. The diminutive kitten’s spiky black fur made him look like a crumpled sheet of black paper. His huge bat ears faced forward as if he were trying to pick up a sonar signal.

Jacob turned on his heel and retrieved his phone from his bedside table. He turned on his camera app and started snapping photos.

“Dad! What are you doing?” Jay grumbled, opening one eye after the first camera flash.

“What does it look like I’m doing? I’m documenting my two sons, for posterity,” Jacob smirked.

“Dad, do something with this cat! He’s so annoying!” Jay said.

“I think he just went to the bathroom and got in bed with me because he stinks! And he kept putting his butt in my face!”

“You know, I changed plenty of your diapers back in the day.”

Jacob switched the phone app to video and started recording.

“You shit on me, you peed on me, more times than I can count.”

“Dad! I’m sorry, but get this cat away from me!” Jay yelled, punching the pillow and rolling over with his back to the camera. Bones, startled by the violent motion, jumped about a

foot into the air and scrambled off the bed. Jacob followed the cat, still taping. It skittered out of Jay's bedroom and ran for Jacob's room, using his nails to climb the side of the bed and landing on Jacob's pillow. He blinked at Jacob, then started yelling.

Jacob turned off the camera app, tossed the phone on the bed, and knelt on the side of it, leaning on his elbows and drumming his fingers on the mattress to get Bones to come closer, which he did on his skinny little chicken-bone legs. Bones sniffed Jacob's hand as if he'd never encountered it before, tentatively and with short, jerky motions. Jacob wondered whether a cat's propensity to startle was a way of escaping predators. Bones did it all the time.

The winter break had begun, and schools were closed until well after the New Year. Jacob would be at loose ends until then, especially since he knew his son, the social butterfly that he was, would not spend much time around the house. He'd either be out of the apartment, hanging out with friends, or bringing friends over to play video games. Whatever Jay was doing, he had no interest in doing it with Jacob. And it appeared Jay also had no interest in the newest member of the family, regardless of Sasha's prediction.

Then it occurred to Jacob that making the decision to keep Bones was partly driven by the desire to get and stay close to Sasha, but also because he wanted to have another reason to connect with Jay. He had moved them to Center City to give Jay more educational opportunities in a smaller town, and to be closer to Cecelia. The flip side of giving Jay more opportunities is his son was less dependent on Jacob. Jay was



spreading his wings and would be flying away soon. Jacob knew this day would come, but he still wasn't ready for it.

Jacob picked up Bones and returned to Jay's room.

"What are you up to today?" he asked his son.

Jay rolled over in bed and sighed.

"Well, apparently, I won't be sleeping in today," he whined.

"Even though it *is* the first day of winter break."

"*Pobrecito*," Jacob teased.

"I'm supposed to go over to Maddie's house," he said.

"Oh?" Jacob asked, perking up, because Maddie's house was also Sasha's house.

"We're supposed to be going into the city," he said. "Her dad is having some kind of Christmas thing with his girlfriend and wanted Maddie to come. She wanted me to come with."

"Oh...were you going to mention it to me?" Jacob asked, wondering whether he should be annoyed that his sixteen-year-old made plans without consulting him, or pleased that Sasha was alone for the next couple of days and thus, theoretically available to spend time with him.

Jay rolled his eyes. "Dad, I'm going up to Chicago with my bestie for the weekend," he said.

"Okay, better, but that sounded like you were informing me, rather than asking me," Jacob pointed out.

"Dad, would it be okay if I spent the weekend in Chicago with Maddie?" he asked.

“Sure, son,” Jacob said. “Do you need a ride to the train station?”

“No,” he said. “Her dad is going to pick her up from her mom’s house. You can give me a ride to her mom’s house, though.”

“And probably give you some cash, right?” Jacob asked.

“Nah, *Abuelita* already gave me some cash,” he said with a teenage smirk.

There was an enormous upside to being the only close grandchild of a Mexican-American *abuelita*, Jacob mused. Cecelia and Jacob had conspired to purchase Jay his first car for Christmas. Over the past month, Jay’s *abuelita* had scoured Craigslist and social media marketplaces to find a reliable ride for Jay—a low mileage ride his son wouldn’t be embarrassed to drive. They’d found a used Ford Escape that while a decade old, had only about 90,000 miles on it. On one of the weekends Jay spent with Maddie in the city, Jacob had picked the car up and driven it around for a couple of days, to make sure it wasn’t a lemon. Then he and Cecelia stored it in Marla’s storage unit until Christmas. The plan was to put a bow on it and park it in front of Cecelia’s house to be discovered by Jay when father and son arrived to visit on Christmas morning.

“Let’s have breakfast, and I’ll drive you over there,” Jacob said. “Since you’ll be gone for the weekend, you need to do your chores before you go over there.”

They ate pancakes and spent the morning cleaning the apartment before Jacob dropped Jay off at Maddie’s house,

where Richard's white BMW was parked. Jacob got out of the car to acknowledge the parents and see the kids off.

He hadn't seen Sasha in a week and his heart skipped a beat when he saw her. She wore plaid flannel shorts, a long-sleeved Henley top, and a pair of fuzzy pink indoor booties. Her legs were long, lean, and sexy. He was surprised she wasn't freezing, but he was glad for the opportunity to get a good look at that fine, brown skin of hers. Jacob noticed Richard's gaze lingering over Sasha's legs, and his eyes narrowed. Didn't that fool already have a girlfriend who was helping him throw a Christmas party the kids were about to attend? Richard had had his chance with Sasha and had blown it. He had no standing to admire Sasha's legs.

Although...Sasha smiled at the guy pleasantly, a smile that lifted the corners of her mouth and crinkled the corners of her eyes. Clearly, she still had positive feelings toward her ex.

At last, the asshole drove away with the kids, with Sasha standing on the front porch smiling until they turned the corner at the end of the block. Then the radiant smile abruptly fell, and she made eye contact with Jacob. He'd been leaning against the driver's side door of his Explorer, legs crossed at the ankle. He made to walk up the neat little brick path to her front door in order to chat with her, but she closed the door before he could make it that far.

The message was obvious: go away, Jacob.

That's okay, he told himself. He had time on his hands since his son was out of town. He had cleaned his house. He could take care of things he'd been putting off, like grocery shopping and looking for Christmas gifts. He hadn't gotten anything for

his nieces and nephews back in Texas, nor had he gotten any stocking stuffers for Jay and Cecelia. He also needed to get something for Marla.

He visited the local mall and found art supplies for Jay and crafting kits for Marla and Cecelia. He window-shopped for games for the kids back in Texas, then went online to order them and have them delivered, wrapped to go under their respective Christmas trees.

He went home, hung out with Bones, ate dinner, then sat in front of the flatscreen, flipping idly through channels, feeling restless.

Finally, he carefully lifted Bones off his lap, switched off the television, and went to dress for a run.

He found the cold invigorating rather than daunting. It felt good to fill his lungs with cold, Midwestern air. He'd assumed when they'd moved to town the cold would be a major downside, but Center City wasn't known for the sort of brutal winters common in Midwestern cities like Chicago and Detroit. The winter had been pleasantly mild, with only a couple of incidents of snow flurries that hadn't accumulated. He liked the winter weather and couldn't wait until it really snowed. Houston only offered a couple of weeks of winter weather a year, and it only snowed every few years, a snowfall that rarely accumulated.

He stretched for a few minutes, then set off on a route that took him past the hospital complex, the high school, the town's biggest green space which the townies affectionately called the "Family Reunion Park," the cat clinic, and finally,

Sasha's house. He slowed just a little when he passed the cute little brick bungalow with its enclosed front porch.

Jacob had run past her house more times than he could count, and he had long ago memorized the cute little bungalow. It had a brick and siding exterior which had all been painted a pale green color. A few concrete steps led to the enclosed porch, windowed on all three sides. There were window planter boxes all around the front and sides of the porch.

A light shone from the living room, and he could see she had a Christmas tree set up, presumably in preparation of being decorated. He remembered what was there before. She had orange Halloween lights adorning the window boxes, and paper cutouts of ghouls, witches, and vampires taped to the porch windows. The front yard had been staked with plywood headstones. It was obvious that trick-or-treaters were welcomed at this house.

That fit her personality, he'd thought at the time. Someone who loved to take care of animals probably also loved children in adorable costumes.

*She just doesn't love history teachers,* he mused.

Not that he was looking for her to love him... was he?

He shook off thoughts of the L word and let his mind travel back to his visit to her clinic. She had seemed to warm up to him when he'd brought Bones. They had had a moment at the end there. It had taken everything in him to contain himself to giving her a hug, instead of pulling her voluptuous body hard against his and crushing his lips to hers. He wanted desperately to feel her soft curves against him.

He saw a car pull up to Sasha's house, a blue Mercedes, and his senses went on alert. Was she seeing some rich guy?

But two women got out of the car carrying overnight bags. He ducked behind a large oak tree like a movie villain. When he snuck a glance around the tree, he saw Sasha welcome the two women into her sanctuary, then close the door behind them. Some kind of girls' night activity, he guessed. Jacob waited a moment, then took off for home.

In his apartment, he showered, applied a touch of cologne, and dressed in a waffle-weave, long-sleeved t-shirt in a deep blue color that he'd been told made his deep olive complexion appear to glow with health. He threw on faded jeans and a pair of Timberlands, along with a shearling vest. Instead of eating a true meal, he made himself a sandwich consisting of chunks of rotisserie chicken, rolled up in a flour tortilla, with a squirt of mustard for flavor. He washed it down with water, swishing it around in his mouth to dislodge any possible food particles in his teeth, then decided to go the extra mile and re-brush his teeth.

As Jacob stood at the bathroom sink inspecting his appearance like a freshman on his first day of high school, Bones watched the proceedings with rapt attention, bat-like ears perked up with interest. He paused to cuddle the little guy, then checked his food, water, and litter. All seemed fine, so he threw on his leather bomber jacket and headed out the door.

Jacob stopped for gas, even though he knew he already had three-quarters of a tank left. As he stood and watched the display on the gas pump eat up his money, he wondered what the hell he was doing. Was his plan to drive by her house like a

lovesick teen, as he had done many times before? If he wasn't careful, she'd spot him and possibly even call the cops on him. He knew he wasn't being rational, but he drove past her place, anyway.

He reasoned he was not stalking her. He was merely driving by her place to make sure everything was okay for her and her guests. Sasha was a single woman, after all. He was being a good friend.

He stopped a few doors away from her house, parking and turning off the car. He then took his phone and in order to look less suspicious, made a show of looking through it. If asked, he had a perfectly good excuse for parking here.

He was so intent on surreptitiously watching the house from behind his phone he didn't realize anyone was approaching his car until he heard knocking on his window.

Jacob jumped so hard he dropped his phone. He made out a person wearing an ordinary winter jacket, but the person held a lit flashlight that temporarily blinded him, so he couldn't make out much more about the person.

"Roll your window down, please sir," the person said. He or she moved the flashlight out of Jacob's eyes, and he blinked. Was he finally being pulled over by police?

After he put the window down, he realized the person was a woman, and the woman wore a black t-shirt under her winter jacket that said NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH in white letters. She had a ball cap that matched the t-shirt. She was an older woman, well into her sixties with a pleasant face, a cloud of curly gray hair, and bright blue eyes. She smiled at him. Next

to her was a man of similar age and wearing similar attire. It wasn't the police, but it *was* the neighborhood watch.

"Sorry about that, sir," she said, putting the small flashlight in her jacket pocket. "I didn't mean to scare you. We're with the neighborhood watch. I'm Ellen, and this is my husband, Clarence."

Jacob managed a wan smile and a little wave.

"We've noticed your car driving down the street on a couple of occasions," Clarence said gruffly. The man was muscular, brown, and bald. He looked familiar, but Jacob couldn't place him.

"Ah, yes," Jacob said, ready to use his pre-rehearsed excuse as to why he was meandering the neighborhood. "I'm new to the area and haven't quite found my way around town yet. I hope there haven't been any complaints."

"No complaints," Clarence said.

"We just like to keep on top of any suspicious vehicles," the woman said, then hastened to add, "Not that your vehicle is suspicious. Or you, for that matter."

Jacob could appreciate that these folks were simply keeping an eye on the neighborhood, not racially profiling him. They seemed sincere.

"You might be suspicious," Clarence said, popping Jacob's racial harmony bubble.

"I'm sorry to cause any worry," Jacob said. "I teach history at the high school."

Ellen's eyes lit up.



“Oh, you do?” Ellen exclaimed with delight.

“Yes, I took over for Mr. Newton,” Jacob said. He kept an eye on Sasha’s door as he spoke with the couple. “He had a triple bypass over the summer. I moved up here with my boy from Houston.”

“Well, that’s just great!” Ellen said. “I just retired from the school district a couple of years ago. I was the head librarian. I was so sad to hear of Mr. Newton’s health issues.”

“I hear he’s doing well, ma’am,” Jacob said. “They tell me he was about to retire, anyway.”

“I heard that too,” Ellen said.

Clarence watched Ellen and Jacob as they launched into a conversation about the various teachers and administrators at the high school. Finally, he seemed to lose patience with the conversation.

“I’ve seen you over at Sasha Norwood’s house back in October,” Clarence said impatiently. “You drive by her house; you jog by her house. Where do you live, son?”

Jacob blinked rapidly, surprised at this turn of conversation. He flushed red to the tips of his ears.

“Oh! Are you dating Sasha?” Ellen asked. “She’s a nice girl. And that daughter of hers, such a sweetheart. She used to sell us popcorn for Scouts all through elementary and middle school. Very accomplished young woman. Sasha is a very beautiful woman. You got lucky, let me tell you.”

“Well, we aren’t really dating,” Jacob said.

Ellen frowned and looked confused. “You’re not?”

“He’s probably stalking her,” Clarence deadpanned. “It’s the curse of a beautiful woman.”

Jacob was offended, even though the allegation was a little true. “I am not stalking her!” he said.

“Then you must be stalking Maddie,” Ellen said, holding a hand to her chest with alarm.

“No ma’am!” Jacob shouted in denial. Christ, the girl was in his AP History class this semester. “It’s not like that at all.”

“Are you a friend of Sasha’s, or not?” Clarence demanded.

Thinking fast, he blurted, “She’s my vet!”

“Your...vet?” Ellen looked deeply confused now.

“She’s not *my* vet,” he clarified. “I rescued a cat recently and Sasha is *his* vet.”

Clarence looked skeptical.

Jacob reached for his phone, which had hit the floor of the passenger side of his Explorer. He grabbed it, then scrolled through photos until he found several of Bones.

There was Bones, climbing one of the living room curtains with his needle-sharp claws. Hiding in a cardboard box. Sitting on Jay’s pillow as his son tried to sleep. Exploring the dishwasher. Climbing the kitchen counters to look for errant food crumbs.

“Oh, he’s darling!” Ellen exclaimed. “What’s his name?”

“Bones,” Jacob said, smiling at the photos as he said the cat’s name. Yep, he really was darling.

“Is he okay?” Ellen asked, wringing her hands with worry. “Is that why you’re here, to see Sasha about your kitty?”

“Uh...yes,” Jacob said, thinking on the fly and lying with ease. “The office is closed, and Bones isn’t well. He has some kind of tummy upset.”

“I don’t buy it,” Clarence grumbled. “There’s no reason for him to drive by all those other times.”

Jacob said nothing, but was careful to maintain eye contact, looking as sincere as he possibly could.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Clarence,” Ellen gave her husband an admonishing look. “You think a high school history teacher with a rescue cat is here to do Sasha and her daughter harm? Don’t be so suspicious!”

“If you’re really here to see the doc, why are you sitting here in your car?” Clarence demanded. “Before you said you were lost. Now you’re claiming to need help with your cat. Which one is it?”

Jacob thought long and hard about the next lie he was prepared to tell. Finally, he came up with the perfect scenario.

“I was a bit embarrassed to show up at Sasha’s house unannounced,” he said. “We never exchanged numbers, and I wanted—needed—her advice on Bones’s stomach issues. I’m really worried about the little guy.”

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed!” Ellen declared, tugging on the chrome handle of the driver’s side door. “You need to go see her! Right now!”

“If your cat is really sick, you really need to go see her, don’t you think?” Clarence stated gruffly, folding his arms over his

chest. It was clear Clarence didn't believe him, and that was aggravating. The fact that Jacob *was* actually lying did nothing to temper his annoyance.

"Yes!" Jacob said firmly. He opened his door and got out of the Explorer and closed the door. He straightened his shoulders and marched the few doors down to Sasha's house. He climbed the steps and entered the enclosed porch. When he looked over his shoulder, he saw Ellen giving him two thumbs up as Clarence continued to glower.

Jacob rang the bell, but nothing happened. Then he knocked, but heard only yelling and a television babbling in the background. Then he heard a loud crash, accompanied by female yelps of surprise.

Alarmed, he tried the front door, which was unlocked. When he walked into the living room, Sasha and the two women he'd seen earlier in the evening stood around a fake Christmas tree that was literally broken in two. A television played a Christmas movie, and there were ornaments strewn around the room. All three women wore pajamas, but Sasha had sadly changed out of the lounging shorts she'd worn earlier. She was still cute in a pair of men's boxer shorts with Santa heads scattered across the fabric and an old t-shirt with a well-worn cardigan sweater.

"It's past time you replaced this tree," one of the women pointed out. "Now maybe you can get a real one."

Sasha looked at the woman like she'd sprouted an additional head.

"I liked that tree," Sasha pouted adorably. He wanted so much to kiss those pouty lips.

“That tree was like the Charlie Brown Christmas tree come to life,” the friend retorted. “Let’s clean this mess up and figure out where we’re going to get a real one.”

“I know where to get a real tree.” Jacob couldn’t hold back from intruding.

Three heads swiveled to check him out. The two friends looked him up and down with unabashed interest. Sasha’s brows knit with consternation. Jacob couldn’t keep his eyes off her. Her hair was loose and messy, her cheeks tinged with pink color as she blinked at him.

“What are you doing here?” Sasha sputtered. “What makes you think you can just walk right in here?”

“I tried the doorbell first, but I guess you didn’t hear me,” he said, running a hand through his hair a little nervously.

“Sasha, aren’t you going to introduce us?” one of the friends asked, giving Sasha a pointed look.

“Why should I? He’s leaving,” Sasha grumped, arms crossed firmly over her unfettered breasts.

“Geez, don’t be rude,” the friend said, approaching Jacob with a hand out.

“I’m Camille White, and this is Moonbeam Upshaw,” one of the women introduced herself, then waved at Moon, who looked up from the disaster at her feet, smiled, and gave an acknowledging finger wave.

“Jacob Romero.” He shook hands with Camille, smiling warmly. She was an attractive woman with smooth skin, high cheekbones, and a full, curly Afro. Moon was a cute redhead with corkscrew curls and a round, freckled face.

But Jacob's eyes glanced over the two women. He only had eyes for Sasha, who met his interest with an unapologetic scowl.

"Jacob teaches history at the high school," Sasha said grumpily. "And apparently, he also shows up at people's houses uninvited."

"It was too late to reach you at the clinic," Jacob said. "I'm worried about Bones."

"Bones?" Moon wondered aloud.

"I'm fostering a cat I found in my mom's garage," Jacob said.

"Aww..." Moon and Camille cooed in unison.

"Yes, and whenever he has an issue, he feels like I'm the only person who can help," Sasha complained, folding her arms tightly over her chest. However, Jacob couldn't help but notice that the woman of his dreams wasn't wearing a bra, and her bosom jiggled slightly against the thin fabric of her t-shirt.

"You're not the only person," Jacob said with a smile. "But you *are* the best person."

"Let's chat on the front porch," Sasha grumbled. She snatched some kind of blanket with arms and stalked to the front porch. He followed her, closing the door behind them.

# Chapter Five

## *Sasha*

“What are you doing here?” Sasha demanded the moment the door closed behind them. The motion-activated light came on automatically, bathing them in mellow golden light.

She had wrapped her Snuggie around herself for warmth. She covered her legs and all evidence of her free-boobing status. Sasha was small on top and often went without a bra while at home, but she wasn't used to people just dropping in on her. Especially not people who featured prominently in her dirtiest dreams.

The shirt he wore made his complexion look unnaturally gorgeous. Why on earth did he look that good, damnit?

“What's wrong with Bones?” she demanded.

“Bones?” he echoed, blinking, looking confused.

“Yes, Bones,” she said.

He continued to look confused, and that was the last straw.

“There's nothing wrong with Bones, is there?” she whispered loudly. She was careful not to raise her voice, aware that Camille and Moon were probably on the other side of the door, eavesdropping.

He frowned.

“No, that was just something I said to get past the neighborhood watch,” he said. “I was actually just going to

drive by your place a couple of times. I pulled over, and this older couple accosted me.”

“Ellen and Clarence,” she mumbled. “So, in order to keep them from calling the police, you fabricated a medical emergency for your cat.”

Jacob took a moment to absorb this analysis.

“Yes,” he said, not looking even a little repentant.

“Because you’re stalking me?” she whisper-yelled. She was pretty damned mad at him.

“No,” he said. “Because I’m pursuing you.”

“You told me I would come looking for you,” she pointed out.

“That’s true,” he said, eyes intense as he stared at her. “But it’s been a week, and I’m tired of waiting on you.”

“You can’t do that,” she protested, shaking her head in disbelief.

“I can do whatever I feel is necessary to win you over,” he informed her. “The night of homecoming.”

“Don’t bring that up again,” she said, holding up a rebuking hand. “That was only supposed to happen one time. We agreed.”

“We need to come up with a new agreement,” he said. “We don’t need to come out to the kids, but we can still see each other.”

He slowly began to close the six feet of distance between them. She clutched the Snuggie around herself protectively when she saw the lustful intent in his eyes.



“Stay where you are,” she breathed, chest heaving, willing him not to take a single step more.

He walked right into her raised hand. Her palm pressed against his heart, which beat frantically under her hand.

“Why is your heart beating so fast?” she asked, a note of wonder in her voice.

“Beating fast?” he asked. His voice came out dark and husky. His warm hand enveloped hers, holding hers in place. “Maybe it’s because my heart is finally where it belongs.”

That made her melt a little.

“I can see in your eyes you’re starting to understand where I’m coming from,” he said. “You want to try, don’t you?”

Sasha pressed her lips together, but said nothing.

“Come here, *querida*,” he said, drawing her into his arms. She placed her cheek on his chest and sighed. It felt so good to be in his arms again.

He walked her over to one of the Adirondack chairs, sat down, then drew her down on his lap. She automatically pressed her face into the crook of his neck and sighed. He smelled musky and spicy as she took an experimental sniff, and he sucked in a breath.

“We don’t have to date when the kids are around,” he said.

“We can take it slowly.”

“You think so?” she asked.

“Definitely,” he said, moving a hand to hold her waist and bring her closer. Then he nuzzled her neck, making her voice tremble with desire.

“Oh,” she said. “I see. That might work.”

He buried his nose in her neck, licked the skin on the side, and breathed her in.

“You smell so good, *querida*,” he said against her skin. “Like cinnamon and apples.”

“Oh, well, it’s actually cinnamon and apples,” she admitted in a voice that rose in pitch when he gently nibbled her skin. She babbled on nonsensically. “My special apple cider recipe. People like it.”

“Do they?” he asked, trailing his lips over her skin. Her nipples tightened in response. “I’d like to try it some time.”

She arched into his touch. “Would you? I’ll make you some one day.”

He pulled away from her to examine her face. “Promise?”

“Yeah—” she started to say, but was interrupted with his mouth on hers. He claimed her lips with a groan so helpless and lusty that she moaned in response.

His mouth devoured hers. He sucked on her tongue hungrily, holding the back of her neck with his free hand to hold her still so he could do the thing he’d been dying to do for so many weeks.

“You don’t want to walk away from this feeling, do you?” he asked her huskily. “Tell me how you feel.”

“I’m really attracted to you,” she admitted. “Really, really attracted. I even have dreams about you?”

He traced the outline of her lips with his thumb. “I’m glad I’m not the only one.”

“You dream of me?” she asked in amazement.

“Just about every night,” he said.

“Sex dreams?” she asked.

“If you must know...yeah, sex dreams,” he admitted. “But not just sex dreams. I seem to have dreams about us doing things like going to the grocery store.”

“Really?” she laughed. “Were we clipping coupons?”

“Don’t remember,” he said with some regret.

“Was it Whole Foods or Costco?” she asked. She was genuinely curious about how this dream had shaken out.

“Don’t remember,” he said, kissing her neck in order to get her to focus.

“Did we have to stand in line a long time? Did we have more or less than ten items?” she murmured.

“I feel like we are getting off track,” he said. “These questions are boner killers.”

She chuckled nervously, remembering one of the less obvious reasons she avoided relationships. She always managed to say the wrong things.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be,” he told her. “I think there’s more to us than sex. Otherwise, I’d have moved on from you ages ago.”

“Really?” she said, and it was her fervent hope that he was telling her his truth, even though she’d never admit to it. She had ignored so many of her heart’s desires to focus on Maddie, her career, her business, that she had resigned herself to a

lifetime of booty calls, hastily arranged flings that might satisfy her body, but never satisfied her heart.

“Yes,” he said. “I know there is risk, *querida*,” he said. “I’m a single parent as well. Jason’s mother left us when he was five years old. I had to do everything myself, with help from my family. It wasn’t easy, and it’s hard to let go and do things for yourself.”

Sasha thought about what it had been like to be pregnant her senior year of high school. No one thought she could be a good mom at her age. With the help of her family and Maddie’s three honorary aunties, she had proven all the naysayers wrong. She was so close to launching Maddie into the world that it was hard to switch gears and start dating again. It was almost as if she didn’t want to jinx her daughter by taking her eye off the ball.

“I’m not sure dating is the way to go,” Sasha said. “At least, not right now. I don’t want word to get back to Maddie. I know it doesn’t seem rational, but she’s almost out of the house. I don’t want her to think I’m distracted when she needs me the most.”

“Then what did you have in mind?” he asked.

“We can do like we did homecoming night,” she said. “You can come over after dark. Park behind the house and we can order in, or you can bring takeout. We can hang out, watch movies, and...whatever else comes to mind.”

“So, you want a booty call?” he asked, perking up at this suggestion. Sasha wore too many layers of bulky fabric to feel him, though she knew her butt was parked right on his crotch,

and she wondered if kissing was enough to make him hard. She herself was dripping wet.

Since Jacob was a school teacher, he had a very correct, precise way of speaking. Sasha wouldn't call it pretentious, just...correct. Really correct. Before that moment, she would never have considered such a phrase as "booty call" could come out of his mouth.

"More like friends with benefits," she said, thinking that sounded a lot more benign than "booty call."

"When do you think that would happen?" he asked. He took to nibbling her neck again, making her shiver in the best way possible. She found herself wiggling in his lap, then grinding a bit. If they kept going like this, they'd be giving Ellen and Clarence, Neighborhood Watch Couple, something to report.

"Ah, well, Maddie is with her dad this weekend," Sasha said. "My girls are here tonight for a grown-up slumber party. We were supposed to be trimming the tree, but the cat sort of broke it."

"Broke your tree?" he asked as he peppered soft kisses along her collarbone.

He slid a hand under the Christmas-themed fleece of her Snuggie, under her ratty old shirt, cupped her waist, and explored the skin of her abdomen with slightly calloused fingers. Sasha was two seconds away from tossing off the hybrid blanket despite the cold evening, peeling her shirt over her head, and offering her breasts to his hands and mouth. She couldn't do that, so she shook her head to clear it.

"Anyway, we can get together tomorrow night," she said.

“What do you want to eat?” he asked.

“You don’t have to bring me anything special,” she said, then suggested, “I could make something for us.”

“This is the closest we will get to a real date, *querida*,” he said. “I want to do this properly. Or as properly as you’ll let me.”

“Just make sure you bring some fresh condoms,” she advised him. “The ones we used last time were left over from the bachelorette party we threw for Camille, and we used them up, anyway.”

He leaned back to study her face through heavy-lidded eyes. “I’ll do that,” he said. “And I’ll surprise you with dinner.”

He pulled her face close to his again and kissed her thoroughly. His beard stubble scraped her face and his wet tongue invaded her mouth. The kiss was a feast for her senses. His scent, combined with the smell of winter in the air, invaded her nostrils. The nubby fabric of his Henley was warm under her fingers. When she snaked her hands up to touch his neck and tunnel her fingers into his hair, she was stunned by how soft and thick his hair was. He tasted faintly of toothpaste, and something salty, and his whispered words caressed her ears while they also caressed her heart.

It occurred to her that she might be getting in over her head, regardless of the rules designed to put distance between herself and Jacob. But it had been so long since she’d so much as contemplated a relationship with someone that she felt she could take a chance. Jacob wasn’t objecting, was he?

“I have your number,” she said. “I’ll text you when I’m ready for you to come over, okay?”

“You have my beard marks all over your face,” he said, tracing her bottom lip with his fingertips. His expression was one of smug male satisfaction. “Will your friends know what we’ve been doing out here?”

She bobbed her head from side to side, pursed her lips, then said, “Maybe. Probably.”

“Will it get back to Maddie?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I’ll make sure it won’t.”

Moments later, she watched him walk down the sidewalk to his car. The street was silent and cold, and she could hear his footfalls on the sidewalk. She waited until he got into his SUV, turned on the headlights, drove past her house, and waved at her.

Her body had cooled as he turned the corner at the end of the block. Pulling the blanket around herself again, she went inside her house, closed the door behind her, and leaned against it with a sigh.

Camille and Moon stared at her.

“What was that all about?” Camille asked, hands on hips.

“I think you know what that was all about,” Sasha said.

“So, you...and zaddy?” Moon asked.

“Jacob Romero,” Camille corrected.

“Me and zaddy,” Sasha admitted. “But, you know, you need to keep it quiet, okay?”

“You don’t want Madison to know,” Moon stated.

“Exactly,” Sasha said.

“You’re not going to be able to keep this from her forever,” Camille said. “You should probably just tell her.”

Camille had a point, but it was a point Sasha didn’t want to acknowledge out loud.

“We’ll see,” said Sasha.



# Chapter Six

## *Jacob*

The weather had taken a turn for the worse when Jacob showed the following evening. He parked behind Sasha's bungalow and walked up the narrow path that ran along one side of her yard to her back porch, which was enclosed, just like her front porch. He had texted before he came over, then following her request, he texted again after picking up Thai food and pulling up behind her house. The back porch light next to the door was on. He brought out a paper shopping bag of takeout, set it on the ground, then reached in for the cat carrier.

Sasha waited for him on the porch dressed very casually in a pair of black yoga pants, fuzzy red Christmas-themed socks, and a black, long-sleeved t-shirt with two flame-shaped Christmas bulbs. One of the bulbs had a speech bubble that said, "Working over the holidays?" And the second bulb's speech bubble said, "Off and on." She let him into the back porch where he could just make out the shapes of patio furniture and various cat accouterments: a very tall cat tower, a basket of toys, litter pans, and food bowls.

He stopped to pull her into his body with his free hand, then planted a lingering kiss on her full lips.

"Hello," he said. He gave her another kiss and as their lips continued to touch, he asked, "How was your day?"

Sasha thought a moment about how she should answer his question. She didn't want to confess that she'd checked in with

Maddie to make sure she was actually staying in Chicago for the weekend. She'd been known to leave her dad's house early, and Sasha didn't want the girl returning while Mom was getting her freak on. Sasha has also changed her sheets, vacuumed, and took a long bath in scented water and shaved her legs. She'd even tried putting on more makeup than usual, but washed off the excess when the extra mascara made her look like her eyelids had been attacked by tarantulas.

"Good, good," she said breezily. "I sent my girls home this morning. Along with the extra cat I was taking care of. You know, the one who destroyed my Christmas tree?"

"Do you keep your cats out here?" he asked, looking around.

"Sometimes," she said. "I use this space mostly for my fosters. When it's cold, I have a space heater I use to keep them warm. I happen not to have any at the moment."

"You seem like the type who would keep them in the house with you," he said. She took the cat carrier from him and shouldered her way into the back door, which led to the kitchen. He followed her inside.

Her kitchen was bright and cheerful with white cabinets, beadboard wainscoting, and green vinyl tile. The refrigerator, dishwasher, and microwave were all white, and her range was a white, vintage affair, impeccably maintained. In one corner of the kitchen, an archway framed the small eat-in area. The table was white with a natural wood top, similar to the butcher block counters installed in the kitchen. She'd set the small table with plates, cups, and cutlery. Jacob put the bag of food on the table, then watched as Sasha placed the carrier on the floor, opened the door, grabbed Bones gently by the

midsection and brought him out. She took him and placed him in the litter pan at the far end of the kitchen. Bones sniffed the litter pan, then scratched at the litter and promptly hopped out of the pan.

“He’s a little less spicy than he was before,” Sasha told him with a smile. “Whatever you’ve done to socialize him is clearly working.”

“What I’ve done is let him sleep with me and lounge on me whenever he feels like it,” Jacob said, his smile rueful. “It’s not like I have a choice in the matter. It’s either bend to his will or listen to him scream.”

They stood side by side at the kitchen sink, washing their hands. She leaned slightly and sniffed at his neck.

“What are you doing?” he asked, pausing in the motion of lathering his hands.

Sasha said nothing, reaching for the soap bottle and squirting a bit on her hands.

“Are you sniffing me?” he demanded with mock outrage.

“Maybe...” she said slowly, blushing as she washed her hands.

“You smell good.”

“Do I?” he asked, nudging her with an elbow.

“You know you look good and smell good,” she said, giving him side eye. “Let’s not do the false modesty, okay?”

“You’re pretty hot stuff yourself,” he said. “And I’m sure you know that, too.”

“I’m a mom,” she told him, reaching for a dish towel to dry her hands. “And I work with animals. You already know I

don't date, so I don't spend a lot of time trying to look cute."

"I'm glad you like Thai food," he said. "I've been to this place a few times since we moved here. I got the red curry and the green curry. Also, spring rolls and basil stir fry."

"Sounds great," she said.

They sat to eat their meal, then moved to the living room to find something to watch on television and share a bottle of zinfandel. The artificial tree had been broken beyond repair, Sasha told him. "I had to drag it to the alley to be taken with the trash."

They settled in to watch *Miracle on 34th Street* and were soon joined by Bones, who had finished his reconnoiter of the house. He climbed Jacob's pant leg with his tiny, sharp claws and settled himself on his person's lap, purring contentedly. Jacob thought the kitten's position might make things tricky later.

"I was a little reluctant to leave him home alone," Jacob said sheepishly. "I hope he doesn't get in the way later."

"I think we can work around him," she smiled.

They continued to watch the movie for another few minutes until she picked up the remote and pressed pause.

"Are you into this movie?" she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

"I was, but we can watch it later if you prefer," he laughed.

"Good." She switched off the television and tossed the remote on the coffee table. "Let's go."

She grabbed his hand, and he had just enough time to move the startled Bones off his lap before she dragged him up the

stairs to her bedroom. Giggling, she backed into the bed, sat down hard, and held out her hand to him. He took it, placing a knee on the edge of her bed and smiling seductively. He pulled his sweater over his head and tossed it to the floor, along with the t-shirt underneath it.

She reached up to touch him.

“Your chest is so broad and muscular,” she said, trailing a finger down his chest, starting between his pecs and working her way down his abs. “Your stomach is nice and flat. No dad bod for you.”

He resisted the urge to beam at her compliments. He didn’t want her to think he was arrogant. “Thank you.”

He watched avidly as she lay on her back, lifting her hips to wriggle out of her yoga pants. He grabbed her ankle and dragged her closer, planted her feet on his shoulders, and peeled her leggings off, tossing them on the floor. She was left wearing nothing on bottom but fire-engine red lace panties that perfectly set off the bronze of her skin. She also wore a pair of cheerful Christmas socks that he also removed. He ran his hands along the insides of her toned thighs.

“Your skin is so soft and smooth,” he murmured. He let go of her legs and went to work on his belt and jeans. She used her big toe to trace his belly button.

“You don’t have an innie, nor an outie,” she proclaimed with a snort. She’d had two glasses of wine and was apparently a lightweight because she giggled like a schoolgirl.

“What do you think it looks like?” he asked.

“It looks like a swirl,” she said. “Or maybe the at symbol.” She traced the sign in the air with her fingertip, and she teased his belly button with her toe.

Jacob was ticklish, which she should already know, since he’d lost his shit when she’d traced it with her tongue weeks ago. He waggled a finger at her.

“You’re a naughty girl, aren’t you?” he teased. He pushed down his jeans and stepped out of them. Then he just stood there, looking at her.

“What are you waiting for?” she asked, slurring her words ever-so-slightly. A drunk Sasha was a fun Sasha. “Let me see the goods.”

He rolled his eyes, then joined her on the bed. She had made it up with white sheets and a pretty vintage quilt. Her bedroom was similar to the rest of the house. Comfortable. Vintage without making a visitor feel like visiting an elderly aunt’s house. Still, the bedroom was decidedly female in character, and he felt kind of like a pirate invading her feminine lair.

“Let’s take this top off first,” he said. He tugged at the hem of her top. She put her arms up like a small child being undressed for a bath, and he pulled the top over her head. Now she was naked except for the red lace bra that matched her panties. She was a classic pear shape, with luscious round hips and thighs, and small, high breasts. He pushed her back onto the bed and grabbed a breast, teasing the nipple through the lace. She arched into his touch and moaned, then brazenly parted her thighs for him.

He covered her breast with his mouth, sucking her nipple through the lace until she was writhing beneath him.

“Take the rest off,” she murmured huskily. “I want to feel you inside me.”

“So impatient,” he teased.

“You’ve been pursuing me for weeks now,” she reminded him.

“Why wouldn’t I be impatient?”

He chuckled and knelt between her legs, quickly positioning her legs over his shoulders. The crotch of her panties was drenched with her arousal. He burrowed his nose into the space, then sucked the fabric with his mouth.

“Stop playing with me!” Sasha whined, wriggling her hips.

He chuckled at her impatience.

He went to his knees and swung her legs over the side of the bed. He wiggled out of his boxer briefs, fished a strip of condoms out of his jeans pocket, and crouched before her on the bed. She had already removed her undergarments and had her head propped up on a pillow, legs open. Her breasts were loose and free, the dark nipples pointing at him. Her pussy was shaved down to a landing strip. She rubbed her clit, using her juices as a lubricant.

“Come on, *Papi*,” she said. “I’ve been waiting eight weeks for you.”

Yeah, he was finished dicking around, so to speak. He’d been lusting after this woman for months. He needed to be inside her immediately.

He quickly sheathed himself, pushed her hand away from her pussy, and folded her long legs up to her shoulders, before sliding in slowly, savoring the sensation of entering her.

“Ohhhh...” he sighed.

“Ungh...” she grunted.

“You feel so good,” he told her. And she did, the best pussy he’d ever experienced. Warm. Tight. Deep enough to take all of him. He had to pause a moment to collect himself as the marvelous sensation of being inside her washed over him.

He began to pound her right off the bat because he knew she could orgasm from penetration, provided the pace was hard and fast. That’s what he gave her for the next few minutes, grateful for his running habit, and also running a list of Civil War battles through his mind in order to avoid finishing too soon.

Sasha’s hair was a dark, unruly halo around her head on the white pillow as her lips formed a hollow “O” and she thrashed below him, clutching the sheets and tossing her head back and forth.

“Oh Jesus, oh God,” she babbled.

“That’s it, baby,” he encouraged. “Take my dick. Tell me how it feels to you.”

“So hard,” she panted. “So long and hard. I can feel you so deep.”

“I love this pussy,” he grunted. “I’ve never had a pussy this good.”

He was starting to sweat from the exertion of fucking her good, while simultaneously trying not to come too quickly.

Sasha was close. He could tell by the look of focus on her face, her eyebrows furrowed, chest heaving, and a keening



sound building in her throat.

“Come, Sasha,” he said, surprised at the urgent, rough tone of his voice. “Come for me, baby!”

He adjusted the angle of his hips, and that’s when her eyes rolled back in her head and she came hard, gasping and crying out. He continued to stroke into her as she floated back to earth. Her eyes were glazed and unfocused. She licked her lips and gave him a sly little smile. He collapsed on the bed next to her, watching her as all the tension left her body and she relaxed.

“That was nice,” she said.

“I agree,” he said, cupping her breast, then pinching her nipple. “Nice for orgasm number one.”

“Hey, I won’t fault you for trying again, but I’m pretty sure you wore out my pussy,” she laughed huskily.

“I think we may have had this conversation on homecoming night,” he reminded her. “And I proved you wrong then. I can prove you wrong again.”

“I had been celibate for, like, a year before we hooked up,” she said. “I had a lot of horndog saved up. You could have sneezed on me and I would have come.”

Jacob was stunned she would say such a thing. His mouth fell open, and he gaped at her.

“Excuse me,” he said, miffed. “I cannot believe you just said that to me.”

She laughed and rolled onto her side. She punched her pillow and slammed her head down on it.

“I’m pretty tired, too,” she confessed. “Maybe we should sleep.”

He narrowed his eyes and spanked one of her sexily round hips.

“Woman!” he barked.

“Oh, that’s right,” she said. “You probably didn’t finish. I don’t mind getting you off. Hang on.”

She made a jaw-loosening motion, then rolled her shoulders.

“Lay on your back,” she said.

“Oh, fuck you,” he scoffed. He flipped her onto her back and spread her legs as she squealed and squirmed. “I’m going to make you come again, you little witch!”

He dove tongue-first into her warmth, finding her clit with deadly accuracy. He held her folds open with his fingers and sucked the bundle of sensitive flesh into his mouth, circling it with the tip of his tongue. She bucked and wiggled against his mouth, but he held her fast and firm, not allowing her to escape his oral assault. She quickly orgasmed again, hard, her clit jumping and pulsing against his tongue. Her body seized violently as she yelled her release and pressed her back into the mattress.

Jacob licked her gently through her waning tremors. She twitched and shuddered for another minute, and as usual, he made note of her reactions.

Jacob increased the pressure of his tongue on her, and she made a feeble attempt to push him away. This got her nowhere, since Jacob’s reputation was on the line and he

resolved that she would have no fewer than three orgasms before they took their post-coital nap.

He raised his head to peer over the landscape of her body. “You were so confident a little while ago,” he said in a low voice. “Now you need to take this like a big girl. Stop trying to avoid the orgasms you deserve.”

She stared down her body at him, gave him a “WTF?” look, and tried to shift her hips before he could hold her still again. She was too slow.

Jacob held her hips perfectly still and attacked her dripping wet pussy, alternating broad strokes of his tongue with nipping and lightly biting her clit. This did not produce the desired result, so he redoubled his efforts and inserted two fingers deep into her pussy. He stroked her from the inside, finding her g-spot and rubbing it relentlessly as he sucked her clit.

It was all he needed to do before she detonated again, shouting with pleasure until her voice went hoarse.

Her face took on the dazed expression of one who recently had an earth-shattering orgasm. She lay limp and spent on the bed, and Jacob climbed up her body, pivoted her hips, then entered her.

He sucked in his breath at the wonderful shock of being inside her again. He nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent deeply, before moving to her lips.

“Can you taste yourself on my lips?” he whispered into her mouth. “Tell me.”

“Yes...I can,” she whispered back.

“What do you taste like?” Jacob asked her, sliding in and out of her at a measured pace.

“Um...I don’t know,” she said, frowning. Shrugging. Her eyes were wide open now, and she peered at him like he was a bug under a microscope.

She wasn’t sure she wanted this level of intimacy, Jacob thought. She was thinking about what would be the right thing to say in this moment. But Jacob wanted Sasha indefinitely, and if he was being honest, for keeps. He was not going to let her avoid talking to him about things that mattered. For instance, what he experienced when he was with her, and why she could not be replaced.

“Sweet?” he asked as he stroked into her oh-so-slowly. One advantage of pushing forty was that he could usually talk himself out of an orgasm when he needed to.

She appeared to consider this for a moment. “Yes,” she said.

“What kind of sweet?” he asked.

She looked curious, and a little shy. She chewed her bottom lip. He gave her a lingering, open-mouthed kiss.

“Taste it,” he said. “Taste your lips.”

She ran her tongue over her lips to capture the taste.

“Fruity? A little?” she said.

“Citrus,” he confirmed. “Like a grapefruit. And a little bit of honey.”

“Also, salty?” she licked her lips again.

“Yes, salty,” he affirmed. “This is what I’ve been missing for eight fucking weeks. Missing your taste. Missing your scent.

Missing these lips.”

He kissed her again, and she hummed against his lips.

“Let’s not wait eight weeks to do this again, okay?” he said.

He didn’t wait for her answer before he kissed her again, deeply, invading her mouth with his tongue, not letting her think too much about what she wanted to say—what she *should* say.

He picked up the pace of his thrusts, slamming into her harder, sweat dripping from his face as he began to feel the tingle at the base of his spine that signaled his impending orgasm.

He held off long enough to make sure he was going to coax another climax out of her.

“Jacob!” she gasped.

“What, baby?” he asked.

“Jacob!” she repeated, biting her bottom lip hard, he thought, to avoid saying something in the heat of the moment that she could not take back. He wanted her to feel safe in his arms, so he didn’t demand more of her than he already had.

“Come, baby!” he shouted, as his own orgasm built and built...

“Yes!” she yelled, finally letting go.

As she pulsed around him, he came too, lights sparking behind his eyelids, hips bucking madly and without rhythm, and it felt like his entire body and soul emptied into hers.

## Chapter Seven

### *Sasha*

Always an early riser, Sasha took advantage of her natural tendencies to inspect Jacob's handsome profile in the thin morning light.

The man was ridiculously good-looking, with high cheekbones, criminally long eyelashes, a beautiful cleft chin, and an even, smooth complexion that was a bronzed deep olive. He blushed brick red when he was aroused. And when he was fucking her brains out.

There was something about last night that was different from when they'd had sex on homecoming night. Then, it had been hard, fast, and frenzied. It had been a long time for both of them that crisp October night, and they were giddy from the opportunity presented by absent children. They had fucked until the wee hours, their coupling frantic and passionate in the way of new lovers, and he'd left around two in the morning. They had agreed it would be a one-time thing, since Sasha insisted on putting Maddie first in all things. Sasha had a busy life, and being an entrepreneur and a mom placed many

demands on her time. She had been happy to let Jacob be her one-time booty call.

But now eight weeks later, Sasha wasn't so sure. She found herself imagining what it would be like to hang out with Jacob without having sex. Watching the Christmas movie together the night before felt comfortable to her—maybe a little too comfortable. It was a good thing she had suggested they turn it off. It was a good thing he had agreed. She had been close to holding his hand.

It was the fault of that damned black kitten, she mused. Who could resist a hot, sexy man who sacrificed for his child's education and took in stray, special-needs kittens? Not a veterinarian single mother who ran a cat rescue in her spare time, obviously.

She narrowed her eyes at Jacob's handsome face. He looked entirely blameless. Boyish and innocent. But she sensed something other than a booty call happening between them. They had gone from a one-time tryst to planning what they would do once Maddie went off to college.

How the hell had that happened?

Sasha let out a harsh sigh, whipped the quilt off herself, and reached for her discarded clothing from the night before. She put on the t-shirt without the bra, then plucked a pair of plain cotton granny panties from a basket of clean laundry and pulled them on. Then she pulled on her yoga pants and headed for the bathroom.

“Morning,” said the hot man lounging on her bed in a creaky, morning voice.

She froze, still facing the door, and squeaked, “Morning.”

Sasha opened the bedroom door quickly, without turning to Jacob, and practically tripped over the little ball of black fluff known as Bones. The cat had been quiet all night, but had apparently been waiting patiently, soundlessly, right outside her bedroom door. By storming out of the bedroom, she had awakened the sleeping pipsqueak.

“Meow!” he yelled, swaying slightly on tiny little legs.

“Well, hello there,” she greeted the little critter.

“Meow!” he said. His little black face was adorably fierce. The only things on his face that weren’t black were his wee little white fangs and his bright pink tongue.

She picked him up, delighted when he allowed her to hold him. Then he noticed Jacob in the bed behind her and scrambled away from her to get to him. He left tiny red scratch marks on her hands.

“Bones is up!” she announced and hurried out of the room.

In the bathroom, Sasha took care of business, then splashed water on her face. She toweled off and examined her reflection, wondering who the woman in the mirror was. Surely not the dedicated mother who put her child’s needs ahead of her own. Not the woman who owned her own veterinarian practice. Because the woman in the mirror wasn’t thinking about being a mom or a business woman.

Sasha was into this guy, this—this—Jacob Romero. She liked his looks, his sense of humor, his devotion to family.

She was sprung. Dick-mo-tized. And oh shit, maybe she was even a little in lo—



“Hey, did you fall in?” Jacob called from the bedroom, interrupting her thoughts, thank God.

“Just a minute!” she called back, reaching for her toothbrush.

Jacob stood outside the bathroom door when she opened it. He was bare-chested and attractively scruffy, hair sticking up in many directions. He wore his jeans, but they were unbuttoned, the belt loose and flapping like a tongue. He held the adoring black kitten against his bare chest.

“Hey,” he said with a smile. He kissed Sasha lightly on the lips, breathing into her mouth slightly, and that was when she realized the bastard was somehow immune to morning breath.

She made an impatient noise deep in her throat and brushed past him. “There’s an extra toothbrush in the linen closet,” she said over her shoulder.

Sasha didn’t wait for a reply. She grabbed her phone off her charger and went jogging down the stairs. She’d forgotten to put the leftovers away the night before, she realized, and she needed to clean up in the kitchen.

Except, there were no containers of takeout food on the kitchen table. There were no dirty dishes in the sink, and a quick scan of the living room revealed no dirty wine glasses. She checked the refrigerator, found the takeout containers neatly stacked inside. A peek in the dishwasher revealed the previous evening’s dirty dishes had been placed inside. Since the appliance wasn’t full, he hadn’t run it, which was exactly what she would have done. The man had all his good qualities prominently on display, and that annoyed her.

“Hey,” he said from behind her, making her jump. He must have noiselessly made his way down the staircase to join her in the kitchen. He grinned at her, still holding the kitten.

“What do you want for breakfast? You got eggs?”

“Um, I’m not sure,” Sasha said. “Shouldn’t you run along home?”

“Why?” he asked, absently stroking the kitten’s head. “It’s early yet. Do you have work today?”

“Well...not until later...” she said.

“Then why the rush?” he asked, looking puzzled.

“Well, we are only supposed to be booty calling,” she said.

“Booty call means sex, no more, no less.”

“We ate together last night,” he pointed out. “And we watched a movie together.”

“Part of a movie,” Sasha said.

“Right,” he said. “My point is, having a meal and watching part of a movie together doesn’t mean we aren’t having a booty call. I did smack your booty, as you may recall.”

Sasha blushed to the tips of her ears.

“And if you’re not hungry, we can go upstairs and have more sex,” he said, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

“Ah...” she said, at a loss for words. “Well, I’m not really hungry right now, but I would like coffee.”

“I’m great at making coffee,” he said. “I noticed last night that you drink Bustelo. Good choice.”

“The only choice,” she said.

Sasha sat at the kitchen table and tried to entice Bones to play with her as Jacob made coffee.

“When is Maddie supposed to be back?” he asked as he popped a K-cup into her coffee maker. “Jay didn’t tell me.”

“She’s supposed to be back tomorrow evening,” she said. “It may be later than that. It depends on how well she gets along with her dad.”

“Oh?” he asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“She’s come home early a few times,” Sasha said. “Her dad was pretty much out of her life other than the occasional phone call until she hit middle school. They are working on their relationship.”

“How do you take your coffee?” Jacob asked.

“Black, no creamer,” she said.

He handed her a mug of coffee and started another cup for himself. The man had a kind of unconscious grace. He moved like a jungle cat, and Sasha couldn’t help but think of how it felt to have him between her thighs all night. She was close to asking him to go back upstairs, but resisted the impulse. She needed some distance from this dude, before she totally lost her shit over him.

“How is that going?” he asked. “Maddie and her dad’s relationship?”

“It’s better than it’s been in the past,” she said, snapping out of her reverie. “I was a senior in high school when I found out I was pregnant with Maddie. I was in my third trimester when I received my diploma. I had to grow up fast, but Richard wasn’t ready to be a father. He came from a well-to-do family

and was able to help support Maddie financially, so there were no worries there. And my parents were extremely supportive.”

Sasha sipped her coffee and realized she was providing Jacob with more information than he’d asked for. Bones was steadfastly refused to play with her. He sat on his hindquarters and watched Jacob with rapt attention.

“Anyway, Richard was out of her life for a long time, and there were trust issues to work through,” she said. “Richard tries, even though he’s done it on his own schedule. I try to be supportive.”

“That’s all you can do, isn’t it?” he asked.

His coffee finished brewing, and he sat at the table across from her. The cat patted Jacob’s jean-clad leg and meowed.

“What about Jay’s mom?” she asked.

“It was your classic shotgun wedding,” he said. “Two Catholic grandmas, one unexpected pregnancy, equals one short-lived marriage. My ex and I divorced when Jay was five. She does her own thing now, not quite sure what that is, but she hasn’t seen Jay in years.”

“I’m sorry,” Sasha said. “I’m sorry for Jay. That must be tough.”

Jacob shrugged nonchalantly, though she could see the shadows in his eyes. “I’ve had to be mom and dad to him. It does suck sometimes, but Jay’s resilient.”

“Kids are resilient,” she agreed. “But Maddie seems to enjoy her time with her dad, for the most part.”

“That’s good,” he said. “So, what are up to today?”

“I’m going into my practice today,” she said. “We have short hours on Saturday.”

“How did you get interested in veterinarian science?” he asked.

“Well, my plan A was to go to medical school,” she said. “But when I had my daughter, I had to shift gears a bit. I’ve always loved animals.”

“Do you have any regrets?” he asked.

She frowned as she considered her answer. At the time, she was pretty unhappy to have to change her career plans, but now in her mid-thirties, she was happy with her decision.

“I have everything I want,” she said. “My daughter is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and as you know, it’s pretty exciting to watch them chase their dreams. People don’t think a single teen mom can successfully raise a child.”

“I’d say the same is true of young single fathers,” he said.

“People tend to look at single dads with pity.”

She smiled. “Jay seems to have his head on straight.”

“He does,” Jacob said. “It feels like lately, he doesn’t have much time for me.”

“That’s because his family gave him the confidence to be self-sufficient and independent,” she said. “What is he interested in?”

“He’s an artist at heart,” Jacob said. “Photography, painting, fashion design, whatever.”

“That’s a wide range of interests,” she said.

“Jay has a way of looking at the world,” Jacob said. “I’m always amazed at what he sees when he’s looking at ordinary things. Also, he goes shopping with me and picks out my clothes.”

“Nice! Maybe I should get him to go shopping with me,” she laughed.

“Well...it can be a bit like living with that guy from Project Runway,” he said. “That gray-haired guy?”

“Tim Gunn? That’s hysterical!” she exclaimed, gulping the rest of her coffee.

“Dad, is that what you’re wearing?” Jacob said, quoting his son. “I’ve heard it more than once.”

She let out a bark of laughter. “That’s too much,” she said, standing and placing her mug in the dishwasher. She opened her refrigerator and pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“I think I could eat now,” she said. “How about you?”

He nodded, and she began to remove items from the refrigerator. “I need to be at the clinic in a couple of hours, but I think we can squeeze in a proper breakfast.”

They continued to chat over canned biscuits, patty sausage, and eggs. Sasha found herself relaxing, enjoying the opportunity to chat with another single parent. Jacob was easy to talk to. Even though he kept his shirt off the entire meal, Sasha hadn’t detected the slightest bit of self-consciousness.

They had just loaded the dishwasher and started the wash cycle when Sasha heard a car door slam. Puzzled, she went to the front door and looked through the peephole. It was

Maddie, getting out of the driver's seat of a car Sasha recognized as Richard's white BMW.

"Oh shit!" Sasha said under her breath. Panic thrummed through her body as she watched Maddie close the driver's side door and walk around the car to look in the trunk.

Jacob was on her heels and looked at Sasha quizzically.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Maddie, and I think Richard too!" she whispered, flapping her hands in dismay. "You have to go! Now!"

Jacob attempted to look around Sasha.

"Don't look!" she whispered urgently. "I don't want her to see you here!"

His brows furrowed, he nodded, and without a word, dashed up the stairs, still holding the cat. He was back in seconds, holding Bones in one hand, his shoes and shirt in the other. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and disappeared out the back door.

Sasha looked down at herself, realized she was a bit underdressed to greet her ex, and snatched her Snuggie off the living room to wrap around herself.

She opened the door and waited for her daughter.

"Hey!" Sasha said. "You're home early! Where's your dad?"

Maddie pulled an overnight bag out of the car and shut the trunk lid. She walked up the brick path to the house, smiling ear to ear.

"Hey, Mom," she said.

“What’s going on?” Sasha asked, hugging her daughter briefly and stepping aside to let her pass.

“Dad’s not here,” Maddie said, grinning. “Jay and I drove back here early in my new car.”

“New—?” Sasha repeated.

“Dad got a new car and gave me his old one,” Maddie said. “I was so excited I couldn’t wait to drive it home.”

Sasha’s mouth dropped open, and she stared at her daughter, blinking with incomprehension.

“Dad’s going to pay for the insurance and registration, and all that,” Maddie said. “He said I was going to need a car for school. Isn’t it great?”

“Wow,” Sasha offered, astounded at Richard’s attempt to buy his daughter’s affections. Then she chided herself for being too critical. It was a lovely gesture, even it was way over the top.

Maddie headed upstairs, presumably to leave her overnight bag in her own room across the hall from Sasha’s. She followed her daughter up the stairs.

“So...where’s Jay?” Sasha asked from the doorway of her daughter’s room. “You said he drove back here with you?”

“I dropped him at his apartment,” she said, passing her mother in the doorway to use the upstairs bathroom. She closed the door behind her, and Sasha heard Maddie close the toilet seat, loudly.

Sasha winced, realizing Jacob must have done his business in the upstairs bathroom, but neglected to close it when he was finished. It made sense, since he lived in an all-male



household. It was quiet in the bathroom for a bit, and Sasha wondered whether Maddie noticed the toilet seat was in the wrong position.

When Maddie exited the bathroom, she jogged down the stairs. Sasha hurried after her.

“Did you make breakfast?” Maddie called from the kitchen. “I smell breakfast. Any leftovers?”

“Uh, yeah,” Sasha said.

When she caught up with her daughter, Maddie had her head in the refrigerator, poking around. She pulled out the plate of leftover cooked sausage and biscuits. She put two of each on a small plate and put them in the microwave to nuke them.

She leaned against the kitchen counter and grinned again. The girl was all smiles this morning.

“I can see you’re super excited about your car,” Sasha said.

“It’s nicer than my car.”

“I can’t wait until January,” Maddie said, looking pleased with herself. “Wait until I drive into the student parking lot driving a fucking BMW.”

“Language!” Sasha admonished.

They chatted for a few more minutes before Sasha went to get ready for work. She showered, dressed, and went to strip her bed so she could toss the sheets into the wash on her way out of the house. That’s when she discovered the condom wrappers, quite a few of them, in the sheets, on the floor, under the bed. They’d had a lot of sex, had gone through a lot of condoms. Sasha expected she’d be sated for a while, but as she stood there, remembering their night together, she found

her pussy swelling and growing wet, her body instantly aching with need.

Damnit, that good-looking bastard had her sprung.

# Chapter Eight

## *Jacob*

Several days after Jacob had engaged in an evening of sexual escapades at Sasha's place, he found out the kids were going to some lock-in at the school gym overnight, sponsored by the Art Club. Jay and Maddie had become friends through the Art Club. She was president of the club, and Jay was vice-president. The club organized trips to the city to visit art museums and galleries, and also local excursions to try things like glass blowing and pottery. The club had organized the lock-in to raise money for a Spring Break arts camp they were planning to organize for underprivileged children.

Jacob thought the lock-in was the perfect opportunity to spend some quality, between-the-sheets time with Sasha. Sasha was having none of it. The close call they'd had earlier that week when Maddie had returned from Chicago early spooked her.

"What if they come home early and catch us?" she'd told him when he first proposed the assignation.

He wanted to tell her that maybe they should tell their children they were together, but of course, he could not. He had agreed with her initial terms, after all, and he couldn't go back on his agreement now. Sasha was already commitment-shy. He was loath to push her to do something she wouldn't want to do.

Jacob had spent the better part of the last week annoyed by his situation with Sasha. He wanted more time with her. It was pretty obvious she wanted him too, and not just for sex. He

was grumpy and moody, and he didn't know what to do with himself.

So, Jacob had found himself at the vintage Marquee Theater in downtown Center City one winter evening. Jay had mentioned it to him at some point. There were occasionally art exhibits there, as well as community theater productions. In the run-up to Christmas, the theater was showing classic Christmas films for free, charging for concessions only.

The Marquee read, *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and Jacob had never seen it before. He was in desperate need of a distraction.

When he circled the theater looking for a parking space, he noticed a familiar car in the parking lot. Sasha's Honda CRV was parked in front of the theater. The parking gods had smiled down on her.

He parked in the lot across the street, fed quarters into the meter, and entered the lobby of the theater. He decided to hang back a bit, because if she saw him, she might just bolt out of the theater. The lobby was dimly lit, with couples and singles milling around the concession stands, or simply standing around and chatting before the next showing of the film began.

He spotted Sasha standing close to the doors of the theater. She held a tub of popcorn in one hand, and a soft drink in the other.

He should stay where he was, avoid talking to her, because she might run away from him. He stood there, watching her from afar. Actually, he was less watching her dispassionately, than mooning over her. She wore those ass-defining jeans she seemed to wear frequently, a blue fleece jacket, and a pair of

brown leather booties. Her hair was up in a hastily tied ponytail, with a few strands escaping to curl enticingly at the back of her neck. When she turned her head to the side briefly, he saw she wore a small pair of gold hoop earrings that caught the light and looked beautiful against her golden skin. He remembered nuzzling her soft, warm neck, and how she'd shiver when he licked and nibbled her there...

Jacob snapped out of his musings and made his way to the concession stand to buy a bottle of overpriced water and a soft pretzel. He decided avoiding Sasha was foolish. They were two adults who knew each other, both of them in the same place at the same time. It didn't have to actually mean anything, like they were dating or something. Jacob and Sasha were two people who arrived at the same destination, with the same activity in mind, in two separate cars. No big deal.

So, he headed over to where Sasha stood and cleared his throat. She didn't seem to hear him at first, so he cleared it again, and she turned around to face him.

Her eyes widened when she saw him, then they narrowed.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, blinking rapidly. "Are you following me because I told you I didn't want to see you tonight?"

"Following you?" he said, offended. "Hardly. I'm here to see the movie, same as you."

She eyed him suspiciously. "Really?"

"Yes, really," he said. "This is a public place, isn't it? Do I need your permission to go to the movies, *querida*?"

Sasha's eyes darted around as if she expected they were being watched. "Fine," she said.

Jacob decided to press his luck. "Since we are both here at the same time, we could sit together and enjoy the movie, as friends."

She still looked suspicious.

"But I guess you might have issues with a platonic relationship," he said. "Maybe you just don't like hanging out with other people."

He knew this was untrue, but he was okay with being a wee bit manipulative, since Sasha was being irrational.

Sasha nodded to an unoccupied corner of the lobby where a wobbly looking café table sat looking forlorn. He followed her there. They placed their snacks and drinks on the table, Sasha looking around furtively to see whether they were being observed.

"Did you know you left the toilet seat up in my bathroom?"  
Sasha hissed indignantly.

Jacob studied Sasha's face, looking for hints as to what made leaving the toilet seat up such a serious infraction.

"I'm...sorry?" he said slowly, not sure what he should have said. The conversation was beginning to feel like a trap.

Her eyes bugged with disbelief. "You really don't know why I'm upset?"

"No, I don't," he said, wincing, slowly realizing this was the wrong answer.

“Maddie used the bathroom after you,” she said between clenched teeth. “We’re girls. We never leave the toilet seat up unless we’re *cleaning* the toilet.”

Jacob felt he might be standing in conversational quicksand. “So, did she think you were cleaning the toilet?”

“No, thankfully, she didn’t notice,” Sasha said, rubbing her forehead with the back of her hand. She was quite frustrated with him, and he still wasn’t sure why.

“It was an extremely close call,” Sasha went on. “The only reason she didn’t notice the toilet seat was up was because she got a new car.”

Jacob let this information sink in. “You bought Maddie a new car?”

“No, no,” she waved a hand dismissively. “Her dad got a new car and gave her his old one for Christmas.”

“Doesn’t he drive a BMW?” Jacob was astounded.

“Well, he did,” she said in an off-hand manner. “I have no idea what he’s driving now.”

“He gave a BMW to a teenager?” Jacob was appalled. Was the guy that rich?

“Yeah, but ask me if I care?” she scoffed, bemusement in her eyes. “He may indulge her because he hadn’t been around for a lot of her childhood. He can afford it, and I don’t need to worry about getting her a car before she goes off to college. She said he’s paying for the insurance and whatnot, so really, what’s it to me?”

“Okay then,” Jacob said. He knew no one who could give a teenager a luxury car for Christmas. He ran a hand through his hair and collected himself.

“When I got back to the apartment the other day, Jay was already home,” Jacob confessed.

“What did he say?” Sasha asked, looking appalled at this news. “Did he realize you weren’t there when he got home?”

“He said nothing,” Jacob said. “He was asleep when I got home. That kid is not a morning person, and he sleeps whenever possible.”

Sasha gave him a skeptical look. She glanced at the theater doors, which had just opened, letting the audience for the earlier showing out. She grabbed his arm and dragged him out of the line of sight of the crowd. He rolled his eyes at her.

“Is this really necessary?” he whispered.

“Just...wait,” she said. She looked around the corner, then ducked back, and told him to hush.

“Moon and Camille are out there,” she told him. “Let’s just give them a couple of minutes to leave.”

Jacob went along with the ruse, keeping an eye on the drinks and snacks on the tottering café table, making sure no one walked off with them.

After a while, the theater no longer disgorged patrons, and those waiting in the lobby went in and found their seats.

“Okay, let’s go in,” she said.

“This makes no sense,” he informed her.



“Do you want to watch the movie, or not?” she said, cocking an eyebrow.

They watched the movie together, sitting closer to the theater doors than he would have otherwise liked, since all the good seats were taken. The theater was nice though, the seats covered in red velvet, with small café tables positioned in front of the seats. The floors were not sticky from dropped candy and spilled soft drinks. They laughed at the funny scenes, tapped their toes to the musical numbers, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. At one point, he found their knees touching, and she didn't move away from him.

When they left the theater, the workers were shutting down the concession stands and sweeping up the popcorn littering the floor. The crowd for the second showing wasn't as big as for the first showing, and the patrons filed out quietly. It was close to 11 p.m. In their small town, it was too late for established couples to add another stop if it were date night and the kids were with the sitter. People in Center City took their asses home after they had their fun.

Jacob knew for a fact there wasn't much still open at this hour, other than the one Wal-Mart on the edge of town, Pookie's, and its *divier* counterpart, an ersatz beer garden near the railroad tracks on the seedier side of town.

“So, that wasn't so bad, was it?” he asked as they stood in the parking lot, a few feet from Sasha's car. “The world didn't explode because we were out together in public.”

“No one saw us,” Sasha said, throwing cold water on Jacob's observation.

“Debbie Downer!” he told her with a chuckle.

She smiled at him. “I told you, we can date in August,” she said. “If you don’t want to wait, I understand.”

But something flickered in her eyes when she made this suggestion.

“I don’t want anyone else, *querida*,” he said, his voice husky. “I would think that would be clear by now.”

She looked away with a frown. The movie crowd had quickly thinned. It was cold, and the patrons had hustled to their cars to go home. Her eyes darted around, and he realized she was looking for someone who might recognize them.

“You are really hard on a man’s ego,” Jacob observed.

“I don’t understand what you mean,” she said, rubbing her arms against the cold.

Jacob was tired of being put off by her. He was tired of feeling frustrated by this situation. She wanted him; he wanted her. It was pretty simple, really, yet Sasha operated with the foolish notion that she had to impress people with what a great mother and businesswoman she was.

“You think you have to impress people with how great a mother you are,” he said. “Because you were a teen mom. Everyone around you knows you’re a great mom. Your daughter runs art programs for underprivileged kids and is going to college. You’re a great mom. She’s a great daughter. You did a great job. You can stop sacrificing for her. You deserve to have a relationship of your own.”

What he didn’t say, what was on the tip of his tongue, was that she deserved more than a relationship. She deserved love. And he was the man to give it to her.

Jacob studied her expression to see whether his words penetrated. Her gaze was steady, carefully blank. It was as if she wanted to avoid giving away her feelings.

“You have a successful career,” he said. “You don’t have anything to prove to anyone. You never did.”

He reached out to touch her arm, giving it a squeeze. Her expression never wavered.

“You think about what I said, okay?” He kept his voice a low, sensual whisper.

“I’m going to follow you home, okay?” he went on, looking around at the quickly emptying street and parking lot next to the theater. No one appeared to notice them.

He pursed his lips, kissed his fingers, then placed the kiss on her lips. Only then did emotion register in her eyes, a subtle softening he wasn’t sure he had a name for. Regret, maybe?

He followed her home to make sure she made it there safely. When she got out of the car, she locked it remotely, the headlights blinking, then going dark again. He sat in his car, a few doors down from her house to maintain her sense of propriety.

He watched as she climbed her front steps, the motion sensor on the front porch turning the light on. She seemed to pause at the door, and he thought she turned her head to look down the street at him.

After he was sure she was safely inside, he put the car in drive and went home.



# Chapter Nine

## *Sasha*

Several days after *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, Sasha made dinner for Maddie and herself, continuing to ponder what Jacob had said to her.

Was she trying to impress people with the sacrifices she'd made as a mother? She'd bragged about Maddie incessantly to anyone who would listen. Every time Maddie had won a spelling bee, science fair, or made the honor roll, Sasha would walk around on a pink cloud of contentment. Maddie had gotten into her first-choice college, and that meant she'd done a good job as a mother, didn't it?

"What are we having?" Maddie asked, peering into the pot of boiling water on the stove.

"Cheese tortellini with chicken and pesto, and a salad," Sasha told her daughter.

"Yum!" Maddie said.

"Why don't you put the tortellini in the water," Sasha suggested. "It's in the freezer."

The tortellini dish was one Sasha had made countless times, as it only took 10-15 minutes to make, perfect for a single mom who had been either a student or worked outside of the home during the entirety of Maddie's childhood. Over the years, Sasha had become adept at creating meals that didn't need to be so much cooked as thrown together.

They sat at the same tiny kitchen table Sasha had shared with Jacob a few days earlier. She allowed herself to wonder what it might be like to have Jacob and Jay at the dinner table with Maddie. For the first time since she'd had Maddie, she pondered the feasibility of somehow creating a blended family with someone.

“Do you remember Jeff Hill?” Sasha asked, trying to sound casual. Jeff had been a man Sasha had been involved with when Maddie was in middle school. He'd been the store manager for the local big box home improvement store. Sasha had made the mistake of upgrading him from casual booty call to introducing him to her daughter. It did not go well.

Maddie made a face. “Yes...I remember him,” she said.

“Why?”

“I was just wondering if you ever thought of him?” Sasha asked.

“Definitely not,” Maddie said. “That guy was weird.”

“Weird?” Sasha said, feeling defensive. “He was not weird!”

“He kept calling me ‘kiddo’ even when I asked him not to,” Maddie said. “When I played volleyball, he came to my games and gave me feedback and training tips. Then he started showing up at my practices to give me tips. Without you.”

Sasha had forgotten those details. Jeff wasn't a pervert stalking pre-teen girls. He was just...competitive. He'd never been married before and didn't have children. It was one of his fondest wishes to have a child to coach in athletics.

“Okay, that was weird,” Sasha admitted. “He was a nice guy, just...inappropriately enthusiastic.”

“Yeah,” Maddie said, stabbing her food with her fork and holding up the pasta. “Have you ever noticed how tortellini kinda looks like shrimp?” She popped the morsel in her mouth and chewed.

“You have a unique way of looking at the world, my daughter,” Sasha said, thinking she would never look at tortellini and unsee the image of a shrimp.

“Anyway, what about Jeff Hill?” Maddie said. “You going to start dating that guy again? I thought he moved away.”

Sasha had had to stop going to that particular big box home improvement store after she’d dumped Jeff. It was a pity, not because she wanted Jeff, but because it was her favorite home improvement store, and she’d really missed shopping there. Jeff Hill had eventually found a better job in another town, just in time for her to start a backyard shed project.

“No, I’m not going to start dating Jeff again,” Sasha assured her daughter. “You and I never really talked about it and I just wondered if you ever thought about it.”

“Nope,” Maddie said, giving her mother side-eye. “Not at all. But please don’t ever do that again.”

*Okay then, Sasha mused silently. No dating when Maddie is at home. Got it.*

Maddie finished her meal, rinsed her plate, cutlery, and water glass, and put them in the dishwasher.

“I’m going out,” Maddie said, moving to take her winter jacket from the mud room area by the front door. “A bunch of us are going to see Christmas movies at The Marquee. Double feature. Don’t wait up!”

“Take condoms if you need them,” Sasha said. “And make good choices!”

Maddie made a face. “Yeah, see you later, Mom.”

Sasha slumped at the dinner table. She felt disappointed at Maddie’s response to Sasha possibly dating again, but she didn’t know what to do about it. She had already decided not to date, so getting confirmation from Maddie shouldn’t change the way she felt about her situation, right?

Sasha no longer had much of an appetite. With a sigh, she went about cleaning up the dinner mess, putting the leftovers into plastic storage containers. With the dinner dishes, the dishwasher was now full, so she popped a soap pod into the appliance and started the wash cycle.

She was feeling bummed, though she didn’t know why. What was different now that she had confirmation from Maddie that dating wasn’t a good idea? Nothing was different.

She flopped on the living room couch and flipped channels aimlessly. The corner where she’d planned to put their Christmas tree still sat empty. She really needed to replace it. There were only a couple of weeks until Christmas.

With a home improvement channel running soundlessly in the background, Sasha pulled up a shopping app and started browsing Christmas trees. She was interrupted by a notification on her smartphone. Holly was video calling her.

“Hey, girlfriend!” Holly’s pretty face filled the screen. In the background, she saw Holly’s living room with its cheerfully decorated Christmas tree and massive Craftsman fireplace draped with garlands. Sasha knew Holly’s Christmas



accouterments were real. Her husband Tor insisted on real trees, wreaths, etc. every year. Holly, true to her name, always had lots of Christmas spirit. She wore a green elf hat atop her mop of curly hair.

“Hey, lady!” Sasha smiled, happy to see a friendly face.

“What’s up?”

“Hey, I wanted to let you know we can’t make the Christmas adoption event,” she said. “My company’s Christmas party is the same weekend.”

Holly was a sales executive for a technology company. Tor was a general contractor who flipped houses in St. Louis, where they lived. He also worked with Travis Beckett, who ran a goat ranch and sprawling vacation rental property, whenever the rancher wanted to add a cabin to the property. Holly and Tor grew up in Center City living a few doors away from each other, but only became romantically involved when they were stranded at a roadside hotel two Christmases ago.

“Oh, bummer,” Sasha said.

“Hey, what’s going on with you and zaddy history teacher?”

Holly asked.

Sasha realized this was the real reason for the call: to get her laid by the history teacher. Little did Holly know she’d already accomplished that task. On two separate occasions..

“What makes you think something is going on with him?”

Sasha asked.

“Because I saw you at the bar with him, and I have it on good authority that the two of you were at the movies together,”

Holly said the last part in a singsong voice.

Well, shit! How on earth did Holly know about that?

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sasha said, irritated. “I was at the movies a few nights ago, and I think Jacob was there too, but we weren’t there together.”

“That’s not what I heard,” Holly said, grinning like a jack-o’-lantern.

“Well, whatever information you have has to be second hand at best,” Sasha asserted, racking her brain, trying to figure out who ratted her out.

“It was Moonbeam, Camille’s new friend,” Holly blurted.

“She was there with Travis, the goat rancher. Who knew a guy with goats and chickens and guest cabins was technically a rancher, not a farmer?”

Sasha thought about Travis, a friend of hers and also an informal customer. She supposed he was a rancher versus a farmer. He raised animals, had no crops that she knew of, although he didn’t slaughter his animals. She’d never given it much thought.

“Ranchers raise animals, farmers raise crops,” Sasha said. Then she sat up abruptly. “Wait a minute. Is Moon dating Travis?”

“It sure looks like it,” Holly agreed. “She’s kind of a hippie, and that surprised me, but I bet they are cute together...”

Holly wagged her eyebrows suggestively.

“Moon and Travis together surprises me,” Sasha said. “They don’t seem like each other’s types. Travis’s ex-wife was your typical Midwestern blond milkmaid type. Moon just... isn’t.”

“Every cup has a saucer,” Holly pointed out. “Maybe they complement each other.”

“Maybe,” Sasha agreed. “What about Camille?” Sasha asked. “Is she now dating that Andrew guy?”

“Pretty sure she’s involved with him,” Holly said. “I don’t know that I’d call it dating, exactly, and we did encourage her to get her groove on. Now we just need to find someone for you. Someone like the history teacher, for instance.”

Sasha managed a thin smile, trying not to let her feelings show in her expression. She realized the emotion she was experiencing was loneliness. She was so used to being alone that she had long ago stopped considering how she actually felt about it.

Sure, her plan was to date Jacob in August, when Maddie was off to college, but the reasons for waiting that long had begun to feel hollow. Holly was married to an awesome guy with a new baby. Camille was openly having a short-term fling with a handsome, rich guy. Moon, who’d been in town about five minutes, had caught the eye of dating-averse Travis Beckett.

“What’s with that look on your face?” Holly asked.

“Hm?” Sasha snapped out of her musings.

“You look sad,” Holly said. “Why do you look so sad?”

“It’s nothing,” Sasha lied. “I’m just a little tired today. Work and everything. I still haven’t replaced the Christmas tree, and the idea of doing it makes me want to weep.”

Sasha realized, to her astonishment, that she *was* really tired. It was only 7:30, and she felt ready for bed. Her eyes felt gritty, and her muscles seemed achy.

“You do look tired, hon,” Holly said. “And may I suggest you ask the history teacher to go Christmas tree shopping with you? Your kids are friends, good friends from what I can tell. I think you could make a lovely evening of it. Think about it.”

Sasha sighed, admitting silently to herself that it seemed like it could be fun. She had even heard of a tree farm, not that far on the outskirts of town, where they could cut down their own tree. Her parents had always had real trees. Sasha’s fake tree was one she’d purchased after she’d moved into the off-campus house with Holly and Camille, with toddler Maddie in tow. It had been part of her bid for independence after having spent two years raising her child in her parents’ house. Her first major purchase as an independent adult.

“I’ll think about it,” Sasha said. “But I think I need a nap right now. See you later, hon.”

They hung up. Sasha stared at the screen blankly, having no idea what was on the television or why she should care.

She picked up her phone again, pulled up Jacob’s number, and sent him a text message.

# Chapter Ten

## *Jacob*

The late afternoon sun shone brightly, reflecting the light dusting of snow on the ground. Jacob's eyes burned and watered from the brightness. He didn't think he'd ever experienced such a bright winter day in Houston, even on those rare occasions it had snowed in Texas.

He parked the Explorer in front of Sasha's house, feeling like he was getting away with something. He wasn't parked several houses down from Sasha's, hoping to catch a glimpse of her. There was no neighborhood watch to shine a flashlight in his face and question his motives. No commitment-shy woman to hustle him out the back door, half naked and carrying a rescue cat.

Today, Jacob and Jay parked right in front of the cute little bungalow, summoned by Sasha to provide support to her and Maggie in their quest to find, purchase, and bring home a once-live Christmas tree.

Jacob felt he was becoming used to Sasha's hot-and-cold responses to him. Love was a complicated thing, after all, and she was dealing with a lot of competing impulses. She wanted to be a good mom, but she also wanted to have her own non-mom life while she was still young. Her first obligation was to Maddie, just as his was to Jay. So, while he would have liked his relationship with Sasha to be linear, starting from now to happily ever after, he could accept it was more like a dance. Two steps forward, three steps back, etc. As he walked up the

front walk with his son, he decided to embrace the push and pull of falling in love with Sasha.

Sasha and Maddie were at the door before Jacob could ring the bell. They were dressed for the cold weather in heavy coats, gloves, and knit beanies. Maddie had a broad, open smile for Jay.

Sasha tried for a pleasant smile that said, "Hello, platonic parent friend. Ready to get a Christmas tree?" Instead, her smile seemed tentative. Shy.

"Adults in the front, offspring in the back," Jacob said, heading off any discussion on the matter. Gentleman that he was, he held the door open for both women, giving Sasha a subtle once-over that included him undressing her with his eyes.

The kids grumbled and piled into the back seat, Maddie complaining that she could be driving her own car right now, where she could be in the front seat.

"If you don't want to come, sweetie, you don't have to," Sasha said in the calm, classic manner of mothers dealing with smart-mouthed children.

Maddie sighed and pouted in the back seat.

"Let's go," she told Jacob.

"You'll be the navigator?" he asked. "We're new to town. I'm not sure where I'm going."

"Sure thing," she said.

The drive was relatively short. Only twenty minutes and they left the small college town behind and were smack dab in the

middle of the sticks. There seemed to be nothing but fields as far as the eye could see, filled with flat stalks of whatever would be growing in the summer broken and tilting into the soil. Jacob was a city boy and didn't have context for so much land set aside to grow food. He knew such places existed, but he had little firsthand experience with them.

"You grew up around here?" he asked Sasha, looking at the tracts of land.

"In Center City, actually, but of course I've been outside of town too," she smiled. "I'm going to guess you're a strictly city guy?"

"Uh, yeah," he said. "I've been to the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. We would visit the animals in the stalls, or pens...or whatever."

"I did 4-H for four years," Maddie piped up from the back seat.

"You did everything for at least four years," Jay told her.

"Miss Overachiever."

"Hey, now!" Maddie protested.

"Dad, tell them about the longhorns," Jay said.

"The longhorns?" Sasha asked. "Like longhorn cattle?"

"I assume so," Jacob said, wondering what Jay meant. "What about them, Jay?"

"You'll be driving along in the suburbs, on your way to Wal-Mart, and bam! There are cattle on the side of the road," Jay said.

“Oh yeah,” Jacob said. “The landowners get tax breaks for land zoned agricultural. So, the owners will buy the land, hold it until the market for suburban tracts goes up, and put a few cattle on the land to keep the tax break until they’re ready to sell.”

“Huh,” Sasha said with wonder. “So, there will be an empty lot next to—what—a gas station?”

“Exactly,” Jacob and Jay said in unison.

Maddie had her phone at the ready, thumbing whatever search terms would reveal the veracity of Jacob’s claim. The interwebs being what they are, she found something better: an article about a man who brought a longhorn into a pet store to challenge their policy that “all leashed pets are allowed in the store with an owner.”

Maddie passed Sasha the phone to view the article, which included video of a couple leading a longhorn into the store, the front doors sliding open automatically. There was a moment of suspense when it wasn’t clear whether the horns would make it through the double doors, but they somehow managed to get the creature to turn its head sideways, allowing it to make it through the door.

“Sad to say, I have never been to Texas,” Sasha said. “I can see I’ve really been missing out.”

“Texas is famous for longhorns, but that’s not the only thing we’re famous for,” he said.

“There are the bluebonnets,” Maddie said. “Everyone knows about Texas bluebonnets.”



“King Ranch casserole was on heavy rotation on our dinner menu a few years ago,” Sasha said.

“Mom! We should make that for dinner tonight!” Maddie said, excited. “You guys can stay for dinner, can’t you?”

“Dad, we should stay for dinner,” Jay said.

“We’re going to need help setting the tree up and decorating it, Mom,” Maddie pointed out.

Jacob gave Sasha a sidelong look, silently asking how she felt about the idea. He could refuse if Sasha gave him any indication she was against it.

“I think it’s a great idea,” Sasha said, looking at Jacob from behind her long lashes. “It’ll be fun.”

She sounded tentative, but she’d said “yes, ” and he was going with that.

“Jay and I will go shopping and make dinner,” Maddie said.

“You and Mr. Romero can get the ornaments and stuff out of the basement. While we’re cooking, you two can get the tree set up, and we’ll start decorating it while the casserole bakes.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Jacob, smiling and feeling pleased.

At the tree farm, they selected and cut down their tree of choice, allowing the kids to take photos for social media. The attendants helped tie the tree to the top of the Explorer. The men carried the tree inside and set it up with a stand they’d purchased at the tree farm.

Parents and teens stood there for a moment, admiring their handiwork. Then Sasha gave Maddie her debit card, and the kids left to go shopping.

“Okay, then,” Sasha said brightly, once the kids had driven off in Maddie’s ridiculously expensive car. “Let’s go downstairs and get the rest of the ornaments.”

Without waiting for a response, Sasha headed for the kitchen, taking the stairs down to the basement. Jacob followed.

Sasha’s basement was unfinished, but tidy. Jacob had been in his mother’s basement, but had little experience with basements. Basements were rare in Texas, and Jacob didn’t think he’d ever known anyone who had one when he lived in Houston. His knowledge of basements was restricted to the film versions he’d seen over the years, which invariably included spider webs stretched over grimy little windows set high in concrete walls.

Sasha’s basement seemed basic to him. The floors were concrete, the walls cinder block. On the far wall of the space, a washer and dryer occupied a forlorn-looking space underneath a window. Everything was clean and dry, though, with large plastic storage containers neatly labeled with brown craft paper rectangles printed with Sharpies, on rows and rows of deep industrial shelves. No spider webs in sight. No grimy windows, and it smelled just fine. Slightly musty, maybe, with an overlay of laundry detergent and dryer sheets.

The Christmas decorations were on one of the sturdy shelves, in green and red lidded storage bins.

“This is extremely well organized,” Jacob commented. “Tidy.”

Sasha made a face as she pulled out one of the storage bins and popped the lid to see what was inside. She pushed the bin back into its place and pulled out another one. She peeked inside and, apparently satisfied with the contents, hefted it off

the shelf, and handed it to Jacob. He placed it on the floor in anticipation that she might hand him another one.

“Were you expecting an untidy basement?” she asked.

“My knowledge of basements comes from movies and television,” he said. “They are usually creepy and gross.”

“What about your mother’s basement?” Sasha asked, handing him another box.

“It’s not dirty, but it is disorganized,” he said. “She has a lightbulb dangling from the ceiling by a cord. There’s a tiny little chain hanging from it. You burn your fingers every time you try to turn the light on. It smells fine, but it’s creepy.”

“Huh,” she said. “Maybe you should help her out by getting her some better lighting.”

“I will, eventually,” he said. “Every time I go over there, I’m doing something around her house. Last time, I helped her with her garbage disposal.”

Sasha pulled out another bin, looked inside, and handed it to him. He promptly placed it on the floor on top of the first two bins.

“That’s it for now,” she said. She went to step around him, but he stopped her.

“Hey...how do you think today is going?” he asked.

“Um, good, I guess,” she shrugged.

“I was surprised to hear from you,” he said. “Happy, but surprised.”

“Happy?” she said, looking into his eyes with a question in her own. “That’s an odd way to put it.”

“Sasha, I have zero game when it comes to you,” he said.

“Hearing from you makes me happy. You asking me for something you need makes me happy. Spending time with you and our children? Happy.”

Sasha blinked at him, perplexed.

“You make me happy,” he said. As he spoke, he moved closer and closer to her without consciously doing so.

“I do?” she said.

He was close enough that they shared breaths.

“You do,” he said. “You frustrate me, but you make me happy when we are together.”

“Oh,” she said, licking her lips nervously. “I see.” Sasha wasn’t used to a man being so direct with her.

“I think I must make you happy, too,” he told her.

He placed a hand on the center of her chest, where her heart fluttered excitedly against his palm. Then he took her hand and placed it on his chest, so she could feel his heart beating as well.

“Your heart is like, galloping,” she said, her voice full of wonder and husky with desire.

The tone of her voice had him surging toward her, cupping her face in his hands, and planting a hungry kiss on her mouth.

Her mouth was wet, warm, and soft. He slid his tongue deep, tasting coffee and some kind of mint on her tongue. One hand went around the back of her neck, holding her in place as he deepened the kiss, plundering her mouth hungrily, swallowing

her moans of pleasure, rotating his hips involuntarily to generate friction. He pulled back briefly to look into her eyes.

“I make you happy, don’t I?” he demanded in a raspy voice he didn’t recognize.

She gazed into his eyes, her brows knit. He knew she didn’t want to admit how she felt about him. Her eyes darted back and forth between his.

“I...I...” She seemed to grasp for the right words, and he watched her intently. “I want you to fuck me.”

“What?” he whispered. “What about the kids?”

“Maddie always takes at least an hour at the grocery store,” she said. “Whether she’s going in for dental floss or buying the fixings for Thanksgiving dinner, she always takes a long time.”

Jacob knew Sasha was using sex to distract him from a conversation in which she might admit he made her happy. He should have cared that he was being manipulated, but he wasn’t. Not even a little bit. Because sex with Sasha was a good idea in all circumstances.

“Okay,” he breathed into her open mouth. “Let’s go upstairs.”

“No!” she exclaimed. “Just in case they come home early, we need to do it here.”

# Chapter Eleven

## *Sasha*

It probably wasn't a good idea to have a quickie in the basement when, theoretically, impressionable teens might return at any moment.

Sasha was aware of the risks as she watched Jacob fish in his back pocket for his wallet, extract a foil packet, and unfasten his jeans. She, meanwhile, worked the button fly of her own jeans, pushed them and her underwear down and over her hips, and got only one leg free before Jacob's hands were on her hips, holding her up against the cinder block wall before plunging into her wet and aching pussy.

"Oh shit, oh shit!" she keened at the contact. Her head bumped against the wall, but she didn't care. It felt like he hadn't been inside her for a whole damned year, and she wanted to weep at how amazing it felt.

"God, this pussy," he growled, pumping into her with gusto, panting, murmuring nonsense in her ear. He had his hands full of her ass, firmly enough to leave a bruise. He held her in such a way that her back wouldn't be shredded by the wall.

Her pussy trembled with every hard, fast thrust. She clawed at his back through his t-shirt, not able to get him close enough to suit her needs.

"Jacob!" she cried. "Oh God, keep fucking me just like that!"

She couldn't believe she was saying such filthy things.

"You want me to keep fucking you?" he grunted.

“Yes!” she said. “I love your dick!”

“I love your pussy, baby,” he told her. “It’s the hottest pussy in the world...”

His filthy nothings made her crazed with lust, and she clawed at him furiously as he fucked her against the wall. One leg hooked around his waist as she attempted to bring him closer, ever closer. She wanted him deeper, and the angle wasn’t quite cutting it.

“Jacob, I need—” she panted.

“What do you need?” he asked, slowing his movements.

“Deeper...bend me over...please,” was her disjointed response.

He seemed to get it. He withdrew, leaving her shaky on her feet, and looked around the room to find something to bend her over. He grabbed her hand and led her to a low-profile armchair, bending her over the back, and entering her from behind.

“Oh my God!” she shrieked and bit her lip. She should probably keep her passionate screams to herself, just in case the kids happened to come home earlier than expected. But it was hard not to scream when he pummeled her sensitive bits so thoroughly.

“Did you miss me this week?” he asked her. The words came out in a breathless hiss.

Sasha knew she was being asked to reveal things about herself she didn’t want to admit. Things that left her emotionally vulnerable to him. She decided not to answer him, but he slapped her on the ass and slowed the pace of his thrusts.

“Tell me,” he said, stroking the spot where he’d struck her with the palm of his hand. His calloused palm soothed her stinging flesh.

“I missed you,” she wailed. “You do make me happy.”

The admission didn’t freak her out as much as she thought it would. It felt freeing to tell him how she really felt.

“Good girl,” he said gruffly. “You know I missed you. You know you make me happy.”

She wiggled her ass, urging him to get moving again.

He chuckled, moving again, setting up a rapid pace that had her shrieking her climax until her throat was raw. A few moments later, his rapid pace became unfocused. Frantic. She felt him swell against the walls of her pussy, and she knew he was close to finishing. He came with a primal grunt, pulsing inside of her, sagging against her backside as his legs went weak.

Jacob continued to move inside her, slowly, as his pleasure waned. Once he stopped, he carefully disengaged himself.

The smell of sex hung in the air, musky and sweaty, and Sasha experienced the first hints of regret. She gave a little shake of her head to clear her brain and got to her feet on rubbery legs. She glanced around and noticed their activities had little impact on the room, although there were skid marks where the chair legs had scraped the concrete floor. She braced herself on the back of the chair and reached down to pull up the leg of her jeans, which was turned inside out and bunched at her ankle, along with her white cotton panties.



“Wait,” he said, hitching up his jeans without pulling them all the way up. He waddled to the laundry area, reached into a basket, and pulled out a hand towel.

“Clean?” he asked.

She nodded, and he ran the cloth under the faucet of the utility sink. With the wet rag, he wiped her clean before rinsing the rag and wiping himself. He wrapped the used condom in paper from the basement half-bath, then picked up the scraps of the wrapper from the floor. She pulled herself together and peered at herself in the half-bath mirror. Her skin had a sheen, and she was flushed. She splashed water on her face and patted it dry, then turned this way and that, studying herself in the mirror. The wrinkled long sleeve t-shirt she wore was stained with sweat and she decided to change it. She pulled the t-shirt over her head, the basement air cool against her heated skin, and tossed it into the hamper of dirty clothes.

“Give me the wash cloth,” she said, holding her hand out. She took it, buried it at the bottom of the dirty clothes hamper, thinking she would run the washer later that evening as she usually did. She then went looking for a clean top to wear in the basket of clean clothes.

“Are you sorry we did this?” he asked, observing her. He had rearranged his clothing so he looked more or less pulled together. Sasha thought he looked ridiculously good, and part of her marveled that someone so good looking was pursuing her. He could have any woman he wanted, and he wanted *her*.

“No, I’m not sorry,” she said, closing the distance between them to cup his cheek. “Not at all. You make me feel...”

She trailed off, chewing her bottom lip and frowning.

“Feel what, *querida*?” he asked, placing his hands on her hips. His eyes were intent on hers.

“A lot of things,” she confessed. “Maybe more than I want to tell you right now. I wouldn’t want you to get a big head.”

He chuckled, then tipped her chin up for a soft kiss. “We’ll take this conversation up later, okay?”

Sasha was saved from having to reply by the sound of car doors closing and young voices chattering from outside.

“You grab two of those, I’ll grab one,” she said, making a move to pick up the lidded storage bins of Christmas ornaments.

She hustled up the stairs with the ornaments, aware he followed closely behind her, probably checking out her butt. She turned around quickly, saw that, indeed, his eyes were on her ass.

“Caught you looking,” she teased under her breath.

The kids blustered through the front door, toting many grocery bags, far more than Sasha thought were required for the recipe. She placed her storage bin in front of the unlit fireplace and followed the kids into the kitchen, wondering what all they’d purchased. Lots of sweets and junk food, it turned out.

“Mom, we’re out of school for two more weeks,” Maddie said. “We hardly have any provisions.”

Maddie was taller and thinner than Sasha, and young enough that she burned calories like they were going out of style. Sasha remembered those high-calorie-burning days with fondness. When she’d delivered Maddie, she was back to her pre-pregnancy weight in about a month. She’d breastfed the

greedy and fussy Maddie. Sasha hardly had time to eat when her daughter was a newborn. The constant nursing and tending to Maddie had made the weight melt off in no time.

Watching her daughter assemble the ingredients for dinner, Sasha marveled at how grown up Maddie was. She wasn't the type of mother who preferred one childhood stage over another. She'd loved them all and was sad this phase of her life was coming to an end.

Sasha sighed and turned away from the scene in the kitchen. Time to trim the tree. In years to come, Maddie would no longer be home to trim the tree with her.

She knelt in front of one of the bins and began to remove Christmas lights. Jacob joined her.

"What was with that sigh?" he asked, his voice low, an expression of concern in his eyes.

"Oh...just missing my girl," she said, realizing how strange that sounded.

"Even though she hasn't moved out yet?" he asked. "Believe me, I know how you feel."

The kids put the food in the oven, then joined Sasha and Jacob in the living room to trim the tree. They broke to eat the casserole with a bagged salad, then returned to decorating the tree.

Sasha caught Jacob watching her more than once, although she tried not to notice. But she did notice, and it was all she could do not to blush. When the tree was done, she found she didn't want the evening to end yet. She wanted to hug Maddie when she suggested they play Settlers of Cataan.

They played two games, snacking on bakery cookies and trash talking each other's game-playing abilities. Maddie won the first game, and Jacob won the second one. Sasha wondered whether this is what being in a blended family might be like. Then she chided herself for jumping the gun. Jacob had only said he wanted to date her, not marry her. She was getting way, way ahead of herself.

Still, when the evening ended, her heart lifted when Jacob said, "We should do this again some time."

Sasha kept a straight face when she replied, as casually as she could, "That sounds like fun."

Maddie and Jay hugged at the front door, as was common with kids their age. Sasha hugged Jay and gave Jacob a parting wave. Mother and daughter watched the Romeros get in the Explorer and drive home.

Though it was barely 8p.m., Sasha was bone-tired and couldn't stifle her yawn.

"Mom, you okay?" Maddie looked concerned.

"I'm good," she said. "Guess my week is catching up with me."

"We really should do that again," Maddie said as they closed the door.

Thinking of what she and Jacob had done in the basement before the kids had come home, Sasha had to agree.

# Chapter Twelve

## *Sasha*

It had been a day of disasters for Sasha.

Bone tired, she'd gone to bed early the night before, then had gotten up long enough for a quick breakfast with Maddie before the girl headed up to Chicago to hang out with Jay and a couple of their art club friends. Maddie had said it was to go to some obscure art museum, but Sasha suspected there might be fake IDs and surreptitious clubbing involved. She'd gone back to bed, and when she woke again, she'd been horrified to find she'd slept through her alarm and had to rush to the clinic for abbreviated Saturday hours, barely making it there on time.

She'd dragged herself through the morning, and rather than stopping at the grocery store, put in a Costco order through her grocery shopping app. Friends were coming to hang out that evening. The cat adoption event had been a resounding success, and her closest friends were the ones who had made it possible. She'd be an absolute bitch if she told everyone they couldn't come over for some holiday cheer in front of the tree she had decorated with Jacob, Maddie, and Jay.

As she'd gone through her morning performing checkups, squeezing anal glands, and treating her patients for parasites, she thought of Maddie and her friends gallivanting through Chicago's nightclubs with their underaged selves and possibly fake IDs. Maddie had the wherewithal to purchase condoms, and Sasha hoped she'd use them should the occasion arise. Sasha knew Richard was in town for the weekend, and

apparently, he'd broken up with his girlfriend, so there would be no distractions to contend with in the event he was called on to bail Maddie out of jail. One of the friends going with her for the weekend was another girl who had always seemed fairly responsible. She could presumably be counted on to hold Maddie's hair should she become shitfaced drunk at some seedy club and need to throw up in a toilet.

Sasha was unaccustomed to these feelings. She had been a helicopter parent for seventeen years. Should she care more? Possibly. She blamed Jacob for her spiral of indifference. It had been happening for a while now, ever since she'd let him into her home and body on homecoming weekend.

Jacob had rocked her world in the basement a few days before, but she knew in her heart of hearts that it was because of the things he'd said to her, not the things he'd done to her. She'd come home after a morning at the clinic and had time before the groceries were delivered, so she'd sat on the living room couch and gazed at the blinking Christmas tree as if it held the secrets to life's most enduring questions. It was then she'd had a revelation that scared the shit out of her.

She was in love with Jacob Romero.

"Christ on a cracker," she'd said out loud.

Sasha had never been in love before. She hadn't been in love with Richard, whom she'd met at a house party and, drunk but not shitfaced, decided to fool around with him in the upstairs bathroom of a house where the parents were away for the weekend. If she'd thought about condoms at the time, things would have turned out differently for Sasha, though she would

not go so far as saying she regretted it. Maddie was the best thing she'd ever done in her life.

Which made this love thing a little tough to take. Didn't love mean you made the object of your affections the most important person in your life? Where did that leave Maddie?

And...how did Jacob feel about her?

She had little time to ponder these things, because her Costco delivery arrived on the heels of her astounding realization. She put the groceries away, storing the overflow items in the garage refrigerator. She took the personal health items upstairs with her to be put away later, then she took a shower.

She felt bone sore and exhausted as she stepped out of the shower, and it was only one in the afternoon. Her guests would arrive at seven. She threw on yoga pants and a t-shirt and went to the living room to relax for a few minutes and watch a little television.

The next thing she knew, the doorbell was buzzing, over and over. She picked up her phone to see who was at the door and realized she had missed quite a few texts and voicemail messages. The clock display on her phone reported a time of 3:43p.m. Alarmed, she blinked rapidly, wiped a puddle of drool off her cheek, and went to answer the front door.

Jacob Romero. Of course.

"What are you doing here?" she asked groggily. She thought her speech sounded slurred from sleep.

"You invited me," he said, leaning in to give her a soft, lingering kiss that had her going to her toes to avoid having to

crane her neck. Then she chastised herself for responding so eagerly, disengaged, and shook her head to clear it.

“I invited you for seven tonight,” she growled. He stepped right past her without bothering to ask for an invitation to enter.

“And I figured you would need help getting set up, since the kids are away this weekend,” he said, unwinding the scarf around his neck, then hanging it and his bomber jacket on the coat hook by the door.

“I don’t smell anything cooking,” he said. He headed for the kitchen, and she followed him.

“That’s because no one is going to be here until seven,” she pointed out, though generally speaking, she would have already started cooking for a gathering starting in three hours.

Jacob made himself at home in the kitchen, opening the refrigerator and surveying the non-perishable snacks piled on the counters: chips, jarred salsa, bakery cookies, bread.

“What were you planning to serve?” He braced himself against the vintage kitchen sink with two hands, his legs crossed at the ankles. “Is this one of those Costco holiday meals they advertise in their circulars? You know, the heat and serve kind?”

“What if it is?” she grumbled.

“I’m just trying to understand what’s going on,” he said, flashing a dimpled smile and organizing the snacks into categories on the countertop. “I want to help you in any way that makes sense for you.”



She wanted to tell him that nothing about the current situation made any damned sense to her.

“A Costco party is nothing I need to be ashamed of,” she told him tartly.

He approached her with his hands up, palms facing Sasha in a placating gesture.

“I have no problem whatsoever with a Costco party,” he said hastily, his dark eyes smoldering and yet sincere. “I just want to be part of the party.”

His words made her melt a bit, so when he placed his hands on her hips and brought her pelvis closer to his, she didn't resist. Instead, she reluctantly allowed herself to be drawn in, but she placed her hands on his chest to keep her distance.

She narrowed her eyes at him and regarded him critically. What did Jacob Romero want from her? How did he feel about her? He'd only mentioned dating her in the open, not falling in love. He met her unflinching gaze with a sexy one of his own. Neither said anything during their stare down.

“I got potstickers, breaded mozzarella sticks, buffalo wings, spring rolls, pinwheel sandwiches, meat and cheese rollups, spinach artichoke dip, queso, hummus, ice cream, chocolate chip cookies, croissants, Italian bread, tortilla chips, and cheesecake,” she said to fill the silence.

“It may be pre-prepared, but no one will go home hungry,” he chuckled.

They stood there for a while longer, looking at one another, not saying anything. She chewed on her bottom lip, unsure of what to say, and Jacob met her reticence with an expression of

infinite patience. She couldn't just come out and ask his intentions, could she? She imagined introducing Jacob to her parents, who had moved to Indianapolis when Maddie was in the third grade, her dad having been transferred by his company. Would her dad take Jacob on a man-to-man walk, get the younger man to let down his guard, then demand to know Jacob's intentions toward Sasha?

"Um...why don't we get the baking sheets and whatnot together?" she suggested.

"I'd be happy to do whatever you'd like," he said cheerfully.

They spent the next couple of hours staging the appetizers on baking sheets, transferring dips and salsas to attractive serving dishes, and finding places for all the vintage serving dishes she'd collected over the years.

Sasha hosted several cat adoption events every year. Maddie and Jay had volunteered at the most recent event, and Jacob had stopped by briefly at the end of the event to pick up his son. Sasha told Jacob about the cat adoption event. There had been drama when Camille's ex-fiancé Darren, had shown up at the event, after stalking her on social media, to break up her relationship with Camille's new man, Andrew.

"I think it worked out," Sasha concluded as she rummaged, through her bottom cabinets for more serving dishes. "I'm pretty sure she's coming with Andrew tonight."

"All's well that ends well," Jacob said as he arranged breaded mozzarella sticks on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. He had donned one of her aprons, a frilly number covered in kittens and hearts. It was criminal how good a truly handsome man could look in frilly women's accouterments.

“Luckily, not that many potential adopters were still hanging around when Darren showed up,” she said. “We managed to place all the cats and kittens, and that rarely happens.”

“It doesn’t?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Camille’s friend Moonbeam did a last-minute social media campaign that got us a lot of exposure,” Sasha said.

She removed a set of oval, cobalt blue serving dishes Sasha had scored at the local Habitat for Humanity ReStore. They were dusty, so she ran them under the faucet and wiped them dry with a dish towel, placing them on the counter with the rest of the serving dishes she’d fished out from the cabinet. She didn’t think she had another serving dish left in her entire house to devote to the cause of feeding her guests.

When she went to get to her feet, she got a case of the spins, and planted her feet in order to avoid toppling over. Jacob was at her side in an instant.

“You okay?” he asked with concern.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, blinking away the black spots that appeared in her field of vision.

Jacob tilted her face up to inspect it. “Your skin is ashen,” he said, sounding as if he were on the verge of panic.

“Really? Because my skin is brown, so that would be pretty weird, wouldn’t it?” she asked breathlessly.

“You know what I mean,” he rolled his eyes. “Your skin doesn’t have that glow you always have.”

She frowned. “I glow?” she asked.

“Your skin is kind of a dark bronze,” he said. “Your skin is beautiful. You look like a goddess. Except when you look like you’re about to pass out, in which case, you look ashen. And you’re sweating.”

He had her by the shoulders, staring into her face. She felt out of it. She needed to sit down. Or maybe, lie down.

“Come on, you need to have a lie down,” Jacob said firmly, steering her out of the kitchen. She thought he was going to deposit her on the living room sectional, but he helped her upstairs to her bedroom, clearing the box of Costco pharmacy items off her bed and helping her stretch out. He removed her flats and found a throw blanket to drape over her.

“They’re going to be here soon,” she protested feebly.

“And until they get here, you should rest,” he said. “I’ll finish up downstairs.”

Jacob left the room, turning the light off as he went. Despite the fact that Sasha knew she should not be sleeping while the man she loved baked Costco treats for her guests, she soon found her eyes drifting closed.

Sasha’s eyes popped open when she heard what sounded like a pair of middle schoolers giggling on her front porch. She strained to listen and recognized one voice as Camille’s. She sat up quickly, swung her legs over the side of her bed, and turned on the bedside lamp. Where the hell were her shoes, anyway? Her eyes roamed the darkened room, trying to find meaning in the amorphous shapes around her.

In one corner of her bedroom was the box of Costco toiletries she needed to put away later, placed on the seat of the rocking

chair she once sat in while nursing Maddie. She didn't see her flats anywhere. What had Jacob done with them?

It didn't really matter, she supposed, because it was her house. She would be among friends, and shoes were not a requirement.

She padded down the stairs, realized she had no idea what she looked like, and made a beeline around Jacob to the downstairs bathroom.

She looked okay, she thought. She had luckily fallen asleep on her back, and had no sleep creases on her cheeks. She was pretty clear-eyed too. Her hair was a little mussed, so she used her fingers to smooth it, quickly took care of business, washed her hands, and went into the kitchen to grab appetizers.

In the foyer, Camille and Andrew stood at the open doorway, Andrew handing Jacob a wine-shaped gift bag.

"Uh, zaddy?" Camille was saying, making Sasha cringe inside. Hadn't she introduced Jacob to her girls before? Why couldn't Camille call Jacob by his actual name?

Sasha placed a tray of assorted appetizers on the coffee table and went to greet her guests. She still felt a little out of it. Camille offered to help in the kitchen, but Sasha waved her off.

"Appetizers courtesy of Costco," Sasha deadpanned as she accepted a social kiss from Andrew. Then the smells emanating from the kitchen made her stomach pitch, and she turned on her heel to walk away. Sasha couldn't remember when she'd last eaten. That early breakfast with Maddie, maybe? That had to be the reason she felt tired and queasy.

She decided she needed to find something light to nosh on, to get her blood sugar up.

She was searching for something she could eat that wouldn't make her want to throw up, yet also prevent her from fainting, when Camille found her in the kitchen.

"You okay, sis?" Camille asked.

"Yes, fine, thanks for asking," Sasha grumped. She felt frumpy in her yoga pants and oversized, shapeless t-shirt. Also, pink and white striped fuzzy socks and the Christmas tree earrings she'd fallen asleep in. Sasha didn't feel cute at all.

In contrast, Camille wore snug jeans, a fuzzy white sweater, and over-the-knee boots. Her friend had the cuteness of a woman with a new boyfriend. Sasha was a little jealous of her cute friend.

"You're being weird, Sasha," Camille commented.

"No, I'm not," Sasha insisted. "What's going on with you and Andrew? Seems like you two became a couple without consulting me."

"Sorry I didn't clear it with you first," Camille said. "It almost didn't happen, to be honest."

"What happened?" Sasha gave up all pretense of searching in her cabinets. She nodded at the back door and spoke in a lowered voice, "Let's go out there, away from the boys."

And from the smell of cooking food, Sasha thought to herself.

The three-season porch was pleasantly cool, despite the fact that the space heater was off. Sasha had been feeling

overheated, and it felt good to be outside. The two friends sat on the old patio set Sasha had kept out there for years.

Camille launched into the story of how she and Andrew had met, which turned out to be at the wedding she ran out on. Andrew was a millionaire entrepreneur, the limo company was one of his businesses, and he happened to be driving the limo at her wedding.

As Camille gushed about her new love, Sasha tried to be happy for her, and not jealous of the way Andrew had swept her off her feet and into his arms. Camille had sworn off men after her fiancé Darren cheated on her on their wedding day, yet she managed to give love another shot with Andrew. Sasha wished it could be that easy for her and Jacob.

Sasha melted at the adorableness of Andrew and Camille's relationship. Andrew had driven them around in a limo all afternoon with a sign attached to the back bumper that read, "NOT JUST MARRIED." It was so adorable and sweet that Sasha felt herself on the verge of crying.

The back door opened and Moon and Holly stepped out onto the enclosed porch.

"Did you know there's a limo parked in front of your house with a sign on it that says, JUST MARRED?" Holly asked.

"Marred?" Sasha asked.

"Some of the letters must have fallen off," Camille said.

"You got marred? Or married? I don't understand what's going on." Moon was the picture of confusion, her expression going slack.

“No one is getting married,” Camille said. “At least, I’m not getting married. Holly is already married. Sasha, are you getting married?”

“Oh, hell no,” Sasha said, aghast.

“Not even to the zaddy in the living room?” Holly said, grinning. “You say there’s nothing going on with him, but the dude is in your house right now, drinking your cider. His name is Jacob, by the way,” Holly confided to Moon and Camille.

“That sounds kind of filthy,” Camille said. “I like it!”

“He is *not* drinking my cider,” Sasha lied. “We don’t have that kind of relationship.”

“You *sure* he’s not hittin’ your kitten?” Camille asked.

Sasha rolled her eyes dramatically. “Please shut up.”

A sound from the kitchen had all four women swiveling their heads to see the cause of the commotion. It was Travis and Jacob, in the kitchen, rooting around in the fridge. The large window at the back wall of the kitchen looked into the porch. Travis and Jacob could clearly see into the porch if they wanted to, and the women could see the two men as well. It was kind of like watching a stage play with two hot hunks as the actors.

The two had clearly found something to talk about, and although the women couldn’t quite make out the words, they were chatting companionably. Jacob extracted two bottles of beer, then handed one to Travis. Then Jacob opened a drawer next to the fridge and unerringly found the church key, which they took turns using to open the bottles. Jacob tossed the



opener back into the drawer, then flashed a dimpled smile at the ladies.

Or rather, at *Sasha*.

The two men left the kitchen, then three sets of curious eyes were directed at Sasha.

“If there’s nothing going on with Zaddy, why would he know where to find the bottle opener?” Camille wanted to know.

“Well...” Sasha said.

“It’s okay if you’re dating someone, Sasha,” Holly put in. “I know you think Madison wouldn’t like it, but she’s about to go away to school, anyway. It’s time you started living your own life, girl.”

“Let’s back up a second,” Camille said. “He’s been over here before, hasn’t he?”

“After Fat Joey totaled the fake tree, the four of us went to get a real one,” Sasha admitted. “They wound up hanging out with us for the evening, setting up the tree and decorating it. He’s a single parent, too.”

“Awww...” Holly and Moon said at the same time.

“You guys are perfect for each other,” Camille said. “I don’t understand what the issue is.”

Sasha felt vaguely ill. “I have a plan for my post child-rearing years, and I’m not interested in deviating from that plan,” she said. “I was supposed to be traveling to exotic locations, taking interesting classes to expand my horizons. I’m only thirty-four years old, for god’s sake.”

“Maybe Jacob might like to go on adventures with you,” Holly suggested. “You never know. You should hang out with him and see what develops.”

“Yeah, that seems like a good idea,” Sasha wailed. “But even if I wanted to do that, that option is off the table.”

“What do you mean?” Moon asked, waving at the kitchen window. “He’s here. He flashed his dimples at you and smiled. He’s cute. He has a really nice butt and that big dick energy.”

“Believe me, I know all about the big dick energy,” Sasha said, thinking about their rolls in the hay. Jacob’s ass was even better without the jeans.

“So, he is hittin’ the kitten?” Camille demanded.

“Yeah, it’s worse than that,” Sasha said. She pushed away from the patio table and put her head between her knees. Sasha felt ill again and pushed herself away from the patio table and put her head between her knees.

“Sasha, what the hell? Are you okay?” Holly rushed to Sasha’s side and knelt on the floor.

“I’ll get some water,” Moon said, banging her way into the kitchen.

Camille tipped Sasha’s face up to get a better look at her. Her normally beautiful brown skin had a greenish undertone. Sasha covered her mouth with a fist, trying to suppress...dry heaves?

“Sasha...don’t take this the wrong way, but...” Camille let her words trail off.

“Are you pregnant?” Holly interjected in a stage whisper.

Moon chose that moment to return with a glass of water.

“What? You’re pregnant?”

Holly took a quick look through the kitchen window. “Keep your voice down!”

“Maybe?” Sasha said.

“Aren’t you a healthcare professional?” Holly asked, placing the glass of water on the table in front of Sasha. “Shouldn’t you know whether you’re pregnant?”

“I would if I could work up the nerve to actually take the test,” Sasha moaned miserably, thinking of the jumbo pack of tests she’d ordered from Costco. Ordered, but had been afraid to take just yet.

“Okay...” Camille said calmly. She, too, glanced at the kitchen window to make sure they wouldn’t be overheard.

“So...you might be pregnant,” Camille went on. “And...who’s the daddy?”

“Sasha!” Holly said, a little too loudly. “Is Zaddy the daddy?”

# Chapter Thirteen

## *Jacob*

When four women congregate in one room, speaking in low tones with one another as they shoot surreptitious glances at the kitchen window, it might not be cause for alarm, but it's a safe bet that they are discussing something secret and mysterious.

Jacob wondered what the four women on the back porch were up to, and whether it had anything to do with the giant box of Costco pregnancy tests he'd seen in Sasha's bedroom. Perhaps it had something to do with Sasha's apparent bone-crushing fatigue and queasiness.

He had the vague memory of the flavored condoms they'd used on homecoming night ripping as he'd pulled out. She'd been pretty blasé about the mishap, letting him know she wasn't at her fertile time of the month, so they had nothing to worry about. Then she'd reiterated her lack of interest in a relationship and sent him home in the middle of the night.

He'd texted her a few times over the following weeks, and she'd never responded. It appeared at the time that she'd moved on to the next thing in her life and was done with their passionate interlude. Problem was, he wasn't done. Not even close, and that was from a personal perspective.

Their kids had met through the Art Club at the high school and had been regularly involved in projects together. Jay had been at Sasha's house many times, and Maddie had been to Jacob's

apartment as well. Even though Jay was only a junior, the two teens seemed to get along well and have a lot in common.

Jay was welcome at Sasha's house, but Jacob was not. The more he thought about it, the more the situation bothered him. Finding Bones in his mother's garage turned out to be the opening he needed to re-engage with Sasha. Thinking of how she reacted to a hissing, spitting little stray with good humor brought a smile to his lips.

"What's going on out there?" Tor Oleander asked, nodding toward the kitchen. "Our womenfolk have deserted us."

"Beats me," Andrew said with a shrug. "I'm just going to eat these great appetizers and wait until they're finished."

"By the way, why is there a 'JUST MARRED' sign on the back of your limo?" Travis asked. "There's a letter missing, right?"

"There are a *lot* of letters missing," Andrew explained, his expression rueful.

"I'm going to take advantage of the women being outside and find some violent entertainment to watch," Tor said, picking up the remote control from the coffee table. He flipped through channels, pausing at a college football game. Then he kept flipping until he found an MMA fight.

This caught the attention of all four men. Two giant, muscular men beating the ever-loving shit out of one another. Tor, Jacob, Travis, and Andrew tapped into their inner troglodytes as one man drew blood from the other. It flowed down his face, and Jacob wondered how much blood letting would be required in order to make the powers that be stop the fight.

The men were into watching the carnage when a woman's horrified voice interrupted them.

"Oh my God, what the hell is that?" Camille exclaimed. "Is this appropriate Christmas party viewing?"

The men all turned to look at Camille, chastened.

"Just kidding," she laughed. "I need to take care of something upstairs. Y'all carry on."

She went up the staircase, then came down again moments later with a hand tucked under her sweater. Jacob wondered what she was hiding. A pregnancy test, perhaps? None of the other men mentioned anything, so Jacob decided not to bring it up.

He focused on the bloodbath on Sasha's flatscreen, not really following the fighters' blows. He was too preoccupied with thoughts of what was happening on the back porch.

Sasha was the next to emerge from the back porch, and she hid something underneath her oversized t-shirt. She ducked into the half-bath off the kitchen. Jacob watched the wood panel door with its vintage glass knob like a cat watching a mouse hole until Sasha emerged a few minutes later with something hidden under her t-shirt again.

A good ten minutes passed before any sound whatsoever came from the back porch, and then, Jacob detected only indistinct murmurs.

"A watched pot never boils," Tor approached Jacob and spoke to him in hushed tones.

Jacob turned to stare at Tor through narrowed eyes. "What do you think is going on out there?" Jacob asked, voice equally

low. He was impatient, as always, when it came to Sasha.

“If it’s something that affects you, it will come out eventually,” Tor said. “I’ve learned that Camille, Sasha, and Holly are more like sisters than friends. They seem to share all the big life events with each other. I think it’s because they bonded over raising Maddie together. When something big is happening, it’s best to let them work it out without interference.”

Jacob let out a harsh sigh of irritation. The moment he considered having a relationship again, leave it to him to find someone difficult. Jay’s mother hadn’t been difficult. When she was there, she was there; when she wasn’t, she wasn’t. No mixed messages. Of course, she’d abandoned Jay, so she wasn’t a model of relationship stability.

“How long have you been with Holly?” Jacob asked, eager to change the subject.

“We grew up here in Center City, a few doors away from each other,” Tor said, his blue eyes going a bit sappy. “She was kind of like the daughter my father never had. When her aunt died, she came back to town to get the house ready to sell. I had moved to St. Louis years before, but I came to town to see my dad. That’s when we met again. She was no longer too young for me, and she wasn’t as skinny as I remembered her being. Also, she no longer wore her hair in pigtails.”

Jacob smiled. Tor was clearly besotted with his wife.

“She lived in Chicago, I lived in St. Louis, but we were able to work it out,” he said. “We’ve been married a couple of years now.”

“And you have a son,” Jacob added.

“We have a son named Bo, yes,” Tor smiled.

“I’m guessing Holly was the first of the friends to marry?”

Jacob asked.

“Yes, she was,” Tor said. “We thought Camille would be next, but it didn’t work out that way.”

Jacob vowed to himself that Sasha would be the next of their group to marry, regardless of whether she turned out to be pregnant.

The women soon re-joined the rest of the group. Their expressions communicated nothing of what they had discussed on the back porch. Sasha’s face was carefully neutral, while the other women seemed pleasant enough.

Sasha joined Jacob, slid an arm around his waist, and gave him an encouraging squeeze. He could only blink at her, perplexed, wondering what in the hell was going on with her. He slid his arm around her waist, tentatively, not wanting to overstep any boundaries.

“You okay?” he bent his head to whisper in her ear.

She gave him a fragile smile.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” she said. “Everything’s good.”

“Really?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said, giving him a final squeeze before leaving him to work the room.

The cage fights were turned off, and someone found an on-demand channel playing Christmas carols instead.

For the remainder of the evening, Jacob watched as Sasha chatted easily with her guests, smiling and seeing to



everyone's needs, as if nothing was amiss. And maybe nothing was amiss, Jacob thought, and he was simply assuming there was something secretive going on.

Still...it was hard to ignore the signs that Sasha might be pregnant. All the evidence—the cranky mood, the purchase of an economy pack of pregnancy tests, and Sasha's apparent fatigue—pointed to that fact.

The question was: how did he feel about it?

The answer was: delighted.

He'd always thought he'd have a large family. Certainly, more than one child. If Sasha was pregnant, he'd have another child and possibly, a stepdaughter. Sasha was a good mother, successful in spite of—or maybe because of—the fact so many assumed that as a single teen mom, she couldn't possibly do a good job raising her child. Sasha now had a thriving career, was a pillar of the community, and was more mature than she'd been when she'd had Maddie. Jacob liked to think he was a good dad too, and also more financially secure and mature. They'd make a great child-rearing team.

But Sasha had been adamant that she didn't want a relationship. The only reason she'd invited him over for the evening was because the kids were away and there would be three other couples there, de facto chaperones who would ensure she and Jacob avoided intimate conversations like the one they'd had in her basement days before.

Jacob found himself observing how the other couples related to one another. Tor and Holly were obviously very into one another, Tor tracking his wife's every movement, feeding her snacks and making her sit on his lap the entire time. Tor had

the look of the Viking deity he was named after, tall enough to have to duck under doorways, hands like dinner plates, and weirdly wide shoulders. He had mentioned he'd played hockey in high school, and Jacob believed it.

Camille and Andrew had the heart eyes of the newly coupled. They ate from the same plate, and because they had a limo, had both had enough wine to make them giggly.

Moon and Travis had come together, and while they weren't an official couple, it was obvious something was going on between them. No matter where they were in the room, they always seemed to be leaning toward one another, as if there were an invisible tether holding them together. Jacob had noticed them laughing at the same time, though in separate conversations. They were so in sync, in fact, that it almost seemed as if they were going out of their way to avoid one another. Ostensibly, they'd arrived together because they were coming from the same place, Travis's ranch and vacation rental compound.

Jacob wanted to be a couple with Sasha. He wanted a relationship with her. The want was more like a need, and if he was honest with himself, marriage had been his endgame for some time. Maybe even since the night of the homecoming game. Sasha was everything he could hope for in a mate. She was loving, accomplished, and easy to be with. She was beautiful and sexy. Independent. Because she didn't need him, he knew she wanted him for all the right reasons.

And he was certain she wanted him. She just had hang-ups about relationships. Since the hang-ups weren't really rational,

Jacob only needed to show her that she had more to gain from being with him than she had to lose.

The get-together began to break up at around eleven. The women took turns giving Sasha warm hugs and murmurs of support. Handshakes and social kisses were exchanged and admonishments to drive safely given.

At last, Jacob and Sasha were alone together. They stood in the foyer, looking at one another, for a long, pregnant pause. Sasha looked a little worn out, but her color was better, and he'd seen her eat a few appetizers over the course of the evening. He wanted to ask her about what she'd been talking about with her friends on the back porch. He wanted to ask about the significance of the Costco pregnancy tests. He wanted to know how she was feeling.

He opened his mouth to speak, but she turned away from him and headed for the kitchen.

When he caught up with her, water ran in the sink as she rinsed dishes before placing them in the dishwasher.

“Would you believe Camille has a new man already?” Sasha said. “When she walked out of that church six months ago, I wasn't sure she'd ever let anyone in again.”

Jacob had chatted with Andrew briefly that evening, so he knew the story of Camille's cheating ex-fiancé.

“Andrew seems like a good guy,” Jacob said. “And it's obvious he genuinely cares for Camille.”

“They seem like a good match,” she said.

Jacob glanced around the kitchen, which was a mess. He decided to pitch in without asking, since Sasha was likely to

wave off his help. He looked in a drawer for bag clips, then went to work emptying bowls of chips back into their respective bags. He put the bags in the pantry, then started consolidating all the cookies into a single bakery container.

“Do you keep your cookies in the fridge?” he asked.

With her back to him, she waved a hand dismissively.

“You really don’t have to do that,” she said, her voice pitched unnaturally high. She sounded nervous.

“I want to do it,” he said. When she didn’t turn around, he reached for her, cupping her elbow with his hand, but she kept right on rinsing dishes and stacking them in the dishwasher.

“In fact, you can just go on home,” she said in that same tight, high voice. Her hands seemed to shake as she rinsed the dishes.

Jacob flinched at how easily she could dismiss him.

“Do you really want me to leave?” he asked.

“You’ve done so much already,” she said. “When I needed a nap earlier. That was really nice of you.”

“I didn’t do it to be nice,” he said, squeezing her elbow. He reached around her and turned off the water, then turned her around to face him. She kept her eyes downcast and attempted to step away, but he didn’t let her. He tilted her face up to his with a thumb and forefinger, and that’s when she looked up at him. Her huge brown eyes were full of pain and distrust. It looked as if she was on the verge of tears.

“Do you know why I did it?” he asked.

She swallowed hard, her lips trembling, eyes blinking rapidly. She shook her head.

“I did it because I wanted to be near you,” he said. “You must know I’m crazy about you, *querida*.”

Sasha said nothing, but when she went to sidestep him, he didn’t stop her.

“I don’t think I ever told you how I met Maddie’s father,” she said, grabbing a dish towel to wipe first her hands, then her eyes. “A bunch of friends and I went up to the city to some kid’s house party. Richard was a freshman at Loyola. We hung out all night then...hooked up in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Wasn’t very smart of me, actually, ‘cause he gave me the ‘just the tip’ line.”

“You were just a girl—” Jacob stopped when she held a hand up to silence him.

“Anyway, when I found out I was pregnant, I called him,” she said. “To his credit, he didn’t give me a lame ‘are you sure it’s mine’ line. He asked me what I wanted to do, then when I said I thought I was going to keep the baby, he told me he wasn’t ready to be a dad. Then he said he also wasn’t ready to get married, but that his family would help pay to support Maddie, provided I got a paternity test. You see, he believed the baby was his, but his parents would want to verify.”

She breathed heavily at the memory, her eyes distant and unfocused.

“So, I cussed him out, told him I hadn’t even considered marrying him, and hung up on him,” she said.

“You were strong to do that,” he said, his admiration of her growing by the moment.

“I was a seventeen-year-old hothead,” she laughed ruefully. “I called him back a week later and told him I’d contact him after the baby was born to get a paternity test. He wasn’t offering to support me. He was offering to support his child, and Maddie deserved the money.”

“You were a strong woman then, and you’re a strong woman now,” he told her.

Sasha made eye contact with Jacob. “My point is, I didn’t need a man to marry me, just because I was pregnant,” she said, her voice steely with determination.

Jacob let this proclamation sink in, then crossed the few feet between them to take her damp hands in his.

“What if a man wanted to marry you because he loved you?” His voice was thick with need, and he found himself surprised at having asked her.

“I would wonder whether the man really knows me as well as he evidently thinks he does,” she said, a hard edge to her voice. She kept her eyes on his, determined to show him that she meant what she said.

“I would say to you that you don’t know what this man feels,” he told her.

She laughed at this, and the dam holding back her tears finally broke.

“Right,” she said, wiping her leaking eyes with the back of her hand.

“Sasha, are you pregnant?” Jacob couldn’t resist asking.

“If I said ‘yes’, what would you do?” she asked.

“Well, I wouldn’t tell you I wasn’t ready to be a dad, and I wouldn’t ask for a paternity test,” he said. “You may have noticed I’ve been low-key stalking you since before Homecoming. I would be shocked if another man had been able to get that close to you.”

“Okay...that’s...” she seemed to be searching for the right words. “Weirdly romantic?”

“I would ask you to marry me, but I would have asked you eventually, even without a baby,” he said.

“I’m going to finish up here,” she said, turning back to her work. Apparently, she wasn’t going to answer whether she was pregnant. At least, not yet.

“And I’m going to stay here and finish up with you,” he said.

“Okay, but don’t think that means I’m going to have sex with you again,” she informed him.

“You’re such a sweet-talker,” he told her.

He stayed until the dishwasher was loaded and turned on, everything that wouldn’t fit in the dishwasher was washed, dried and put away, and the living room was put back in order.

When she said she was ready for bed, he followed her up the stairs, waited for her to get ready for bed, and tucked her in.

“You have left Bones alone for a long time, haven’t you?” she asked around a jaw-cracking yawn.

“There’s a lady in my building who’s watching him for me,” he said, quickly adding, “She’s sixty years old and not my

type, anyway.”

“Not your type?” she asked, eyelids drooping.

“I’m into women who deny that they want me,” he deadpanned.

She gave him a sleepy smile.

“Thanks for helping out today,” she said. “I appreciate it. And we can have that...other conversation tomorrow. Or whenever. I’m too tired to think right now. Please see yourself out. Thank you.”

“Tomorrow,” he conceded. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

He kissed Sasha on the forehead. “Goodnight, *querida*.”



# Chapter Fourteen

## *Sasha*

There's no day better than Sunday. This one in particular was going to be better than most, Sasha mused, because Maddie was going to be in Chicago until at least dinnertime.

Therefore, she'd have all day to relax, take care of herself, and ponder the significance of the change in her life circumstances. She could work through what to do without either her full-time daughter, or her part-time lover, around to clutter her mind with irrelevant or confusing information.

## *Pregnant.*

According to the three, count 'em, three, Costco pregnancy tests she'd taken the night before in the downstairs bathroom, Sasha was most definitely pregnant.

Knocked up. On the nest. In a family way. *Embarazada*, as she learned in freshman Spanish, is a "false friend" of the English "embarrassed" and should not be confused with an actual cognate.

As she lay in bed, watching the morning cast weak light across her bedroom ceiling, she had the idle thought that she hadn't really heard Jacob speak much Spanish around her. She wondered if he spoke much Spanish at all. It just hadn't come up. He called her *querida*, which she remembered to mean something like "dear."

The fact that she didn't know how well Jacob spoke Spanish, along with the myriad other traits most couples knew about

one another, brought home the fact they really didn't know much about each other at all.

Even as she thought this, she realized that wasn't really true. Even before he'd told her he wasn't the cut-and-run type when it came to having children, she already knew he would be devoted to their child. He would be the kind of guy to attend childbirth classes with her, and later, have encouraging words and ice chips at the ready when she was in labor. He wouldn't drop out of his child's life for years, then come back when the kid was half-grown. He would be there for every ballet recital, Little League game, den meeting, band practice, always in the front row, cheering his kid on.

Jacob was a great dad. The kind of guy Sasha wished she'd chosen the first time around. She was going to choose Jacob the second time around, she just wasn't sure what that looked like yet.

Sasha felt better once she'd made the decision that Jacob was going to be in her and their child's lives for the foreseeable future. It was better than how she'd felt the night before, when finding out she was pregnant while she had a houseful of dinner guests was quite overwhelming. Everything would work out just fine.

Sasha grabbed her phone off her nightstand and powered it up to read her messages.

*Maddie: Dad is driving me crazy. Can I come home?*

Maddie often blew up with her dad, the consequence of years of barely acknowledging the girl's existence and her resentment of this neglect. Sasha was of the mind that if it was

possible to have a relationship with her dad, Maddie should try. The message had been sent ten minutes earlier.

*Sasha: He just gave you a car. Why are you beefing? Stay through dinner, then come home.*

Next, there was a group text from the girls. Sasha decided to read through it while taking care of her morning business. She padded to the bathroom, where she found the motherfucking toilet seat up again. She used a square of toilet paper to lower the seat, shuddering as she did so. She sat on the toilet to pee, staring at the conversation thread, which had come through the night before.

*Camille: How are you, sweetie? ☐☐*

*Holly: How are you holding up?*

*Moon: Did you talk to your baby daddy? ☐☐☐*

*Holly: I hate that term. I think Moonbeam means, did you discuss your situation with your child's father?*

*Moon: Sorry. ☐*

*Holly: ...*

*Camille: I'm sure Moon didn't mean anything by it. Don't be rude! ☐*

*Moon: I'm still sorry if I offended. ☐☐♀*

*Holly: NVM. How did it go with Jacob?*

*Moon: My 2 cents, I think he'll be a great dad. I just met him, but he seems so nice.*

*Holly: He is nice. I met him during Homecoming. His son is friends with Maddie.*

*Camille: Wait. Did you get pregnant Homecoming weekend?*

*Holly: I think she prolly did.*

*Moon: Sorry if this offends, but did you get pregnant with Maddie during Homecoming, because if so, I think you should stop going to Homecoming games.*

Sasha couldn't help but let out a snort of laughter.

*Sasha: I'm fine. Just got up. Jacob knows. Will talk to y'all later.*

She thought her message answered their questions, while cutting off further conversation. She didn't want to talk to the girls about what she planned to do without first discussing it with Jacob.

She turned on the shower to let the water get hot while she brushed her teeth. She received another text from Maddie.

*Maddie: Mom!*

Sasha squinted at the screen, wondering what the one-word text meant, and how she should reply.

*Sasha: You should stay in the city and try to get along with your dad. Go do something with Jay. Distract yourself for a while, then go back to dad's house and try again.*

Sasha felt this was good motherly advice and hoped Maddie would follow it. She stepped into the shower and scrubbed herself thoroughly with her lavender-scented body exfoliant. When she stepped out of the tub, she felt clean and invigorated.

She dried herself, then moisturized with petroleum jelly as well as a super-luxuriant body balm Moon had recommended.

Back in her bedroom, she dressed in clean yoga pants and a t-shirt. When she sat on the edge of the bed to put on her socks, she glanced at text messages again and found another one from Maddie.

*Maddie: Mom!*

Sasha sighed, rolled her eyes, and decided the whining didn't deserve a response. She tossed the phone on the bed, and that's when she felt needle pricks sinking into her ankle.

"Ow!" she yelped, looking for the source of the pain.

A tiny little kitten meowed loudly. He was black except for his bright green eyes and pink tongue.

"Bones?" she asked, tentatively, not at all sure why he would be there.

She quickly pulled on her socks, then scooped up the kitten and cradled him to her chest. He continued to meow urgently as she went down the stairs to find him something to eat.

"What are you doing here?" she asked as she fed him a small dish of dry kitten food.

"I brought him," said a male voice from the kitchen doorway. Sasha jumped and clutched a hand to her chest.

"What the hell, Jacob!" she yelled. The man looked adorably ruffled, his hair sticking in different directions and a sleep crease on his cheek. He wore a dark t-shirt and sweatpants. He hadn't been wearing the outfit the night before.

"Morning," he said, sliding an arm around her waist and giving her a kiss on the cheek. "I see Bones already said hello."

She blinked. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, in a minute, I’ll be making breakfast,” he said, sounding far too chipper in the face of her outrage.

“But why are you here?” she asked.

“I’m here to provide loving support to my wife-to-be,” he said.

“What?” she yelled, looking at him as if he’d grown an extra head. “I never said I would marry you!”

“Oh, come on,” he smiled, placing a protective hand over her still-flat belly. “We have to get married, don’t you think? I want to take care of you and our baby.”

It was kind of sweet, actually, but she was mad at him. She was supposed to be taking the day to ease into second-time motherhood. She wanted to be alone today to figure out what she thought she should expect from Jacob as the baby’s father. She wanted to think and plan before she had a conversation with him. Hell, she wasn’t even discussing her pregnancy with her girls yet.

She pushed away from him and turned angry eyes on him.

“You were supposed to go home and wait to hear from me.”

“Last night, you said we would discuss it ‘tomorrow’ and it is now Sunday morning,” he said. “It’s tomorrow. I went home last night after I tucked you in, picked up Bones, and crashed on that comfortable sectional of yours.”

He gave her a look that communicated, “aren’t I a clever boy?”

“But you shouldn’t be here,” she whined, flapping her hands in dismay, her morning peace shot to hell.

“Why not?” he asked, looking genuinely puzzled.

“Because never did I say you should come here at the crack of dawn on a Sunday morning, with your cat, to make tomorrow happen before I was ready!” she waved her hands wildly.

Jacob kept on smiling. “I wanted to be here to support you,” he said. “You shouldn’t have to go through this alone, like you did the first time.”

“I didn’t do it alone the first time,” she said, holding up an index finger, which trembled with her anger.

Something in her expression must have made an impression on him because his toothy smile gradually faded.

She poked her finger at the middle of his chest as she made her next points. “I had my parents, I had my girls, Maddie’s daycare workers, and her teachers,” she told him. “She didn’t have her dad to help raise her, but I had plenty of resources to take up the slack. Parenthood is an obligation, but it’s also a gift. Richard missed out, and so did Maddie, but she turned out great even without her father’s love and attention.”

Jacob only blinked, stunned at her outburst, and she realized her reaction might be over the top. He was stepping up to be a part of their child’s life, and that was important.

“The baby will benefit from everyone who loves it,” Jacob said, emotion thick in his voice. “Him or her. I want to make sure you know that I want this child. I already love this child.”

“I’m not telling you not to care,” Her heart melted a bit at his declaration. “I’m just saying I need you to slow down. I need you to give me time to figure out how I want this to go. I need

you to give me the space I need to think about how the next twenty years of my life is going to go.”

Jacob frowned, his arms folded over his chest, his legs planted shoulder-width apart. To most people, he would seem imposing and maybe even a little scary. But here she was, making herself vulnerable, and he wasn't trying to talk her out of her feelings. He was listening to her, unhappily maybe, but he *was* listening.

“I—” She started to confess her true feelings for him, but she wasn't ready to open that Pandora's box. Once she said it, she couldn't take it back. Jacob continued to study her face, waiting for her to finish speaking.

“I just—” she tried again. “I just wanted tomorrow to be more like twenty-four hours, you know?”

This finally made an impact on him. His face relaxed into a tentative smile. He pulled her into his arms, and she let him.

“I understand, *querida*,” he said. “You don't have to say more.”

“But hey,” she said. “We can still have breakfast before you go, okay? Then we can start the twenty-four-hour countdown all over again.”

He chuckled, then brushed a kiss on her lips. It was quick and light, chaste almost, but it was enough to start her engine running and her body heating. With her anger discharged, her body was now primed for makeup sex. She felt her pussy swelling against the plain cotton of her underwear, and her unfettered breasts soon sported painfully erect nipples under her old t-shirt. She became aware of his wonderful musky



male scent, more intense than usual because he hadn't yet taken a shower. When he took her hand to lead her to the kitchen table, she shamelessly checked out his butt cheeks, which looked great against the fabric of his sweatpants. She wanted to sit at that table and watch him make her a meal she would not immediately throw up, enjoying the dick print in the front of his sweatpants.

So, she allowed him to be in charge for now, secure in the knowledge he'd be gone before she had a chance to be overwhelmed again by her situation.

He made her a cup of peppermint tea, which didn't upset her stomach, then they agreed she could probably eat skillet-fried sliced potatoes and onions. Sasha was starving. She hadn't had much to eat the night before.

So, she sat at the kitchen table, watching Jacob sauté thin sliced red potatoes with an onion, stomach growling because she hadn't eaten much the night before, when she heard the front door open and Maddie call out.

"Mom, are you cooking? I couldn't stay with Dad, he's so annoying," Maddie called. "I decided to just come home early —"

Her voice trailed off as she entered the kitchen and took in the scene before her.

Her mother sipping tea, sitting at the kitchen table, and definitely not doing any cooking. Also, her AP US History teacher stirring something in a pan on the stove. Both her mom and Mr. Romero were casually dressed, neither of them wearing shoes and, if she wasn't mistaken, her mother wasn't wearing a bra.

“Mr. Romero?” she asked. “What are you doing here?”

Jay followed close on Maddie’s heels, and he too took in the room with confusion and questions in his eyes.

“Dad?” Jay said.

Sasha and Jacob exchanged a look. He smiled and waved a spatula at the two teens.

“I thought you were going to stay with your dad until after dinner,” Sasha said, putting down her teacup and crossing the kitchen to hug both kids. Jay returned the gesture, but Maddie, clearly confused, only allowed her mother to hug her without hugging back.

“I know you said I should, but he got a new girlfriend and we got into a huge...” she trailed off.

“Discussion,” Jay supplied.

When Sasha stopped hugging Maddie, she stepped back to study her daughter’s expression, to gauge her emotions. Maddie studied Sasha back, still holding her overnight bag. Then her eyes bobbed back and forth between the two adults in the room. Her brow furrowed.

Bones jogged up to the newcomers and let out a plaintive meow.

“Who’s this?” Maddie asked, smiling at the kitten. She squatted and held out a hand for the kitten to sniff. Bones shrank away, hissing and spitting, backing away with an arched back and stiff legs.

“Another rescue?” she asked her mother. Maddie was used to her mother bringing home many rescue cats over the years.

“No,” said Jay, bending to pick up Bones and holding the kitten against his chest. “This is our cat.”

The kitten immediately began to purr loudly in Jay’s arms.

No one said anything. The only sounds interrupting the awkward silence were the kitten’s contented purring and the potatoes frying on the stove. Jay was fully engaged in stroking the kitten, but Maddie continued to watch the adults with a piercing, suspicious gaze.

“I’m going to put my bag upstairs,” Maddie finally said, turning on her heel to leave the kitchen and dashing up the stairs. Sasha let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding.

“So, Jay, did you have fun in the city?” Sasha asked.

Jacob turned back to the skillet, stirring the potatoes, as Jay launched into a blow-by-blow of what he and Maddie had done from the time they’d left Center City Friday night until approximately five minutes before they’d walked through Sasha’s door.

Maddie returned and frowned at the adults. She crossed her arms over her chest and sat at the kitchen table, pouting.

Sasha gave Maddie the side-eye, then the *mom* look that told children of all ages to adjust their attitude right fucking now. In response, Maddie rolled her eyes.

The potatoes were done at last. Jacob placed the plate of potatoes on the table in front of Sasha with a smile, ignoring the eye daggers Maddie shot in his direction.

“Why are you eating potatoes?” Maddie said with a pout.

Sasha was about to tuck into the pile of potatoes, but she put her fork down and looked at her daughter's sullen face across the kitchen table.

"Excuse me?" Sasha asked.

"Why is Mr. Romero here before eight in the morning fixing you potatoes?" Maddie asked snidely. "Did you wait until Jay and I left town to have breakfast together?"

That's basically what happened, Sasha mused, but that didn't mean her daughter had the right to give her a hard time about it.

"I think it's time we got going," Jacob said to no-one in particular. "Jay, let's get going, okay?"

"Maddie, you're being rude," Sasha hissed.

"I am?" Maddie shrieked. "Why are you sneaking around having breakfast with Jay's dad, Mom? Why is there a big old box of pregnancy tests on the floor of your bedroom? What's going on here, Mom?"

# Chapter Fifteen

## *Moonbeam*

Cookie's offered a number of Sunday breakfast specials, all of which included a short stack of pancakes. Moonbeam Upshaw perused the menu with slow deliberation, finally deciding on the two-fer: two eggs, two strips of bacon, two patty sausages, with the short stack on the side. Then she put her menu down and faced the man sitting across from her at the table.

Travis Beckett looked hot as hell in his trademark flannel shirt, a blue plaid one today that brought out the deep sapphire of his eyes.

"Figure out what you want?" he asked, eyes twinkling. His skin was rosy, the lingering effects of the cold morning, and his full, pink lips curved into a quiet smile.

"Yep," she said, smiling smugly. "And it's going to be awesome."

"Let me guess," he said. "Lots of protein. Lots of sugar. Basically, lots of food."

It was an ongoing joke between them. Moon was a petite woman and a hearty eater.

"I didn't eat much last night," she reminded him.

"I'm not sure why," he said. "She made enough to feed a small village."

"She likes to cook, or so I'm told," Moon said.

“Did she really do the cooking, though?” Travis cocked an eyebrow.

“I think baking Costco appetizers counts,” she said. “It’s more than I do.”

“Because it’s been a while since you had a kitchen,” he pointed out.

“Most of the places I’ve stayed in have had some kind of kitchen, from full-on gourmet to one of those compact kitchens where the fridge, sink, and oven are one unit.”

“Sounds like what you have in the A-frame,” he observed.

“No, the A-frame has a true, one-wall kitchen,” she said.

“Every part of the kitchen is separate. I personally think that’s the best way to go. When one of the pieces goes on the fritz and can’t be fixed, you can replace it without having to replace a \$3,000 all-in-one kitchen.”

“That was my thinking when I planned the kitchens for my cabins,” he said.

“Great thinking, Beck,” she said, tapping the side of her head to signify how well he could think.

The waitress arrived, took their orders, and relieved them of their menus.

“Anyway, even when I have a nice kitchen to cook in, I often default to heating things up,” Moon shared. “I’m not mad that Sasha and Jacob didn’t personally prepare all those damned appetizers from scratch.”

“Sasha and Jacob...” Travis said suggestively, eyebrows up, letting his voice trail off.

“Sasha and Jacob...” Moon said, feigning ignorance.

He rolled his eyes. “What’s going on with them? Are they a couple or what?”

Moon pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you,” she told him.

“Come on...think of all we’ve shared,” he said, his rosy complexion going even brighter. He gave her a smoldering look. “Especially last night.”

After months of correspondence, followed by weeks of circling each other in a protracted mating dance, Moon and Travis had finally given in to their attraction and did what came naturally. All night long.

“We saw you girls huddling on the back porch,” he said in a coaxing tone. “What were you ladies up to, and did it involve Jacob?”

“Do *you* think it involved Jacob?” Moon hedged, giving him a sidelong glance.

“I think Jacob thinks so,” Travis said. “He only pretended to be watching the MMA fight. He was actually staring at the back porch the whole time, like Superman trying to see through lead.”

Moon snorted a laugh. “Seriously. I can’t tell you. It would violate girl code.”

Camille, Moon, and Holly hadn’t been sworn to secrecy regarding Sasha and Jacob’s unexpected pregnancy, but she assumed Sasha wanted to keep the information on the down low until further notice.

Their food soon arrived, and they tucked into their meals with gusto. As Travis signaled for the check, Moon noticed Sasha's daughter Madison enter the diner and talk to the hostess, who seated her at a small corner table. Maddie ordered without the menu, then slumped in her chair, glowering at her phone as she crankily texted someone. She tossed the phone on the table and stared out the front window distractedly, arms crossed over her chest. The girl didn't look like her usual cheerful self. Moon watched the girl so intently she didn't hear Travis when he tried to get her attention. He grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

"Hey," he said. "What's up?"

His eyes followed the direction of her stare. "Isn't that Sasha's daughter? Jacob said the daughter and his son went to visit her dad for the weekend. Guess the kids are back in town."

"Her name is Madison," Moon said. "Maddie, and the son's name is Jason, but he goes by Jay. Can we hang here for a minute?"

She didn't wait for Travis's response before taking out her phone and texting Sasha.

*Moon: I'm at Cookie's with Beck and your daughter is at Cookie's. Thought she was staying with her dad through Sunday eve? She looks mad. You ok?*

Moon had an Android phone, so she had no idea whether Sasha had received the message or was responding. She sipped her lukewarm cup of coffee and waited for a response, which came in less than a minute.



*Sasha: M argued with dad and came home early. J was here. She found the pg tests in my room, blew up. J and Jay left. Mad Maddie left in a huff.*

*Moon: I'm sorry. Anything I can do to help?*

*Sasha: I dunno. M will come home when she feels like it.*

Moon thought about Sasha, who just discovered another unplanned pregnancy by someone she hadn't known all that long, having to deal with Maddie having a temper tantrum when she should be supporting her mother. Moon didn't know if she could do anything to help, but she could try.

*Moon: I'll try to talk to her.*

*Sasha: □□what are you doing at Cookie's with Travis?*

Moon didn't want to get into her own tangled love life at the moment. She reasoned it would be far easier to intervene in someone else's love life, so she replied,

*Moon: Having breakfast. I'll try to talk to her and get back to you.*

Moon swigged the last of her coffee, grimaced, and made to get out of her seat. Travis put a hand on hers.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I need to talk to Maddie for a few minutes," she said. "Do you mind waiting?"

"Sure," he shrugged.

Slowly, she walked to Maddie's table, curling her lips in a self-deprecating smile.

“Hi, Maddie,” she said, giving the younger woman a finger wave. “Remember me?”

Maddie squinted, trying to place the stranger approaching her breakfast table. Her face relaxed when recognition dawned.

“You’re Aunt Camille’s friend, aren’t you?” Maddie asked, smiling tentatively.

“Yes,” Moon said, pulling out the chair opposite Maddie and sitting down. “Do you mind if I sit?”

“Um...” Maddie hedged.

“Thanks,” Moon said as if she’d been given explicit permission to join the young girl. “I saw you walk in, and if you don’t mind my saying, you looked pretty upset. Want to talk about it?”

Maddie blinked.

“I was at your mom’s place last night with Travis over there,” she waved at Travis, who was obviously texting on his phone. “And I think I might know why you’re upset this morning.”

Maddie rolled her eyes and blew out an impatient breath. “Did you talk to my mom?”

“Well, sort of,” Moon admitted. “We texted a little while ago.”

“Right,” Maddie said. “Then you know why I’m mad. My mom has been lying to me for months, apparently, along with Mr. Romero. And maybe even Jay, who I thought was my friend.”

“I can see why you might feel betrayed,” Moon said.

“Exactly, and I really don’t need to talk about it anymore,” Maddie said.

The waitress arrived with Maddie's meal, which turned out to be exactly what Moon had ordered, though with scrambled eggs. Moon liked her eggs sunny side up.

"Good choice," Moon commented. At Maddie's confused expression, Moon went on. "I had the same thing for breakfast."

Maddie gave a shrug that managed to be almost as confused as her expression.

"How do you feel about your mom having another baby?" Moon asked.

Maddie had just popped a big bite of pancake in her mouth, chewing slowly and thoughtfully. She seemed surprised by the question.

"I mean, I guess it's good," she said. "I always wanted a sibling. Now I get one when I'm about to go off to college. Kind of late, maybe."

"I'm an only child," Moon commiserated. "My mom passed away when I was in middle school, and I think my dad is past having more kids."

Moon's parents had divorced when she was five, but continued to live near one another in the same neighborhood in Cleveland, allowing her to have as much time as she needed with both parents. Her parents remained as close as exes could be, her dad nursing her mother through an ultimately futile fight against cervical cancer. She was twelve when she went to live with her dad full time.

"I'm sorry about your mom," Maddie said sincerely. "Did your dad ever remarry?"

Moon let out a snorted laugh. “Oh yeah, he remarried,” Moon said. “My dad has been married five times.”

Maddie blinked in disbelief. “Seriously? It seems like every time I see my dad, he has a new girlfriend he wants me to meet. At least, none of them expected to be my stepmother.”

Moon flagged the waitress and ordered a Diet Coke, settling in for some extended girl talk.

“I’ve had four stepmoms,” Moon deadpanned. “None of them seemed to want to have children with my dad.”

Left unsaid was none of them seemed to want the child her dad already had, either.

“That’s rough,” Maddie commented. “My mom dated one guy I know of, a dude named Jeff. We didn’t really get along all that well, and they stopped seeing each other.”

“So, your mom has been without a companion for seventeen years?” Moon asked, injecting as much sadness as possible into the question.

“I was Mom’s companion,” Maddie said, and Moon thought about the kind of mental ducking the girl had to do to miss the point. Moon decided to lay it out in a way there could be no mistaking what she meant by asking the question.

“Sasha should have the option of going through life with an adult companion,” Moon suggested.

Maddie frowned, but continued to eat.

Moon decided to let Maddie eat and think about the fact that Sasha had needs Maddie couldn’t fulfill. She excused herself to run back to her table and sat across from Travis.

“Beck...” she started, her voice low so she wouldn’t be overheard. “I’m staging an intervention with Maddie. Can we catch up later? It might take a while.”

“How long?” he asked, his voice discreetly low.

“I really don’t know,” Moon winced. “If I need a ride back to the ranch, I’ll text you, okay?”

Travis took her bailing on him like a champ. “Sounds like girl code stuff,” he conceded.

“Exactly,” she said. “Probably Camille or Holly would be better suited to this kind of thing, since they are her honorary aunties, but they’re both out of town.”

“No problem,” he said drolly, an understanding smile curving his lips. “Maddie’s a good kid. I’m not going to stand in the way of her village giving her the intervention she needs.”

They both got to their feet, a busboy standing off the side waiting to clear the table for one of the waiting groups of patrons to use. Cookie’s had filled up with the first wave of post-church customers.

Travis was a quiet, reserved man, but he looked so adorable in his sheepskin jacket, plaid shirt, and jeans that Moon couldn’t resist throwing her arms around his neck and planting a lingering kiss on his lips. He blushed to the tips of his ears, and that made him even cuter. The only thing missing from his rancher getup was an honest-to-God Stetson.

He glanced around the diner furtively, gave her a quick peck on the cheek, and left the diner. Many pairs of curious eyes followed him.

When Moon got back to Maddie's table, the girl was just about finished eating.

"Wow, you eat as fast and as much as I do," Moon commented, sipping her soft drink.

Maddie shrugged.

"So, what are you up to today?" Moon asked.

Maddie frowned and pursed her lips. "I was going to be at my dad's today, but he had yet another girlfriend over, even though he knew I was coming," she said. "It's like he can't stand not to have a girlfriend around when I'm there."

Or maybe he's not sure how to relate to his teen daughter, so he makes sure there's always another female around when said daughter visits, Moon mused.

"You know what? I have yet to find a mani-pedi place in this town." Moon injected excitement into her voice. "I bet you know all the best places."

Maddie looked skeptical. "I feel like we're replicating a scene from Legally Blonde right now," she said.

"I'm not sure what you mean," Moon replied. "My parents didn't believe in a lot of mass media. I travel a lot, so I don't always catch popular culture references. Is that a popular culture reference?"

"Reese Witherspoon plays a really cute, but smart girl who follows her boyfriend to law school?" Maddie said expectantly.

Moon knew who Reese Witherspoon was, vaguely, but she wasn't exactly sure if she'd seen anything the actor had been

in.

“Take me to your man-pedi place and you can tell me all about it,” Moon said. “I’m buying.”

An hour later, they reclined in vibrating salon chairs, their feet and hands soaking in scented water, as Maddie explained the premise of Legally Blonde to Moon, who grew increasingly confused the more the teen explained.

Sensing Maddie’s relaxed state, Moon decided to push the subject of Sasha’s love life.

“So, I’m going to ask you a question, and I want you to think before you answer,” Moon coaxed. “Were you surprised to learn your mother was involved with Jacob?”

“There was this one weekend when Jay and I went up to the city for the weekend,” Maddie admitted with a sigh. “When I got back on Sunday, the toilet seat was up, which never happens. I found part of a...condom wrapper in the bathroom trash can, and there was a used litter box in the house.”

“So, what did you do?” Moon prompted.

“I put down the toilet seat, emptied the trash can, and dumped the litter box,” Maddie continued. “I suspected my mom of having some kind of relationships over the years that weren’t dating. I never talked to Mom about it because it made me feel weird to discuss it. When I came home with Jay this morning, and Jacob was there with his shoes off, making Mom breakfast, and with his little black cat, I tried to ignore it. Then, when I walked past her room, I noticed a box of pregnancy tests from Costco. The box had been opened, and I

decided since she wasn't doing much to hide it, I shouldn't do much to ignore it."

"I see," was Moon's response. "Have you thought about the fact that you like Jay to go to your dad's place with you for the same reason your dad always has a woman around when you visit?"

Maddie frowned thoughtfully.

"You're going to have to share your mom with Jacob, possibly a stepbrother, and a new baby," Moon said. "Change is hard, but it also forces you to grow."

Moon decided she was done dispensing pearls of wisdom, at least for the moment, and as Maddie drove her to the ranch, she changed the subject to Maddie's plans for college.

"I'm majoring in theater," Maddie smiled excitedly. "I can't wait! You know, Meghan Markle graduated from Northwestern with a theater degree."

"There's an actor I have heard of," Moon said. "Even though I travel most of the time, I still maintain a Netflix account. I binged *Suits* a couple of years ago."

"Where are you going next?" Maddie asked. They had pulled up to the A-frame, and Maddie let the engine idle. Sasha had told the girls the night before that Richard gave Maddie his old BMW as a Christmas present.

"I'm not sure, but I do know I'll be here through the holidays," Moon said. "I'm going to be helping Beck with a couple of holiday-themed events. After that, I really don't need to be anywhere. I can work from anywhere."

"What do you do for a living?" Maddie asked.



“I’m a writer,” Moon said. “I write middle-grade novels, but I also do freelance assignments for clients. Mostly marketing stuff. Web content. Site building. Social media. That kind of thing.”

“What series do you write?” Maddie asked.

“The Turnbow Twins,” Moon said, remembering that Sasha mentioned Maddie used to read the series.

“OMG, I love those books! You’re my idol!”

Moon blushed, as she often did when she ran into a fan.

“Thanks,” she smiled. “Kids seem to like them, so I’m going to keep writing them.”

“That’s amazing!” Maddie enthused. “Imagine meeting famous author Anatolia Luna!”

“In the flesh!” Moon said.

“Well, I’m glad you’re sticking around for a few more weeks,” Maddie said. “I gotta say, you and Travis looked pretty cute at Cookie’s.”

“Travis is pretty cute all on his own,” Moon said. “He needs to get a cowboy hat, so he can be a proper rancher.”

“Maybe you should get him one!” Maddie gave her a playful arm punch, carefully, so as not to ruin her nail job.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Moon said.

The two of them hugged and said good bye. Moon watched from the tiny porch of the A-frame as Maddie drove away.

When she let herself into the cabin, she was greeted by Fat Joey, whom she was cat-sitting while Camille went off

gallivanting with Andrew. The cat was insensitive to her need to preserve her nail job and demanded to be fed. She very carefully opened the bag of dry food and poured a good-sized portion into his dish, spilling some of the kibble on the floor. She'd clean it up later, she decided.

Her phone buzzed with a text message the moment she kicked off the ridiculous salon-issue flip-flops and collapsed on the futon.

*Sasha: Are you still with Maddie?*

*Moon: She had breakfast at Cookie's. Then I took her for a mani-pedi and we talked it through. I think she's coming your way now.*

*Sasha: 😊❤❤*

*Moon: Girl to girl intervention FTW!*

*Sasha: Thanks, honorary auntie #3!*

*Moon: My work here is done...*

Moon pulled up her last text string with Travis, which was full of all kinds of double entendre, suggestive language, and lewd emojis. She smiled as she reread the conversation.

Then, chewing on her bottom lip, she composed a very naughty text to send him.

## Chapter Sixteen

### *Sasha*

Sasha heard the door of the BMW slam a few moments before the front door of the bungalow opened. She imagined Maddie pausing at the front door, dragging her feet as she did as a little girl who had been naughty, reluctant to face her consequences. She'd received the text from Moon more than an hour ago and had wondered if or when Maddie would show.

Sasha waited in the kitchen, wearing the same t-shirt and yoga pants she'd been wearing that morning, covered with the same pink and red ruffled apron of hers Jacob had once worn to make her breakfast. She was tired, her hair pulled back haphazardly into a low ponytail, her eyes droopy. She removed a baking sheet of assorted appetizers from the oven, leftovers from the previous night's party, planning to nosh on them to see what might agree with her.

Several days of morning sickness reminded her of how sick she'd been her entire pregnancy with Maddie. Sasha was not a happy pregnant woman, not when she was a teenager, and apparently not now. She would take it all in stride, of course, but earth mother, she was not.

But, then as now, she loved her baby and couldn't wait to meet him or her.

When Maddie appeared at the doorway, Sasha shot her a put-upon look and placed the baking sheet on the kitchen counter a little too hard.

“Hello,” Sasha growled, her annoyance with her daughter outweighing her relief that she’d come home. She realized she hadn’t been dealing with the surprise pregnancy much better than Maddie had been.

Jacob had said he wanted to be her partner in raising their child. He’d said he loved her and wanted to marry her. And what did she do? She showed him the door. Temporarily, yes, but that wasn’t exactly a confidence-building reaction. She knew she could raise a child as a single parent with a supporting cast of loving adults pitching in, but did she want to do that again? No, she did not.

She needed to make clear to him how she felt about him. She needed to discuss with him how their lives together could unfold. It wasn’t right to tell him how it was going to go down. She’d been alone for so long that she had no mindset for how to negotiate with another person in a relationship. But she wanted to figure it out. With Jacob.

Maddie stood at the kitchen doorway, watching her mother’s movements closely. Sasha thought Maddie looked at her like she might actually detonate.

“Anything I can do to help?” Maddie asked cautiously.

It never failed to amaze Sasha how her daughter could walk into a room in any state of shambles and ask some variation of “do you need help?” There were breakfast dishes in the sink, a basketful of laundry Sasha had brought up from the basement but hadn’t been able to muster the energy to fold and put away. The dishwasher was loaded and ajar, and a simple peek inside would determine whether the contents were clean or dirty, providing clues as to what the disposition should be.

“You can literally do whatever you’d like to help,” Sasha said. They had had this conversation many times over the years.

“Look for something that looks like it’s out of place, and do what needs to be done to fix it.”

Maddie blinked, sighed, and let her shoulders drop. She picked up the basket of laundry and sat at the kitchen table to fold it.

“I guess I deserve that,” Maddie admitted. “I’ve been kind of a brat.”

Sasha shrugged in acknowledgement. She had never been one to hold a grudge.

Sasha placed an assortment of appetizers on a small plate with a pair of tongs, waited for them to cool, then nibbled on a breaded mozzarella stick. She let the taste fill her mouth, chewed tentatively, swallowed, and waited to see how her stomach would react.

No copiously watering mouth, no triggered gag reflex, no queasiness. All good. That morning’s skillet potatoes, peppermint tea, and Costco breaded mozzarella sticks were currently on her “okay to eat” list. She ate one more of the cheese sticks and chewed slowly. She was so hungry, which was frustrating combined with the nausea, but she had to pace herself and not eat too fast.

She glanced at Maddie, who had stopped folding long enough to watch her mother chewing gingerly.

“Did you know Moon is actually Anatolia Luna?” Maddie blurted.

“I did know,” Sasha said. “I thought I mentioned that to you.”

Maddie shook her head. "I had kind of an embarrassing fangirl moment when she told me that."

"I'll bet," Sasha said.

Silence stretched between them again, and Sasha decided to try a mini quiche. It proved to be the sort of bland food her stomach could tolerate.

"When did you start seeing Mr. Romero?" Maddie asked.

"Although, I guess I should start calling him Jacob. Away from school, anyway."

"Homecoming weekend," Sasha said. "Mostly when you and Jay were out of town at your dad's house."

"So, the fact that I'm finally going to be a big sister can be attributed to the fact that I wanted a wingman when I went to visit Dad?" Maddie attempted a smile as she said this.

Sasha chuckled. "We might have noticed each other before that," Sasha conceded. "Did you suspect I was seeing someone?"

"Yeah, I did," Maddie confessed sheepishly. She went on to tell Sasha about the toilet seat and cat box, finishing with, "There were some...other things I noticed. I guess I just thought it wasn't my business."

"Well, you were right," Sasha said. "About the toilet seat and cat box. And the fact that it wasn't any of your business."

Maddie nodded in acknowledgement.

"He's a great teacher," Maddie said. "Very popular at the school, especially with the female students. Some will want to scratch your eyes out."

“Ah...” Sasha said, taking in Maddie’s poor attempt at humor.

“When you invited Mr. Romero...Jacob to help us get a real Christmas tree, was that your way of telling me about your relationship?” Maddie asked.

She had finished folding the laundry and had placed it back in the basket in neat stacks. Sasha took her plate of tidbits and sat at the table across from her daughter.

“Maybe,” Sasha said, startled by the suggestion. Perhaps she had, without realizing she’d done it. “You can blame Fat Joey for the destruction of the old fake Christmas tree. Auntie Camille’s annoying cat. I would never have had to replace the tree, and it would never have occurred to me to ask anyone to help us with it. You have to admit, it’s nice to have men around for some of the heavy lifting life throws at you.

“We had fun that day,” Maddie said.

“We did have fun that day,” Sasha agreed, smiling as she thought of the quickie they’d had in the basement while the kids were away buying groceries. “The King Ranch you and Jay made was delicious.”

“Are you going to marry him?” Maddie asked carefully. Sasha could see her daughter was trying to find the best way to talk about her mother’s new relationship without being obtrusive.

“Not sure yet,” Sasha said. “We haven’t been seeing each other for very long. Marriage is a commitment.”

Maddie pursed her lips and gave Sasha the slightest bit of side eye. “Having a baby isn’t a commitment?”

“Well, your dad and I didn’t get married,” Sasha pointed out.

“Shotgun weddings are not exactly the norm these days.

Having a baby is a commitment primarily to the baby.”

“You and dad were too young to get married,” Maddie said.

“He goes through a new girlfriend every few months. He’s not the marrying type.”

Maddie got up to open the dishwasher to check the state of the contents. The dishes were clean, since Sasha and Jacob had run the dishwasher after the party last night. Maddie started putting dishes away, while Sasha ate the other mini quiche.

When she was finished putting away dishes, Maddie leaned against the kitchen counter and watched Sasha chew. She took out her phone and began texting.

“Who are you texting?” she asked her daughter.

“Oh, just a friend,” Maddie said, waving a dismissive hand. She stuffed the phone in her back pocket, picked up the basket of laundry, and left the room, presumably to put it away.

Sasha eyed the remaining food bits, wondering what she should try next. Definitely not the buffalo wings. In fact, she wondered why she’d heated them up. Looking at them now made her want to hurl. Maybe the pot stickers would be okay? She tapped her fingers on the tabletop next to her plate, mentally debating her next morsel. Both remaining choices seemed dubious, at best.

She got up, opened the fridge, then went for one of the rollup sandwiches left over from the night before. Then something weird happened. Her reaching fingers made a beeline for a large, lidded food storage container, her heart beating with delighted anticipation.



Because there was the cheesecake they'd had for dessert the night before. She dug inside the fridge and found sliced fresh strawberries and chocolate sauce. She knew cheesecake did not make a suitable meal for a pregnant woman, but she'd worry about that later. She'd go to Costco herself and buy a mega-bottle of prenatal vitamins.

For now, she was going to doctor this cheesecake within an inch of its life, then cram it in her pie hole. She popped the chocolate sauce in the microwave for fifteen seconds, plated a slice of the cheesecake, sprinkled it with the sliced berries, then poured a generous dollop of the chocolate sauce on top. She sat at the table and dug in, amazed that eating the cheesecake didn't produce any ill effects. She sighed in pleasure at the taste, and with regret that she couldn't have cheesecake for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. She gobbled the treat down quickly, and some of it dribbled down her chin and onto her clothes. Of course, the mess entirely missed the apron and landed on her t-shirt, making a stain about the size of a silver dollar. She dabbed at the spot with a fingertip as she leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and sighed in contentment. She felt as if she was able to face anything with a full stomach.

The sound of the doorbell interrupted her mental happy place. She frowned, made to get up, then halted when she heard footsteps thundering down the stairs and Maddie's voice calling out, "I'll get it!" She still got up to see who was at the door and was stunned to see Jacob and Jay walk through the front door.

Nothing happened for several long seconds as everyone took in everyone else. It was a mirror of the awkward silence that

had started the day. They'd all had several hours to digest the events that made them an instant family. However, it seemed none of them had anything to say about those events. Sasha felt shy all of a sudden and aware of the fact that with her frumpy clothes, now stained with chocolate and dairy products, she wasn't much to look at. And Jacob stared at her with his hands in his bomber jacket, smiling sexily, smoldering at her. She felt his attention was unwarranted.

Maddie was the first to speak.

"Jay and I are going to hang out," she announced. "We're going to play video games for a few hours and play with the cute little black kitten, then we're going to a double feature at the Marquee Theater. *Home Alone*, then *Home Alone 2*."

Jay appeared to be surprised at this news. "We are?"

"Yes, we are," she said meaningfully, reaching for the doorknob. She gave Jay a stern, older-sister look.

"Don't you need your jacket?" Sasha suddenly remembered how to speak.

"It's in the car," Maddie smiled. "We'll be gone for hours. And we'll text you periodically to let you guys know we're okay."

Translation: We'll text periodically to let you know where we are and approximately how far away we are, just in case you guys are...busy doing something we don't want to interrupt.

Maddie gave her mother a hug. "Love you, Mom."

Then Jay surprised Sasha by following suit. "I always wanted to be a big brother," he pronounced solemnly.

Sasha realized that if she did, in fact, marry Jacob, Jay would be both a big brother and a little brother. She wondered whether the boy had considered that yet.

Maddie then turned to Jacob, holding a hand out. “Welcome to the family, Mr. Romero, I mean, Jacob.”

Jacob ignored the hand and pulled her into his arms for one of the hugs Sasha knew felt so good.

“Thank you, Maddie,” he said graciously. Then he turned to Sasha. “And thank you, Maddie, for inviting us over.”

“Maddie...invited you?” Sasha asked, amazed. “Thank you for inviting him, I mean, them, over.”

“She stopped by our place to talk to us,” Jacob confirmed.

“She apologized for what happened this morning, and she asked if we would be open to visiting this afternoon. She wanted to come home first, to see how you were feeling.”

“She did,” Jay put in. “Although, I thought that would mean we could both actually come inside.”

Sasha snorted a laugh, then covered her mouth with a hand.

“That’s why you came home later than Moon said you would. That’s who you were texting.”

Somehow, Maddie had done the perfect thing to fix the rift she’d created with her surly tantrum. Apologies would not have been enough to make up for her earlier behavior. The only right thing to do was to make amends.

Sasha realized her daughter had matured quite a bit in the space of a few hours, and she was proud of the woman she was becoming, the woman she had helped shape for the past

seventeen years. It made her excited to be a mother again. She loved this amazing kid.

She held her arms out for a hug. "Love you, kiddo," she murmured into Maddie's ear.

"Love you too, as I've already said," Maddie said with a smile. "Now it's time to go, little brother."

Maddie grabbed Jay's arm and tugged him out the front door.

"I'm not your little brother," Jay protested as Maddie closed the door behind them.

That left Jacob and Sasha alone, together.

Alone at last.

# Chapter Seventeen

## *Jacob*

“Alone at last,” Jacob said, a wry smile twisting his full lips. He opened his arms to Sasha, and without hesitation, she stepped into them, placing her head in the middle of his chest. She smelled so sweet...like a cookie.

“Sasha, why do you smell like a cookie?” he asked.

She chuckled, pulled away slightly to gaze into his eyes. “I was doing this experiment earlier, to figure out what I can eat,” she told him. “After some trial and error, I discovered cheesecake to have the fewest adverse effects on my tummy.”

It was Jacob’s turn to chuckle.

“Let’s sit,” Sasha suggested, taking his hand and leading him to the living room sectional.

Once they were settled next to each other on the couch, she took his hands with hers. Her hands were warm and dry, and even though she kept her nails short and unpolished, her fingers still managed to look elegant.

“I’m glad Maddie apologized to you and Jay,” she said. “It makes it easier to have this conversation with you.”

“Is that good or bad?” Jacob asked, feeling uncertain.

When he and Jay had left that morning, he had no idea where he stood with Sasha. With a pregnancy in the mix, the stakes were incredibly high. But Sasha had said nothing to stop them from leaving. Had, in fact, been about to ask him to leave so she could think over their situation by herself. She hadn’t even

wanted to talk about things with him. It didn't bode well for the future of their relationship.

"I'm sorry that I asked you to leave this morning," she said, as if reading his mind. "I know that must have been difficult for you. I know you're invested in my pregnancy. And I was an idiot to ask you to leave, and to let you go."

"Is that what you think?" he asked. "I'm invested in you, *querida*. I want *you*."

She blushed.

"I guess I know that," she said. "I mean, we kept running into one another even after Homecoming weekend. It feels like you were either stalking me, or fate keeps bringing us together."

"A little of both, I think," he agreed with a smile.

"First of all, I think it needs to be said that I'm going to keep my baby," she said. "I've been a single mother before, but that wasn't the best thing for Maddie. She gripes about her dad and his girlfriends, and he doesn't always do or say the right things, but he loves her and every child deserves a father's love, flawed though it may be. That's not what I want for our child."

Jacob let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. He was relieved to learn she wanted to have their baby, and that she wanted him to be involved in the baby's life.

"Beyond that, I don't think it's right to figure out the rest by myself," she said. "Once this baby is here, we're family. We should make these decisions together, because we're family."

Jacob realized this was a big deal for Sasha, who had been making these decisions primarily on her own, no need to

consult anyone else unless she wanted additional data points.

“I appreciate that you’re not used to asking people for help,” he said, squeezing her fingers. “I don’t want to be an obstacle. I want to be the person you depend on to help you make the decisions. I want to share the burdens and share the joys of parenting with you.”

Sasha frowned and licked her lips. Jacob sensed it wasn’t a negative frown, but more like the expression one makes when struggling with the right thing to say, and the right way to say it.

“That’s what I want too,” she said. “But I want more, too. I was too shell-shocked last night to tell you. And this morning, I felt overwhelmed. I had just found out I was having a baby with a guy I met in October.”

“What do you want?” he prompted.

“I want you to love me,” she said, her dark eyes sincere. “And I want to love you back.”

Jacob nodded in encouragement.

“I used to think having a man to love wasn’t something I needed,” she said. “I had my daughter, I had my friends and family, and a career I love. But now I think I’ve been missing out.”

Jacob blinked at her, opened his mouth to say something encouraging, but she put her fingers on his lips.

“I mean, I love you already,” she said in a rush. “I’m in love with you already.”

Jacob continued to blink, scarcely believing the words coming out of Sasha's mouth.

"Did you just say you were in love with me?" Jacob asked. After months of pursuing her, months of her putting up roadblocks in the name of being the best mother possible, to have her tell him she was in love with him without being coaxed into it left him flabbergasted.

"Yes, I did," she said, giving him the kind of cautious side-eye people employ when they aren't sure whether the other person is picking up what they are putting down.

"I love you too, *querida*," he said, excitement building in his chest. He let go of her hands long enough to take her face in his hands, peppering urgent kisses all over her face, her eyes, her cheeks, and finally her mouth. Then, he took her in his arms and held her tight, inhaling her sweet scent, savoring the feel of her soft body against his. An idle thought entered his mind: this morning, she hadn't been wearing a bra, and it appeared she never had a chance to put one on. The knowledge made his dick, which had been sporting a semi since the door closed behind Jay and Maddie, surge to fully erect in record time.

"I'm so in love with you," he said. "From almost the beginning. Maybe even before the night of homecoming. You just seemed so smart, so confident, and your relationship with Maddie seemed so strong whenever I saw you together."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he couldn't resist shutting her up with his mouth covering hers, invading her mouth, sucking on her tongue. Then he moved onto her neck, pulling



the neck of her t-shirt to the side so he could more easily access the spot where her neck met her shoulders.

When she gasped and moaned, he redoubled his efforts, delighted by her response. She slid her fingers under the hem of his t-shirt, running her hands over his back, curling her fingertips into his flesh.

Jacob's heart filled almost to bursting knowing she also paid attention to his responses, knowing she loved to do the things that turned him on.

“Upstairs, upstairs!” she whispered harshly in his ear. “We can take off our clothes upstairs and stretch out.”

“Don't you want to finish our conversation?” he asked. He didn't want to miss anything they needed to work out just because he was horny as hell.

“What else is there to discuss?” she asked.

“We should get married,” he pointed out as he laid kisses up and down her neck.

She paused in the motion of trying to slide her fingers under the waistband of his jeans. He pulled back to examine her face, looking for clues about how she felt about marriage.

“Okay,” she said. “I'll marry you, but only after we've been engaged for a year,” she said.

“A whole year?” he was incredulous. “You want this baby born out of wedlock?”

“I don't care about that,” she said. “It's more important that we are sure about what we're getting into, you know? Once you get me a ring, the one-year countdown starts.”

“Well, damn,” he whined as he hovered over her. “Do we have to have a big, giant wedding?”

“No,” she told him. “I don’t want a big wedding, actually. I’d be happy to hop on a plane to Vegas and get married over the weekend. I bet my girls would enjoy that. Vegas is a great place for bachelorette party debauchery.”

He gave her a bug-eyed look of incredulity.

“Just kidding, babe!” she said hastily. “Anything else we need to talk about can wait, can’t it? We don’t have to use condoms anymore...”

This was a point that, frankly, had not occurred to Jacob.

He crawled off her, got to his feet, then grabbed her hand to drag her out of the room. He pushed up her the stairs ahead of him, removing his t-shirt as they went.

He was working on the ties of her apron when they made it to the bedroom. Soon, their clothes were strewn all over the room, and they collapsed on the bed next to each other. He continued to kiss her deeply, savoring the taste of cheesecake and chocolate on her tongue, memorizing the contours of her mouth with his own tongue. She met every thrust of his tongue with one of her own as she squirmed and rubbed up against him like a cat.

Jacob quickly changed positions, placing her knees over his shoulders and curling his arms around her hips so he could eat his fill of her taste. Sasha was warm and slick, ready for him. He was desperate to taste her, to hold her still and lick her until she screamed and writhed in that primal, abandoned way of

hers. Soon, her fingers tunneled into his hair, grabbing it, pulling on it, as she forced her pussy into his mouth.

He ate like a starved man. He used his mouth to convey every promise he wanted to make her, every bit of love he had to give her. He wanted her to always know how much he needed her. He wanted her to know that he would worship her like this as long as he drew breath.

“Ahhh!” she screamed and her legs quivered against the tension of his arms. He felt her orgasm as a series of pulses against his tongue. He continued to lick her until her tremors subsided and her legs relaxed. He went to his knees, then back on his haunches to look at her. She was utterly limp, her long legs open, her pussy vulnerable under his lusty gaze. Her small breasts, slightly fuller now in his estimation, pointed up at him, the nipples tight and dark.

She looked like a goddess.

*His goddess.*

He crawled up her body, hovering over her, then fitted himself between those beautiful legs of hers. Her skin was flushed, her eyes glassy, her full lips parted. He couldn't resist kissing her again.

“Open your eyes, *querida*,” he said after planting a lingering kiss on her plump lips. The head of his dick was positioned right at her entrance. He loved the way it felt when he first entered her, and he wanted to see the moment of penetration in her eyes.

Her eyes fluttered open slowly, and he plunged all the way inside her.

It had been years since he'd been inside a woman uncovered. Sasha was unbelievably hot and wet. He could already feel himself teetering at the precipice, and he had to wait a moment to let his body adjust to the overwhelming sensations.

"Oh, fuck, I love you so much," he grunted, making himself hold still, bracing himself on his hands on either side of her torso.

"Please move," she begged, moaning and thrashing beneath him. "Please, please."

"Say it," he grunted through a few tentative strokes. He wanted to slam into her more than anything. He wanted to last long enough to give her pleasure. Most of all, he wanted the words. He *needed* the words.

"I love you," she said, looking him straight in the eye.

He collapsed on his elbows to get closer to her. He gingerly palmed her breast and nuzzled it. "Are your breasts sore?"

"Yeah, sorry," she confessed.

"It's okay." He gently kissed each peak. Then he began to stroke inside of her, slowly, languidly, holding her gaze the whole time.

"Say it again," he said. "I need to hear the words from you."

"I love you," she said, her eyes glowing with adoration. "I love you. I love you. I'll say it as many times as you want. I want you to always know how I feel about you."

"Good girl," he praised, smiling at her. "Now I'm gonna fuck you."

She let out a bark of laughter, which made her body clench around his dick. “Do your best, big boy.”

Jacob picked up the pace. He pounded her into the mattress, murmuring filthy nothings in her ear as he did so, focused on her pleasure while keeping his own orgasm at bay. He varied the angle of his thrusts, hitting her g-spot and eliciting a guttural “Ohhhhh...” from her.

His chest swelled with male pride at her obvious enjoyment.

“That’s absolutely the best use of your big, fat dick,” she said. “I love you and your big, fat dick.”

“You do?” he grunted. “That’s good, because I love your hot, wet pussy and the way it feels around my dick.”

“Make me come, so you can finish,” she rasped. “I want to feel your cum dripping out of me.”

That particular image sent him barreling inexorably toward his own release. He couldn’t stop himself. Not a chance. So, he bumped her spot over and over again, his rhythm random and unfocused, until she came with a loud gasp and a shriek, digging her blunt nails into his ass cheeks.

That triggered his climax, and he came hard with a shout, emptying himself completely within her. He went utterly still as his tremors gradually subsided, then he rolled off her and onto his back, panting and wiping the light sheen of sweat from his brow.

“I could feel you coming,” she told him, rolling onto her side and running a finger lightly down the center of his chest.

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. She smoothed the eyebrow with her thumb.

“These eyebrows,” she said. “I wonder if the baby will have these eyebrows.”

“Only if she’s lucky,” he told her.

She traced a circle around one of his nipples, then gave it a little pinch, which made him flinch and grab her hand.

“I see what your reaction is now that our passion has cooled, but I’ve noticed you like these kinds of touches when we’re going hot and heavy, don’t you?” she teased him.

“You’ll have to do some trial and error to find out, now won’t you?” he said. “Gotta keep that sense of mystery going.”

She flopped on her back and stared at the ceiling.

“So, what do we do for the rest of the afternoon?” she asked.

“Go grocery shopping? Maybe laundry? Or should we see what’s on Netflix?”

Jacob peered at her, wondering why she thought they’d have hours to waste on Netflix or any number of domestic chores.

“Well, my plan is to go downstairs, get a glass of water, then come back up here and fuck you again,” he deadpanned.

She blinked. “Aren’t you worn out?”

“Have you forgotten about homecoming night?” he asked.

Jacob had been lusting after Sasha ever since he and Jay got to town and his son had befriended her daughter. When he’d finally gotten Sasha into bed, he had wanted to make it count.

She made a show of thinking it over, frowning and pursing her lips.

“I guess I have,” she said. “What should I remember about homecoming night?”

Growling, Jacob rolled Sasha onto her back and mercilessly rubbed his prickly cheek into the side of her neck, prompting screams and giggles.

He was going to love doing that to her for the rest of their lives.

# Epilogue

*Northwestern University Move-In Day...*

Jacob, Jay, and Sasha crowded into Maddie's tiny dorm room at Northwestern University. Maddie sat on the twin bed in the single-occupancy room, which she had just made up with new white sheets and boho comforter. The room was utilitarian and contained only the narrow bed, a chest of drawers with matching mirror, and a small desk. The rest of her belongings were stacked around her in boxes and laundry baskets, staged to be unpacked and put away in the next few days.

Next to her on the bed, two-month-old July Celestine Norwood Romero cooed up at her big sister, kicking her legs as Maddie changed her diaper. The baby had been born on the Fourth of July, and was named after Julián Romero, Jacob's late father. Her name also carried on the tradition of "J" names in the Romero family.

July lay on a changing pad, with a clean diaper, diaper cream, and a pack of wipes at the ready.

"I can't believe you're voluntarily doing that," Jay said.

"Oh, it's only a little pee, little brother," Maddie waved a dismissive hand.

"Stop calling me that," Jay griped.

When she was done changing the baby, she expertly wrapped the used wipes into the wet diaper, making it into a neat little bundle. Then she packed the diaper-changing accouterments back in the diaper bag.



“I’ll take that,” Jacob said, reaching for the diaper and bag.

Maddie refastened July’s ruffled diaper cover, then pulled her yellow sundress down. She picked her sister up and bobbed the little girl up and down on her knees, making kissing noises. The baby shrieked with delight, her cupid’s bow-shaped lips stretched into an open-mouthed smile, her big brown eyes wide with delight, flashing the adorable dimples she’d inherited from her father.

“I’m going to miss you, little sister,” Maddie said with an exaggerated frown, addressing her sister with the nickname the rest of the family had adopted right after her birth. “I love you, Little Bean.”

Sasha looked on, getting a little choked up seeing her girls so happy in each other’s company.

“We are going to miss you too, Big Bean,” Sasha said.

“I’ll be home for Thanksgiving,” Sasha pointed out.

“Oh, I think you’ll be home before Thanksgiving,” Jacob said.

“You’re a mama’s girl.”

“I don’t know, Dad, this room is pretty sweet,” Jay joked, looking around the tiny room.

“This isn’t too bad, is it, Little Bean?” Maddie said. “I have everything I need right here in this room, and I don’t have to share a room with anyone.”

“This room is about the size of your closet back home,” Sasha said, stepping forward and making “gimme” hands at the baby. Maddie handed July over to their mother, who settled the baby into her carrier sling.

“Oh, don’t be so negative, *querida*,” Jacob said, placing a protective hand on the baby’s bottom. “The room is cozy, not small. And it also has that terrific view of the tiny dorm room on the other side of the quad!”

Maddie shot Jacob a big dose of side-eye.

“Dad jokes,” Maddie said. “Haven’t we discussed the subject of dad jokes? As in, you’re not supposed to make them?”

“Yeah, Dad,” Jay agreed. “Please, stop.”

“Such a rough room,” Jacob complained. He leaned in to whisper into July’s ear. “You like my jokes, don’t you?”

July gazed up at Jacob with naked adoration, while simultaneously chewing on her own fist.

Jay consulted his phone, texting with Richard, who waited at the restaurant in town where they’d agreed to meet for dinner before heading south and leaving Maddie to prepare for Freshman Orientation Week, then her first week of classes. Sasha was sad to see her firstborn leave home, but excited for the future her daughter was creating for herself.

They left Maddie’s micro-dorm room and took Jacob’s Explorer, as well as Maddie’s BMW, to the restaurant. After much deliberation, Maddie had decided to leave her baby garaged at Sasha’s house in Center City, at least for now. It was expensive to garage a car near campus, and public transportation was easy to access. Maddie and Jay drove up together, and Jay would make the return trip home after dropping Maddie at her dorm.

When they drove up to the restaurant, Richard and his latest squeeze were waiting outside. He stared at his phone,

impatiently scrolling and texting with his thumbs. His girlfriend was a tall, leggy brunette who cast him resentful, sidelong looks, apparently not happy being ignored. As with most of Richard's women, the brunette was actually age appropriate, in her early to mid-thirties.

"Looks like your ex has a new boo," Jacob snickered as he pulled up to the valet station. "Don't they make a cute couple?"

"Try to be nice," Sasha chided him, her lips twitching in her effort to stifle her laughter.

The valet jogged to the driver's side and took the key fob from Jacob, who put up a finger to let the man know he needed to wait until Sasha and the baby got out of the car. Jacob easily lifted the baby seat out of its docking station, as Sasha reached into the footwell of the passenger seat for the diaper bag and hopped out of the car. Together, they joined Richard and his girlfriend in front of the restaurant to wait for Maddie and Jay.

Jacob nodded at Richard, who looked surprised to be interrupted from the important work of playing with his phone. Richard spared July barely a look before giving his phone one more simian poke and pocketing it.

"How are things, Jacob?" Richard asked.

"Good," Jacob said. "Maddie's dorm room reminds me of my college days."

Richard frowned. "Did you go to Northwestern?"

Jacob pursed his lips, remembered how at Maddie's high school graduation dinner Richard had dazzled the table with a

series of odd conversational non sequiturs that illustrated just how socially awkward the man could be.

“No,” Jacob said. “I went to Texas A&M. Where they also have tiny dorm rooms.”

Sasha overheard the exchange, gave Jacob a knowing smile, then turned her attention to the BMW pulling in front of the restaurant. Maddie and Jay hopped out, gave the keys to the valet, then joined the others.

Inside, no one had anything to say at the hostess stand as they waited to be seated.

The weather was pleasant and temperate for September, and they were seated at a table on the flagstone patio behind the restaurant. It was a lovely space, more like a beautiful garden with a koi pond and fairy lights strung through the towering trees.

Richard’s date whispered something in his ear, and he blinked and frowned.

“Everyone, this is my friend Becca,” Richard said awkwardly.

“Betty,” the “friend” corrected, scowling.

Sasha was willing to bet real money Betty was a “friend” who actually had sex with Richard. It didn’t look as if Betty appreciated being friend zoned by someone who was having sex with her.

The meal was delicious, and everyone who wasn’t Richard did a good job making small talk. Betty actually seemed nice, asking Maddie what she planned to major in, what she was taking her first quarter at Northwestern, and so on. She asked Jay about his school and extracurricular activities. Then she

asked to hold the baby, and July, tiny extrovert that she was, went willingly and responded to Betty's attempts to make her smile and gurgle.

She asked Sasha about her veterinarian practice, Jacob about his job as a school teacher, and after gushing over Sasha's engagement ring, asked when they were planning to marry.

Richard looked up from his phone long enough to scoff.

"We are going to Vegas for a destination micro-wedding," Sasha smiled. "In December."

"I can't wait, *querida*," Jacob said, giving her an exaggeratedly noisy, smacking kiss.

"I can't wait either, babe," she said, returning the kiss.

"Aw, you guys are so cute!" Betty said. "And your little girl is so adorable!"

Sasha and Jacob smiled at each other. The kids made gagging noises. Richard rolled his eyes.

"He's a *history teacher*," Richard put in, glowering, making it clear how little he thought of history teachers.

"And I'm a cat doctor," Sasha said brightly.

"College student here," Maddie put a hand up. She shot Richard a tight smile as she bugged her eyes at him. Her expression was all admonishment, and Sasha could almost hear her saying, "Daaaad!"

"High school student, yearbook photographer," Jay said neutrally, not wanting to get into any sort of disagreement.

"Dispenser of smiles," Betty said, holding the baby up.

“More like filler of diapers,” Sasha said ruefully. “What do you do, Betty?”

“I’m an accountant,” Betty said.

Awkward silence followed as everyone studied Richard expectantly, waiting to see whether he’d play the game with them. But he said nothing, and Sasha was once again reminded why she never, ever considered marrying him.

The check arrived, and Richard paid, as he had insisted at the outset of the meal. Everyone hugged goodbye in front of the restaurant. Maddie’s car came first, and the kids hopped in and drove north, toward the Northwestern campus. They planned to hang out at Maddie’s dorm before Jay headed south to Center City.

Next, Richard’s car, another white luxury vehicle, this time some kind of Mercedes, was retrieved. Richard got in alone, looking unhappy, and drove away.

Betty had her phone out, poking at the screen, and when she looked up, she caught the Norwood-Romeros watching her in puzzlement.

“I’m getting a rideshare home,” she said with a rueful smile. “I think Richard goes through a lot of female friends, doesn’t he?”

Jacob and Sasha exchanged meaningful looks. Maddie had mentioned that very thing on more than one occasion.

“He does,” Sasha said as neutrally as possible, but with a note of sympathy.

“Thought so,” said Betty, still with the wan smile. “It was nice to meet you and your beautiful family.”

“You as well,” Jacob said. “Good luck to you.”

Jacob’s Explorer pulled up. He and Sasha loaded July and all her baby crap into the back seat, getting her comfortable for the long road trip ahead, then climbed in.

“So, I guess they weren’t such a cute couple after all,” he said.

“Well, they were one-half of a cute couple,” Sasha said. “He’ll find another one. Maybe Richard just needs to kiss more lady frogs.”

The drive home felt freeing, knowing they were down to just the one kid for the time being. Too bad the one kid was the one requiring two full-time equivalents.

“So, how is the new class of pimply AP History students shaping up?” Sasha asked. With a new baby in the house, Sasha felt as if she wasn’t tuning into Jacob’s life the way she should. She’d be going back to work the same week Maddie would be starting her first week of school, which meant the constant motion of a family with multiple children would be shifting into yet another gear.

Jacob smiled. He loved his job, and his students.

“Oh, you know,” he said. “They believe they know everything. They’ll continue to think that until that first pop quiz.”

Sasha chuckled.

“Are you excited about going back to work?” he asked.

“Actually, yes,” she said. “All the books seem to think I should be sad about the end of my maternity leave, but I’m actually excited. I miss my cats.”

“My mother is excited about you going back to work as well,” Jacob said.

Jacob’s mother made no bones about her excitement at having another grandbaby to look after and spoil. Already, their little bungalow was overrun by tiny little outfits, in addition to all the other things a modern, middle-class baby seemed to need. Which is why they had put in an offer on a five-bedroom, Craftsman-style bungalow that faced one of Center City’s many playgrounds. They hoped to live in the spacious home for many years to come. They had even talked about having another baby. They were both still young.

“I’m excited July gets to have her *abuelita* every day,” Sasha said. “In addition to the aunties, including Moonbeam.”

“Ah yes, Moonbeam,” Jacob said. Jacob didn’t quite understand Moon and Travis together as a couple, though he did like both of them.

“Come on, you know you love that girl,” Sasha said. “Without her, we might not be together right now.”

“I think we would have worked it out eventually,” he said.

“But I do appreciate her wise counsel to Maddie.”

They pulled onto Lake Shore Drive, which was far and away Sasha’s favorite way to get to the North Shore. Something about all the smooth curves and the lake view made her feel mellow. The afternoon sun shone brightly, the sky was a startling blue. Along the lakefront, bicyclers and joggers were out in force.

“I’m going to miss my Big Bean,” Sasha sighed. Jacob reached over and lifted her hand to his lips.



“I know, baby,” he said.

Sasha gazed out the window, feeling melancholy, yet happy for Maddie. She thought of all that had happened in the past year and a half. Camille’s escape from her own wedding. Two of her good friends finding the love they deserved. Gaining a life mate, a son, and a baby daughter. Getting engaged to the man she never suspected she needed. Seeing Maddie take the first steps into adulthood. If anyone had told her a year ago that she’d be in the position she was in now, she’d have laughed in their faces.

Sasha’s phone buzzed with an incoming text. She unlocked her phone and read the message.

“Guess who this is?” she asked Jacob. Without waiting for his response, she went on, “It’s Debby.”

“Oh, news on the house?” he asked, shifting in his seat and looking more alert. “Did we get the house?”

She smiled at the screen foolishly, happily. Then she told him how another of their dreams was about to come true.

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