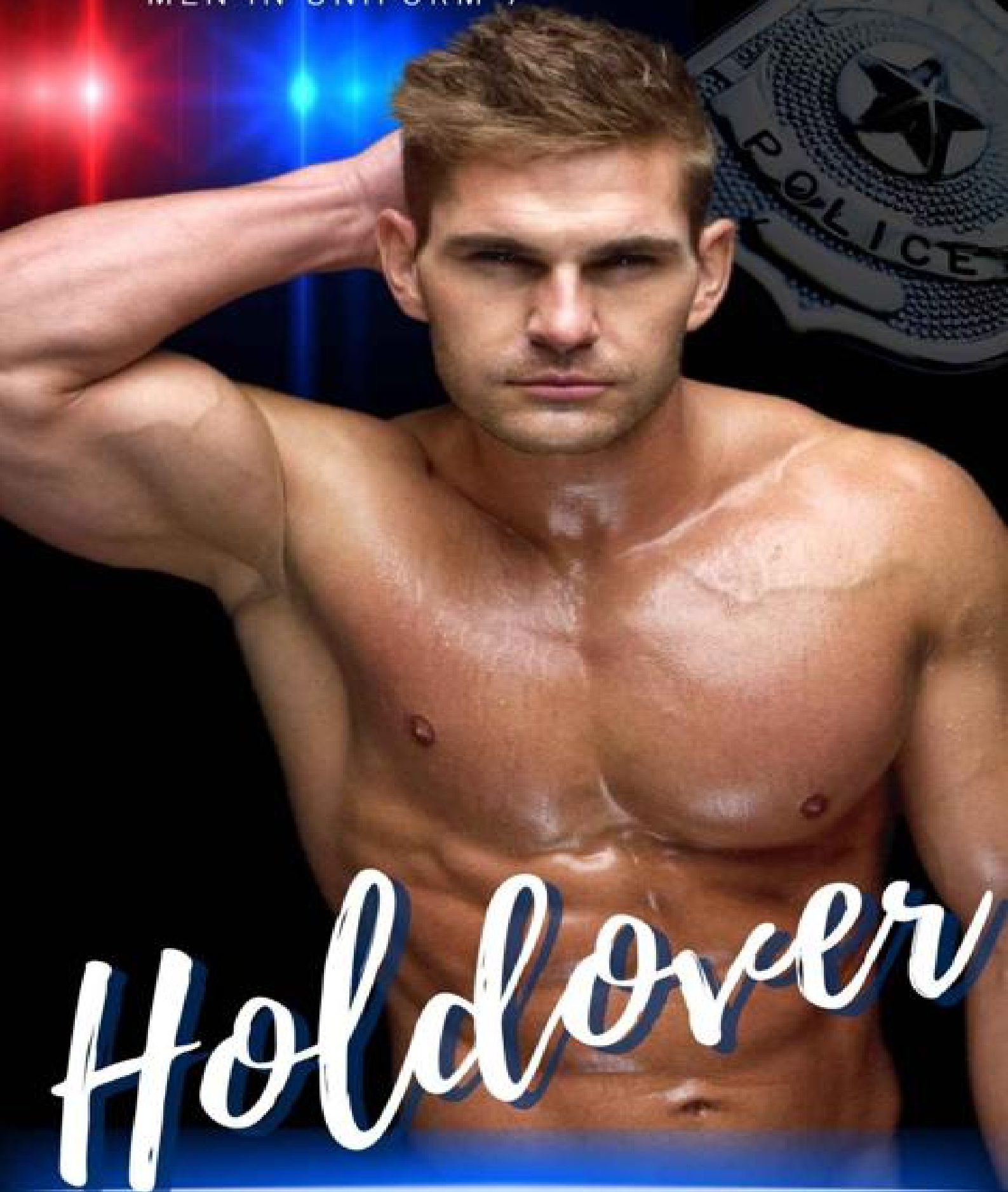


MEN IN UNIFORM 7



# Holdover

M. D. DALRYMPLE

# HOLDOVER

A SINGLE DAD, FIRST RESPONDER,  
STEAMY POLICE ROMANCE!



M.D. DALRYMPLE

BOOK SEVEN



Copyright 2023 M.D. Dalrymple/ Michelle A. Dalrymple LLC All rights reserved

Cover Art: licensed by Canva.com

Interior Formatting: Atticus

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, distribution, or electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the author constitutes unlawful piracy of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use the material from this book, other than for review purposes, prior authorization from the author must be obtained. Copies of this text can be made for personal use only. No mass distribution of copies of this text is permitted.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, dates, places, and events are products of the author's imagination or used factiously. Any similarity or resemblance to any person living or dead, place, or event is purely coincidental.

# CONTENTS

[1. CHAPTER ONE](#)

[2. CHAPTER TWO](#)

[3. CHAPTER THREE](#)

[4. CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[5. CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[6. CHAPTER SIX](#)

[7. CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[8. CHAPTER EIGHT](#)

[9. CHAPTER NINE](#)

[10. CHAPTER TEN](#)

[11. CHAPTER ELEVEN](#)

[12. CHAPTER TWELVE](#)

[13. CHAPTER THIRTEEN](#)

[14. CHAPTER FOURTEEN](#)

[Excerpt from Charming:](#)

[Police Blotter](#)

[A Thank You–](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also By Michelle](#)



# CHAPTER ONE



“STEVENS-44, WE HAVE 459 burglary in progress on Hansen Court. Alarm has sounded. Suspect is believed to be in the area.”

The grainy voice of dispatch ended as Officer Richter Williams snatched the radio from the dashboard.

“Stevens-44 enroute. Show me 10-6.”

“Copy that.” Dispatch clicked off and his on-board computer lit up with the address. Ric flipped the switch for his lights and sirens and raced towards the right turn lane.

This burglary wasn’t far from his own neighborhood, which pissed him off. This rash of house robberies had only increased over the past weeks. The criminal hit in broad daylight, ballsy as hell in Ric’s opinion, but opportune. With everyone at work or school, the Tustin neighborhoods were empty during the day, and these robbers knew it.

Hansen Court was quiet when Ric arrived. He turned off the sirens but kept the lights going as he rolled up to the address, one house in from the edge of the street — a prime target.

The front door of the house hung open. Ric pulled his weapon and radioed the situation to dispatch. A second black-and-white called out that it was on its way. He glanced around the property. The neighborhood was empty. No sounds of cars peeling out or driving away at all. No sounds of dogs barking at someone in their yard, No sounds at all.

Unless the guy was still in the house, he'd gotten away before Ric arrived.

“Fuck,” Ric cursed under his breath.

Maybe he'd get lucky and the robber was stupid and slow and still in the house.

With a steady set of steps, he pushed past the open door, looked to the left and right around it, and entered.

The rumble of a car in the road carried into the house — his back up.

Officer Tyrell Blaser was out of his car and at the door before Ric's left foot made it fully inside. He had his own weapon drawn and at the ready.

“Any sign?” Tyrell Blaser asked behind him quietly.

“Negative,” Ric answered in a low tone. “All clear through here.”

“I'll go left,” Tyrell said as he stepped lightly into the house.

Ric veered right, heading down the narrow hallway of the two-story ranch toward the bedrooms. Nothing seemed out of place until the last bedroom on the left, the lower floor master,

which was torn apart. It looked like the robber found the jewelry and watches. Maybe some tech? Ric ducked past the door and checked the bathroom.

“Clear!” he called out to Tyrell.

When Ric returned to the living room, he met Tyrell coming down the stairs, holstering his Glock.

“All clear upstairs. I’ll run down the homeowner if you start on the report?”

Ric grimaced. Writing the report took a hell of a lot longer than notifying the homeowners, but he had been first on scene.

“Yeah, copy that. Let me get my clipboard from the car.” Ric glanced around the house as he made his way to the door.

They had missed the fucker *again*. The captain was going to want someone’s head on a platter. This slew of burglaries did not look good for the department, and the city council was going to want to place blame somewhere.

How the hell did the cops keep missing him? Or them if it was more than one suspect? How did they get in and out before the cops got there? A lot of planning, casing, and blending in.

Ric grabbed his clipboard and began filling it out. He had the sense something else was going on, but what?

His cell phone buzzed, and he absently grabbed it from his pocket. A photo of a button-nosed blonde girl popped up on his phone. His daughter, Bella.

She never called him. Not unless it was an emergency. His heart skipped a beat, and he clicked the answer icon.

“Bella? What’s wrong?”

“Hello. My name is Darby. Are you Bella’s dad?”

Ric froze.

Who the hell was on his daughter’s phone?



Darby walked the short distance to her mailbox as the afternoon began to slip towards its dusky sleep. This early in spring, cool, nearly five pm, and she was done working for the day. Her burgundy maxi skirt and flowing black top billowed in the breeze as she flip-flopped her way down her driveway. Cool, but not cold enough for closed-toed shoes. That rarely happened in southern California.

She picked paint off her fingertips before opening her mailbox – her most recent piece was coming along better than she had hoped. Her mind was turning over ideas for her next series. She hadn’t done anything in dark green in a while ...

Shouting from a driveway two houses down and across the street snapped her from her thoughts. They were loud enough and she was close enough to catch the entire exchange.

A sporty black car idled in the driveway and a young man stood next to it, yelling at a young woman who had apparently emerged from the front door of the house. Darby knew she shouldn't eavesdrop, but her days were shockingly uneventful, and this was sounding better than any daytime television.

“Get the fuck away from me, Dee! I'm so sick of you and your busy shit.” The young man stormed to the driver's side of the car while a petite, black-haired young woman followed, whining.

“Andres! Wait. It's just until seven! I can't leave her!”

That statement, and the appearance of a strawberry blonde, fairy-like little girl (*first grade maybe?*) stepping out onto the front stoop made Darby forget her paintings and her mail. Surely the woman wasn't going to leave the little girl alone? For a guy?

*Come on, girlie. Guys are a dime a dozen,* Darby thought.

Maybe not in Darby's closed off life of painting, but for a young lady who filled out tight jeans like a model – huh uh. She'd have no problem finding another guy if this one bailed.

*Just let the guy walk. You'll be better for it.* Darby hoped the dark-haired woman might read her thoughts.

The blonde fairy girl reached the end of the short front walkway, keeping her distance from the couple, but like Darby, overly interested in what was happening.

The Andres fellow got into his sporty car, gunned the engine to back the car out of the drive, then roared off down

the street opposite Darby.

“Fuck!” the young woman screamed before racing past the little girl back into the house.

Darby breathed a shaky sigh, relieved that the young woman had a good head on her shoulders – then caught her breath when the woman came back out, purse in hand, keys jingling.

*Oh no.*

The young woman got into her copper sedan, and like her boyfriend, gunned the engine.

Wait, isn't she taking her daughter? Or whoever the little girl was?

Now Darby was frozen, half on and half off the curb, laser-focused on the unfolding drama. The little girl screamed.

“Where are you going?” the girl yelled and ran toward the car. The young woman rolled down her window.

“You'll be fine. Go inside and lock the door. Your dad will be home soon.” And with that, she backed down the drive and turned the same way as the sporty car, leaving the little girl standing forlorn in the driveway.

*Someone else must be home with the kid,* Darby told herself.

But the little girl didn't go inside the house. Instead, she burst into tears right there in the driveway.

*Oh no,* Darby thought again. *Someone has to be home.*

Leaving her mail in the box (it was probably mostly advertising mailers anyway), Darby made the quick decision to intervene. Even if it was just to get the girl inside the house.

Darby strode across the street and cut through the grass to the girl.

“Hey honey,” Darby cooed in a low, kind tone as she crouched to the girl’s height. She didn’t want to frighten the girl.

The tiny blonde girl partially twisted and looked at Darby through her balled-up hands at her eyes.

“Let’s get you inside, honey. I saw your mom leave. Is someone else home with you?”

The little girl mumbled something about her mom. Darby didn’t understand a word.

“What did you say, honey?”

“I said she’s *not* my mom,” the girl whined. “She was babysitting me.”

*Oh no.* Babysitting meant no one else was home. *Okay Darbs, time to take action.*

“Okay, how about this? I heard the babysitter say something about your mom or dad coming home soon?”

The girl had dropped her hands and looked at Darby with big, watery brown eyes and tear-streaked cheeks. She nodded exactly one time. Darby’s heart throbbed in her chest. *Oh, the poor thing.*

“My dad,” she mumbled.

“Okay, sweetie, let’s do this. We’ll go inside and call your dad. You have his number?” Another single nod. “Then I’ll wait with you until he gets home. Is that okay?”

The girl didn’t nod this time. She drew her arms close to her sides.

*She’s nervous, and probably scared. Of course she is.*

Darby gave the girl the biggest smile she could muster and held out her hand. “Oh, I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Darby. I live right across the street in that yellow house. And we’ll call your dad first thing. Does that sound okay?”

Darby’s complete lack of experience with children was showing. Not that her lack of experience was by her own choice, yet here she was, trying to convince this six-year-old to let her into her house. Wasn’t that the rule they taught all kids? Stranger danger? This might not work out well. Darby tried to appear more innocent as she smiled.

The girl studied her with a cautious gaze before nodding once again.

Darby stood. “Great! Let’s –”

But her words cut off when the girl reached for her hand to be led into the house. Oh, the feel of those little fingers clasping onto someone they hoped they might trust. Thank God it was Darby and not someone else who might hurt her. Darby’s heart was wrecked. She cleared her throat.



“Let’s go inside. Do you have a cell phone or your dad’s number next to the house phone?” Did kids today even know what a *house phone* was?

“Bella,” the girl squeaked out as they walked toward the front door. “My name’s Bella. I have a phone in my backpack for ‘mergency only.’”

The girl, Bella, was obviously echoing a parent’s words. Darby squeezed the girl’s hand as they entered the house.

“I think this kinda qualifies. Go get your phone and we’ll call.”

Bella stood in the front entry, not opening the pink sparkly backpack on the floor that Darby presumed belonged to the girl. Darby tipped her head in question at Bella, who pointed to the door.

“You gotta lock the front door. Always the rule when we’re home. Lock the door. And only an adult can answer it.”

Well, if nothing else, the dad was teaching his daughter to be safe. In this day and age, that was a prudent thing, and this dad was protective of his kids. Good for this little girl, bad babysitters notwithstanding.

Darby locked the door, and a look of relief washed over Bella. She gave another one of her single nods, this time in what appeared to be approval, and crouched to her backpack. She drew a plain black cell phone from it – one step up from a burner phone you could get at the drug store. No unsupervised

internet or adult apps for this little girl. From the protective nature of her dad, *that* was not going to happen.

“Can you get his number or call him?”

The girl pressed the power button on the phone — the dad was smart. The first icon on the phone was to call him. *Good dad. Very prepared.*

The phone started ringing, and the girl held it up to Darby, who shrugged and plucked it from the girl’s hand. Like most kids, Bella evidently didn’t like talking on the phone.

A hard voice tinged with panic picked up on the other end of the line. “Bella? What’s wrong?”

“Hello. My name is Darby. Are you Bella’s dad?”

“Who are you?” the voice hardened.

“I’m sorry,” Darby told him in her calmest voice. She really didn’t need an angry dad calling the cops on her because she was in his house with his daughter when she was only trying to help. “But your daughter, Bella? Her babysitter bailed. Took off and left her alone. I live two houses down and watched it happen, so I came over, brought Bella inside, and had her call you right away.”

“Dee left? Just left? Fuck!” the guy cursed.

“Yeah, and I didn’t think it safe for Bella to be home alone. I don’t have anywhere to be, so I can stay here until you get home.”

The silence on the other end of the phone was odd. Didn't most people jump at the chance when someone offered help? Maybe this poor dad, who seemed to be a single dad, wasn't used to help.

"I can call her grandmother, but it might –" he paused. "But I'll be almost home by then."

Here Darby was – a stranger alone with his little girl. In this day and age, she didn't blame him for not trusting her.

"Listen, my name's Darby Collins, and this is no big deal. What time will you be home? We won't move from the house. We can watch TV or color or play a game until your get here. And you can call every five minutes if you want."

More silence. She could practically hear the gears turning in his head, trying to decide if he could trust her.

Then she realized she left her phone at home and house unlocked.

"I don't have my phone with me," she continued. "I left it at my house, so I have to run across the street to lock the house and I'll grab it. Then I'll text you my number from it so you can call me or Bella."

The dad huffed out a long breath. "Okay, yeah. Okay, can you put Bella back on?"

"Of course."

Darby handed the phone to the little girl.

“Hi, Daddy!” The girl paused. They weren’t on speaker, so Darby only heard Bella’s side. “Yeah, she just left. A guy came by, her boyfriend or somethin’, and they got into a big fight.” Pause. “No, an argument, Daddy. Not *fighting* fighting. And then he left and she left.” Pause. Her eyes flicked to Darby. Daddy must be asking about her now. “No, Daddy. She’s nice. She even locked the door when we got here to be safe.” Pause. “Yeah, I’ll go with her to lock her house and get her phone, but we’re coming back home, right?” Bella looked at Darby, who nodded reassuringly.

“Okay, Daddy. I’ll be good.” Pause, and a dimpled smile that could melt snow from the ice caps kissed her little cheeks. “I love you, too, Daddy.”

Then Bella clicked the phone off and put it back in her glittery backpack.

“Daddy said we need to go to your house quick to get your phone?” Darby nodded and Bella slipped her hand against Darby’s to hold it again. “You shouldn’t forget your phone. You never know when you’ll have a ‘mergency.”

Darby smiled to herself as they exited the house into the gloaming. “You’re right. But I was only intending to get my mail. I would have grabbed it if I knew I was having a play date.”

Finally, a smile for Darby, full of teeth and dimples. “A play date? I haven’t done a play date with a grown up before!”

Darby tugged lightly on her hand as they reached her driveway. “Well, let’s get my phone and keys, and we’ll head

to your house for our play date.” Darby grabbed her phone off the counter while Bella waited in the front entry, gazing around the house, then Darby locked the door on her way out.

“Do you like to draw? Or color?” Darby asked. Did kids still color pictures with crayons or markers? Darby had no idea.

“I love to draw!” Bella gushed with the eagerness only a child can have for something like drawing.

Darby patted her hand. “Then this will be a great play date indeed.”



Ric broke every speed limit to get home.

The woman on the phone sounded nice – and if she was home getting her mail and watching the neighbors fight, Ric could only imagine that she was some grandmotherly type with too much time on her hands. Probably needed to get out of the house, anyway.

But this Darby woman had been true to her word, had texted her number to him, then had Bella call him and let him know they were back in his house, doors locked (*good girl, Bella!*), and coloring.

Bella probably loved that. The girl drew on everything. Even the walls at one point, until Ric had a long talk with her and threatened punishment. Drawing and coloring – Bella probably loved the grandmotherly lady.

He had called his mother to see if she could get there more quickly than he, but she wasn't home, attending an event even farther away. She'd never make it. So, he had to rely on this random stranger to watch his most precious possession. He left the station while still in uniform, something he rarely did, to make it home in record time.

The house was dark, with only the living room light illuminating the bay window when he arrived home. When he unlocked the door and entered, Bella jumped up, squealing with joy.

“Daddy!” she cried out as she threw herself at his legs. Ric picked her up in one arm and kissed her apple-hued cheek.

“Hey, Bella baby. I got home as quick as I could.”

Then he turned his face to Darby, and his brain froze.

Not a grandma, not in any sense of the word.

She had light brown hair that fell in waves around her shoulders and the look of a woman who cared little for the world, as if nothing bugged her at all.

But her rounded hips and full rack bugged him, and in a *good* way. A flash of excitement drove down to his groin, making him think of what he'd like to do to that body with the round hips and full rack. A flash he hadn't had in a *long* time.

She rose and sauntered closer to them, her hand outstretched.

“Hello. I’m Darby. You must be Dad?” She pointed to his uniform. “That explains a lot, the locks and Bella’s emergency comments.”

*Fuck.* He’d never told her his name. He nodded.

“Richter. Ric. Sorry.” He jostled Bella to his other arm and took her proffered hand. “Nice to meet you. Yeah, I’m a cop, so it comes with the territory. And thank you for this. I really can’t thank you enough.”

“Daddy! Look what Darby taught me!”

Bella wiggled until Ric was forced to put her down and tear his gaze from the striking Darby to the narrow coffee table in the living room, which was covered in multi-colored paper. Keeping her hand in his, Bella led Ric to the table and pointed to the pictures. They were surprisingly well-done drawings of flowers.

“Did Darby draw these with you?” he asked. She had to have helped — a six-year-old couldn’t have drawn like this. He hadn’t seen Bella do anything like that before.

“No, Daddy. Those are mine. Darby showed me how to draw flowers so good. These are hers.”

Bella moved the papers and exposed drawings that couldn’t be drawings — they were far too real and appeared to be jumping off the page. And that was with *crayon*.

Ric turned slowly to Darby. “You drew these? And showed Bella how to draw these other ones?”

Darby smiled at him — a smile that nearly stopped his heart (*Stop it, Ric! Act like a fucking adult and not a smitten kid!*) — and sashayed to the table.

*Does she know she walks like a goddess?*

“Yeah. Those are mine. And learning to draw flowers is actually easy. It’s a few tricks with darker shadows and fine lines.”

“But these look real.”

“I know, Daddy! She draws better than anybody!”

Ric looked at Darby askance.

Darby gave them a small smile.



“I’m an artist,” Darby told him.

“I know she is,” Bella piped up. “Look how good she is.”

“An artist? Like a *real* artist?” Ric asked.

Darby giggled to herself. She was used to that question. Very few people made a living as an artist. But to have someone as handsome and built as this cop ask, *that* was



something different. Did he know how strikingly handsome he was? He had to.

“Yeah. I’m the artist in residence at Mount Laguna College for a year,” she continued, trying to keep her eyes on his face and not on his broad, uniformed chest. “I teach one class at noon two days a week. I also have a special exhibit at the college I have to host twice a month on Saturday afternoons. Otherwise, I’m in my studio at home, painting, or at the Laguna Royale Art gallery. I have a larger exhibit there. My *Lapis Lazuli* collection.”

Ric looked as though he’d been kicked in the chest by a horse. She was also used to that response. His cheeks matched his strawberry blonde hair, and his green eyes were wide.

“So, you live down the street? How have I never met you before?”

“I was traveling a bit, for gallery openings and galas, but that gets tiring. Since most of my showings are around here, and I have the artist in residence position, I decided to rent a house for a year.”

From the corner of her eye, Darby noticed that Bella was getting bored with their conversation, shifting from one foot to the other. Darby turned her attention to the girl who tugged at her dad’s arm.

“Daddy? Can I show her my room? We stayed in here and in the kitchen until you got home.”

Darby lifted her eyes to meet Ric's, and her heart fluttered in her chest. His lightly tanned skin contrasted with this strawberry blonde hair and stole her attention for a moment. He really was a stunningly handsome man. How was he a single dad? And the uniform? That was a panty-dropper right there. It made him seem huge. He cut a perfect figure. Enough to make her swoon, if she was the swooning sort.

"We made sandwiches," Darby said suddenly, feeling the heat of admiring him sizzling under her skin. "For dinner, I mean. I didn't want to nose about your house too much."

Bella kept tugging Ric's hand, and he gave in. "Yeah, let's show her your room. Then we can have some sandwiches." His gaze met hers, and she had that swooning feeling again. *Get it together, Darbs!*

"Did you eat yet?" he asked.

"We waited for you, Daddy!" Bella cheered as she walked them down the narrow hall. Then, dropping her father's hand, she tucked her tiny hand into Darby's. "It's right here. We painted it purple last year, and I got to put up all my unicorn pictures."

Bella's room was the epitome of an ideal little girl's room, complete with glittery unicorn posters, light purple walls, and gauzy white and purple curtains.

"This is my room. This is my favorite unicorn stuffie ..."

Darby nodded approvingly as Bella pointed to her toys, but she barely heard the girl speak. She was too focused on how

close Ric was standing to her, his body heat touching her through the back of her shirt.

“Are you hungry?” Ric asked, his breath wisping through her hair.

Darby had to suppress the urge to shiver. Other than a few random gallery owners, when was the last time she’d been this close to a man? Especially a man built like Ric? Too long, evidently.

“Yes!” Bella answered for her. “We waited for you to get home. Can I have chocolate milk with my sandwich?”

Ric took a half step back, and with an exaggerated move, gestured toward the kitchen, letting Darby and Bella go first. “Will you join us for dinner?” he asked.

Bella nodded fiercely at Darby, making her blonde hair swing around her face.

Darby nodded at Bella, then turned her smile onto Ric.

“With such an eager invitation, how can I say *no*?”

# CHAPTER TWO



*WHAT ARE YOU DOING, Ric?* he asked himself as he followed his daughter and Darby to the kitchen. He struggled to keep his eyes from fixating on her rounded backside as she sauntered down the hall. No matter how sexy he found her, he knew he didn't have time to date, nor the inclination. Not with his busy life with Bella.

Not that he hadn't tried. He'd gone out on a few dates when Bella was a baby, all of which failed miserably. A few more dates as she got older and his mother, Yvonne, chided him for his lack of a social life. Yvonne might have used it as an excuse to keep Bella overnight, but those dates fizzled out as well. Ric had gotten laid once or twice in a *friends-with-benefits* situation over the past year, but nothing more than that. His obligations to his daughter and his job took up too much of his time, and most of the women he had tried to date looked at him like he had a disease when he mentioned a young daughter.

One of the women tried to date him seriously, but she didn't really want to fill in the role of mother, and had tried to only

meet with Ric when she could avoid Bella. That wasn't going to work at all.

So no, he wasn't looking for anything romantic right now.

Then why was his whole body reacting to this woman who randomly stumbled into his house?

Because she had a body that rivaled a '50s pin-up girl, and she was amazing with his daughter. *Those are the only reasons why*, he tried to tell himself.

Several triangle-cut sandwiches sat on a plate, turkey and cheese. Bella climbed up on the counter-height stool and grabbed one. "See Daddy? She cut them into triangles like Grandma does. The triangles taste better."

Ric grabbed a plastic cup from a cabinet next to the refrigerator, then pulled the chocolate milk carton from the fridge.

"I try to tell her it's the same sandwich, no matter how it's cut."

Bella shook her head wildly. "No, they don't! Triangles are better!"

As Ric poured the milk, Darby delicately lifted one of the sandwiches and took a large bite.

"I think triangles taste better, too. I cut all my sandwiches into triangles," she told Bella between bites. Darby gave Ric a quick glance and a subtle wink. Bella giggled and took a bite of her sandwich.

“See, Daddy? Better.”

Ric set the cup in front of Bella and grinned at her. “I can see I am outvoted,” he said as he took a sandwich. “Let me taste these better, triangle sandwiches.”

He settled his gaze on Darby as he took a huge bite. Without dropping his gaze, he nodded as he swallowed.

“Definitely better,” he agreed.



Darby didn't know if he meant the comment in the flirtatious way she took it, but her cheeks burned again, and she looked down at her hands, suddenly more interested in her sandwich. A glass of water she'd drunk from earlier sat on the counter, and when her sandwich was gone, she washed it down with a large sip. She hoped it would calm her shaky insides.

Ric was still studying her. She tried to figure out what he might be thinking, but the rest of his face was a mask.

Made sense. He probably had to hide a lot of his facial expressions as part of his work. That idea was so foreign to Darby — the more expressions she saw, the more she could paint or draw. She was not the closed off sort.

“I should be going,” she finally said. The kitchen was growing far too warm for her under Ric's laser focused gaze.

“I’ll walk you to the door. Bella, stay here and finish your sandwich, please.”

“Can I hug Darby goodbye?” she asked with a mouthful of sandwich.

Ric’s mask slipped a bit, and he appeared conflicted by her request and at a loss for words. He gave Darby a baffled, open-mouthed stare.

Darby smiled at him, then turned the smile to Bella. “Of course, sweetie.”

She leaned down to the little girl and hugged her with one arm, but Bella wasn’t about to let her off that easily. With her thin arms open wide, Bella wrapped both arms as far as she could around Darby’s waist. It was such an eager hug, one full of need and excitement.

Darby understood that need — the need to embrace shared by parent and child. This little girl was wreaking havoc on Darby’s underused motherly instincts.

“Will I see you tomorrow?” Bella asked.

Darby’s heart sank, unsure of what to say. It put both Darby and Ric in a complicated situation — this had been an emergency thing, not the start of some peculiar friendship. Darby licked her lips, trying to come up with an answer.

“We will see, baby,” Ric saved her from answering. “She’s busy, but we’ll see.”

“But who will sit me tomorrow, Daddy? It’s Friday and you work Fridays.”

It was Ric's turn to work his lips. He didn't have an answer for that. *How the hell is this kid so precocious?* Darby wondered. Were all kids like that?

"I'll figure it out, baby. Now finish your dinner."

With a contented bob of her head, Bella swung herself back around to the counter to pick at her sandwich.

Ric tanned face was a bit more pink. Evidently, he was struggling with his daughter's questions.

At the door, Ric unlocked it and opened it a crack. "Well, thank you for saving the day. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't showed up."

Darby flipped her hair back over her shoulders as she looked up at him. He wasn't overly tall by any means, but he was taller than her barely five-foot one inch height. And that was in shoes.

*Oh, but he is devastatingly handsome.* He filled out the uniform in a delicious way, and Darby knew she would be reliving this moment later on that night as part of her fantasy bank.

"Not a problem."

He opened the door a bit more, but Darby didn't move. An idea struck her head like lightning, but it was a bold idea, and for a worried parent like Ric, she wasn't sure how he'd receive it.

"What are you going to do about Bella tomorrow?" she asked.



Ric pulled his head back, apparently surprised by her question. Then he wiped his palm across his forehead.

“I don’t know,” he answered in a breathy tone. “This sitter was a newer one, but she came with a decent reference. I used a sitter placement group this time. An older neighbor used to sit for her, but she moved away to live with her son, and I’ve been scrambling since. I’ll probably have to take the day off and start searching, again.”

His voice held a note Darby was familiar with, a tone of defeated frustration. He was extremely worried about finding a babysitter, even if he didn’t outwardly show it.

“I have an idea, but if you aren’t comfortable with it, just let me know.”

Ric tilted his head slightly.

“What idea?”



“I know you don’t know me well. I can provide references,” Darby tried a joke that fell a bit flat on Ric’s hard features. “But I don’t work in the afternoons, and Bella and I had an amazing time today. I can watch her after school until you get home. At least to buy you time until you find a babysitter you’re more comfortable with.”

Ric's brow furrowed slightly. "What? No, I can't ask you to do that..." His voice trailed off. Actually, he could. Darby could drive a truck through his doubt.

"Yeah, you can. We made it through today easily enough."

That hard edge of worry softened even more. "Really? Are you sure? It's not too much?"

Darby quieted for a moment as the blur of her days passed through her mind. Days spent alone in her studio with a paintbrush, lonely walks to campus for her one class, her gala nights solo. Having someone, even a tiny person who was still learning how to draw flowers, to hang out with was an improvement.

Ric might struggle as a single dad, but at least he had someone to walk through life with him. Darby's chance at that was gone, and she had no partner in her life. Despite the added responsibility of caring for a child, she found herself hoping that Ric said *yes*.

His shoulders drooped and his hand fell from the door.

"Say yes, Daddy!" Bella's tiny voice hollered from the far side of the room.

Darby turned her head in unison with Ric to see Bella at the kitchen doorway, with a big grin and a chocolate milk mustache. How long had she been eavesdropping? Long enough, apparently,

"Bella," Ric sighed out her name, then turned back to Darby.

“Okay, so, tomorrow then? I work Tuesday through Friday. That won’t interfere with anything?”

*Like what? My non-existent social life?* Darby thought in her hyper-critical mind’s voice.

“Not at all. What time does she get out of school? Do I have to pick her up or anything?”

Ric lifted his forearm to the door frame and leaned against it. Her heart skipped a beat. *What a sexy, casual move.* How was *he* a single dad?

“If you don’t mind a short walk, you can pick her up at the elementary school right around the corner at Vine Street Elementary. She gets out at 2:15, and I’ll get you the house key ...”

His voice drifted off again, he cursed lightly under his breath.

“What about the key?” Darby probed.

Ric rubbed his fingertips across his forehead. “I’m going to have to change the locks again. The sitter has the house key.”

Darby started. “Wait, was it on a unicorn key chain?”

“Yeah, why?”

She flicked her head toward the couch side table. “I think she left it behind when she bailed.”

Ric leaned in close to look over Darby’s shoulder at the table. This time his relief washed over his whole body.

“Okay, well, that’s good.” He reached past her, pressing the length of his body to hers, and snatched the key off the table. Darby didn’t start breathing again until he was fully upright.

“So, here’s the key. I’m usually home later than I was tonight – closer to six thirty or seven. And you don’t have to worry about dinner or make sandwiches. I can do that.”

Darby grinned. “How about we play that by ear? Bella and I can make dinner if we’re up for it.”

“Yay!” Bella screeched and raced to Darby, hugging her legs.

“Bella, come on.” Ric scooped her up again in a practiced move, as if his daughter weighed nothing.

“Okay then,” Darby tossed her hair out of her face and smiled at them both. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She lifted her finger and pressed it against Bella’s nose, and the girl giggled.

Her gaze drifted to Ric, who was smiling. Not widely or with mirth, but in a slight way, a contented way, one that made her heart threaten to burst from her chest and her knees weak.

She had to get out of here before she embarrassed herself with him, so she palmed the key ring and gave him a quick wave as she exited the doorway.

Once outside in the cool spring air, she inhaled, clearing her lungs, as the sound of the lock slid into place behind her.



“I like her, Daddy,” Bella said the moment the door closed. Ric carried her toward the hall bathroom to start her bedtime routine.

“You did?”

Bella nodded and leaned her head against his shoulder. “She drew pictures with me. My other babysitters just watched TV or looked at their phones.”

They reached the bathroom and set her down on the tile. He parked himself on the closed toilet and started the bath.

“You like drawing with her?”

He wanted to keep her talking. Nothing was as fulfilling to him as hearing her chatter away. His mom once told him to keep Bella talking, even if it’s a small thing, because if she tells him the small things now, she’ll tell him the big things later. *Because to kids*, his mom had said, *it was always big things*.

“Yes. She’s the best draw-er. She makes the flowers look so real, it’s like you can pick ‘em.”

The bathwater was warm enough, so he put in the stopper and added a bit of body wash to mimic bubble bath, exactly as Bella liked it. Then he rolled up his uniform shirt sleeves.

Normally, he changed before he got home, or right after. He didn't care to bring work home with him in any way. But Christ, he was still wearing his gun belt. What sort of impression did that make with Darby?

*And why do I care?*

“She’s an artist, honey. She draws like that for a living.”

Bella screwed up her face. “People can do drawing for a job?”

Ric tugged her shirt over her head until it popped out in a blonde mess. Then he pointed at her leggings to tell her to take them off.

“Yes, they can, baby. If they’re good enough.”

He plopped her in the bubbly tub and dumped a cup of water over her head. She giggled again and wiped her eyes.

“Can I be an artist when I grow up?”

Ric wiped her face with the damp washrag and grinned. “You can be anything you want to be, baby.”

She quieted and patted the bubbles, then looked up at him. “Daddy, you’re still wearing your uniform. It’ll get wet.”

Ric glanced down at himself. “I know baby, but I was in a rush today –”

“Because Dee got into a fight with her boyfriend and left?”

Ric grimaced and hung his head. All he wanted to do was protect his daughter, and here he was, letting his daughter stay

with a stranger because her babysitter bailed. What the hell was wrong with the world?

*Not any stranger,* a small voice in the back of his head told him.

*Shut it. I don't have time for that.*

“Yeah, baby. But I’ll change once you’re done with your bath.”

“I think Darby liked your uniform. She kept looking at it.” Bella lifted some pathetic bubbles into her hands and blew on them. Ric straightened.

“She kept looking at it?”

Bella nodded. “Yeah. I think she was curious about it. She doesn’t have to wear a uniform to be an artist, does she?”

*Darby was looking at my uniform? At me in my uniform?*

“No, baby. Let’s get you washed and in jammies. Then I’ll change.”

Bella blew more bubbles at him.

*Darby was looking at me?*

Foolishly, that thought made his heart skip a beat and sent a surge of heat to his groin.

# CHAPTER THREE



PICK UP WENT WELL, with Bella throwing herself at Darby's legs again. The little girl wore a plain purple top — *a lot of purple for this girl!* — and her strawberry blonde hair was loose and wild around her head. They walked home with Bella talking non-stop.

“Are we going to draw again today?” Bella slipped her hand into Darby's. The simple gesture filled Darby with a comfortable warmth.

“Do you want to? We can draw as much as you want.”

“My daddy says you do drawing for your job. Is that true?” Bella swung their hands and jumped over the cracks in the sidewalk as they walked.

“Yep. More painting than drawing, but some drawing is involved.”

“What do you do with your paintings?”

“They are displayed at different galleries where people can see them and buy them.”



Bella sucked in her breath and turned to Darby. “Can I go see them sometime?”

It was like Bella reached into her chest and squeezed her heart. She seemed so eager.

“Of course. I’ll talk to your dad about it. We can go to the college campus nearby where I have a display.”

Bella squealed. “I can’t wait!”

When Ric got home (*not in his uniform*, Darby noted with dismay), Bella gushed about going to see the paintings.

“She said we can go this weekend!”

*This weekend?* Darby’s jaw fell open, and she sat back on the couch. “Wait, no –”

Ric grinned and picked Bella up for a hug. “We can go this weekend. Where are we going?”

Darby pressed the palm of her hand against her forehead. Normally, she adored it when people wanted to see her art. She was proud of her art and the compliments made her feel successful. Why was she nervous about Ric seeing her paintings?

“Uh, she wants to see my art. I have an exhibit at a gallery in Laguna Beach.” She flicked her eyes to Bella – that would be a bit of a drive and a long day for a six-year-old. “But I have a smaller exhibit right over at Mount Laguna College.”

Bella squealed and clapped her hands, but Darby’s attention wasn’t on Bella. It was on her father. Ric’s face lit up at the

prospect of her art show. Darby had to take a deep breath.

“What time?” he asked, setting Bella down.

“Uh, yeah. The college gallery opens at ten. I can drive, since I have a parking permit. Unless you prefer to drive separate.”

A handsome, wide grin split his face. “Probably better you drive. I can only park where I want when I’m in uniform and driving a police car.”

*You can wear your uniform*, she thought wildly before catching herself. Darby licked her lips and her cheeks burned under his riveted gaze. What was it about him that made her so nervous around him?

“Okay, tomorrow at ten.”

“It’s a date,” he said.

*He probably meant it flippantly ...*

Bella squealed again. “A date! A date!” she cheered as she raced off to her room.

Then they were alone. Darby stood on shaky legs and moved past him toward the door.

“Now that you’re home, I’ll head out.”

She reached for the door, but he moved behind her and grasped the doorknob.

“I’ll get that for you.”

He swung it open, and Darby once again noted the locks. Three total. That seemed like a lot for this safe, quiet

neighborhood.

“I meant to ask, what’s up with all the locks? Did you have a break in?”

Ric’s full lips pursed briefly before he answered. “No. More of an occupational hazard. On patrol, I see the worst of everything, even in good neighborhoods. And there has been a rash of break-ins in some of the Tustin neighborhoods on my patrol. Better safe than sorry, I suppose.”

“Yeah, that’s a sound philosophy.”

They fell silent as she stood at the threshold. She should have stepped out of the doorway, but something in the way he looked at her kept her rooted to her spot. Ric seemed to be leaning toward her, then he paused right above her.

Darby gathered her wits and cleared her throat.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said in a tight voice and stepped quickly out the door.

“Yeah, tomorrow,” he answered in an equally tight voice. “And be sure to lock your doors. Can’t be too safe, and I wouldn’t want anything to happen to you.”

His comment sounded like nothing more than a cautious reminder, but in his rich timbre, it rocked Darby to her core. She nodded and walked down the walkway in a stupor.

And she didn’t hear the door close and lock until she turned onto the driveway and out of his view.



Ric leaned his feverish forehead against the closed door, trying to catch his breath. He felt like he'd just chased a runner, only more shaky. He could chase criminals, tackle them down, disarm a line-backer sized man without blinking, yet this petite artist had him twisting in the wind.

What was wrong with him? Why was he behaving this way?

*She's the babysitter*, he reminded himself and pressed the palms of his hands against his eyes.

A temporary babysitter at that. Why did every interaction with her make his insides weak?

Because he found her sexy as hell, loved her smile, and couldn't get enough of her casual attitude. So many people were hung up on their work or the like, rushing through every day, yet here she was volunteering her time to color with Bella.

Nothing about Darby seemed rushed. And in a world where he felt like he was always on the run – after a criminal, after Bella, after time itself – being with someone who never rushed was a welcome relief.

Darby exuded calm – something he severely lacked and that he hoped didn't affect Bella. Was his shockingly sudden desire

for Darby only part sexiness and his own interest? Did the other part of his desire include having Bella be around someone like her?

More than once during the day, Ric had wondered what it would be like to be with Darby, to try to date her, to see how they would work as a couple. She was so great with Bella ...

But every time he had those thoughts, another set of darker, intrusive thoughts came on their heels. He knew Darby all of one day, and other than the flare of lust that ignited inside him every time she bent over or he saw how she behaved with Bella, he had no other knowledge about her. What if this was all a guise? What if she was ...

And there it was, the negative side of every interaction he'd had with women since Bella's mother had bailed. Most likely his trauma response; still he couldn't help but believe that every woman was like that – ready to leave at any moment.

He had hoped Bella's mom would change her mind, yet earlier last year, she had sent paperwork asking to have her parental rights terminated. She hadn't ever wanted kids and agreed to the baby at Ric's urging when she found out she was pregnant. Sometimes he realized how horrible he had acted, convincing Anne to keep the baby for their marriage, and he had sincerely thought she would change her mind about kids once the baby was born. And oh, Bella was pink and round and perfect, enough to convince anyone, except Anne.

No matter how badly Ric felt about the entire miserable situation, when he looked at Bella with her curly strawberry

blonde hair and wide brown eyes, he knew in his heart that he had been right about it all. If it meant losing Anne, then it was worth it.

His gaze moved to the pictures on the table. More flowers, in blues and greens, and his mind shifted from his traumatized thoughts of his ex to Darby.

Maybe she wasn't like his ex. It was in poor taste for him to even make that assumption based on nothing. Especially when everything he had seen in the past two days spoke of a woman who enjoyed coloring with a six-year-old.

Maybe he would ask her out. A real date, not a quick coffee date as he had in the past.

He could see how things went tomorrow at the gallery, and if it went well, he'd ask her out on a date.

*A real date. One with only him.*

“Daddy!” Bella shouted from the hallway. “Are we eating dinner tonight or am I going to starve? Darby pulled out some chicken dinner thing, and I’ve been waiting!”

*You and me both, baby,* Ric thought and shoved himself off the door towards the kitchen.

“Let’s eat!”

# CHAPTER FOUR



RIC AND BELLA WERE at her door right before ten that Saturday. When the doorbell rang, Darby took one last once-over in her mirror – wavy hair pulled back and neat, flowery tunic-top, and fitted black leggings. A pair of lavender slides on her feet completed the look.

Was it enough for a pseudo date, if that’s what this was?

She hoped so.

With a last sweep of lip gloss across her lips, she strode to the door and swung it open.

Nothing would compare to the sight of Ric in his uniform, bright hair and eyes against the dark blue, but his grinning face over a dark green polo shirt that pulled taught across his lean-muscled chest was a close second. He also carried a car booster seat.

The man was nothing if not a paragon of pragmatic safety.

“Darby!” Bella screeched and threw her arms around Darby’s legs in a big hug. Darby reached down and patted her back.

“Hey, Bella! Are you ready?”

Bella stepped back. Her excitement was infectious. “I’ve never been to an art place before.”

Ric took Bella’s hand, and his obvious indulgent pride at his daughter was just as infectious as Bella’s excitement. “She wanted to dress up for the event.”

Darby hadn’t missed the frilly purple dress with a glittery unicorn printed across her slender chest.

“Obviously. It’s a big event, and I am so glad you’re excited for it. You’ll be the best dressed there.”

As Darby closed and locked her door, Ric stood behind her, so close she felt the heat emanating from his frame.

“Best dressed because the rest will be college students?” he joked.

Darby whirled around and grinned. “Jeans and sweats are typically the style *du jour*. She’ll also be the youngest visitor, probably.”

Ric gave his daughter a side-long look. “Well, she also promised to be good at this event. No running around and loud voices, remember?”

Bella rolled her eyes and gave Darby an expression that said *can you believe this guy?* Darby smiled.

“She’ll be fine. Half the students are louder than she is on any day.” Darby led them to her car and opened it. “Let’s go.”





They parked close to the campus gallery, and Darby led them in. Butterflies crowded her gut, and she swallowed to tamp down her nerves. Why was she so nervous? She'd had many shows and exhibits before this, with important people in the art world. Why was she nervous to show her work to Ric and Bella?

Because kids could be harsh. Yeah, that she knew.

But she also wanted Rick to be impressed.

After they approached the glass double doors with the words Sever's Art Gallery etched above them, Bella took Darby's hand. Darby glanced down, watching as Bella, who held her father's hand, too, swung between them. She squealed as her feet lifted off the pavement, then giggled when she landed.

When she did it again, Darby made sure to have a better grip on the girl's hand to help swing her high. Bella giggled louder, and when she landed safely, Darby looked over her head at Ric. His face was a mask, not of anger or happiness but a closed one she couldn't read. His green eyes bore into her with intensity.

What was he thinking?

Then they were at the door, and her focus shifted to the gallery.

“It’s a small gallery, with the front entrance and welcome, then to the left, a series of three open rooms. My exhibit is in the middle one. And be warned, they’ll hit you up for a donation on the way in and on the way out.”

Ric nodded as he swept Bella up into his right arm and opened the door for Darby, then stepped through the doors with Bella.

“Hi, welcome!” The attendant called out in her cheery voice. “It’s so good to have you –” The woman, most likely an art or art appreciation student, stopped mid-sentence. “Oh my God! Theo! Come here! It’s Darby Collins!”

Oh, that was *not* the response she wanted. Darby bit her lip as she averted her gaze.

A lanky, black-haired kid joined them, and Darby recognized him from her art class. Her heart sank.

She wasn’t a famous painter – what artist today was? But her students knew her, and they did tend to gush a bit.

*Not now*, she pleaded to herself.

“Oh, Ms. Collins! It is such an honor to meet you! We didn’t know you were coming today! Is there an event or something?” the woman asked as she stretched to peer around the three of them.

“Ms. Collins! Oh my gosh! It’s so great to see you in the gallery! I didn’t know today was a day you were hosting.”

Theo's voice was as cheery as the attendant's. Darby forced her lips into a thin, grateful smile.

"Hello! No, no event. I babysit this little girls sometimes, and she wanted to see some of the art, so we decided to drop by."

"There's a few other people here today, so they might want to meet you," the spiky-haired attendant said. Then she dipped her eyes and looked a bit abashed. "Can I—" she started, then tried again. "Can I get your autograph?"

Darby couldn't bring herself to look at Ric or Bella. *What must they be thinking!*

"Of course. How about one of the counter cards with my paintings on it?"

"Me too!" Theo chimed in.

The attendant grabbed a pen and two counter cards, colorful 4x6 cards with photos of Darby's paintings on the front and details about her exhibit on the backside. At the bottom of the cards, right under her *Hibiscus in Early Morning* photo, she signed her name with flair. Then she handed them to Theo and the attendant.

"Thank you so much, Ms. Collins! And I'll take you to the exhibit, so you can show your friends." He reached to the counter and grabbed a few more cards and the pen. His shame-faced grin was endearing. "Just in case anyone else wants an autograph."

“I’d like one, or two if you can spare it,” a deep voice behind her boomed. *Ric*.

It took everything inside her not to turn around to Ric. Why did *he* want an autograph?

“Of course!” Theo exclaimed and handed her two cards and the pen.

Giving Ric a side glare – oh, the smug look of expectation on his face was too much – she signed the cards and handed them to Ric, who tucked them in Bella’s shimmery backpack.

“Those are worth money, I bet,” he said in a low voice that gave her shivers.

Darby glanced at him again. “Not worth the price of the card I wrote on. Now get over it, they’re students and they’re making a lot more of it than it is.”

“This way,” Theo directed with a wide look of awe on his face and led them to her exhibit.



When they reached the room that held Darby’s paintings, Ric set Bella down with a strict directive to not touch *anything*, then lifted his gaze to Darby. She stood before one of the paintings, exuding modest pride. Then his gaze slipped to the painting, and he froze.

Ric stood in front of the canvas, his eyes fixed on the intricate swirls of paint and the bold brush strokes that seemed to leap off the canvas. He had never seen anything like it before. It wasn't just a painting of a moss green and yellow flower, it was something more. Nearly four feet tall and so lifelike – and she did something with the lines of paint to make the flower appear to be leaping off the canvas. It seemed that he could reach out and touch it in the air.

As he moved from one piece to the next, he was struck by the raw emotion and passion that radiated from each one as each petal seemed to stretch outward. If he squinted, Ric could imagine they were moving, and it was as if he was seeing this singular flower through Darby's eyes.

No wonder the students wanted her autograph. Here she was, downplaying herself like this was nothing, and instead he was awe-struck by her art and talent.

He turned to the artist herself, her piercing hazel eyes studied him intently. He felt a surge of embarrassment, as if she could see right through him, but he couldn't tear his gaze away. Then she flicked her gaze back to her impossible floating flower.

“Daddy!” Bella whispered next to him as if she held the gallery in reverence. *Impressive for a loud six-year-old.* “I feel like a fairy. Are those real?”

“As real as the canvas they're painted on. They look like they aren't painted.”

“What do you think?” Darby asked him, her voice soft and curious.

Ric hesitated, glancing down at Bella and unsure how to put into words the emotions that her art had stirred within him. “It’s... amazing,” he finally said, his voice barely above a husky whisper.

Darby smiled, her eyes lighting up with pride as she half-turned to her art. “Thank you,” she said. “It’s called anamorphic painting, or *impasto*, where the art is like 3-D and seems to be coming off that canvas. I’m glad you like it.”

He didn’t just like it — he loved it. He nodded, fully unable to find the words to express how moved he was by her art as his eyes moved from one floating flower canvas to the next. Ric felt a bit like Alice in *Wonderland*, these huge flowers over his head, and he knew he’d never be able to forget this moment, or the woman who had created it.

If she had stirred a long dead desire in him before, showing him and Bella this side of her only ignited that passion more.

# CHAPTER FIVE



SUDDENLY A MAN APPROACHED Darby, a card and pen extended. His presence tore Ric's attention from Darby and her art to the venue as a whole.

“Autograph?” the man asked. He appeared to be the artsy-type, at least to Ric, what with his loose button up and hair in a smooth ponytail. He looked a bit older than the other students Ric had seen in the gallery.

Darby smiled politely and took the proffered card and pen. Ric cursed under his breath, realizing that his normal attention to his surroundings had been supplanted by Darby and her flowers.

A little hand tugged on his fingers. “Daddy, you have to put a dollar in the swear jar,” Bella scolded him. Nodding absently, Ric's hawk-like eyes continued to survey the small gallery.

The man requesting the signature was the most significant stand out, and Ric pressed Bella behind his leg as he studied the man. He didn't care for how close the man stood next to

Darby, towering over her petite frame, and Ric inhaled and shifted to stand closer to her.

Another young man with a clip board stood behind ponytail and studied a painting – he might be a student. A couple of girls were in one of the other rooms, right at the edge and visible from the corner of Ric’s eye. That made eight, including Darby, Bella, and the two workers.

An emergency door was to their left on the far side of the hall which was lined with tissue-covered windows – probably to shield the art from direct sunlight. The only other egress Ric could see was the glass double doors at the welcome entrance.

The pony tail man finished his small talk with Darby – it sounded like he was asking about her class and if she was teaching next semester, a question that had also crossed Ric’s mind – and had stepped away.

“Daddy?” Bella asked, peeking around his leg.

Ric’s attention partially shifted to Bella. “Sorry, baby. I’ll put money in the jar, I promise.”

“Were you checking the place out, Daddy?”

Bella knew the routine – he had explained it on more than one outing in the most casual way he could find. Even the grocery store had to be “checked out.” Darby turned toward them, rejoining their conversation.

“Yes, I was, baby. I forgot to do it when we walked in, which is why I said the bad word.”



“Forgot to check the place out?” Darby asked, her clear brow furrowed in question.

Ric tilted his head at her. “Occupational hazard. I try to check out a place where ever we are. I look for entrances and exits, possible hazards, stuff like that.”

He purposely didn’t mention potential human threats, because he didn’t want to cause Bella or Darby, any concern. Especially since that ponytail guy made the hairs on the back of Ric’s neck rise up.

It was probably nothing more than Ric feeling heightened need for security after being distracted – the guy was in a college art gallery after all. Ric glanced around the building. Not much art theft going on here.

“Do you want to see the rest of the exhibit and the other two? One is by a full professor here. He does these neat contrast color landscapes, and then the other room is student art.”

“Yes!” Bella shouted way too loudly for an art gallery.

Ric lifted his finger to shush her, but Darby merely took Bella’s hand and, with a joyful grin and shining eyes, led her to the next painting.



After leaving the gallery, Ric invited Darby to a late lunch. Or rather, Bella did.

“Daddy, can I have chicken nuggets for lunch? I saw the Straw Basket chicken place on the way here.”

Ric twisted to look at Bella. “Yeah, we can do that, if Darby is okay going through the drive through –?”

He left the question hanging, and Darby nodded, thinking chicken strips would hit the spot – she’d skipped breakfast due to her nerves.

“No, Daddy. Can we eat there? I don’t want to wait until I get home. My tummy is hungry *now*. Please?”

Ric dropped his head before looking back at his daughter over his shoulder. “I don’t know what Darby has to do today. She’s busy, honey.”

“No, she’s not. Unless she’s got to paint more?” Bella leaned as far forward as her booster and seat belt permitted. “Do you have to paint more?”

Darby giggled at the power play of the tiny blonde girl and her father whom she had wrapped around her pinky finger. Darby glanced up at the rear-view to see Bella.

“I always have to paint, but I have time today. If your dad is okay with it, we can eat there.”

Bella didn’t answer but held out her hand and lifted an eyebrow to Ric, as if to say, *see?*

Ric hung his head again, his strawberry blonde waves shining in the bright spring sunlight.

“I know when I’m defeated. Two against one? So not fair. Okay. Straw Basket it is.”

Bella giggled and clapped, and Darby hit her blinker to make the left toward the restaurant.



They chatted while they ate as Bella regaled them with imaginary stories of her toys and about how she wanted to make flowers like Darby did.

Though Darby kept her face turned toward the chatty Bella, her eyes kept shifting to glance at Ric. Once or twice their hands touched as they reached for napkins or ketchup, and she couldn’t help but notice how broad and powerful they seemed. And hot, just like the rest of him, hot enough to cause her stomach to jump into her chest at each touch.

Was it her imagination, or was he flicking his gaze toward her as well?

Probably her imagination. He was a handsome, single dad cop. If he was looking for a date, it was with a leaner hottie with no attachments, not a short, curvy, lonely artist who babysat his kid.

Even as she thought it though, something else inside her immediately contradicted that. His gaze kept moving to her, full of bright green intensity, and he didn't shy away when their hands brushed. Rather, he seemed to linger.

Not that anything would happen. She wasn't looking for a relationship or the like, and he was too busy with Bella. Even if anything *did* happen, it'd be a one-night stand, and wouldn't that make babysitting awkward?

Darby shoved those complicating thoughts from her mind and took another bite of her chicken strip. At least right now, she wasn't lonely. She had Bella for company, and by proxy, Ric. For a moment she could enjoy this facade of family life that she'd never have.



Bella hugged Darby goodbye before Ric and Bella walked across the street to his house. Darby paused a moment, leaning against her car to watch them walk away — Bella's hand firmly attached to Ric's, the little girl's exuberant, bouncy steps, and Ric's caution as they crossed the road.

Darby's eyes did a quick once-over along Ric's backside, noting that he filled out his jeans as well as he did his uniform pants.

Oh, the man was well-built. Not too big – bulky wasn't Darby's thing – but that lean, defined muscle that peeked out as he walked or when his arms flexed or in his chest when he lifted Bella, *that* was ideal. Not too different from the statue of David in Florence she'd had the opportunity to visit on a semester abroad in college years ago. That was *it*. She finally put her finger on it.

Ric was perfectly sculpted.

Her mind ran away with that idea, and she wondered if his backside looked as good out of the jeans as in them.

*Darby, stop!*

They made it across the street, turned and waved before continuing to the next house. Darby waved back with a heavy sigh.

She might admire him and put those images into her fantasy bank, but that's where they'd remain – fantasy.

Guys like Ric didn't go for the mousy artist types. Not when they had a kid to worry about.

Bella. That little girl only made Ric more appealing. Darby hadn't realized how much she missed in not having kids of her own, and she truly enjoyed Bella's infectious enthusiasm for life and how excited she was to be with Darby. Thinking about kids struck an aching pang in her gut, and she exhaled that pain as she entered her house and closed the door behind her.

And locked it. Ric was rubbing off as her.

She smiled to herself.

If nothing else, she'd at least enjoy these moments with Ric and Bella while she had them. One thing Darby had learned, opportunities should never be squandered.

# CHAPTER SIX



THE NEXT WEEK WAS a busy one for Ric, because not one but *two* houses were hit on Tuesday. Ric and the other patrol cops were losing their shit over it.

One on Edison Street in the early morning, right after the homeowners drove off to work, and the other on Leafton in the afternoon, during school pickups and midday coffee breaks. Both times, the burglar got away with jewelry, mostly costume pieces fortunately, and a few high-end pieces of tech. The guy or guys didn't take anything big – no TVs or the like, nothing that would be noticeable or attract attention.

Wednesday morning briefing was a buzz because the recent break-ins gave Tustin patrol new information about how this suspect operated. It was evident he cased the joints, because he managed to find the exact time when the homeowners were gone and much of the surrounding neighborhoods were otherwise occupied or empty.

And the burglar fit into the neighborhood – he didn't stand out or look unique enough to catch anyone's eye or draw attention to himself. The guy could walking down the street or

the dude checking his mail for all they knew. He covered his face as he got close to the front door, then covered any door cameras. This guy knew what to look for, how to avoid detection, and how to get away without notice.

The burglar was a stunning criminal. Smart enough not to get caught.

*Yet.*

All criminals made a mistake eventually, of that Ric was certain. And they would be there when this guy, or these guys, messed up with lights, sirens, and cuffs.

His sergeant recommended that the patrol cops work the areas near yesterday's streets, because the guy was already familiar with those areas, and from what they were able to determine, he stayed in one area for a time before moving to another neighborhood.

Maybe today was the day they'd catch him before he moved on.



Thursday afternoon, Ric turned his black and white onto Adamson Drive midafternoon. It was close to the final bell for most elementary schools in Tustin, and the patrol officers were out in full force, scoping for this guy.



*What guy?* Ric wondered. A guy who fit in and looked like he was part of the neighborhood — A jogger? A guy walking his dog? A guy looking to pick his kid up from school? Not having a sound description didn't help.

Adamson was a tree-lined block of well-established homes, many of them large houses that were once part of a planned development, as were many homes across Southern California. Many of the houses had been upgraded and improved, boasting stamped concrete driveways, sparkling pools, and solar panels.

*The perfect neighborhood to rob. It's where I'd go,* Ric reasoned.

Ric slowed the car as he scanned the road, the houses, their porches, their narrow side yards that halted abruptly at secure fences. If someone was doing a B&E, which house would he pick? One where the door was more difficult to see from the road, easy access to the door ...

That was when Ric saw a man leaving a house to his right.

Ric slowed his car, called in his location to dispatch, and indicated he was going to assess the situation.

“Copy that,” dispatch replied.

The guy shut the door, but he didn't turn around and lock it. Instead, he hefted his satchel higher on his shoulder and stepped off the top porch stair.

Ric hit the brakes, shut off the car, and was immediately out the door to peer over the top of the vehicle. He narrowed his

eyes when the man looked up and froze on the second step.

“Sir. Did you forget to lock your door?” Ric called out, tensing on his toes.

The man stared back, then Ric saw it. He saw the moment the guy decided he was going to run. Probably not the homeowner, because the guy’s face tightened and his gaze shifted to the side.

“Police! Don’t run!” Ric shouted as the man dropped the satchel and took off, and Ric was off the car and running after him.

Lean and fit and not carrying twenty pounds of gear, the burglar had the advantage in this foot race.

The burglar, dressed in nothing more than a black baseball hat, black t-shirt, and dark jeans to fit in, dashed through the quiet suburban streets. Ric had started hot on the suspects heels, but the guy was fast and determined. His vest and cuffs jangled as Ric ran. Sweat poured down Ric’s face as he pumped his legs, his heart racing with adrenaline, and he pinched the radio on his shoulder.

“Dispatch! 10-18, 10-18! We have a 10-64, suspect on the run, black ball cap, t-shirt and jeans, on Adamson Drive!”

“Copy that. Backup has been notified.”

“Dispatch,” another voice came on the line as Ric’s feet pounded the pavement. “This Henry-24, show us enroute.”

The guy cut a hard right, jumping over thigh-high bushes, toward the main road. Did he have a car there? A getaway

driver? Ric lost sight of him when the suspect turned, and by the time Ric reached the hedges, the suspect was gone.

Ric bent over and pressed his hands against his thighs, panting hard and listening for the guy.

Nothing but the far off sound of screaming kids and approaching sirens.

Rick stood back up.

“Fuck!”



Ric despised bringing work home. But after his fruitless chase, backup's inability to locate the suspect, and the subsequent paperwork, Ric was on edge.

He tried to look at the bright side – the suspect had dropped his satchel to run, and they had recovered the home owner's belongings. More jewelry and small, pricey tech. That should have made Ric feel somewhat better, but it didn't. He'd lost the guy, and Ric carried the weight of that failure like Sisyphus did his eternal boulder.

He hadn't even gotten a decent look at the suspect! Rick lamented that as he drove home. Ball cap, t-shirt, and jeans? Generic, and easily changed. At one point, it looked like some

hair slipped out of the ball cap, but as for color or length, Ric couldn't tell. Only that it maybe was on the longer side.

And what if this guy kept moving up the criminal ladder to home invasions, robbed the house while the homeowners were home, or worse, ended up killing someone?

All because Ric couldn't catch the guy in a foot pursuit. *Fuck*, he'd been fast. But where the hell had he gotten to once he made that right? Even the patrol car couldn't find him. The guy might be fast, but he couldn't outrun a cop car.

As he pulled into the drive, he realized he was pissed at himself, but more pissed that they hadn't been able to catch this suspect that technically hit house number nine today. Nine houses, and still nothing.

Before Ric left the car, he ran his hand through his hair and tried to calm himself. He made it a practice to let go of any work stresses before walking through his front door. Bella needed a dad who was present and happy, not one who was angry and stressed out. It was why he left his uniform at work until the weekend for laundry, and why he didn't mention work at all at home. His baby girl deserved better than that.

Lately, though, leaving work at work had been more difficult to do. Tonight was no different.

He unfolded himself from the car and made his way to his front door, key jingling in his hand. Darby had been great at making sure the front door was always locked, and he appreciated that she indulged his neuroses.

The door opened wide as he entered, and as usual, Bella screeched her joy. “Daddy!”

Unlike other days, however, she didn’t come running right for him. She and Darby were at the living room coffee table, with all sorts of art supplies covering it. The art was more exciting than giving her dad a hug?

He flicked his gaze to Darby, who knelt on the carpet as she worked at the table. Then she turned to him and smiled, a wide, radiant smile that warmed her face and made his insides melt. If he had held onto any stress from work, that smile evaporated them all.

Ric froze where he stood in the entryway, his eyes riveted on Bella and Darby.

This, this was what he had been missing. Bella safe and content, joyfully engaged in an art project – not zoning out in front of the TV or on her tablet or playing alone. A beautiful, engaging woman, Darby, enjoying her time with Bella, welcoming him when he got home.

That was the missing piece. Someone like Darby. No, Darby herself. *She* had been the missing piece in his life.

Now that she was here, and he had this freaking epiphany in his own small, tiled entry, he didn’t want her to leave. He was supposed to be finding a new babysitter so Darby could resume her life, her job, her art. She had her own life to live.

But he wanted her here. He needed her here, in his life, in Bella’s life.

This was the family he had always craved.

And the peace he felt when he entered the house and saw the two of them together – he couldn't create that peace inside himself on his own.

No, she couldn't leave.

“Hey, guys!” he announced as he kicked off his shoes and sat on the couch next to Bella. “What are you working on?”

“Look what Darby is teaching me! She's showing me how to draw flowers like she does.”

Bella held up a picture of a purple flower (*of course it's purple*, Ric thought).

“See, I put in these stems and this brown and gray here.”

Ric took her picture and studied it under Bella's watchful eyes. It was still a child's drawing, but it was a very good child's drawing. Darby was more than talented – she understood her craft so well, she could teach it to a six-year-old.

“This is really good, baby girl,” he told Bella.

Darby had set her pen down and joined him on the couch, sitting close to him to peer at the drawing. His insides jumped at her nearness. Did she have any idea what she did for him? What effect she had on him? That she made him feel excited and lusty and protective, all at once?

She pointed to the drawing. “It's just the shadows, and the stamens for texture. Something I thought she might be able to

do easily. But they make a huge difference in any flower picture.”

Her breath was light on his face as she spoke, and her breasts pressed against his arm. It took every ounce of willpower he possessed not to turn and kiss her right there in front of Bella. Ric steeled his expression so he didn't betray his emotions and nodded.

“It does make a huge difference. Hey, Bella, can we put these up on the fridge?”

Bella nodded. “Yeah. We can get rid of some of the other pictures. Those are like baby drawings next to these.”

Ric shifted to face Darby, unable to miss how close her face was to his. If he leaned forward a bit ...

“Do you want to join us for dinner?” Ric asked instead, hoping his voice was strong and unwavering. “I have a frozen pizza in the freezer.”

Darby smiled again. Her upper lip was a tad thinner than her lower lip, and when she smiled and her upper lip thinned more, it made her smile seem somehow wider, more enticing.

“That would be great. We got busy in our art and didn't even think about dinner.”

Ric stood up and offered her his hand. She clasped it and rose. She wore a long sleeved dress that clung to every curve, and Ric struggled to keep his eyes on her face.

“I make dinner every night, and you are doing me a favor with the babysitting. I'd never ask you to make dinner for us.”

Darby shrugged. “I appreciate that. I’m not the best at schedules. I eat breakfast for lunch a lot times.”

“We do breakfast for dinner, sometimes!” Bella piped up as she headed toward the kitchen. She had leapt to her feet, ready to eat the moment Ric mentioned pizza.

“I love breakfast for dinner!” Darby answered in an equally excited tone.

“Why don’t we all do breakfast for dinner instead then? I have eggs.”

“Can we make pancakes, too, Daddy?” Bella asked as she twirled into the kitchen with her drawing. Her purple tutu-style skirt spun out. Ric was certain she fancied herself a dancer artist.

“I think we have pancake mix,” Ric said as he moved to the pantry. “Yep, one box of pancake mix.”

“I’ll get the eggs!” Bella announced as she finished putting her drawing under a photo magnet. She opened the fridge, grabbed the carton, and set it on the counter.

From the corner of his eyes, he saw Darby leaning against the kitchen doorway, watching the activity. Was she hesitating to join, or enjoying the show of chaos?

“How do you like your eggs?” Ric asked.

Darby stepped to the counter and leaned on it, giving Ric a way-too good look at her full cleavage. His groin throbbed in urgent need. He had to glance away and study the pancake mix box.



“Scrambled works for me.”

“I love scrambled!” Bella shouted.

Ric pulled the milk from the fridge. He had the sense that Bella would love anything Darby said or did. He wasn't the only one entranced by Darby. It seemed his little girl was smitten. Should he be worried about that? What happened when she wasn't babysitting Bella anymore?

Christ, he hadn't thought about that – that Bella might become as attached to Darby as Ric was. Maybe Darby might still come by and say hi every once in a while? Or Ric could take Bella to her art exhibits?

If she was more than the babysitter, that wouldn't be a problem, a little voice in his head spoke up.

He brushed it away. No, he'd known Darby all of a week. He shouldn't be having thoughts like that.

But here he was. Having them. Maybe it was time to take this to the next level. He might be rusty at his game, but nothing ventured, nothing gained. And right now, he wanted nothing more than to keep Darby in his life, for Bella and for him.

He cleared his throat and set the milk by the eggs.

“Scrambled eggs and pancakes, coming up!”

His earlier irritations over the suspect out running him were gone.



After they finished eating, Darby helped Ric wash the dishes while Bella made her way back into the living room to work on her art. Darby couldn't help but giggle when she said that. Ric was going to have to invest in a lot of art supplies if Bella kept up on the art.

“Thank you for sharing your passion with her,” Ric said suddenly as he snapped the dishwasher shut.

“Oh, that's the easy part. I just wasn't sure how well I'd do with kids, not having had a whole lot of experience with them.”

Ric gave her a side glance. “You seem to have made it work well. Bella adores you.”

Darby grinned to herself as she hung the towel on the oven handle to dry. Ric's comment made her heart pound against her chest.

“Well, that's good. But it's probably the art.”

She turned to the counter, and Ric was there, right there, his chest brushing against her breasts. Her pounding heart slammed harder, threatening to explode, and her head swam. Why was he so standing close to her? His eyes were lowered, and she couldn't read them.

“It’s not the art,” he said in a husky voice and reached for her hand.

Darby thought she’d faint. His hand was broad, and her fingers were lost in his hand.

“It’s you,” Ric continued in that liquid heat tone. “And she’s not the only one. I was wondering –” he paused and lifted his eyes to her as that liquid heat made his eyes blaze in a green fire. “Can I take you out on a date? A real date, just you and me.”

Darby swallowed hard, unsure if she’d be able to form words. Her brain didn’t want to work. His face was near enough that if she had wanted, all she had to do was rise up on her toes and press her lips to his. Late day beard stubble covered his cheeks and chin, a shade darker than the reddish blonde hair on his head, and she wondered what it would be like to run her hand over his cheeks.

“Darby?” he pressed when she didn’t answer.

“Yes,” she blurted out, as if she might not be able to answer unless she said it as fast as she could. “I’d love a date.”

A look of relief washed over his face. Had he been as anxious as she was feeling?

“What about Bella? Do you have someone to watch her?”

Ric nodded. “She’s spending the weekend with my parents. We do it once a month, minimum. I drop her off on Saturday morning and pick her up late Sunday afternoon. She’s the only

grandchild, so you can imagine how spoiled that weekend is. She loves it.”

Darby couldn't help but give Ric a wavering smile. “I can imagine. Yes. Let's go on a date.”

“Is dinner okay? I can pick you up. One of my buddies on patrol is dating a woman who owns a wine bar-restaurant type place. We can start there.”

*Start there.* So he is hoping for more after that. Another location like a movie? Or back to her place? She hoped it was back to her place. No only had she been in a huge dry spell, she wanted to see if his backside was as sexy as his jeans had hinted.

And if his short and curlies between his thighs were as bright as the hair on his head.

*Darby! You haven't even had dinner yet!* she chastised herself.

But she didn't care. He'd been on her mind so much during the past week, that if he hoisted her to the counter and took her right there in the kitchen with Bella in the other room, she wouldn't have protested. She knew where this dinner was going, even if he didn't.

“Yeah, dinner is a great start. What time?”

“Can I pick you up at five thirty or so? The place is on the far side of Tustin.”

An early dinner. He was planning on something more.

“Oh, yes,” she answered her eyes riveted on his.

It was going to be a long wait until Saturday night.

# CHAPTER SEVEN



DARBY CHANGED HER CLOTHES at least seven times before 5:30.

*I don't have any date clothes!* She lamented to herself. Not any date clothes with the muscled cop with his wavy hair and heart-stopping smile!

She finally decided on a fitted, long black skirt, a low-cut maroon shirt with flowing sleeves, and a pair of ballet flats. Though she knew she should wear heels because she was so short, she hated heels and preferred stylish comfort over height.

Plus, he already knew how tall she was. The heels weren't fooling anyone.

While she was pinning her wavy hair up on the sides, her doorbell rang. Darby gave herself a breathless once over in the mirror. *Outfit?* Check. *Makeup?* Check. *Hair?* Check.

Grabbing her wristlet off her unmade bed (*who had time to make a bed?*) That was never at the top of her to do list, especially not when she and Ric might be messing it up again

later, if she got lucky), she made her way to the front door. Butterflies the size of pterodactyls had taken up residence in her chest, trying to beat their way out of her rib cage. She took a deep breath, counted to three, and opened the door.

Ric had been looking at the ground, and when she opened the door, his strawberry blond head came up and his sizzling green eyes locked onto her. They froze, each stunned in the moment.

He had brushed the waves back with a bit of gel product, trying to tame the waves, difficult even with his shorter hair. He wore a long-sleeved white button up with black embroidery on the collar, shoulders, and cuffs. Jeans, again, this time black, and Darby hoped to get the chance to walk behind him at some point to see how good he looked in this pair.

“You — you look stunning,” he told her in a rush of breath.

Darby gave him a relieved smile. “Thanks. You do, too. Love the shirt.”

Ric shrugged off-handedly. “It’s not my uniform, but it’ll do, do you think?”

She smiled wider and nodded. “Agreed. It’ll do.”

Ric grinned back and held out his elbow to her. “Shall we go? Your chariot awaits.” He swept his other hand toward his car parked behind hers in the single drive.

Threading her arm through his, she looked up at him. “I can’t wait.”



Dinner was exquisite, at least for Darby. When was the last time she ate something other than finger food either at home or at an art event? A person can eat only so much hummus and crackers.

Ric walked her to the table behind the waitress, but when she showed them the table in the middle of the restaurant, he glanced around.

“Can we have a booth, or a corner table instead?”

The waitress, to her credit, didn’t miss a beat, widened her smile, and told them to follow her.

“What’s wrong with that table?” Darby asked Ric under her breath.

He nodded briefly to the waitress and held out a chair at a table tucked into the side of the restaurant. Darby sat, and he settled into the chair with his back to the wall. It seemed an odd choice for a well-built man, to squeeze into a space so cramped.

They put in their wine order, agreeing on a bold red, then Ric smiled at Darby.

“Sorry about that. Occupational hazard again. I don’t like sitting where I can’t see what’s at my back.”



Darby's eyes flicked to his seat, his back to the wall, then around at the restaurant.

"Ohhh," she breathed out. "That makes sense. Like double locking your doors."

His eyes shifted downward. And was he blushing? Yes, he was!

"Yeah, well, some habits are hard to break." Then his face shifted and gave her an enticing grin. "What about you? Any occupational hazards?"

Darby tapped her fingernail against the white tablecloth. "Other than more paint-stained clothes than I can count, no. Needless to say, I don't spend on a lot when clothes shopping. I can't justify spending good money on clothes I'm going to redesign with paint."

"That seems like a fair occupational hazard. I'll be sure not to hug you if you have any fresh paint stains."

Darby giggled like a fool at his quip, but his words made the butterflies in her belly flutter that much harder. Was he serious about that hugging comment? She hoped so.

Ric didn't seem to have any issues selecting what to eat, and the bottle of wine they shared did more to make her feel comfortable than anything else. They talked through the meal, sharing stories, and Darby found herself liking Ric more and more than the evening drew on.

Halfway through dinner, she placed her hand on the tabletop, and Ric reached across and placed his hand over

hers. Nothing obvious, no comment, and he kept telling his funny story about his mom and dad, all while his hand rested on hers. Warm. A gentle weight. To her, it grounded her and quelled the anxieties that perpetually lurked in her brain.

How did he know to do that? How did he know his touch would calm her, this simple, basic touch?

Not only did it ground her, his touch was like a live wire, making her feel more alive, and a surge of heat flooded between her legs. Ric affected her in such a deep way, something she'd never had experienced with anyone else.

She had to pretend everything was fine and that she didn't want to fuck him there on the table as she laughed appropriately at his story and took another sip of wine.

When the waitress brought the check, Ric grabbed it and placed his card in the fake leather folder.

“What do you want to do now?” he asked with one ruddy eyebrow high on his forehead.

Darby knew exactly what she wanted to do. But would he be up for it? Her lip curled slightly into her cheek. He was a guy – if it ended in sex, he'd probably be up for anything.

“Come back to my place.”

His eyes widened slightly, and she bit back another laugh.

“Not quite, big boy. Maybe if you get lucky.” (*oh, yeah, he was getting lucky. He just didn't know it yet.* She didn't wear her matching black bra and panty set for nothing). “But I want to do something else.”

Ric sat back in his chair and rubbed his index finger across his upper lip in the single-most sexy move Darby had ever seen.

*Yeah, he's getting laid.* She needed to see if the rest of him was as sexy.

"I'm up for anything," he said as the waitress returned with his card. He pocketed it and rose, pulled out her chair, and ushered her out of the restaurant.



"You want to paint me?"

Ric wasn't sure if he heard her right. *Like, canvas paint? Real paint?*

Darby nodded as she led him up to her studio. She had mentioned the extra upstairs bedroom got great midday light and afternoon light, and all of her art supplies fit well in the room.

He paused at the doorway, taking in the canvases that adorned the walls. Flowers that seemed to reach out, ready to be touched, in a rainbow of colors, paints and jars and cloths, and her own painting area with an easel near the center of the room. An overstuffed chair with a round side table was tucked into the corner near a book shelf full of more art necessities.

Truly an amazing room, and one that any art aficionado would have killed to step in.

In that moment, Ric wished he was more familiar with art so he could appreciate the space more.

“I’d like to paint you in your uniform at some time,” she said as she turned on the overhead light. “For now, I’d like to do a quick portrait drawing. I love your coloring – russet blond hair and green eyes and tanned cheeks.”

She spoke like an artist, complimenting him artistically, but he grinned to himself, taking it as a compliment for Ric the man. He ran his hands over his wavy hair, smoothing it.

“Okay. Will this take long?”

Darby went to one of her shelves and grabbed pencils and brushes. “Why? You got a hot date?” she teased.

His breath caught in his chest. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

Her hand paused midair, and she turned her head slightly to peer at him from over her shoulder. *Good* – she seemed as enticed as he was.

Ric had to admit that when he suggested dinner, coming back to his place was the last thing he believed would happen. Now, he realized that was the second last thing. The last thing he expected was to be a model for her art.

How could he sit there and watch her work when all he wanted to do was bend her over that chair and sink himself as deep into her lush body as humanly possible?

Darby dragged the chair away from the wall a few inches. “Sit here and look up at the light.”

He did as she instructed, and she went to work, sketching on her canvas with the pencils. She’d peer at him, squint so hard it made him laugh, then turn to the canvas. Her eyes – when she focused on the canvas, it was like her eyes went somewhere else, like she was possessed, and her fingers moved deftly with confident ease. Ric peeked at the lines, which seemed like a mess until she added a few more lines, shading, and then scratched darker pencil marks across the image.

Suddenly he was looking into a gray and white mirror of himself.

Ric rose and studied the canvas more closely. She wasn’t merely skilled or good. She was *exceptional*.

“That’s amazing,” he whispered.

Darby set the pencils back on the shelf.

“You said painting?” he asked.

She turned to him. “I’d rather have the daylight to do that, so I’ll start the painting tomorrow.”

His eyebrows rose on his forehead again.

“Oh. I thought you said you wanted to paint me.”

She grinned, shockingly wolfishly for the petite artist.

“I do.”



When Darby stepped to him, his arms opened and welcomed her and her lips that met his with fervor. Painting, drawing, all things art got her worked up, and here she had the opportunity to release herself with this sexy, strapping cop. She wasn't about to pass up *that* opportunity.

If he turned her down, she was mentally prepared for it. But from what she had seen tonight, she was willing to bet he'd be more than willing.

It seemed she was right. His tongue pushed past the barrier of her lips and danced over her tongue in erotic sweeps. His hands moved down, pressing into her lower back, then farther down to cup her broad ass through her skirt.

He growled into her mouth. "Fuck, your ass is amazing."

That was it, the match that ignited her. She pressed him back, then harder, until he was on the floor of the studio at the drop cloth edge. In a quick movement, she lifted her shirt to expose a long, fitted, lacy tank top that she wore instead of a bra, and her cleavage and outline of her heavy breasts against the thin material made him suck in his breath.

Looping her thumbs into the waistband of her skirt, she shoved it down her ripe, curvy thighs to drop on the floor. The black lace of her boy-shorts contrasted with her pale thighs.

Ric's bright green eyes burned like a verdant fire, and he groaned low in his chest.

Keeping his gaze fixed on the Raphealian curves of her breasts and thighs, he sat up and flung his shirt off, then worked the buttons of his jeans, and shimmied out of them. Darby's eyes fixated on tight belly, his muscled red-furred chest, and the long definition of his thighs. And on the huge bulge under his fitted boxer briefs, also black.

While he was stripping down, she twisted to the side and grabbed several clean paint brushes.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her down until she straddled him. She leaned forward, curtaining their faces with her hair as their lips kissed and sucked and tasted. The smell of his musky cologne mixed with wine and Ric's body, creating an addictive scent that drove her crazy. Her thighs were damp, and she was ready for him.

She handed him one of the paint brushes, and with the other, she stared at his face, tickling down his neck and over his chest. From his position, Ric followed her movements, brushing her chin, her neck, and chest. They took their time, discovering each other with the fine sable.

He brushed over her breasts where her nipple poked hard against the tank top, and she gasped. Her panties were going to be soaked after this. The brushing sensation was almost too much.

She danced the brush over his belly to his shorts. A finger replaced her brush. He sucked in hard when she slipped her

finger below his waistband.

“Can we get rid of these?” she asked.

He didn't speak, but ran his hands over his thighs, taking his shorts with them.

She sat back and watched his movements and her face lit up to see his short and curlies, neatly trimmed and nestled at the base of his hard dick, were only a shade darker than the strawberry blond on his head and chest. She'd remember that color for the rest of her life.

Shifting forward, she wrapped her hand around his thick girth, thick and long enough to satisfy — the perfect blend for good dick. And she had seen him saunter when he walked, so she had no doubts that he knew how to use it.

He groaned and grabbed her where her hips met her lush ass and dug his fingers in. Then his fingers moved to the hem of her tank top, but she sat back fast when he tried to lift it away.

Ric froze.

“Did I do something wrong?” he asked, eyes wide. “I thought —”

“No, it's all good and I'm all in. I have issues with my belly.” Darby dropped her eyes as she spoke. That was *mostly* true.

“I don't know what Kool-Aid you've been drinking,” Ric said as he propped up on his elbows to look straight at her. Balancing on one elbow, he wrapped his hand around her



back. “But you have a banging body and the most perfect curves on a woman. I got hard the first time I met you.”

A tiny smile pulled at the corner of her mouth as she flicked her gaze from him and back to her hands. That was good information to know.

“It’s not that. I agree with you about the curves. No, I have scars —”

She paused, and he lifted up closer until his chest brushed against her breasts. If her scars bothered him, he didn’t seem to care to look. The mood in the studio had shifted, from raw sex-crazed mania to something more intimate in every sense of the word.

“From what?” he asked in a gentle tone.

Darby swallowed the lump in her throat. “From a surgery I had.”

Ric stared at her for the span of several heartbeats, then he shifted away from her and turned party way, showing her his back and side. His upper shoulder and lower back at his hip were riddled with scars. Then he pointed to his right knee and left thigh. Several long scars were embedded in his skin. Most were silvery lines, but a few had puckered, leaving behind a more jagged reminder of the injury.

He pointed to them as he spoke. “Pen knife. Kitchen knife. A pencil of all things. A bad jump over a fence. Minor surgery when I got kicked wrong in the knee.” He finished his countdown from head to toe, then turned to her again and

grasped her hands in his. “We all have scars. Some are visible on the skin, some not. All it means is that you were stronger than whatever tried to kill you.”

Darby’s eyes watered. *Is he for real?* But then, how many men understood scars to the degree that Ric did?

“You don’t have to lift your shirt or show your scars. Keep the tank on. But can you at least pull it down so I can play with those amazing boobs of yours?”

Darby choked out a laugh. Ric was impossibly unreal and had made her feel more comfortable about her scars that she ever had. She giggled as she grabbed the low neckline and pulled, freeing her full breasts to his appreciative eyes.

He sat her back on his lap so his face was level with her bounty. His mouth found one round nipple and latched on, sucking gently and tickling the erect tip of her nipple with his tongue. He grabbed both breasts between his hands and moved to the next one, sucking like he was a man dying of thirst, and Darby was the drink that would save him.

Paint brushes were forgotten as tugged at her panties. “Can we take these off, then?”

Darby grinned down at him. “The rest of this would be difficult otherwise,” she quipped as she wiggled out of her boy-shorts.

Ric froze again. “Shit. I don’t have protection. I haven’t been with a woman in a long time, and I wasn’t sure where this was going to go.”

He looked completely deflated. Darby cupped his chin with her hand.

“As long as you’re clean, it’s okay. I am, and if you are, then you’re okay. I can’t get pregnant.”

His eyes brightened, then narrowed again, “You’re on birth control, or you *can’t* get pregnant.”

Her lips thinned and she lowered her gaze again.

*Fuck! How do I keep screwing this up?* he thought. He moved his hands to her full hips again, tracing her curves with his fingertips.

“Never mind. You don’t have to tell me.”

“No,” she countered. “I do. You should know what’s going on with that, why I would say that. The scars? I had stage 4 endometriosis. I had surgery to get rid of it, but there was too much internal scarring to get pregnant.”

He didn’t know what endometriosis was, and he told her. “But I’m sorry to hear that, anyway.”

Darby inhaled deeply. Now was *not* the time to give a medical lesson. Not when this was the second stop on this long freaking train to sex-ville. Instead, she shrugged and smiled down at him again.

“I’ve come to terms with it,” she answered casually. “Whoa, this got real deep real fast. Can we continue or ...?”

Emotionally deep or not, Ric didn’t seem to care. None of that affected his engorged dick. His fingers dug into her ass

cheeks again.

“Oh, yes,” he half groaned as his cock pulsed against her. “For the love of God, let’s continue!”

She shifted her hips so her damp opening was right above the bulbous head of his dick, then she slid down, eyes closed as she relished that singular moment of fullness.

They both paused for a second, sharing that moment, then his hips shifted, thrusting down and back up.

Darby sat upright and took control of the ride as he pressed deep into her. Her blood pounded in her head, her chest, and at her entry, where every smooth glide of his dick took her to a higher level. He was thick enough that if she leaned forward, he dragged against her clit as he brushed that spot inside her channel, the one that drove her to the brink.

He slid his hand up her back as her hips ushered him in and out, bringing her upper body close to his. When he curved up to meet her lips, kissing her so lightly, it was like a feather across her lips. His moves weren’t frenzied or fast thrusts. No, he was taking his time, holding her hip to keep the pace steady. Ric wasn’t rushing for his moment. He was pacing them, prolonging their enjoyment, drawing it out as long as possible while he enjoyed the sensation of being inside her.

Darby’s sense reeled at the tenderness of it all, of his slow kisses and steady cadence to make sure she had her orgasm. Her mind slowly lost these conscious thoughts as her ass met his thighs over and over, a perfect fit. He groaned as she

continued to work her hips, and his cock flexed inside her, thickening.

He was holding out for her.

“Darby,” he said through his kisses. “God, you feel so good. I can’t get enough of you.”

His tempo increased slightly. Between the feel of his dick in her sheath, his light kisses, and his sexy words, Darby felt herself soaring higher and higher. A tingling bloomed between her thighs and low in her belly, an electric tingling that grew and grew, until she couldn’t fight it any longer.

She threw her head back with a cry of “Oh, God, Ric!” just as her shuddering ecstasy coursed through her. Every part of her shook as his dick brought her to orgasm.

“Did you come, Darby?” Ric whispered as his hands moved to her breasts.

She slowed her hips and nodded. Her tongue was too numb to speak.

“Then get ready for a ride,” he grunted as he shifted his hips again and drove into her. He abandoned any tenderness or pacing as his drove up and in hard, slamming into her tender flesh, chasing his orgasm.

The sensation rubbed her already raw nerves, and as he thrust as deep as he could, she came again, shrieking this time as she clutched his shoulders.

It was a wild ride, and then his hips surged, lifting her high, as he came in a rapid explosion and with a primal, vibrating

groan through gritted teeth. Then he collapsed back to the rug, sweaty and panting along with Darby.

She didn't blame him. It had been a wild ride.



Ric blinked as he slowly came back to reality and to the sexy woman sitting atop him. Her hair was wild and her skin damp as she rested on his chest, and he had the thought that this moment was a singularly perfect moment — one that he hadn't experienced in who knew how long.

Orgasm was often referred to as a little death, and now he knew why. He felt like he touched heaven.

Darby slowly sat up and blinked down at him through her riotous hair.

“Holy shit, Ric. I needed that.”

Ric brushed several wavy locks from her eyes. “I needed that. I needed you.”

Her pink-cheek face softened, and she shifted her gaze.

“Well, you have two options to get past the first time, post sex awkwardness,” she told him.

He couldn't stop the humored grin that split his face. Had he ever met anyone like her? *Nope*, and he'd met a lot of people

in his line of work.

“What are my options?” he asked.

“You can get dressed and go back home,” she said for the first option.

Ric didn't care for that option at all. “And number two?”

“You can join me in bed where we can sleep comfortably and maybe do this again in the morning.”

“That one,” Ric said in a rush. “I choose what's behind door number two.”

She giggled and pressed herself upward and off him. Standing in only the pulled down tank top, reached a hand up help him up. She looked sexy as hell.

He clasped her hand and stood but didn't release her hand. She led him to her bedroom, the door on the opposite side of the hall.

Sparsely decorated compared to the brilliant colors of her studio, but the unmade bed looked luxurious, with a fluffy down comforter and crisp white sheets waiting for them. She held his hand as she moved to the bed, then glanced over her shoulder before climbing in.

“But you got to make me a promise,” she told him.

“What's that?”

“Next time, wear your uniform and bring your cuffs.”

# CHAPTER EIGHT



“HEY, WILLIAMS. YOU GOT a minute?” Sergeant Cortez asked.

Ric had just rolled back to the station and was getting ready to leave. He had already been called in to work a short shift while laying with Darby in her bed early that morning, and he had cursed that bad timing.

They had spent the night dozing in each other’s arms. Not talking much — just being together. Naked, under the covers, touching, things Ric hadn’t experienced in far too long. They didn’t need to talk, laying together in the dark and sharing their breathing was more than enough. He had hoped for another round in the morning, reaching for her before his eyes were even fully open, when his phone dinged.

He almost told the sergeant no, but Ric had *also* told his sergeant that he was available if needed.

So here he was, working four hours on a Sunday morning instead of being in bed with Darby.



*What now?* Ric grumbled to himself as he glanced at the time. He had hoped to get back into bed with Darby, but by the time he left the station, it would almost be time to head out to pick up Bella. Maybe he could sneak in an hour with Darby before then . . .

At least he had last night with her. That mind-blowing night.

Earlier, Sgt. Cortez had informed Ric that they had a lead on the neighborhood thefts, and since Ric was the only cop to have seen the guy, he'd been called in. An officer on the graveyard shift reported a prowler near Adamson, where Ric had seen the guy on Thursday, and his captain wanted Ric on deck to aid in the search.

The morning had been a bust. If the caller had seen a prowler, the suspect was long gone by the time the cops rolled up on the scene.

What did Sgt. Cortez want now as Ric was getting ready to head home?

“Yeah, boss. What’s going on?”

“I need you to holdover for a few more hours. Three at the most? We’re short on cops, we’ve had another call, and the captain wants you to meet with a sketch artist.”

Ric glanced at his phone again and exhaled heavily. Not the best plan for the day, but Bella was still at his mom’s, and he could pick her up a bit later. He had to hope Darby understood why he bailed and didn’t return, but he had the sense she’d understand.

“I can do that, as long as I’m out of here by three to pick up my kid.”

Cortez nodded, and his laser focused black gaze never left Ric’s face. “Great. You’re going to meet Garza on Leafton Street, then be back here by two to meet with the artist.”

“Copy that, boss.”

Instead of jogging to the locker room, Ric swiveled on the ball of his foot and headed back to his black-and-white.

He met with Garza, and they split up as they drove the streets – *nothing*. Lots of kids and families outside on the sunny spring day, too many grills and bicycles to count, and nothing that stood out. It was a regular Sunday afternoon in suburbia. If this guy was blending in, he was fucking brilliant at it. Both Ric and Garza left the neighborhood pissed as hell.

Ric made it back to the station right after two. The meeting with the sketch artist went more quickly than he imagined, not that he had a lot of give the guy. When the artist showed Ric that image on the paper, Ric was mildly impressed – it did look a lot like the guy Ric thought he saw on Thursday, but his mind wasn’t on that image. It was on Darby’s canvas flowers, and how her talent made this artist look like a hack.

As he raced to his car, still in uniform, he texted Darby, apologizing again for leaving as soon as he did. She texted back quickly, assuring him it was not a bit deal and she got more work done on her new series as a result.

– *Can I see this new series?* he typed.

The question was designed to show her he was thinking about her and interested in her, but also because he really wanted to see these paintings. He'd never been into art before, but her paintings shifted his perspective. And he wanted to see her again and couldn't wait.

*– Sure. When do you want to come by?*

He wouldn't have time tonight, not with racing over to pick up Bella. Tomorrow on the other hand ... Bella started school at 7:45. He could be at Darby's house right after.

*–How early? I can come as early as 8 after I take Bella to school.*

*–Yikes, 8 is early. How about 8:30 and don't mind me in slippers and yawning.*

Ric grinned wickedly at his phone. She might not have noticed what she typed, but that was an invitation for a flirty text if Ric ever saw one.

*– Only slippers? Then yes, I'll be there right at 8:30 on the dot.*

She sent him a smiley face, the three dots as she texted him back.

*– Unfortunately I also wear a robe, but maybe after we look at the paintings ...*

Ric sucked in his breath as he got in his car. There it was, she wanted to see him again.

*All of him.*

After the serious notes of their conversation the night before and how he had to leave this morning, Ric thought maybe he'd blown his chance. Yet here she was, inviting him over the next day.

That was a win in his book.

He started the car and headed home. He wanted to throw his uniforms in the washer before he picked up Bella. After all the running he did this week, his uniforms outright stank.

But he had to make sure one of the uniforms stayed with him.

He did have a promise to fulfill after all.



Ric crossed his arms over his chest after ringing the doorbell. If Darby wanted him in his cop uniform, then she was going to get the entire cop. He wore his belt, complete with his cuffs, keys, and notepad, only leaving his service weapon at home.

They'd only need the cuffs. That he had planned on. As he waited at the door, he realized he should have rang the bell in his boots with his cuffs dangling from a finger.

Darby answered the door in a robe and slippers, just as promised. His cock throbbed against his navy blue pants, wondering what was, or wasn't, under that robe.

*Please be nothing*, he thought with a grin and a bite of his lip.

Darby giggled. “Officer. Have I done something wrong?” she asked.

*Oh, she’s playing.* He could play if she wanted that.

Ric stepped through the door as she sashayed backward. “Disturbing the peace ma’am.” Ric closed the door behind him and locked it.

Then he pulled out his handcuffs.

“I need to arrest you.”

It was a bold move, bringing the cuffs on their second date, but Darby seemed to be an on-a-whim type of woman. If she said no or gave any sense of being uncomfortable, he’d stand down. The fact he was wearing his uniform in her house as dress up far exceeded anything he had ever done before, and his dick was rock hard. They could stop the game here and he’d be more than ready.

Darby’s fingertips found the thick lapel of her robe and slipped down, pulling slightly to expose her ample cleavage.

*God, she was stacked.*

His breathing grew ragged.

“Give me your hands, ma’am,” he told her.

She grinned as did as he asked.

“I’ve been bad, Officer,” she said, and his cock surged again.

*Oh fuck*, she was teasing him.

He took a deep breath and put her hand in one, but only tightened it a little. One hard tug and she'd be free. Then he stepped close enough to lean in to her ear.

“Anytime, just say *enough*. The cuffs we be off and we'll be done.”

She rubbed her cheek against his, moving her lips close to his ear.

“It's never enough,” she whispered back, her breath hot on his skin. A shudder coursed through his body as he snapped on the second cuff in front of her.

Before she could move away, he turned his head and caught her lips, brushing lightly then more aggressively, his tongue diving deep as she opened her mouth to welcome him.

He ravished her mouth, kissing her like they would never kiss again. He spun her around and brushed her hair to the side. His lips found the tender, private skin on her neck behind her hair, and his hand slid to her chest, through the opening in the robe, and cupped her swaying breasts.

*No bra, so full. Oh god.*

“I need to search you, ma'am,” he breathed raggedly into her ear.

Noting the couch in her living room to their left, he walked her toward the couch, but instead of laying her down on it, he bent her over and threw her robe over her hips, her full ass

poised for his view, with just a peek of her dark curls hiding the ecstasy between her thighs.

Groaning from deep in his chest, he leaned over her back, covering her with his body, his legs spread to support himself against her bent hips.

“Anytime, say *enough*,” he said again in a low voice. Having someone cuffed at all was a dangerous proposition. Even though he had only used the cuffs for fun once before, having that security of stopping was the only way to play. Especially since his cuffs were the real deal and not cheap plastic play cuffs from the local sex shop.

She arched her back, pressing her rear against his thighs.

“Not yet,” she purred.

Ric put his face into her hair and growled.

He rested his hand against her upper back as he unfastened his uniform pants with the other. “I’ll need you to keep still, while I search you, ma’am.”

Darby turned her head so he could see her profile, her hazel eyes like fine whiskey peeking through her disheveled hair. “Yes, Officer.”

He couldn’t wait any longer. Ric thought he’d explode before he freed his dick and sunk it into between her thighs. The view of her round ass and her wrists trapped in his cuffs above her head made his already throbbing dick swell more. Using his hands, he spread her thighs and slipped his engorged

purple head into the sweetness of her pussy lips, a slow glide until he was seated to the hilt.

At this angle, he was able to shove in deeper and her velvet warmth gripped him tighter. Ric panted at the sensation. He had to pace himself, otherwise, he'd thrust wildly until he busted his nut. And he wanted to relish this sensation and this view for at least a little bit.

Ric curved over her, as she moaned from the dragging sensation between her woman's lips.

Darby's cuffed wrists rested on the couch in front of her and she tilted her head slightly toward him again. "Fuck me, Officer. I've been bad."

*Oh shit.* He was at his breaking point.

His chest throbbed as much as his dick.

"Terribly bad," he groaned into her ear. Then he rose, placed his hands on the thick rounds of her ass so his thumbs curled into her ass crack, and rammed in and out.

She squealed and moaned with each thrust, and he shuddered with every entry, gasping as he withdrew. The pulling sensation buzzed from deep in his balls, a frenzied need to thrust faster and ride the passion he couldn't control. Her ass jiggled as he hammered against her rear. His belt jingled as his hips moved, the accompanying music to their rising gasps and moans.

Darby arched her back, tightening her pussy against his cock and he was there. *Right there.*



He dropped over her, covering her body again. His lips found her ear.

“You’ve been a bad girl,” he huffed, “and I’m coming. I’m coming.” Ric panted as she arched higher and cried out. That did him in. His balls clenched low in his belly and his cock pulsed and pulsed as he emptied every ounce he had into her. One more thrust, then another, and he quivered against Darby, her ass seated against his groin, his heart slamming in his chest, ready to explode, too.

His legs shook as the last of his cum erupted inside her, and he placed his arms on either side of hips as he tried to catch his breath and not fall over.

*God damn, what she did to him.*

He couldn’t pull out, not right away. He had to wait, savoring the sensation of being inside her, being joined to her.

Darby raised her cuffed hands to her face to wipe strands of damp hair off her forehead and turned her profile to him again.

“Never enough,” she said breathlessly with a sly grin.



Once he was able to support himself on his own two legs again, he stood upright and adjusted his pants with trembling hands. Darby started to stand, and he took her in his arms,

hugging her against his uniformed chest. Her finger traced over his pockets and the collar of the shirt.

He'd never look at his uniform the same way again.

With one hand, he reached for the cuff keys, and as he removed them, he noticed that her wrists were a bit reddened.

"I'm sorry," he said, rubbing her wrist gently. "I didn't know they were that tight."

She leaned into him as he rubbed. She was practically purring. "They weren't. I didn't even notice."

Ric tucked the cuffs back into his belt with the key, then wrapped her in his arms again. It felt like she belonged there, that everything was right in the world with Darby in his embrace.

A moment of perfect satiation.

*I could get used to this*, he thought as he kissed the top of her head.

He had missed this feeling of comfort, of satisfaction, of having someone he could expose the more sensitive parts of himself to. Had he ever called anyone a bad girl before? *Holy shit*, he never imagined he'd do something like that. But Darby gave her permission to explore that, to say and do things he normally wouldn't feel comfortable.

That was it — he felt *comfortable* enough with her, like he could say anything to her.

*Anything.*

“Do you want coffee?” she asked as she moved back and tucked her breasts back under her robe. He was saddened to see them covered up.

*Even in a robe, she's sexy.*

“Yes. I don't have anywhere to be until pickup. Except maybe my laundry room. This uniform definitely needs to be washed.”

She set a blue flowered mug in front of him and poured, then pointed to the sugar and dry creamer on the counter. He loaded his mug up.

Wiping her hair off her face, she rested her elbows on the counter and sipped.

Again, the domesticity of the moment struck him, and he realized how badly he needed this, needed Darby, in his life.

That sense of comfort rose in him again, and he set his cup down.

“I've needed this in my life,” he said.

Darby's eyes sparkled at him over the rim of her cup. “What, coffee?”

Ric licked his lips and grinned. “Yes, that. But also, you.” He wagged his finger back and forth. “And this. Fucking you on the couch then enjoying coffee with you while we still stink of it. Of having you in my arms. Of just being with you.”

Darby set her cup down and leveled her gaze at him.

*Don't stop now, he told himself.*

“If that’s too much or too soon, I’m sorry. But you came into my life in this crazy way when I wasn’t expecting it or looking for it. I haven’t felt this alive in a long time. You’re an artist in more ways than one. You brought color back into my life. I love this feeling and I don’t ever want it to go away.”

She leaned as far as she could across the counter, her cleavage on display for him again, and pursed her lips. He got the hint and kissed her, wrapping his hand around the back of his head.

“Enough?” he asked as he drew back.

Had he said too much?

She grinned at him. “Never enough.”

# CHAPTER NINE



DARBY WAS EARLY PICKING Bella up from school later that week. As had become her habit, Bella raced from the classroom, clasped Darby's hand and swung between them as they walked to their street with the warm, spring sun at their backs. The wind blew through their hair, and the early scents of orange blossoms tinged the air.

In moments like this, where Bella did things like hold her hand or proudly show her a drawing, Darby's heart wrenched in her chest. She imagined that this is what it would be like if she'd had a daughter of her own, and it was far too easy for her to imagine having a precocious daughter, just like Bella.

Which made her think of Ric. They had spent a great weekend together and spent the week texting, calling, and talking before she left his house. She had started staying for dinner, and to her, this relationship seemed like something from a fairy tale. So, those imaginings were problematic because she wasn't even sure if she could call Rick a boyfriend, or where this relationship was going. She didn't

know if Rick had even mentioned her as anything more than a babysitter to Bella.

And if Bella thought of Darby as something like her father's girlfriend, she certainly never mentioned anything to Darby.

But right now, with Bella holding her hand and shouting in her little voice about everything that happened at school, Darby shoved all those concerns to the side and enjoyed the fullness of the moment.

"Can I go to your house and paint in your studio?" Bella asked in a voice slightly less boisterous than her normal tone. Darby glanced down at Bella's eager face.

"Of course you can," Darby answered with a thrill lighting in her chest. She had promised Bella that she would take her to her studio to paint one day but never followed up on it. Now here was her chance. "Let me text your dad and tell him we'll be at my house instead of yours."

With her right hand, she reached into her pocket, slid out her phone, and shot off a quick text to Rick. She then tucked the phone back into her pocket.

When they reached their street, instead of veering to the left towards Bella's house, they crossed the street to the right and walked up to Darby's front door. Lifting her keys from her purse, Darby unlocked her front door and held it open for Bella.

"Where's your studio?" Bella asked as she walked in.

Darby set her purse and her keys on the table by her front door. She then grabbed her phone from her pocket and glanced at it to see if Rick had texted her back. No text, so she set her phone next to her purse.

“It’s in one of the bedrooms upstairs,” Darby told her as she pointed towards the carpeted stairwell. “You can leave your backpack here and we’ll head up.”

Bella scrambled to drop her sparkly backpack and then ran for the steps. Darby followed right behind.

Darby opened the door to the spare bedroom all the way, and Bella entered wide eyed and open mouthed. Bella didn’t rush fully into the room, instead she stood close to the door and turned slowly to take in the entire room.

Several canvas pieces hung on the wall and at different heights, so the room was bursting with color. Realistic *impasto* flowers all different shades, and Bella could not seem to get enough of it. In the center of the room stood Darby’s easel. A low table with paint palettes, paint brushes, and jars of water and turpentine was positioned next to the easel on the drop cloth. Darby wasn’t sure how much the drop cloth might save the carpet, but if it helped her get some of her deposit back, the more the better.

Most of the canvases surrounding her easel were shades of yellow and blue, part of her newest series of paintings that she was calling her Van Gogh series. An homage to the great man himself, an explosion of yellows, and blues in a nod to his *Iris*es and *Starry Night*. Darby dug in the closet and withdrew

a small canvas and a portable easel. She said the easel up next to hers on the small table and then grabbed a couple of her lesser used paint brushes. She lifted a small pallet that she had sent to the side, which was unused and completely blank. Turning to Bella, she held out the pallet with a smile.

“What colors do you want on your palette? You can pick as many colors as you like, or you can pick shades of one color like you saw with my series at the studio on campus,” Darby explained to Bella.

Bella’s mouth worked as she studied the paint colors surrounding the room and then glanced back at the plain wooden pallet. Darby did not miss how Bella’s eyes kept flicking to the yellow and blues.

“I’m working on these yellow and blue ones here right now,” Darby said. “Do you want to do ones like those? You can use blue and yellow.”

Bella lit up with a wide smile and nodded her head. Then she clapped her hands as Darby squirted dollops of paint on the little pallet. They spent the next hour or so going over how to use the paints, how to clean the brushes, how to use the paint brushes and different ways to create tiny lines and narrow strokes and bright sweeps with the brushes until Bella was comfortable enough to use to paint on her smaller canvas by herself. She marveled at how the paint bled onto the canvas when she used more linseed oil and then how the color stuck when she used none.



Darby looked over her shoulder as Bella worked, a slight smile crossing her lips at the pure exuberance Bella had using what she kept calling *real paints*. It was a far cry from crayons for a little girl. When Darby turned back to her own easel, she noticed the light had shifted significantly away from the window.

*How late is it?* She padded her pocket to grab her phone, then remembered that she had set it on the downstairs table. There was no clock in the studio.

“I need to go check what time it is. It looks to be getting pretty late,” Darby said to Bella. “Why don’t you come with me, and we’ll see if your dad texted. Then we’ll get you a snack or dinner. We haven’t even eaten yet.”

Bella dropped her brushes and wiped at the tacky paint staining her hands. Darby tilted her head to the door. “And we’ll make a stop at the bathroom to wash all that paint off. I have a special soap that does the job.”

After they washed their hands and went downstairs, Darby sent Bella to the kitchen as she grabbed her phone off the table. She glanced at her notifications as well as the time. It was nearly six, but no notifications from Rick yet.

*Odd*, Darby thought. But if he was busy or there was a lot going on, he might have missed it. She set the phone back down and joined Bella in the kitchen.

“How does grilled cheese sound? If your dad’s not here by the time we’re done, we’ll head back up to the studio.”

Bella climbed up onto the bar-height stool and leaned over the counter.

“Yes!” she cheered. “This is the best day ever!”



The sun had just fully set in a sea of pink and gray when Ric parked in his driveway close to seven. He was tired, and ready to grab dinner with Bella and crash in front of the television with her for the night.

Another long day of chasing this freaking burglary suspect. That led to a whole bunch of dead ends. Ric’s description of the guy wasn’t helping at all, and all patrol units knew that this guy managed to blend in better than anyone they had ever encountered. Ric, and his entire patrol, were on edge.

Most of the cops had drawn the conclusion that the guy had to live near the area to be able to blend in as well as he did. The suspect had also started moving farther south, which rankled Ric because this guy’s hunting grounds were getting too close to Ric’s neighborhood for comfort. He intentionally did not live directly in the area he patrolled for many reasons, including safety. Criminals did not have the same compunctions and they preyed wherever the pickings were easiest.

Needless to say, his captain had chewed them out before they left. It didn't look good for entire Tustin police department if they couldn't catch one stupid random burglar.

He was so tired and considered not changing uniform, but he only had one more day this week and then he'd have to bring all the uniforms home, anyway. Plus, he preferred to be in his own clothes when he came home and saw Bella, so he forced himself to change into his street clothes before he left work. He'd had so many patrol calls, hopping from one to the next that he had shut his phone off while he working with the other patrol cops. And the chance of getting yelled at from his boss or being asked to holdover again?

*Hell no*, so he didn't bother to turn it back on. Why bother when he'd be home in a minute, anyway?

But when he pulled into his driveway, all the windows to his house were dark. The hairs on the back of Ric's neck shot up, and he was immediately on alert. With his finger, he flipped open in his center console as he turned off the car. Grabbing a small key off his keyring, he slipped it into the lock, and from the locked compartment he withdrew his second service weapon. His private weapon, the Glock 19, was one that the department issued so cops could conceal and carry went off duty as needed. Ric didn't feel confident keeping it on his person or in the house when he was with Bella, so he kept it in the lock box installed in his car and made sure the car was secured in the garage each night with the alarm set.

And right now, he was glad that he had it, because something was wrong in his house. With the weapon in both hands low and in front of him, Ric walked up to the door and tried to open the handle but it was locked. Ric lowered the gun considered the door knob. If someone did come in this way, the door would've been unlocked. He backed away from the door and surveyed the large living room window, which was still completely intact.

The other thing he noticed, or rather didn't notice, was a sense that there was any movement in the house. No lights, no sounds — Ric was pretty good at having a sense of movement, even if it was just a general sensation that people were inside the domicile. And he didn't have that sensation for his own home. If asked as a cop, Ric would say there was no one inside.

And if that was the case, then where the fuck were Bella and Darby?

Ric grabbed his phone to call back up, and that was when he noticed he had a text from Darby. He pressed the notification and found the text that said they were at her house.

*When the fuck did she send this?* Why didn't she call him? What was going on?

He wasn't in the best frame of mind. He was angry and irritated and honestly frightened when he stormed over to Darby's house. That was why he still at his Glock in his hand, he was afraid of what he might find at her house, which he

realized was probably a stupid thing to do. But he was so pissed and panicked, he really didn't care.

And what if something *was* wrong? She'd sent the text over four hours ago and not another one. That didn't bode well. Better to be prepared.

First Ric tried the knob, which was locked. That took a bit of panicked weight off his chest. With a balled up fist, Ric pounded on the door. A locked door was a good sign — home invaders didn't relock doors. If everything was fine, then at least she remembered to lock her doors when she was home. Even if she *was* horrible at communicating where his daughter was.

The door latched open, and Darby giggled as she swung it wide. When she saw his face though, her expression shifted and her mouth tightened.

“Ric. Is everything –” Darby started to say, but Ric cut her off.

“Where's Bella?”

He felt a wave of relief that Darby was okay, but where was Bella? Ric didn't wait for an answer. He shoved past Darby and saw Bella standing at the kitchen door entryway, holding a grilled sandwich and chewing. She gave him a cheesy grin before her own smile fell away.

“Daddy. Why do you have your gun?”

Ric grunted, made sure the safety on the gun was in place, then shoved into the back of his waistband. In two strides, he

reached Bella, hoisted her up in his left arm, and then stepped towards the front door.

“Ric? What’s going on?” Darby’s voice wavered as she spoke.

Ric stood at the doorway and turned partway towards Darby to glare at her.

“The next time you’re going to take my daughter somewhere, you better let me know in advance.”

Darby’s eyes narrowed as she looked at him straight on. “I did let you know. I sent you a text as we were walking home from school.” Her voice was just as hard as Ric’s. He could see the irritation in her face transforming into anger at his accusation. And probably at bursting into her house with a gun.

*But he was frantic, dammit!*

She might have sent the text earlier, but he didn’t get it, and something like taking his daughter to her house demanded at least a phone call, in Ric’s estimation.

*No excuses.*

And he told her this. “One text? And I don’t hear anything more for four hours? Then you should’ve called. I didn’t get the text until I got home, and I thought someone broke in my house like it was a home invasion. That something had happened to you and Bella. I had no idea what was going on.”

He was too irate to hear any reasoning. Ric expected her to recoil from him or to look abashed or something, but she

didn't. Instead she straightened her tiny frame as tall as she could get and glared at him right back.

“I did text you in advance. It's not my fault you don't read your messages and then you lose your shit because of it. Bella was fine and had a wonderful day painting, before you stormed in here and ruined it. Now you can leave before you say something you might regret even more.”

Ric didn't answer. He spun on his toe with Bella in his arms and strode out the door. With this free hand, he grabbed the door knob and slammed the door shut on her.

Ric was pissed, and he had every right to be pissed because he didn't know where his daughter was, or if she was safe for a huge window of time. To Ric, that was completely unacceptable.

He had witnessed too many horrible things that had happened to too many kids for it to be acceptable. And the fact that Darby didn't seem to understand only pissed him off more.

As a cop, he had seen too many kids in too many dangerous situations that ended in the most devastating way imaginable. Unfortunately, Bella was also with him and had heard the entire exchange, something he never wanted to have happen, and now he was going to have to put up with her unending questions.

What a *fucking* miserable day this ended up being.



“Daddy, why did you yell at Darby?” Bella’s voice sounded timid, but Ric was familiar with that tool. Bella would make a great detective one day; she had perfected using that little voice to gather her intel before she lectured you on what she thought was the proper thing to do.

Ric was not in the mood for it. He shifted her in his arms.

“Daddy was angry because he didn’t know where you were. Daddy got scared.”

“Is that why you brought your gun? Because you were scared?”

Ric chewed the inside of his mouth over that question. He did regret bringing the gun. That had been unnecessary, and it did nothing more than set Darby on edge and send the wrong message to Bella. Considering he hated coming home in his uniform to her, having his gun out in a moment where he was angry and freaked, did not send a message to Bella that he wanted.

“Yes, baby, but I should’ve put the gun away. I should not have brought the gun to Darby’s house and that was the wrong thing to do. But there’s some dangerous people out there, and I was afraid those dangerous people had done something or hurt you and Darby. “



“No, Daddy.” Bella pressed her palm against Ric’s cheek to shift his head to hers. This was her trick that she used to get him to look her in the eyes when she was saying she something she thought was very serious.

“Daddy, Darby didn’t do anything wrong. Darby shouldn’t do anything bad. She did text you. You shouldn’t have yelled. She did nothing wrong, and I had fun, You did the wrong thing, Daddy.”

Her voice was terse. His little girl was more angry than he realized.

“Bella, you don’t understand.”

That was the rub. There had been a text on his phone, and if he had checked his messages earlier, he would’ve seen it and this whole horrible situation could’ve been avoided. But it didn’t matter. He was here now, and at the end of the day he still believed Darby should’ve called or sent more than one text.

“No. *You* don’t understand, Daddy. Darby is nice. Nicer than my other babysitters! She’s my friend! She does art with me and doesn’t sit on her phone all day instead. She has dinner with us and shows us her art! She even asks me about my pictures! No one else does that, Daddy!”

“Bella!”

She wiggled violently in his arms. “I wish she was here instead of you!”

Ric grew silent. Her words were crazed and childish, but he understood. Darby respected Bella in a way he rarely saw adults, let alone parents, do. Including him.

Ric focused his eyes on Bella. He didn't miss her quivering lip, and he kept his gaze on her wide brown eyes, trying to control his own irritation. He had already made a mess of things – he didn't want to make it worse, especially because he was slowly realizing just how poorly he had reacted.

“Bella, I know you don't fully understand. But for something like that, she should have called or made sure she got a hold of me. Not just one text message. That's just something you do when you have somebody else's child with you.”

Her eyes narrowed slightly.

“But Daddy, we were just at Darby's house. Darby wouldn't do anything like that to me. Darby likes me. She likes us.”

Her tone was as biting as a six-year-old's could get. Ric's chewing moved to his lips. He was skating on very thin ice with Bella. He hadn't mentioned to Bella anything about his relationship or the nature of it with Darby, but Bella could probably guess how Ric felt regarding Darby. And Ric knew that Bella adored Darby. Evidently, Bella was gonna defend Darby to the very end.

“I know that, baby. She likes you very much, but—”

“No buts, Daddy,” Bella scolded him. Here she was, she was gearing up for her big lecture. “Darby is more than a

babysitter. She really cares about me. And she would do anything to protect me. And you came at her angry and with your gun. That was bad. You need to say you're sorry."

Well, *that* was unexpected. He expected a lecture from his daughter but was she seriously going to make sure he said he was sorry to Darby?

"Bella, I —" Ric didn't get to finish. Bella was on a roll.

"No buts, Daddy." She was repeating his own lectures back to him. How many times he told her no buts? "You did the wrong thing. And you probably hurt Darby's feelings, and I love Darby and don't want you to hurt her feelings. You were mean, and that was dangerous and you need to 'pologize. You need to say sorry to her.

Was he *seriously* being lectured this hard by a six-year-old? Ric licked his bitten lips and opened his mouth to see something else, but Bella pressed her palm over his mouth to shush him.

He *was* seriously being shushed by a six-year-old.

"You always tell me that when I do something wrong, I need to take 'sponsibility. You did the wrong thing, Daddy, and you need to take 'sponsibility."

They were at the front door, and Ric pulled out his keys to unlock it.

He was being lectured by six-year-old, and the six-year-old was *right*. He had done the wrong thing. As much as he didn't want to admit it because his anger and his fear over Bella

washed over everything else, in hindsight, now that the situation was resolved, he had to admit Bella was right.

He'd flown off the handle, and he knew it. Both Darby and his own daughter were calling him out on it. He was overly paranoid in general, and Darby would never do anything to hurt Bella. He knew that, deep inside where it mattered. Why hadn't he trusted in that? She treated Bella as her own daughter – even better sometimes. Ric even knew about her problems conceiving, and she'd never risk a child. Never.

No, he had reacted because he was afraid something had happened to both Bella and Darby. He had been afraid he'd lost Darby as well.

Rich had overreacted because he saw danger everywhere. His occupational hazard caused a fight with his daughter and may have cost him Darby.

*Darby.*

She had become their rock, even if Darby never saw herself that way. She might believe she was flighty and absent minded, but that was exactly what their little family needed.

*Their family.*

He huffed out a heavy breath and pinched the bridge of his nose as he stepped through the door and set her down.

Bella was a better person than he was. She was everything good and right in this miserable world, and he had just ripped her away from the only other person in this world that Ric saw goodness in.

“You’re right, Bell. I’m sorry for yelling and for thinking the worst of Darby.”

“You gotta ‘pologize to *her*, too, Daddy. I like her. I know you like her. I don’t want her to leave us like mommy did.”

*OUCH.* He froze and bit back the sad and angry bile that stung in the back of his throat. Her words were a knife in his chest, and he had to blink back fiery tears of hurt and regret that came from a deep well inside him. In a fast move, Ric grabbed Bella and all her stiff fury and wrapped his arms around her so tight. Had it been any other situation, she would have wiggled to get away.

Instead, she clung to him as tightly as he clung to her.

“All right, baby,” Ric cooed to her as they stood in the dark entry. “I will go over tomorrow and apologize. I’ll even text her tonight. Then I need to have a talk to you about Darby.”

“Is it about how much you like her, Daddy?” Her eyes brightened at this.

His aching breath caught in his chest. *This kid* – she was way too smart. “Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

“Then talk to her right away, Daddy. I don’t want her to get madder at you.”

Then she kissed his cheek and disentangled herself from his clinging arms to go to her art on the table. He watched as she picked up one of the fine-tipped markers Darby had given her and started to draw. Shapes and shadows and fine lines, just as Darby had taught her.

*She's going to need her own art studio if she keeps this up,*  
Ric thought. *Or if Darby forgives me.*



That night after he put Bella to bed, he grabbed a bottled beer from the fridge and collapsed onto the couch. He ran his hand through his tightly clipped waves and leaned his head against the back of the couch. His gaze landed on the picture Bella had been furiously working on.

Ric sat forward and with his fingertips, flipped the drawing around to it was upright. It was a picture of all three of them – him, Bella, and Darby – standing in a line, holding hands.

“Fuck,” he muttered under breath.

Making a snap decision, he grabbed the drawing and took it to the kitchen. He hung the brightly colored picture on the fridge and gave it a long look at it.

With a heavy sigh and another *fuck* under his breath, he pulled his phone from his pocket and sent Darby a text. Four words.

*– I'm very very sorry*

He'd be shocked if she texted back, and he decided not to wait. His thumb whipped over the tiny phone keyboard.

*– Can I talk to you tomorrow?*

Then three dots appeared on his phone. Darby was texting him back.

*– Is Bella ok?*

*Fuck.* How could three words make him feel so much worse? Of course Darby asked about Bella first. She would never do anything to hurt Bella or put her in harm's way. Especially since Darby had shared her own fertility issues and how she lamented she'd never have her own kids – she had practically adopted Bella as her own. How would Ric feel if someone suggested he'd harm Bella?

Pissed as hell.

So Darby was probably upset at how he behaved, and angry that he believed she'd ever do anything to endanger Bella. Worse, he might have said that to her, but only because he couldn't admit that he was frightened that something might have happened to Darby as well, as much as he was scared for Bella. He had been frantic thinking Darby might be in danger too, but it was easier to be angry at the situation than for him to admit any feelings that he was trying desperately to hide.

*– She's ok, but mad at me. I don't blame her. When can I come by tomorrow?*

*– I'll be home most of the day, but working in my studio. Text me when you get to the door in case I don't hear the bell*

*– copy that*

Then he set his phone down and exhaled hard.

That was going to be a suck-ass conversation. He'd have to eat all his harsh words, and Ric was *not* good at that.

He glanced at the hall toward Bella's door.

Time to be a role model and grow-ass an adult.



# CHAPTER TEN



THE KNOCK AT THE door came around noon. Darby had been on edge all day, wondering if he would actually come over. She and Ric had been in such a great place, at least *she* had thought so — enjoying each other, building toward something. But after yesterday, she had wondered if she completely misread their entire relationship.

When his text dinged, followed by the doorbell ringing, Darby set her brush on the easel ledge, wiped her hands on a towel, and glanced at her painting. She had been taking her frustrations out on it and it showed. Way too much black and rusty red.

Taking a deep breath, she went downstairs and opened her front door.

And her heart stopped in her chest.

*Contrite* was stamped across his tanned face, and his tight strawberry blond waves were unruly, not brushed back and tamed. He had bags under his normally lively green eyes. No dimples, no smiles, no proud broad chest. His entire being shouted *contrite*.

But he had insulted her in more ways than one, and his boyish good looks weren't going to get him out of this. Darby steeled herself.

“Do you want to come in?” she asked.

He glanced over his shoulder, and she noticed his car in the drive with Bella in the back seat.

“She’s taking me to task,” Ric explained. “Then she’s going to spend the afternoon with her grandmother while I get some errands done.”

“Okay, so here on the front porch.” Darby pointed to a narrow bench set against the front of her house, the smallest excuse for a front porch she had ever seen, but it worked.

Ric dropped his head as he sat next to her and rested his elbows on his knees. “I’m so sorry, Darby. I know you care about Bella so much, and I was an idiot for thinking you’d do anything to hurt her. I cannot apologize enough.”

“Yeah, I’m still pissed. You know, Ric. I told you about me. You should have known –”

“You’re 100% right. And if I hadn’t been so scared, I would have. But the cop in me came out hard when I saw the house was dark.”

Darby nodded briefly. In truth, she understood what he meant. How might she react if she couldn’t find Bella? Like a crazed lunatic.

“But you need to know there’s more. The reason I reacted as hard as I did. I’m not used to having someone I can count on,

first. Then, we've had a string of burglaries, that holdover I did a week or so ago? It's not too far from here and we're worried he's going to escalate. That was going through my mind and ..."

He paused. It seemed to Darby he was uncertain of his next words, but what he explained thus far made sense to her.

"And I was worried for Bella, yes, but I was worried for you, too. I was frightened something had happened to both of you."

There it was. *Me? He had been worried about me?* Darby wasn't good at reading into things, but maybe this relationship *was* going somewhere. Maybe there was more to it than she realized.

Now she was at a loss for words.

"And the gun," he said with a shudder. "I'm sorry about that, but I was so worried. Can – Can you forgive me? Can we start over? Or is it enough?"

She caught his use of the word and shook her head. "No, not enough. I forgive you. It's okay."

He exhaled so hard his shoulders slumped. He covered her hand with his large, warm one, and an electric surge coursed through her. Here he was, doing it again. That simple touch electrifying her nerves and making her feel like the world was tilting off its axis and taking her with it. She exhaled.

"Yeah, okay, but we'll have to scale back a bit, rebuild some of this ..." Darby trailed off, hoping he understood.

“Yeah, yeah, I get that. I’m sorry for that, too.”

They sat like that for a few heartbeats with his hand over hers, trying to reconnect after this misstep.

There was one more question she had to ask.

“Do you still want me to watch Bella?” she asked.

The question wrenched at her gut. She adored Bella, loved being with her, but she knew that at the end of the day, Bella was not her daughter. She was Ric’s and if he didn’t trust her and they had to rebuild, then she’d understand.

“Of course! Oh my God!” Ric turned to her and clasped her other hand. “It was me, Darby! I still trust you with Bella, more than I trust anyone!”

Those words meant more than his apology. He knew he *could* count on her.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, and neither did Bella. I’m not going to punish her for my stupidity. She adores you.”

Ric was baring himself to her, and Darby could do no less. “I adore her right back, Ric. You have to know that.”

“I know that. She’s a better person than I am. She’s the one who pointed out how wrong I was and demanded that I apologize immediately.”

An inappropriate giggle rose in Darby’s throat and she let it out. “Pretty bad when the six-year-old is wiser than her father.”

Ric's lips thinned and he shrugged. "Probably a blessing. One of us should be smart like that. And thank you. Thank you for the second chance. I really thought I blew it."

"You almost did." Darby took a deep breath, gathering her courage. He had admitted he at least cared for her when he was worried for her safety. Now it was her turn. "But I really like you, Ric, and everyone makes mistakes."

"So, did I ruin this, or can I take you out again soon?" He grinned sheepishly, and his dimple peeked out of his cheek.

They might have to take it slow again, but the fact he apologized and wanted to see her again right away made her heart flutter. An idea sprung to her mind, a solution to what might be an awkward second, first date.

"How about a gala event? The Laguna Beach gallery is doing a gala for me next Saturday to showcase one of my series. Would you and Bella like to come?"

His eyes narrowed slightly." A gala? That sounds fancy. Is this like a dress up event?"

"Yes," Darby answered with a slight smile. "You can even put Bella in a fancy dress if you want."

"I'm sure Bella would love that," Ric commented, nodding.

They fell silent, suddenly awkward, and Ric stood. He was still holding her hands so Darby stood with him.

"I should head out. A call or text you later?"

Darby realized how much she looked forward to his texts and phone calls throughout the day, and truthfully, she didn't want them to end. And it would be a good way to get over this hump. She nodded.

Ric squeezed her hand slightly shifted to peck her on her cheek, a chaste kiss unseen by his daughter, and then he turned and practically skipped to the car.

Darby leaned against the stucco of her rental house and watched them drive away. Bella waved to her from the backseat of the car and Darby waved back with enthusiasm and a wide smile. She was grateful Ric had apologized, but this misunderstanding highlighted just how complicating the relationship might be. What is she going to be able to handle a relationship like this? The man, the cop, and his kid? To give Ric a second chance after this horrible misunderstanding?

But as she watched the car drive away, the two strawberry blonde heads disappearing in the distance, she knew in her heart that both Ric and his daughter were worth the chance.



After Ric dropped Bella off with his mom, he swung the car around and headed towards downtown. He wasn't lying when he said he had a few errands to run, but he was starting at the cop bar not far from the station. Earlier he had sent a text to

Tony Sepulveda, a slightly older cop who worked on the POP squad, their Proactive Policing Program, as a school resource officer for the different high schools in the area. He had made a good name for himself with a major drug bust led by, of all things, a middle school teacher several months before and was a bit of a celebrity in the department.

But to Ric, Tony was just old, jaded Tony. They had a long history together on the Tustin Police Department, having worked patrol together for several years. Tony might be a bit cynical, but he was a good cop, and he had a decent amount of life experience. That was the reason Ric had reached out to him earlier in the day.

Tony agreed to meet him for appetizers and drinks at Backfire Grill and give Ric advice, if he had any. And if Tony didn't have advice worth listening to, well, Ric couldn't feel more turned around any presently did. Any advice, even advice from a jaded cop like Tony was welcome.

The bar was dark inside, decorated in dark wood accents, with a good number of people still lingering from the lunch crowd. Tony sat at a small table with his back to the wall.

*Standard positioning*, Ric thought. Any cop taking a seat at a restaurant tried to take a spot close to the corner to the side where he had a full view of the entire room and the entrances and exits, making sure he sat with his back to the wall. Tony did not disappoint.

Ric, having the same mindset, did not sit directly across from Tony. Rather, he swung the chair to the side so he could

face most of the room and the front entry as well. Tony had already ordered, as evidenced by the beer sitting in front of him and the plate of buffalo wings. He had started to dig in before Ric arrived, and a smaller plate buffalo wing bones sat to Tony's left. The waitress came by, wearing jeans and a black polo shirt, a high ponytail, and the wide smile that silently asked for tips.

“What can I get y'all?” she asked.

Ric ordered a beer and nachos before turning to Tony.

“What's bugging you so much you had to drag me out here on my day off and force me to eat his plate of wings?” Tony's black hair was slicked back, and he didn't seem to be hating the wings. Ric gave him a side-long look..

“You seem to be doing just fine with those wings,” Ric commented.

Tony dropped a bone on the extra plate. After he swallowed, he placed his hands on the table, his intense, dark gaze directed at Ric.

“No, really. Why do you drag me out here, brother? We all know you got a kid at home, and you aren't one for meeting up at a bar when you would rather spend time with Bella.”

Ric leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. Tony's gaze narrowed briefly before he slapped his hands together and barked and laughed.

“No shit.” Tony leaned forward and pointed a finger. “You got something on the side. That's what has you all messed up.



After all these years, you finally got a woman, and she's messing with your head."

Ric didn't answer right away. He refused to give Tony the satisfaction of telling him he was right, but Tony *was* right. Tony filled in the gap in the conversation.

"And she's not just a side piece, from the look on your face. She's got you twisted round, which means this is serious. You *like* this person."

Ric's lips thinned. Tony had always been way too good at his job. Decades of experience helped, and Tony could read anyone or any situation. It made the conversation easier for Ric because he didn't have to admit to a damn thing.

"So what's going on with this love interest of yours?" Tony asked. "Does she know about Bella? Is she okay with that?"

The waitress brought the beer said the nachos were on their way. Ric removed the cap and took a swig. He tapped the base in the beer bottle against the table top.

"We actually met because of Bella. Bella adores her. Her name is Darby. She's taken Bella under her wing and they do art together, and she's been watching Bella after school for me before I get home work." Here he paused.

Tony seemed to understand. "And you like this artist." He took another sip of beer.

"I like her a lot, Tony. I don't know what to do because I haven't been with anyone since Bella's mom bailed. She gave up all her parental rights, so it's not like I have any baby mama

issues to worry about. And Darby seems all in with Bella. But I got some trust issues, as you can imagine, and I screwed up pretty bad yesterday.”

With a snort, Tony took another bite of a chicken wing while the waitress brought Ric’s nachos. Ric took a large bite of chip, cheese, and refried beans before speaking again.

“What? Did you interrupt their drawing?” he teased.

Ric took another chip and spoke around his mouthful. “Not quite. A bit worse than that. The night we lost that home invasion suspect guy, I got home and the house was dark. No one home. I panicked, thinking something happened to them. He’s been hitting pretty close to my neighborhood, right?”

Tony nodded and listened as he finished his wings.

“So I grabbed my off duty weapon to check the house. I was lit, right? I also grabbed my phone to call for back up, and that’s when I saw I had it on silent for our meeting, and I had missed a text. They were at Darby’s house.”

Tony wiped his buffalo sauce-stained lips with a paper napkin. “Painting together, am I right?”

Ric spun his beer around its base before lifting it for another swig.

“Yep,” Ric answered. “Only like I said, I was lit. I thought something had happened, so I stormed to Darby’s house.”

“Ohh, but you still had your weapon.” Tony sat back and leveled his gaze at Ric. “You brought work home in the worst way.”

“You have no idea. I had it in front of her and Bella. I got a lecture from Bella about apologizing, and when I spoke to Darby today, she forgave me for losing it and accusing her of trying to kidnap my daughter. And it was all my fault. I reacted badly because of this home invader guy, and I’m not used to having someone I can rely on, you know? But she’s willing to give me another chance. We’re even going to an art gala thing next weekend.”

“She must see something in you. What is beyond me.” Ric socked Tony in the upper arm. “So, what’s the deal? It sounds like everything’s fixed. Why the meet up with me?”

Ric took another swig of beer and didn’t answer right away. The move was intentional, to delay his response. He wanted Tony to put it together and say it, not him. To say it out loud would make it real, and Ric wasn’t sure he was ready for that yet.

But if Tony said it, maybe he could come to terms with it himself.

Because the last time he’d fallen in love with someone, he had created the most amazing thing – his daughter – and that person spit on his love and their family and broke him. Truly broke him. He had barely been able to pull it together, and he only managed to do that because Bella needed him. Bella had saved him.

Loving another person scared the shit out of him. Strong Officer Richter Williams, ready to take on gangs and murderers and violent suspects without blinking, was afraid of

how he felt about the petite artist who had stumbled into his life and his heart.

And he was so afraid of having it broken again. He was afraid this time, if it happened, he would not recover at all.

“Because you’re more than twisted around. You love this artist. Holy shit, Ric. Never thought I’d see it in you.”

Ric set his beer down and ran his hand through his hair.

“So what do I do, brother?”

Tony grinned and sipped his beer as he studied Ric.

“Brother, it sounds like this artist already has Bella in her corner. Your daughter is rooting for you. She wants her daddy to be happy. But if this artist has a way with Bella that benefits her, then it’s a good thing for Bella, too. Kids need that kind of community, you know?”

As Tony had recently taken up with a single mom, he would know. Ric nodded.

“But you can’t keep your artist guessing. That’s not fair to either of you. I know this will be the hardest thing you ever have to do, but you’ve got to put it all on the line, lay your heart out for her to see, and let her know how you feel. Because if you don’t, the miscommunication will only ruin everything.”

“Thanks, brother. Not exactly what I wanted to hear, but what I needed to hear.”

Tony took another swig of his beer, finishing it off.

“And if she’s as great as you say she is, you better lock that down fast before she realizes what a wimpy-ass fucker you are.”

Tony laughed as Ric flipped him off.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN



THE NIGHT OF THE gala, Ric showed up at her house promptly at six. When Darby got into his car, Ric's eyes roved over her body appreciatively. For this event, she liked to wear her old standby — a slightly fitted black gown embedded with silver sparkles. It was so long it trailed on the ground behind her, but had a slit in the front that reached just above her knee and was low cut to off show enough, if she was wearing the right bra.

Tonight she was wearing the right bra.

Ric let out a little whistle as she gathered her skirt into the car and closed the door. Darby could've done the same back to him. He wore a crisp black shirt, a dark green tie that set off his eyes beautifully, and black dress pants. He looked stunning.

“You look so pretty!” Bella clamored from the backseat.

Darby twisted in her seat to look at Bella, who sparkled as well in a purple dress that had a tutu style skirt.

“You look so pretty, too!” Darby told her. “Are you ready for this?”

Bella clapped her hands with exuberance only a young child could have. “I can’t wait! Daddy said it’s a fancy party. I’ve never been to a fancy party!”

Darby turned around in her seat and adjusted her seatbelt as Ric backed out of the drive.

“It *is* a fancy party. They’ll have a bit of food, and we don’t have to stay too long. It’s going to be a lot of standing around and looking at art, with people coming up to talk to me. But it’s only supposed to go until nine.” Darby flipped her eyes to Ric. “That isn’t too late is it?”

Ric shook his head. “Nope.”

“And I told daddy I would be on my best behavior!” Bella added from the backseat.

Darby giggled under her breath as Ric groaned slightly. That was definitely Ric’s command that Bella was parroting.

“I’m sure you’ll be fine,” Darby told her.

They arrived at the gala early a few minutes early so Darby could make sure everything was set up where she wanted and introduce Ric and Bella to the gala the gallery owner. Her name was Simone, a stunning woman with long, straight black hair. She was tall and lean — the word *willowy* came to mind whenever Darby looked at her. Simone also had a very mellow disposition, which worked well when it came to showing and selling Darby’s art.

As Simone was introduced to Ric, Darby noticed Simone's eyes did an appreciative once over, before she crouched down to Bella and welcomed her.

"You're probably our youngest patron," Simone told her.

Bella beamed. "I'm not a patriot. I'm an artist too, like Darby." Bella's eyes lifted to Darby as she spoke, full of pride and admiration. Darby's cheeks burned at the childish complement, because she knew one thing about Bella. Bella did not have it in her to lie about anything. She was the most honest kid, especially when it came to character traits, sometimes a bit too honest. Simone rose and gave Bella one of her mild smiles.

"Then perhaps one day you'll have an exhibit here, too," Simone said. Then Simone glanced to Ric and put her arm on Darby's elbow. "Do you mind if I steal her for just a moment? We have a few things we need to finish going over, and there are some appetizers and drinks over there." She pointed to the far side of the gallery. Ric bobbed his head and took Bella's hand and led her toward the tables.

Simone leaned to look around Darby and watched Ric escort Bella to the food.

"You know how to pick 'em, Darby," Simone stated with admiration. Typical Simone comment.

"It's not quite like that," Darby told her truthfully. She was still trying to figure out what it *was* between her and Ric.



Simone raised one slick black eyebrow at Darby. “It sure *looks* like that. If I was in a relationship with a guy like that, I’d lock it down fast.”

Darby waved her off and glanced around the gallery. “So take me to the exhibit? Let’s get everything set up. And where do you want me to be for tonight?”

Simone tugged on her elbow. “Let me show you.”



The gala event was busier than Ric had thought any art event might be, at least in his limited estimation. Simone introduced Darby to so many black tie, black dress art patrons, and even Ric and Bella received some introductions. Ric’s mind whirled with a mix of pride and humility. Proud of Darby and how amazing of an artist she was, humbled by the fact that here he was, a local patrol cop, rubbing shoulders with some very fancy and probably wealthy people. Ric had noted that all of Darby’s paintings included the tag *Inquire for Price*. Ric knew what that meant: *expensive*.

Which only made him more proud of her.

People slowly left as the evening progressed, and even Bella somehow remained on her best behavior, snacking on crackers and cheese while admiring every single one of Darby’s

paintings. Bella had a comment or question about each one, and Ric did his best to answer what he could.

Darby was all smiles as Simone walked them to the front door to lock up. It was a look that made Ric melt inside, and he knew in that moment all he wanted to do was wake up to that smile every day for the rest of his life.

But was that what *she* wanted? A significant artist with a decent following, married to a small town cop?

*Married?*

Whoa. Where did *that* come from?

The wind caught Darby's hair as they stepped outside, and he brushed a dark strand from her cheek.

The thought came from the moment she saved the day by babysitting Bella all those weeks ago, from the moment she asked to paint him, from the moment she admitted her fears and traumas to him. She may have saved the day, but she did more than that. She rescued him and his jaded heart.

And Bella loved her, too. Surely this was a sign from the universe.

"I'll call you with the final numbers tomorrow," Simone was saying.

Bella tugged on his hand, drawing him from his emotional thoughts, and he lifted her into the crook of his elbow.

"Thank you again, Simone. I hope this went as well as I thought it did," Darby told her.

“Better,” Simone replied with a wide smile before shutting the door and locking it.

Darby turned to Ric and gave Bella a pat on her arm. Bella had curled into his neck, her steady, childish warmth a reassuring weight.

“Thank you for being so amazing, Bella. I loved having you here tonight.”

“Me too. You’re the best artist,” Bella said before tucking her face into Ric’s shirt and closing her eyes.

“She’s beat, but she did have a great time. Better than I ever believed a six-year-old could.”

Ric took Darby’s hand and led her to his car. Her hand was as warm as Bella, and Ric had a surge of emotion, that he had never felt such a sense of peace than he did in this moment.

“Kids are more receptive to art that you’d think. It speaks to our most basic natures, and kids like feeling that they are creating something beautiful, something that allows them to process emotions and feel accomplished.”

“Well, Bella loved your art and doing art with you. And she loved wearing a fancy dress.”

They drove back to Darby’s house first so Ric could drop her off. As he raced around the car to open her door, he hated that he was taking her own house and not to his. This was a night to celebrate in bed together.

When they reached the door, Darby unlocked it but didn’t go right inside. She turned to face him on the small porch.

“Thank you again for coming with me. I had so much more fun tonight with you guys there.”

The side of Ric’s lips curled slightly as he rested his forearm against the porch support beam and leaned over her.

“I do my best. I just felt bad that I don’t know more about art. I don’t know how much support having a cop there did for you.”

She took a slight step toward him and pressed her fingertip against his chest.

“Not Ric the cop. Ric the man. Either way, thank you again.”

Ric exhaled, trying to control both his breathing and his dick that was not listening to his silent order to calm the *fuck* down. Hot blood coursed through his groin.

“Thank you for the invitation. This was such a good night, I hate saying goodbye here and leaving it at that.”

Darby flicked her eyes to the car. Ric read her mind – he couldn’t stay because he had Bella.

But that didn’t mean she couldn’t come to his house later tonight.

“She’ll be asleep in an hour,” Ric whispered. “Would you ... maybe ...”

He couldn’t bring himself to say the words. *Fuck*.

“Come to your place? After Bella’s asleep?” she finished for him.

Ric dropped his chin to his chest. What was he asking? This was a dangerous game – what if Bella woke up, or needed him for something? What if she saw Darby in the house? Or –

“Kiss her, Daddy!” a small voice shouted from the car.

Ric looked over his shoulder as Darby peered around him at the car. Bella had weaseled out of her car seat and her face peek over the half-lowered window, grinning from ear to ear.

Turning back to Darby, Ric looked into her eyes and shrugged. “Don’t want to disappoint her, do we?” he asked.

Darby bit her lower lip. “No, we don’t.”

In a bold move, Ric dramatically wrapped his arms around Darby’s waist, and pulled her close, then lowered his lips to hers.

He didn’t know if it was the excitement of the night or the fact he didn’t have to hide from Bella, but kissing Darby seemed like the most natural and most passionate touch ever.

“Tonight?” he asked against her lips.

Darby pulled back slightly and nodded.

“An hour,” he promised, then let her go.

His arms felt empty.

Darby stepped to her door, leaned to the side to wave to Bella, who waved back ecstatically, and then gave Ric one last sultry look before she closed the door. He waited a second, and when he heard the deadbolt slide into place, he skipped off the porch to his car.

Bella was no longer sleepy. She was wide eyed and bubbly. Ric started the car and drove across the street to his house.

“Will she be my momma? I’d like her as a momma,” Bella commented out of left field and catching Ric so off guard, he jerked the car. It was a good thing he was only going five miles an hour, otherwise he might have had an accident.

“What, Bel?”

“Will she be my new mommy?”

Ric’s hands were suddenly *very* sweaty. He wiped them on the steering wheel. “I don’t know. Maybe, baby, one day. Why? Do you like her?”

“Yes, Daddy, I do. A lot. Do you like her?”

At least there was that. Blended families could be so problematic. He’d taken enough domestic calls to know just how bad. If Bella liked her, that was a fantastic start. He pulled into the garage and got her out of the car.

“Yes, I do, baby girl. I like her a lot.”

“Do you love her?” Oh, that was a more difficult question. “Because I love her,” Bella added firmly, as if that was all Ric needed to know. It wasn’t all he needed, but it helped significantly. Ric picked her up and carried her to the house.

“I know you love her, Bel. But I don’t know if ...” He was at a loss for words. How could he explain complex adult relationships to a first grader?

“You should tell her you love her,” Bella told him with an air of authority. “If you love someone, you should tell them.”

Ric sighed.

“When did you get so smart?” he asked in a tease.

“First grade, Daddy.” Again with her air of confident authority.

“You’re right. I’ll tell her how I feel right away.”

“Me too. I need to tell her, too.”

“We both will,” he promised, and go her ready for bed.



Exactly one hour later, Bella was out like a light, and Ric was in his bedroom, wearing only his dress pants. He was debating if he should put on more comfortable sweats when his phone dinged quietly. Darby was here, at the front door, and wisely didn’t knock or ring the bell.

He unlocked the deadbolt and opened the door as quietly as possible. She had changed, too, and wore a sweater-like coat over a tank top and loose pajama pants, and carried a canvas bag.

“Come in,” he whispered.

She giggled silently behind her hand and tiptoed in. Ric led her to his room, giving Bella's door a quick glance to make sure she was still asleep. *All good.* He closed his bedroom door and locked it.

"I'm a bit paranoid. I'm sorry. I've just never had ..." his words drifted off. Why would he mention another woman with Darby here in his bedroom? What was wrong with him?

"Probably smart. I was surprised when you invited me over."

Darby slipped her coat off and tossed it onto the edge of his dresser with her canvas bag. Then she lifted her tank top over her head, and her full, jiggling breasts fell into his view. His cock swelled painfully against his pants, fully engorged and immediately ready for her. She dropped her gaze to his obvious erection under his pants, then lifted her eyes with a sly smile.

"You aren't wearing a shirt. I thought this only fair."

Ric groaned deep in his chest.

Then he realized what she had done. *Taken off her shirt. Exposing her scars.* He made sure to keep his eyes at her breasts or above. He didn't care about the scars, and he was going to make sure she knew it.

"You can look. It's okay."

He wasn't sure what the right thing to do was, but since she was showing the scars, he believed he should at least look.



They weren't terrible scars by any means, especially not compared to his. But they did pucker a little and he could see how she might not like how the small series of four puckers made her smooth, rounded belly appear. He leaned forward and pushed her back onto the bed. With slow deliberation, he lowered his head and kissed each scar, licking each one before he moved to the next.

She trembled under his kisses and gripped the back of his head. Then he rose over her quivering body and gazed into her anxious eyes.

"They are as beautiful as the rest of you," he told her.

"Oh, Ric," she gasped, and pulled his head down to kiss her lips.

He slipped easily between her legs, claiming her. She seemed always ready for him, but this time, they moved slowly, in unison, a sensual dance. They joined as one, not hard and fast or full of urgency, but of delicate touches and tender passion.

He cupped her face and kissed her as he thrust slowly, each move of his dick touching deep inside her and her body arching to meet him.

Her ecstasy drew out in a steady build. Her body melted against his as her desire, her pleasure, tingled under her skin. His kisses covered her lips, cheeks, and forehead as his breathing increased as did the pace of his movements.

The sensation of being one with him, having him inside her, built her desire that flooded between her legs and spiraled through her entire body. She placed her hands on his chest, gripping his clenched chest muscles as he rode her. The moment spun out longer and his hips rocked back and forth, in and out, fanning the wave of passion that reached her fingertips and toes, then her mind. The spiral exploded as her fingernails dug into his chest.

“Ric!” she cried out softly, biting her lip to mute herself as much as possible.

Only then did Ric’s movements change, his breathing changed. His hands moved to the bed to support his thrusts. He bucked harder, and his face hardened as he stared into her eyes.

“Yes, Darby,” he called in a ragged, breathless voice.

Then he stiffened, and with a jolting shiver, his cock pulsed and he came hard. He thrust a few more times, groaning her name with each movement, then dropped his head to her pillowy breasts, panting.

It was an act of passion, of acceptance, of union, and they remained that way, touching, connected, for as long as they could.



Darby knew she couldn't stay the night. It wouldn't do for Ric to have a woman run into Bella, even if she was comfortable around Darby. Who knew how she might react? But here, cuddled into Ric's muscled arm and her head on his chest, she would wait a bit longer before leaving his warm bed and embrace.

She trailed her fingertips over the lean lines of his body as he breathed in steady satisfaction. If the joke was most cops ate donuts, then Ric broke that stereotype. He was in perfect shape.

"You'd make the perfect model for Da Vinci," she whispered into the quiet. His arm came up behind her and brushed along her back as he pulled her closer.

"I'll take your word for it. You'd know better than I."

"Oh, that reminds me. I brought you something."

"What?" Ric asked, partially sitting up as she rose from the bed.

Dim light reflected off her smooth skin, making her seem more like a fairy or something from a dream than a real person. If she hadn't moved the bed when she rose, he'd think this was only a dream.

She stood by the side of the bed and turned. In her hands, she held a canvas – the one of him she had started drawing after their first date weeks ago. But it wasn't just a drawing of him. She had painted it, and then some.

The image was a painting of him, yes, one so realistic, it seemed he was looking in a mirror. To the right of his visage was Bella, smaller and curled up against his neck as she had been earlier in the night. It was a perfect representation of his daughter, and his heart seized in his chest.

Darby handed it to him then climbed into bed next to him and crossed her legs.

“What do you think? I think I caught your relationship with Bella well.”

That was it – that was what made this piece and all her art so stunning. It wasn’t the representation, but the emotion behind it. That was what this painting presented – not Ric and Bella, but a father and daughter who exuded love, security, joy.

Those same emotions overwhelmed him now, and he set the stunning painting at the end of the bed, then turned to Darby.

“What? You don’t like it?”

“No,” Ric breathed, his heart racing more than it had when he was inside her just moments before. He took both of her hands in his. “Not at all. I love it, Darby. I love you.”

The words spilled from his lips before he could stop them. Darby’s eyes flew wide, full of surprise.

*Oh no.* Had he said too much?

“What?” she repeated. “You –?”

“I love you,” he told her with more urgency. “I love you, Bella loves you. I want you to be a part of my life. It may be too soon, but can we make this official? Can I call you my girlfriend? And would you consider more? If this is working?”

Darby stared at him unmoving. “Consider more? What more?”

Ric shrugged. He hadn’t planned on this conversation at all. He had been struck in the moment. “Maybe moving in? Getting married? We make such a good family, and I can’t stand the thought of not waking up with you in my arms in the morning.”

She didn’t move, and a flare of panic rose in his chest. *Oh, shit*, he had overstepped.

“Yes.”

He wasn’t sure he heard her. He blinked. “What?”

“Yes, I’ll be your girlfriend. Maybe we should wait a bit before moving in to see how that goes?”

Ric nodded and let out a long breath. Letting her know how he felt was like a boulder had been lifted from his shoulders.

“Oh, and Ric?” she asked. He held his breath again as she placed her palms on his cheeks, holding his face right in front of hers. “I love you, too.” Then she grinned slyly. “Never enough,” she breathed out.

Then she kissed him, her body warm and soft as her lips, and he pressed her back into the bed.

She didn't leave until much later that night, tearing herself away from Ric's hard arms that refused to let go.

# CHAPTER TWELVE



DARBY SPENT THE NEXT several days walking on air. How had a random meeting with this handsome cop turned into an easy, passionate relationship and included a child she'd never believed she might have? Between the success of her art gala, completing her most recent series, and this amazing relationship with Ric and his daughter, Darby though she might be living in a dream. Only her texts from Ric and her nights in his bed convinced her otherwise.

On Friday afternoon, she met Bella at her school and they held hands while they walked home. Darby didn't know if Ric had mentioned anything to his daughter, but she seemed to love having Darby stay for dinner or TV time after, and she always gave Darby the fiercest hug her six year old arms could muster when it was time for Darby to leave. Holding hands with Bella had become second nature for Darby.

Who would have thought that such a thing was possible? Not Darby.

They were almost to Bella's house when Bella tugged on her hand. "You said last night you finished your paintings. Can

I see them? Can we paint at your studio?”

Darby giggled at her. “It sounds like you’re using my paintings as a reason to use the studio.”

Bella grinned and shrugged. “Maybe. But can we?”

“Yes. Let’s do that. But first, I’m going to call *and* text your dad. No problems like last time, okay?”

Bella rolled her eyes. “Daddy is so worried all the time. ‘Lock the doors, don’t talk to anyone, don’t answer the phone.’ That’s all he says.”

“That’s because he’s a police officer, and he sees crime all the time. He just wants you to be safe.”

Bella shrugged again. Oh the joy of youthful innocence.

Darby sent a quick text, then called Ric to let him know where they would be. It went to voice mail, but she got a text back from him.

– *On a call. But got the message.* He texted back a smiley face.

“Alright. We’re good. No worrying, Dad, and we can paint all afternoon.”

Bella skipped ahead, tugging on Darby’s hand again. “Can we have pizza, too?”

“We just had pizza last night. Don’t push your luck.”

Bella skipped all the way across the street and up the driveway. When she reached the door, she ran to it and pushed it open.



*Open?*

*Not closed? Locked?*

“Bella! Wait!” Darby shouted and yanked Bella back by her shirt.

Darby felt sick to her stomach as patted her pockets. Had she not locked the door? Nope, her keys were in her pocket, and she remembered double checking before she left.

*Then why is the door unlocked and open?*

Bella moved next to Darby and turned her face up. She must have noted the concern in Darby’s tone, because she didn’t question and stayed right next to Darby.

“Darby, what’s wrong?” she asked in a quiet voice.

Darby took a step back with Bella and pulled her phone from her pocket.

“Just stay here, Bel. We’re not going inside right away.”

Ric picked up on the first ring. *Thank God.*

“Hey, Darby. I got your –”

“Ric, someone’s in my house,” Darby interrupted.

“Stay out of the house,” Ric commanded with no hesitation, his tone immediately changing. “Do you have your keys?”

“Yeah.”

“Get in your car and drive to the police station. I’m on my way to your house now. Take Bella and go.”



Ric dropped his phone and got on the radio.

“This is Stevens-44. 11-11. Officer needs assistance. Burglary in progress at 1225 Fredrick Rd. Repeat, 11-11, 1225 Fredrick Rd.”

Then he hit his lights and stepped on the gas. Even with lights and sirens, he was at least five minutes from the house. He shook with frustration. Maybe one of his boys in blue would get to Darby’s house before him.



“Darby? Who’s in the house?” Bella asked in a timid voice, so unlike her normal, boisterous tone. Darby managed to scowl through her fear. How dare someone make Bella sound that way?

“It’s okay, Bel,” she said as she walked Bella to her car in the driveway. “We’re just being safe, so until your dad gets here, we’re going to drive down the street. Hop in.”

Darby clicked her fob and unlocked the rear passenger door.

“But I don’t have my seat,” Bella said.

*Crap.*

“I know, Bel, but we’re only going down the street, and you’ll wear the seat belt nice and tight. See how it can go lower? It’ll keep you safe until we get there.”

Bella gave her a doubtful side eye, but she climbed in. *So slowly.* Darby wanted to shove her into the car and take off, but that would only scare her more and maybe cause an accident.

There were no good options.

Once Bella was in the seat, Darby tugged the cross belt as low as it could go, which still seemed so big compared to Bella, and leaned across Bella to fasten her in.

“All good. Let’s go.”

She backed out of the car and closed the door. Then she turned around.

And a man in a black track suit, cap, and bandanna on his lower face stood on her porch.

*Oh, shit.*

Her stomach sank lower, and she was certain she was going to puke.



Ric's radio crackled. "Jones-42. Two minutes out. Enroute to Fredrick Road."

*Fuck. Two minutes?*

So much could go wrong in two minutes. He'd bought enough patrol calls to know that.

With his sirens blaring, Ric swerved around a set of cars that had pulled to the right to allow him to pass. He careened past at sixty, slowing only to make the right turn. Was he less than two minutes out? Maybe, if the roads remained clear.

He was sweating.

Ric clicked the radio. "Copy that. Stevens-44 enroute. Less than two."

Once he rounded the corner, he hit the gas, bringing the speedometer to seventy.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN



DARBY SCRAMBLED AGAINST THE car, trying to shield Bella from this man and control her breathing.

Ric had said there had been burglaries. *I'll just let him take what he wants.*

The man in black came close enough for Darby to see his hair was long, spilling past his cap and he hadn't tucked it into the bandanna.

*Why am I noticing this?* she thought wildly.

He stopped an arm's length in front of her, carrying a large black duffel she hadn't noticed before.

"Give me the keys." His mouth moved under his bandanna.

*To the car?* No – Bella was in the car.

Darby clung to the cool metal door, trying to press herself into the vehicle.

"No," she breathed.

The man's hard, steady gaze didn't move. "Give me the keys." He held out a gloved hand – not a work glove or cold

weather glove. More like a driving glove, or work out gloves. Fitted.

*He blends in.* Ric's voice echoed in her head.

Had she seen a long-haired guy wearing those gloves in the neighborhood? Driving by or walking his dog? She couldn't recall.

She clutched keys to her chest and clicked the fob to lock all the doors. Then she hit the lock button and held it so the alarm went off. He didn't even move — the alarm did not phase him at all. She shifted to make sure she blocked any view of Bella. Protecting Bella was the most important thing. *The only thing.*

She shook her head as a sound reached her ears. Sirens in the back ground?

*Oh, please hurry, Ric!*

The man in black stepped closer to her. "Hurry and give me the fucking keys!"

Darby exhaled, then put her keys between her fingers like a poor-man's brass knuckles. She'd lived alone for a long time, and if Ric was on his way, all she had to do was hold this guy off for a minute, maybe two. She could do that. Maybe the keys between the fingers trick would do that.

"No," she said with more confidence than her shaky chest felt. "The cops are on their way. Hear them? Get lost before they arrest you."

"They won't make it in time," he said as lunged for the keys.

He struck her face with her hand as the police car pulled up. Ric was out of the car in a fluid move before it fully stopped.

“Stop! Police!” Ric shouted over his sirens and her car alarm as he tackled the criminal to the ground, and Darby with them.

Relief flooded her momentarily, before landing hard on the cement, directly on her left hand.



The fury Ric felt at seeing tiny Darby stand up to a *fucking* criminal was so hot he tasted it in the back of his throat. Yanking the parking brake of the black-and-white, he leapt from the car and launched himself at the man. His only thought as he tackled the man to the ground was he had to get the attacker and the situation under control before this guy hurt Darby.

Fortunately, the guy was a lightweight, and once he was on the driveway, Ric rolled him over, held him down with one hand and his knee, and unsnapped his cuffs from his belt. He had the guy secured when another car arrived, and Officer Matthew Danes was by his side, reaching for the man's other arm.

“You good, brother?” Danes asked.

Ric nodded and stood. “Yeah. You got him?”

“Copy that,” Danes confirmed. “You think this is the guy who’s been hitting the houses around here?”

“Yeah. It’s the same MO. Far for him, but we’ve been tracking him south.”

Officer Danes yanked on the man’s bandanna to expose his face, and Ric had a flash that he had seen the guy before. It must have been the same guy he had seen and chased a few weeks ago.

Shaking off the odd familiarity, Ric glanced at Bella’s worried face in the window and smiled reassuringly, then stepped to Darby as he clicked the radio for dispatch.

“Stevens-44. I need bus 10-52, at my location. 1225 Fredrick Road.”

“Copy that, Stevens-44.”

Ric crouched to Darby, grasping her right arm. “Hey, babe, you okay?”

He helped her sit up, and he had a horrifying moment when he saw she was holding her arm. She looked up at him with sad, fearful eyes. “It hurts. I think it’s broken.”

He kissed the top of her head, feeling more relief than humanly possible. A broken hand could be fixed. “An ambulance is on the way.”

Darby handed him the keys and pointed to the car door. Ric looked inside to see Bella’s large brown eyes peeking over the



edge of the door.

“Is she okay?” Darby asked.

“She’s fine.”

He clicked the unlock button, and the alarm shut off before he opened the door.

“Daddy!” Bella screamed.

Ric released the seat belt and Bella fell into his arms.

“Daddy! Darby protected me from the bad man!”

Ric lifted Bella out of the car, and she rushed to Darby.

“Are you okay?” she screeched, reaching for Darby, who hugged Bella with her right arm.

“Yeah, I fell on my arm but the doctors will fix me up fine.”

More sirens filled the air with screeching noise as the ambulance pulled up to the driveway. Ric held Bella’s hand as the first responders got Darby on the stretcher. Ric took her uninjured hand as they rolled her to the bus – it was cool and stiff. He gave her a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll meet you at the hospital,” he told her once the stretcher was at the door.

“Lock my house, please,” she asked him as the responders adjusted the stretcher to lift it.

Ric’s pained smile stretched his lips and he nodded.

“We have to get her to the hospital before the arm swells,” the responder said. Ric took the hint and stepped back.

“No, wait!” Bella pulled on Ric, trying to reach for Darby.

“It’s okay, Bella. The doctors need to check my arm. I’ll be fine and Daddy will bring you to the hospital right away.”

That seemed to placate her, and she tucked herself behind Ric’s legs.

Ric moved to the stretcher before it slid into the bus. He leaned in close so only she would hear. “I love you. I was so scared when you called. I can’t imagine losing you. Not when I just found you.”

Darby turned her head enough, and he kissed her lips, softly and briefly, then stepped back quickly as they closed the bus doors.

He was still in uniform, after all.



Officer Danes grabbed Ric’s attention before he could leave with Bella.

“Williams, come take a look at this guy. Hat and bandanna are off. Is he the same shit from that call a few weeks ago?”

Ric shifted his eyes hard from Danes to Bella in an unspoken comment of *language please*, though he knew he was lucky it was only the “s-word,” according to Bella.

“Does he have to put money in the swear jar?” Bella piped up.

Ric gave her a flat smile. “No, baby. Just Daddy. Can you stay right here by Darby’s car for a moment? Daddy needs to talk to Officer Danes.”

Bella leaned against the trunk and waved to Danes as Ric strode purposefully to the black-and-white.

Danes opened the rear passenger door, and Ric gripped the neckline of his bullet-proof vest and ducked in to get a look at the guy.

Then he froze.

Yeah, he knew the guy.

And he suddenly knew *why* he recognized him.

It was the same guy from his earlier burglary call. But with the cap and all black, Ric didn’t notice that he’d seen the guy before that.

At the college art gallery. The fucker had sported a pony tail and asked Darby for her autograph.

*Fuck.*

He’d been casing Darby. Casing the college gallery, then Darby. Did he decide her house would be an easier target, or think to start dealing in art as well as stolen tech?

He’d been casing her, and Ric missed it.

“Fuck me,” Ric cursed under his breath.

Danes leaned in with his hands holding the neckline of his own vest. Otherwise those vests pushed uncomfortably against the neck — that vest hold was common across policing and

military. That familiarity was oddly soothing to Ric after his immediate shock of recognizing the suspect.

“That him?” Danes asked.

Ric nodded and told Danes about the Mount Laguna College art gallery encounter.

“When we search him and his place, we’ll look for that autograph. My guess is he saw the short artist as an easier target than a college campus.”

Ric bit back a grin, the image of tiny Darby wielding her keys like a weapon.

“She sure showed him how wrong he was,” he replied to Danes.

Danes slammed the door shut. “She was lucky, brother. This could have ended very wrong. I’ll write this up and make sure it gets kicked to Andres.” Danes referenced one of the assistant District Attorneys who Tustin police worked with. “She’s a shark when it comes to prosecuting robberies and assaults. She’ll make sure this sticks hard.”

Ric clasped Officer Danes on his blue uniformed shoulder. “Thank you, brother.”

Danes nodded. “Now take your daughter and get your ass to the hospital. You have other work to do.”

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THE HOSPITAL WAS COLD, and Darby shivered under the thin emergency room blanket. The salt-and-pepper haired doctor, who introduced himself as Dr. Hernandez, gently pressed along her arm. She hissed at one point, but the pain wasn't nearly as bad as it had been.

“It's not broken, so that's good. But it looks like you might have injured a tendon, and those can hurt and take some time to heal.”

“Will I use it normally again?” Panic flared in her chest at the prospect of never painting again. The panic was so fierce, her stomach reversed on herself. Dr. Hernandez earned his pay and had a puke bowl under her chin before her lunch came back up.

“I guess the stress of today got to me,” Darby said as she spit into the bowl.

Dr. Hernandez didn't speak, but he looked at her face, her eyes, and squinted.

“You seem pale. Have you been sleeping well?”

“Yeah, I’m just overwrought from today. I wore me out.”

“This seems more than that. Bags like that take a bit of time to show, and you’re not in shock. Not unless you have another condition, like a heart conditions or —” He paused. “Could you be pregnant?”

Darby barked out a laugh, then caught herself and covered it with a cough. How inappropriate! “Nope. That’s impossible.”

The doctor raised his eyebrow. “Now, you know that’s not true.”

“Oh no,” Darby said, shaking her head. “I had stage 4 endometriosis, laser surgery, and scarring. I can’t have kids.”

Dr. Hernandez tapped his pen against his clipboard and leveled his gaze at her. “Actually, no. It means it will be difficult to have kids. Very difficult sometimes to conceive, but not impossible. Let’s get you a test.”

He handed her a cup.



Later that day, Ric brought Darby back to his house and got her settled on the couch. The doctor had said she wasn’t in shock, but with a sling on her arm and her pale skin, Ric had the sense something else was going on.

And she was quiet. Eerily quiet the whole ride home.

He didn't change out of his uniform right away. Instead, Ric found a fluffy blanket to put over her, Bella ran to her room and returned with pillows. She tucked one under Darby, who gave the girl a weak smile, then Bella climbed onto the couch with the other and tucked herself in next to Darby.

Ric didn't miss how Darby reached a hand out to stroke Bella's reddish-blond hair.

Something else was going on, all right. Something that was weighing on Darby hard. Ric's heart stuck in his throat. Was she traumatized by this? Of course she would be. But did that somehow change what was going on between them? Or how she felt about him?

Instead of asking — that was *not* a conversation he needed to have in front of Bella — he went into the kitchen and poured an iced tea in a tall glass and brought it to Darby. He set it on a coaster on the coffee table next to Bella's drawings.

“Thank you,” she said.

Ric sat on the love seat and leaned toward her. Darby twisted under the blanket and rested her chin on the couch armrest, her hazel eyes full of shadows, her hair wild and curling around her face.

*Haunted.* That's what she looked like.

Ric breached the distance between them — only six inches or so, but a chasm otherwise — and brushed a wavy lock off her cheek.

“Something’s wrong, love. It’s wafting off you. Is everything okay? Is there something other than your arm going on?”

Her eyes shifted toward her arm before returning to Ric.

“Yeah, the arm will heal. and the doctor says I should be okay to use it again soon. I’m glad it’s my left arm and not my right. But I do have some other news, and it’s big and life changing and we need to talk about it.”

Ric leaned closer. Her voice was low — trying to make sure Bella didn’t hear? Or was the news bad and she kept her voice down so as not to speak it into the universe? Ric tensed but placed his hand reassuringly on her cheek.

“Tell me. You can tell me anything. Anything at all. If it’s something significant, we’ll get through it together.

“It’s significant all right,” Darby said in an odd tone. Ric’s heart stopped and his blood pumped cold. “And we will have to make some big decisions here soon.”

*We?* Ric’s brow furrowed. He shifted off the couch and knelt in front of Darby. Bella shifted so her eyes peeked above the blanket that covered Darby. She might not understand what was being discussed, but she was a smart enough girl to know something important was happening and to be quiet and listen.

“What? Please tell me, Darby. We can get though anything. I’ll be right here for you every step of the way.”

Her lips twitched into a pained smile. “Good. Because that’s what a daddy should do.”



Ric froze in his spot. His heart still hadn't restarted. She moved her head closer to his.

"I'm pregnant."

Ric rolled back on his heels and bumped into the coffee table, shaking the tea in her glass. He wasn't a man who shocked easily, but this ... "Pregnant? What? I thought you said you couldn't ..."

"Turns out the doctors were a bit wrong. What they meant was so difficult as to be near impossible, but *not* impossible."

She reached under the blanket, pulled out a folded sheet of paper, and handed it to Ric. His vision was blurry, but the information was right there on the lab work. Under *Pregnant y/n*, in bold letters was the word *positive*.

*Positive* meant *pregnant*.

"Is that okay?" Darby asked in a little voice.

His eye shot open wide, then a huge smile split his face, and he gathered Darby in his arms.

"Okay? It's amazing! I always wanted a big family, but then ..."

They both noticed that Bella's face moved above the blanket, a shocked smile on her tiny mouth.

"Pregnant? That means a baby?" she asked in a gasping voice.

Ric's heart had restarted, but it skipped a beat at Bella's question. What if she wasn't on board? Who knew what kids

thought about life changes like this? Not being the only child anymore?

“What do you think, Bella?” Ric asked softly. “If Darby and I have a baby?”

Saying the words out loud seem like something magical and impossible.

Bella’s face brightened as she sat and clapped her hands together. “Can I pick if it’s a brother or sister?” she squealed. She seemed happy ...

No, happy was too weak a word. Ric’s emotions were all over the place. He flicked his gaze to Darby — he could only imagine what her emotions were doing. She was the one who had lived with the dire news that she’d never have children. Now to be pregnant? No wonder she looked to be in shock — she was in shock!

“Nope, baby,” Ric told her. “No one gets to pick. It will be a surprise for all of us.”

She climbed off the couch to stand by him, and she appeared crestfallen, her face no longer quite as bright.

“Bel, will you be upset if it’s one or the other? Do you want a baby brother or sister?”

She shook her head, her loose hair falling into her face. After everything from today, Ric hadn’t had the chance to really coddle her and make sure she was in a good place. Now to hear she might have a sibling on the way? Ric told himself

to make sure Bella got some avid attention from him this weekend.

“No, Daddy. But I need to know which one to add to this.”

Bella slid one of her drawings off the table. It was another picture of all three of them. It was then that Ric noticed the coffee table was littered with a mix of flower drawings, which he had expected, and family drawings. Pages and page of all three of them — by the house, under rainbows and hearts, at a park or in the sky.

Darby took the drawing from Bella and studied it.

“Your use of color is fantastic, Bella. And you’re making huge strides with your contouring. Are you sure you want to add to this? It’s nearly perfect.”

Bella shook her head. “No. I have to add the baby. Then it will show our whole family and be perfect.”



The rest of the evening passed in a subdued, celebratory way. They all cuddled on the couch and watched an animated movie starring talking cats, ate cold pizza for dinner much to Bella’s delight, then Ric got her ready for bed.

Before Ric took her to her room, Bella padded her bare feet into the living room. Her purple nightgown reached her ankles

and had a sparkly unicorn on it.

*Of course it did*, Darby thought with a smile.

Bella stopped in front of the couch and looked at Darby with the biggest brown-eyed look a child could muster. “Can I give you a hug and kiss goodnight?” she asked.

Darby thought her insides were melting. “Of course you can, sweetie.” Darby opened her arms wide and Bella threw herself into them.

But she didn’t pull back right away. She clung to Darby.

“You’ll still love me when the baby comes, won’t you?” she asked in a tiny voice.

Darby’s gut wrenched, and she hugged the little girl tighter. “That’s the neat thing about babies, sweetie. When they come, they bring more love, not less. I’ll love you even more each day, and even more than that once the baby is here. Babies make more love, not less.”

Bella wiggled against Darby, kissed her on the cheek, and then raced back to the hallway toward her bedroom.

Ric came out shortly after, an odd expression on his face. Then again, maybe it was just his new expression — he had appeared off kilter all afternoon. Not that she blamed him.

“I’d feel better if you stayed here the night. I’ll go to your place and grab clothes or things for you.”

Darby flicked her gaze to the hall, and Ric caught it. “If you want, I can sleep on the couch tonight, if it makes you more

comfortable.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m just in a state of shock at every turn.”

Ric slipped out the door, giving Darby a great view of his ass in his jeans. He had changed shortly after they got back to his house, but when she first told him the news, he had still been in his uniform, and he looked sexy as hell on his knees in front of her in that blue. The jeans though — they were a good second choice.

She sighed. How had she gotten here? With this boyishly handsome, fair-haired cop, his fairy-like daughter, and a life she never imagined possible?

Not for the first time, she wondered if the baby would have strawberry blonde hair. It would definitely be curly, or at least wavy. Would the baby look like Bella at all?

The front door creaked open and interrupted Darby’s thoughts.

Ric carried a canvas bag, presumably full of her clothes and toiletries. He set it on the floor by the hall, then joined her, sitting on the edge of the coffee table to face her.

“So I was thinking, it might be better if —” he paused.

Darby tilted her head at him. Sharing emotions seemed to be difficult for him. Darby had noticed that, and if he was this focused on her, it was something emotionally significant. She was sure of it.

“If what?” she urged him.

“If you move in with me. I know it’s soon, and we only mentioned it that one time, but now things have changed, and I’d feel safer if you moved in. I *want* you to move in. I want to wake up to you every morning and have your face the last I see before I go to sleep at night. I want to keep you safe every moment of the day.”

Darby raised her eyebrows. She wasn’t prepared for such an emotional outpouring. “Are you okay with that? What about Bella? Would she be okay with that?”

Ric snorted. “Hell. It was Bella’s idea. She wants to be with you every minute of the day. She’s said so more than once. And tonight she said she wants to help you with your art until your arm heals. You’ll still be able to do your paintings, right?”

A tiny smile tugged at Darby’s lips and she nodded. “Yeah. I’m not left handed.” Then she gazed into Ric’s blazing green eyes. “Are you okay that I’ve pretty much adopted her as my own?”

“If anything, I think it’s better that way. She loves you like crazy.” Ric leaned close enough to press his forehead against hers. “And so do I,” he whispered.

“I love her so much, too.” Darby said, then lowered her voice. “And her daddy. I’ll start moving my stuff tomorrow.”

“*We* will start moving stuff tomorrow. No heavy lifting for mommy.”

*Mommy.* Her heart surged and her brain whirled. *I’m going to be a mommy.*

Ric stood and held out his hand to her.

“Come on. Let’s get you settled into bed. We can watch TV in there until you fall asleep.”

Darby grabbed his hand, and he tugged her upright onto her feet.

As they started down the hall, Darby paused and glanced at the front door.

“You locked it, right? Keeping us safe?”

Ric tugged her into his arms.

“Always.”



*Seven months later ...*

“Right here. Just come and sit down.” Ric held the door open, his face a mask of mixed panic and pride as Darby carried the pink-swaddled baby into the house.

Ric’s mother Yvonne had come to the house to watch Bella, who presently rushed the couple, shrieking with joy.

“Can I hold her?” she squealed as she clapped.

“Let’s let mommy sit down, and then yes, you can hold her,” Ric said.

Bella ran to the couch and jumped on it, leaving a wide space for Darby.

“You got her okay?” Ric asked.

*If he had been overprotective before . . .* Darby thought. She flashed a tired smile at him.

“Yes, Daddy.”

Yvonne, bless her soul, stood to the side and admired the baby from afar. Her strawberry blonde hair was pulled back — it was obvious where Ric and Bella got their hair. That was some hard genetics. And if Angelica’s coloring didn’t change, it appeared she might have that same reddish blonde crown.

Yvonne did her best to stay away, but it would only last so long. From the couch, Darby could taste her grandmotherly need to hold the baby.

Once situated on the couch, she handed baby Angelica to Bella, who held her as if she were made of glass. They had named the baby after one Darby’s favorite painters, Angelica Kauffman, and Ric readily agreed because it sounded perfect with Annabella.

Ric perched on the far arm of the couch, looking down at Bella and the baby, his eyes shining like bright emeralds. Darby couldn’t stop looking at her family.

*Her family.*

A huge yawn escaped her. She suddenly felt so tired. Weary.



Yvonne came over to her, a motherly smile on her face. “Come on, sweetie. You did all the hard work. Now you should nap and let us take care of you and the baby. We’ll bring Angelica in to you after you get some sleep.”

Darby wanted to argue, stay here with her family and new baby, but the mention of sleep made her eyes droop. Yvonne was an experienced mother — Darby had no doubt the woman knew what she was talking about.

Ric stood quickly to help Darby up but Yvonne shooed him back.

“I’ll take her. Stay here with your girls and I’ll help her to bed.”

Yvonne placed her hand under Darby’s arm and practically lifted her off the couch, then walked Darby down the hall.

As she left the living room, Bella’s excited, authoritative voice carried to the hallway. She was speaking to Ric.

“Now you need to marry her, Daddy.”

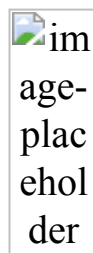
They were married later that year. And Bella made the most beautiful flower girl in her sparkling, purple tulle dress.

When they spoke their vows, they each added a set of words.

*Never enough.*

*THE END*

# EXCERPT FROM CHARMING:



MARIAH SLAPPED HER PHONE before it emitted another trilling beep. She had lowered the volume as far as she dared to still be able to wake up for class, but in the dark of night, the ringer still sounded far too loud.

The snoring body next to her grunted and Mariah froze. The apartment was quiet — she even held her breath to make sure she didn't make as sound either. Once the body settled, Mariah lifted the covers and slipped out, as stealthy as a thief.

And wasn't that what she was doing? Thieving her time away from Derek? Mariah tiptoed to the narrow walk-in closet, and only when the door was secure did she turn on the light.

She blinked in the sudden illumination and released the breath she held as she pulled down the loose tank top, hunter

green duster sweater, and dress slacks she had selected the night before. Mariah hated eight a.m. classes and laid out her outfit the night before to cut back on the time it took to get ready.

Once dressed, she shut off the light and slipped to the kitchen to make a small pot of tea, then closed herself in the bathroom to apply a quick layer of makeup.

For a college professor in her late 20s, makeup should have been an area of expertise for Mariah, but having spent much of her late teens and early adult hood with her nose in a book, makeup had remained a mystery to her.

She was fortunate, however, that her lightly tanned skin only needed a quick application of BB cream and makeup that came in iridescent plastic kits, so all she had to do was open one kit and everything else was ready — eyeliner, shadow, mascara, a hint of blush and lip gloss. Her dark brown eyes were easily smoky, so that saved time as well.

Then came the bane of her existence — a fluffy mound of ash-blonde hair that was half wavy, half curly, and always a frizzy mess. Mariah called it her triangle mess. She pulled it into a bun or a banana clip nearly every day and called it good. Her hair was a disaster. She decided on a clip to keep it under control. It was too early to deal with her hair-disaster.

Zippering up her books, she grabbed a to-go cup of tea and her purse waiting by the front door, then peeked in her purse.

Her keys weren't in her purse.

*Where the hell are my keys?*

She pressed her head against the apartment door and exhaled.

*In the bedroom.* She had retrieved a book from her car last night before bed and left the keys on her bedside table.

*Fuck.*

Mariah pulled off her boots and, leaving them by the front door, slipped back into the bedroom which was still dark thanks to the room darkening curtains. She palmed the keys so they wouldn't jingle and made it to the bedroom doorway.

But she missed her count and banged the side of her head against the door jamb.

She held her breath again, sure that the banging woke Derek, but he continued to snore. His late night was paying off in her favor. Rubbing the side of her head, she made it back to the front door, zipped her boots back on, and left.

*Escaped* was more like it.

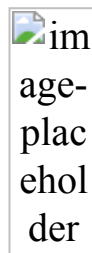
Once she was in her car, she fully breathed again.

“I can't live like this,” she told herself.

She was an adjunct professor, making enough money to support herself, a feminist who was supposed to be a role model for her young college students, yet she lived with a narcissistic emotional abuser who gaslighted her on a regular basis.

Mariah was not proud.

Glancing at the clock in her car, she took a sip of her cooling tea and pulled out to the street toward campus.



Mariah's mind drifted as she drove the short trip. Not for the first time, she asked herself what she was doing with Derek. The past few weeks had become a living hell with the man, and she was still letting him sleep over and dictate how to live in her own home.

*What the hell is wrong with me?*

Why was she letting him do this? She wasn't that type of person. She didn't see herself as that type of person.

In fact, she'd been called a bitch to her face more than once. And she reveled in the term. Why not own it?

What had happened over the past years that made her think she deserved someone like Derek? That was the lone conclusion she could draw — that subconsciously she believed she wasn't deserving of someone better.

*Who the hell am I?*

But what if her subconscious was telling her something? What if she was only worthy of someone like Derek?

They had met at a bar, of all places.

*By God, shouldn't that have been a clue?*

Nothing but a meat market, and two of her friends outside campus dragged Mariah there on a Karaoke night. A tallish blond with a decent physique, at least what she could discern from the button down he wore — took the stage and belted out a decent rendition of *Don't Stop Believing*. Mariah had loved it and ended up cheering louder than anyone else in the bar.

The three shots of Fireball hadn't hurt either.

She got his number, made out with him in the parking lot, and called him later in the week.

Most of their dates had been to bars. That should have been her first clue.

But he was so sexy — with light eyes that squinted in a come-hither way that reached into her chest and squeezed her heart.

When was the last time she'd felt that with him? Mariah couldn't recall.

And he had a great job, so he wasn't leeching off her.

Slowly he'd started making requests of her, about her apartment or how she lived. And as much as she hated herself for it, she'd begun to walk on eggshells around him.

And they didn't do anything together. They didn't watch movies and eat popcorn on the couch. They didn't go to any campus events, even though the music festivals were fun. They didn't have long conversations late into the night. They'd eaten out together all of two times. No dates to the park, nothing. Was she overly romantic, or misguided to think

that relationships should be more? All they shared was the bar and the bed.

The bar and bed.

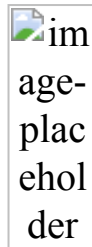
He'd been decent enough in bed to start. Giving it his all the first time or two.

Mariah tapped her fingers on her steering wheel as she waited at a light. She also couldn't recall the last time she came when he was pumping into her. Lately, she'd begun to push him away, using the old "I have a headache" line.

Yeah. Something needed to be done.

*She was done.*

[Check out the Campus Heat Series and Charming here!](#)



# POLICE BLOTTER

THIS IS MY FIRST real single dad book. I've have variations of the single dad story in some of my previous books, but it was more with adult children, and the dad was not the focus of the story.

Much of how I wrote Ric came from the great single dads I know in my life, friends of mine who stepped up as a dad when they divorced in a way this gen-x kid never thought possible. Many of these dads are also a full time dad, with full custody and the like. They do the school work, make and take their kids to all the doctor and dental appointments, do all the running around for friends and extra curricula ... they are the stand up parent, and as a single parent myself, I adore them all for it.

Keep up the good work, guys! And stay sexy!

This was a fun book for me to write, and I hope you, my marvelous reader, love it as well.

I hope you enjoy these pulled-from-real-life stories as much as I do.



# A THANK YOU—

THANK YOU TO MY loyal readers – for you I am eternally grateful. Thank you for reading my police romance. They, in and of themselves, are a work of love.

To my kids and family, thank you for always supporting me. Even though writing takes me away from them, or I drive them nuts talking bookshop, they are my best cheerleaders. I couldn't do this without their support. I do all this for you guys!

Finally, and just as eternally, I need to thank Michael, the man in my life who has been so supportive of my career shift to focus more on writing, and who makes a great sounding board for ideas. Thank you, babe, for putting up with this and for giving me and the kids our own Happily Ever After.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Deerwester-Dalrymple is a professor of writing and an author. She started reading when she was 3 years old, writing when she was 4, and published her first poem at age 16. She has written articles and essays on a variety of topics, including several texts on writing for middle and high school students. She has written over seventy books under a variety of pen names and is also slowly working on a novel inspired by actual events. Her Glen Highland romance series books have won *The Top Ten Academy Awards* for books, *Top 50 Indie Books for 2019*, and the *2021 N.N. Light Book Awards*. She lives in California with her family of seven.

Find Michelle on your favorite social media sites and sign up for her newsletter here: <https://linktr.ee/mddalrympleauthor>

# ALSO BY MICHELLE

As Michelle Deerwester-Dalrymple

Glen Highland Romance

*The Courtship of the Glen – Prequel Short Novella*

*To Dance in the Glen – Book 1*

*The Lady of the Glen – Book 2*

*The Exile of the Glen – Book 3*

*The Jewel of the Glen – Book 4*

*The Seduction of the Glen – Book 5*

*The Warrior of the Glen – Book 6*

*An Echo in the Glen – Book 7*

*The Blackguard of the Glen – Book 8*

*The Christmas in the Glen – Book 9*

The Celtic Highland Maidens

*The Maiden of the Storm*

*The Maiden of the Grove*

[\*The Maiden of the Celts\*](#)

[\*The Roman of the North\*](#)

[\*The Maiden of the Stones\*](#)

[\*Maiden of the Wood\*](#)

*The Maiden of the Loch - coming soon*

*The Before Series*

[\*Before the Glass Slipper\*](#)

[\*Before the Magic Mirror\*](#)

[\*Before the Cursed Beast\*](#)

*Before the Red Cloak – coming soon*

*Glen Coe Highlanders*

[\*Highland Burn – Book 1\*](#)

*Highland Breath– Book 2 coming soon*

Historical Fevered Series – short and steamy romance

[\*The Highlander's Scarred Heart\*](#)

[\*The Highlander's Legacy\*](#)

[\*The Highlander's Return\*](#)

[\*Her Knight's Second Chance\*](#)

[\*The Highlander's Vow\*](#)

[\*Her Knight's Christmas Gift\*](#)

[\*Her Outlaw Highlander\*](#)

[\*Outlaw Highlander Found\*](#)

[\*Outlaw Highlander Home\*](#)

**As M.D. Dalrymple - Men in Uniform**

[\*Night Shift – Book 1\*](#)

[\*Day Shift – Book 2\*](#)

[\*Overtime – Book 3\*](#)

[\*Holiday Pay – Book 4\*](#)

[\*School Resource Officer – book 5\*](#)

[\*Undercover – book 6\*](#)

*Holdover – book 7 coming soon!*

**Campus Heat**

[\*Charming – Book 1\*](#)

[\*Tempting – Book 2\*](#)

[\*Infatuated – Book 3\*](#)

[\*Craving – Book 4\*](#)

[\*Alluring – Book 5\*](#)