



A
TWISTED
MAN



APPALACHIAN STAR - BOOK 4



DEANNNDRA HALL

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A TWISTED MAN (SPECIAL
FORCES: OPERATION
ALPHA)

APPALACHIAN STAR

BOOK FOUR



DEANN DRA HALL



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors have loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Shattered lives and broken hearts ...

BULLDOG

Resilience.

My life was ripped out from underneath me. Serving time for a crime I didn't commit wasn't even the worst of it. The death of my baby and the implosion of my marriage destroyed me—gutted me. But now, I'm clawing my way back out of the pit of despair and shaking off the demons to put the pieces of my life back together. Being welcomed with open arms to the Iron Oak Farms family gives me purpose, but meeting the beautiful and tenacious Tinsley changes everything for me.

TINSLEY

Resilience.

No stranger to ridicule and judgment, I've learned to keep my head down while working toward my goals and trying to stay afloat. It's not easy escaping an abusive ex and being all alone, but I'm doing the best I can. After encountering Bulldog, my world shifts. Suddenly, I can see a future—something to look forward to. But when danger threatens to destroy that hope for something new, Bulldog may not be the fighter I thought he was. Through all the twists and turns, can he finally “man up” and show me a future I deserve?

Come to the hills and hollers of eastern Kentucky and get acquainted with eight of the most determined men you'll ever meet in the Appalachian STAR series.



**Iron Oak
Farms**
Mallie, KY

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The map of Mallie, Kentucky, is not an accurate depiction of the area, although Mallie does indeed exist. It is roughly 24 miles from Hazard, Kentucky; 13 miles from Hindman, Kentucky; and 20 miles from Whitesburg, Kentucky. It's also approximately 81 miles from Fallport, Virginia, the home of Susan Stoker's Eagle Point Search and Rescue.

CHAPTER 1



Bulldog

SOMETIMES I JUST NEED TO GET AWAY FROM ALL OF THEM. Damn shame when you have to hide in the shitter to have some peace.

So now I'm in the bathroom with a magazine, hoping nobody notices that I'm not on the floor. On the other side of the door, there's pounding and hammering, and the sound of the big Juki running as Paddy sews. All I need is a break from the things running through my head, and this article on how to pickle green beans isn't cutting it, although fucking Reboot has probably taken a picture of it so he can try it. Son of a bitch fucking loves pickles. He's one true weirdo.

Bam-bam-bam! "You in there?" Patch's voice calls out.

"Yeah. Just doin' my paperwork."

"You've been in there for a while. Need a glass of prune juice?"

"No." *Fuck you*, I want to yell, but I don't. "I'm fine."

"Right. Fine. Okay."

I might as well give up. I can't escape it anyway. It's pretty much all I think about, day and night. Haunts my dreams when it's not keeping me awake. And with every second that I think about it, my fury grows. From where I sit, I think the only thing that'll shut it down is my death, and I'm plotting that constantly too.

Actually, where I sit right now is on the toilet, and I suppose I should get up. My left leg is going numb.

The first person I see when I step out is Hollywood, and that just makes me more furious. That little bastard has had everything going his way since the day he was born. Yeah, he did a few years in lockup because of his asshole brother, who I'm sure isn't any more of an asshole than he is. Fancy life, lots of money, expensive lawyers, somebody who believed in him enough to help get him out, then a woman. And that wasn't enough. Now he has a kid too. And that idea really drives me nuts.

I've never had any of those things, except for one. Never was wealthy, never an overachiever. Sure as hell never had a woman I could trust. But I had a kid. I found out too late that I was the only one who cared about her, and she was snatched from me by some piece of shit whose name I never even knew until a couple of years ago. If I could get my hands on him ...

My phone rings again and I ignore it. I know who it is and I don't want to talk to her. I've heard all I need to hear. She's got her life together. She's doing so much better. She's so happy, and she's married, and he's a great guy, and blah-blah-blah. Makes me wanna puke. But that last call ... That's the one that did me in, the moment I knew I'd hate her for the rest of my life, her and her life and her marriage and ...

Fuck Imogen. Fuck her and all the good things in her life. Now she's trying to get pregnant? Well, god help any baby that she manages to have. If she's the same kind of mom to it that she was to Paisley, it won't live to see its first birthday. And I should know.

Because Paisley didn't live to see hers. And that was all Imogen's fault, hers and that dickwad she was cheating on me with. Yeah, I know he's the one who really killed Paisley, but Imogen knew it, said nothing, and let them send me to prison for something I didn't do. I couldn't even be there when they buried my baby.

But I plan to be right there when Imogen dies. And I hope I have something to do with it.

“SO, HOW DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?”

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? “Peachy.”

“We’ve talked about the sarcasm thing,” he says, scratching on his paper with a pencil.

“Do you ever write with a pen like a grownup?” I ask.

“And there it is again.”

“And you didn’t answer my question.”

“Yes. I do sometimes write with a pen. But I like pencils because if I make a mistake, I can erase it.”

“So if I say something you don’t like and you want me to say something else, you can just erase it and write it down the way you want. Convenient.” Yes. I’m the most sarcastic son of a bitch in the world, and I own it.

“No. Most of the mistakes I make when I’m writing have to do with numbers. I have a tendency to get them wrong the first time, so I have to write them down, read them back, and then fix them.”

I press my index finger to my chin and stare at him. “And why do you think that is?”

“Kevin, this is your counseling session, not mine.”

“And yet, here we are. I’m asking the questions, and I’m not getting very good answers. I think you should get in touch with your feelings a little more. Your responses seem shallow to me.”

Shaggy stares at me. His name is Baxter, but I call him Shaggy because he reminds me of that weird guy with the bowl haircut in the cartoon with Scooby. Based on his “look,” he thinks he’s a hipster, but he’s fucking fifty-one or something. Way past hipster age. I mean, I’m thirty-nine, and I’m past hipster age, so I can say that with confidence and a good bit of snark.

He stares at me for fifteen seconds or so and finally says, “Look, if you don’t want to do this, I can just tell Captain Scott and Mr. Grady that you’re uncooperative and let it go at that. The other guys out there seem to appreciate me, and I could be working with one of them instead. Your call.”

I roll my eyes to the ceiling and sigh. “Fine. What do you want from me?”

“The same thing I’ve told you in every session. I want you to get real with me. Everybody, and I do mean everybody, is telling me you’ve got a bug up your ass ...” I glare at him. “Yes, I said a bug up your ass. Their exact words ... Well, with fewer embellishments than their version, but that’s it in a nutshell. So is there any chance during our lifetimes that you could try that?” Now who’s being sarcastic, hmm?

“I suppose I don’t even know how to do that.”

“Okay. Let’s try it. Have you talked to Imogen lately?”

I hop up and head for the door. “I can’t believe you went straight to that. Seriously? I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. That’s why we’re in here. To go straight to that, if that’s what’s causing the problems. So either sit down or we’ll call it quits.”

I plop back down in the chair. “Fine. Yes. I’ve talked to her lately.”

“How often do you talk to her?”

“Sometimes when she calls me. Which is way too often. I don’t answer very often.”

“Why does she call you?”

“I have no idea,” I say with a shrug. “I don’t give her any reason to think I’m happy to hear from her.”

“Well, what does she say when she calls?”

“Same old thing.”

“Which is?”

What I let out is more of a huff than a sigh. “Kevin, I’m so sorry. Kevin, can you ever forgive me? Kevin, I wish there was some way to make it up to you. Kevin, I’ve changed so much. Kevin, I’m so happy and I wish you were too.’ It’s like, bullshit, bitch. You’re not worried about anybody but yourself.”

“So you don’t think there’s any way she’s changed?”

“Imogen? Oh, yeah. She’s changed. Being threatened with jail time changed her ass. Put her on the straight and narrow, or at least that’s what she portrays. But this guy she’s married to, a banker, what the fuck does he see in her? A lying, cheating, backstabbing bitch who let somebody kill her own child? Who does that?”

“I need to ask you a question, and I don’t want you to get angry and shut down. And I don’t have a preconceived answer that you’re going to give, so don’t get upset. I’m just wondering ... In your opinion, why did she cheat multiple times while she was married to you?”

“Because she’s a lying, cheating, backstabbing bitch.”

“I get that part, but why? I mean, were you gone a lot?”

“Just for work.”

“And how many hours did you work a week?”

“I worked five eights, then off four, then four eights, then off five. Typical hospital shifts. Most on the graveyard shift because I was big enough to handle the drunks and druggies if they showed up in the ER.”

“That’s right. You were a nurse.”

“Yep. Working on my masters in nursing,” I point out.

“Right. So you were making good money.”

“Hell yeah, I was making good money.”

“What about the guys she was cheating with?”

“Deadbeats. They were all deadbeats. Drunks, druggies ...”

“Was she into drugs?”

I shake my head. “Not that I’m aware of. But that’s why they could come over and bang her while I was gone to work. They didn’t have anywhere they had to be.”

He sits there for a few seconds before he asks, “Did she give them money?”

It’s like somebody’s slapped me upside the head. I’d never even given that a thought. All these years, and it never crossed my mind. “I have no idea. I mean, I suppose she could’ve. It couldn’t have been much or I would’ve noticed, but yeah. I guess it’s possible.”

“Did she ever complain about you not being home enough?”

“Nope. Never. I mean, yeah, I was at work a few nights a week, but when I was off, I was totally home. Didn’t have any interests that took me away from them. I was hands-on with Paisley and helped with household stuff. The only thing I did that took me out of the house was riding with some of the guys.”

“And how often was that?”

“About once a month. We’d all go for a ride somewhere and then to a pub, and eat and talk and play pool. That was it. No big deal. They actually tried to work around my schedule, which nobody else would do. Wasn’t like any of us were sleeping around or anything like that.”

“Is there any way she could’ve thought that was what you were doing?”

“I don’t think so. I mean, she’d call me sometimes while I was out and I always answered the phone. It’s not like I was hiding from her or something.”

“Did you love her?”

That’s the hardest question to answer. “Yes. I did. With all my heart. And Paisley ... She was a dream come true for me. I was a happy man.”

“And what about Imogen? Was she happy?”

“As far as I knew, she was.”

“There were no signs?”

I shake my head. “No. None.”

“Anybody in her family like that?”

“Yeah. Her mom. The woman is a supreme whore. I remember Imogen saying she didn’t want to be anything like her mom, then wound up *exactly* like her.”

“Did you ever point that out to her?”

“How could I? I didn’t know she was cheating.”

“Right.” He says it like he doesn’t believe me.

“I didn’t!”

“I didn’t say I don’t believe you.”

“That’s how it sounds!”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t intend for it to sound that way.” I see him glance at his watch. “Okay, that’s about all the time we have today. For next week, I want you to be asking yourself why you’re so angry at all of the other guys here.”

“I’m not angry at them.”

“Well, that’s how you come across. How ’bout this? How ’bout for the next week, if you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.”

“They won’t leave me alone and let me do that.”

“You *have* to interact with them some, Kevin. You don’t have a choice. But you can be decent in your interactions. And here’s another assignment. There are seven other men here. I want you to pick a different one each day for the next week and say something positive to them.”

“Like, ‘Hey, Hollywood, I’m positive you’re a spoiled little rich bastard.’ Would that do?”

“Practicing your passive-aggressive speeches, I see. I’ll be here next week at the same time. In the meantime, try both of those.”

“Yeah, right. Okay. Bye, Baxter,” I say as I rise and head to the door. The doorknob is cold against my palm when I stop and turn to him. “Am I always going to feel this way?”

“What way is that?” he asks.

“So angry. So much hate.”

“No. You won’t. You’ll eventually feel better. It’s just that it’s been in there for a long time and you’ve never dealt with it, and prison just made you angrier and made it easier and easier to hate. That means it’ll take a while to get rid of, but you eventually will.”

The door swings open and I look back over my shoulder. “I have my doubts,” I mutter as I walk out.

I will always hate her. Always. I will always miss my baby. Always. And I will never, never trust another woman.

Never.

TINSLEY

“ANYBODY SITTIN’ HERE?”

I stare at the loser standing behind the chair next to me at the bar in Ginger’s Place. “Yep. My six foot five, two-hunnert-and-eighty-pound biker boyfriend. But go ahead. Sit down if you’re feelin’ lucky.” Guess he’s not feelin’ that lucky ’cause he walks away.

“You want another one, hon?” McKenzie, the bartender, asks me.

“Nah. One is my limit. See ya later, gorgeous,” I tell her and lay a ten down on the bar. It’s happy hour and beers are only three dollars. She can use the tip. I don’t have money, but I try to be generous when I can.

By the time I get home, I’m beat. I pull an iced coffee from the refrigerator, start the dryer, grab the remote, and sit down

in front of the TV. One of my favorite shows, *Murders to Die For*, is on tonight, and I never miss it. They're real murders but acted out by actors, and then they start giving clues and information to see if you can solve it. Then the following week, they give the right answer for the previous week at the beginning of the show. It's fun, really. There's only one I didn't figure out, and I heard on social media that nobody else did either. Tough one.

I throw a load of towels from the salon in and set it to wash. I should be able to get them dry before I go to bed. My phone pings and I look at it. It's a text, and when I open it, it's a silly meme from Penny. She's turned out to be a good friend, one I can count on, and I hope she feels the same way about me. I send back a laughing face.

By bedtime, I'm beat. I have a bowl of ice cream, turn off the TV, and start the dryer. I can fold the towels in the morning, but right now, I need some sleep. Looks like I need a new jar of hydrating cream, so I need to put that on my list. Seems like I had an extra jar here somewhere ...

And when I open the drawer, there's his bracelet. It's nothing expensive, just something I bought for him at a craft fair. Something else to throw away, so I pull it out of the drawer and drop it in the trash. That's what I've started doing with anything of his that I find. I just throw it away. I've called him about dozens of things and he doesn't really seem to care about them, so fuck that. I'm not wasting my time anymore.

My new sheets are super comfy, and I'm glad I found them on sale—soft and silky, with little cats all over them. Yeah, I know, some people would say they were juvenile, but I don't care. They're cute, and god knows there ain't that much cute stuff in my life anymore, especially when I look in the mirror.

I'm getting older and I'm still alone. What was that my crazy Nanny White used to say? "Good in bed but never wed." Meaning if you're a trollop, you ain't gonna find a husband.

Just a lot of heartache.

I LOOK AT MY APPOINTMENT BOOK FOR THE MORNING, AND I smile. At eleven, I've got Izzy Bruce down for a trim. Penny says she and Ghost are getting along real good, so I can't wait to talk to her.

Sure enough, the door opens and she steps inside with him right behind her. Then I realize she's still wearing that thing on her arm and she can't do much of nothing, so I figure that's why he's with her. "Hey, Tins!" he sings out.

"Hey, Ghost! You guys doin' okay?"

"Can't complain. Babe, I'm going down to the auto parts store to get some fuses. I'll be back in a little while." He leans over and gives her a little peck on the lips before he turns to leave. "Do a good job, Tinsley. I'll be upset if you don't."

"I always do a good job! What, you think I'm gettin' sloppy or somethin'?" I ask, laughing.

I love the way he grins at me. "You? Sloppy? Not a chance!" After he walks out, I see him turn and look at a piece of paper on the window.

"What's that he was looking at?" Izzy asks like she's reading my mind.

"It's a flyer Micah put up. He's selling his bike."

"Oh, no. He's not buying a donorcycle," she announces. I snicker. "That's what they are!"

"Yeah. I know. But around here, no more traffic than there is, it's pretty safe. Has he had a bike?"

"I dunno. Never heard him mention it if he has."

"Maybe he knows somebody who'd like it."

"Could be. Hey, can you do a few reverse highlights? Nothing drastic, just a little bit of color?"

"Sure! I can do that! Won't take but a few minutes. Hang on and let me mix up a color. Be right back." Five minutes

later, I'm back at my station and putting foils into her hair. "There. I can't do much else with it 'til that's done, so I reckon we'll just sit and talk. You likin' it out at the farm?"

"Yeah. It's nice to have Penny and Audrey out there to hang with, and Taylor's so cute. And all the guys are so nice to me."

"You gettin' a new helicopter?"

"Yeah. They're looking at some now. Of course, Frankfort has to do that, so we get what we get. Probably not new, but new to us."

"How's that fella what worked with you?"

"Dean? He's doing good. Of course, it's sad because he lost his leg and they won't let him stay with KSP."

"Why not? It ain't like he's on patrol or nothin'."

"Yeah, but we have to be able to serve as troopers if need be, and he wouldn't be able to."

"What's he gonna do?" My heart breaks for him. Brett is a nice guy, and he didn't deserve that spell of bad luck.

"I snagged him a job at Central States Training."

"Where you used to work?"

"Yeah. Not having a leg isn't going to affect how he flies, and they could use a good instructor. He's patient and kind and smart, and he'd make a good employee. They hired him almost immediately on my say-so."

That makes me smile. "You're a good person, Izzy."

"I try. Hey, is that your car out there?" she asks and points out the window.

I smile. "Yep. AMC Pacer Wagon. I've had it since forever."

"It's adorable."

"Thanks. My dad found it for cheap when I was in high school and fixed it up. While I was still livin' at home, I spent my money to have the seats reupholstered, new carpet,

headliner, and visor covers, and then a paint job. But I kept it as close to original as I could.”

“You did a good job. It’s so cute.”

“You should get you a little car like that! Hey, what about a Javelin? There’s a fella over in Pippa Passes got one for sale. Bright red, white landau roof and white stripes. White interior. Head turner.”

“Know what he wants for it?”

“Nah, but that would be easy enough to find out. Name’s Wally Westbrook. Has a salvage yard out there. I heard he wants a pretty penny for the car, but who’s he gonna sell it to around here? Ain’t nobody in these parts got no money.”

“I’ll talk to Ghost about it and see what he thinks, if he thinks there are enough places around here where we could get parts to keep it running. I don’t want something I can’t get parts for,” she says.

“That’s true. Might want to ask Micah back there or Roger down at the repair shop about that. They could probably tell ya.”

We laugh and talk while I rinse out the highlights, then do the trim and dry it all for her. It’s gorgeous. “Wow. You really outdid yourself, Tinsley. This looks amazing.”

“You gotcha some good hair, honey. Real good hair. It may be straight, but it ain’t real fine and it’s got a lotta body. And them lowlights really give it dimension.”

“Look at my girl!” I hear a voice call out and smile as I see Ghost walk in. “Babe, you look great.”

“Thanks! She’s a miracle worker,” she says and throws a thumb toward me.

I shake my head. “Hey, gotta have something good to work with to do good work.”

“What do I owe you?”

“Oh, let’s just say an even fifty.”

“Here’s sixty,” she says and hands me three twenties. “I’d give you a bigger tip, but that’s all I’ve got.”

“That’s fine, honey. You just enjoy your new look.” Then I turn to Ghost. “Hey, saw you lookin’ at the flyer out there.”

“Yeah, that’s a nice bike. I don’t know if any of the guys would be interested, but I’ll tell them about it.”

Uh-huh. He knows if he wants it, there’s no point in saying anything in front of her. That makes me laugh. “You do that. I know Micah would like to sell it.”

“Come on, babe. It’s getting close to lunch and Audrey might need some help.”

Izzy rolls her eyes. “Fat lotta good I’ll do anybody. I can’t even help myself. See ya later, Tins!”

“See ya later, doll. Y’all have a good afternoon.” As soon as they’re out the door, I grab my little rechargeable vacuum cleaner and suck up the loose hair, then carry the wet cape to the back and put it in my laundry bag. I’ve got about ten minutes until my next client comes in. That’s barely long enough for me to eat a sandwich.

But hey, business is business.

BULLDOG

OKAY, HERE I GO. IF THEY MAKE A BIG DEAL OUT OF IT, I won’t do it again. I’m just gonna try to be smooth and let it kinda blend in. Who should my victim be? The first person I see when I walk in is Hollywood. Nope. Not doing that. I need somebody easier.

Patch. He’s easier.

Now to look for something ... He’s working on a blade, so I wander over on my way back from the blank bin. It’s a long, long knife. Very thin. I wouldn’t even attempt that. I’d fracture

it with the third blow. But he's pounding this thing like a pro, and it's looking really good. Just as I walk up, he stops, looks up, and says, "Hey."

"Hey. That's looking really good."

"Thanks. This is *not* easy."

"Yeah, I wouldn't even attempt it."

"Once you've made one, it gets easier. It's all about how you hammer. You have to be sure to work from the tip to the bolster. If you start at the bolster and work toward the tip, you'll almost always lose the blade."

"Huh. That's good to know. Thanks."

"Sure. If you decide you want to try one, let me know."

"Hey, yeah. Okay. Will do."

Well, that wasn't so hard.

It's funny, but the rest of the day seems to go better. At one point, Paddy comes by and stops to look at what I'm doing. "That's lookin' good."

"Thanks."

"You gonna want a scabbard for that one?"

I look at it for a few seconds. "Yeah. I think so. Just a sheath. No belt loop."

"Okay. When you get it to where you want it to go, let me trace it and I'll make the sheath."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks."

"Anytime." And he walks away.

That wasn't so hard either.

By the time dinner comes around, I'm tired and wishing I had time to take a nap, but I don't. I'll just shower and eat, then come back to my cottage and try to get some sleep.

That's something I haven't been getting much of—sleep. Every time I try to sleep, I start thinking about Paisley, and that leads me to think about Imogen. And that makes me so

mad that I can't sleep. The longer I think about her, the angrier I get, and pretty soon, there's no point in trying to sleep.

Sure enough, that happens again tonight, so I finally just give up and get out of bed, put on my lounge pants and shoes I use as slippers, and head to the kitchen.

Lucky me—Audrey has hot dogs in the fridge and buns lying out, but I'm trying to figure out how to heat them without waking her, the kid, and the asshole. I could take them back to my cottage, but I've got no condiments there, and I need those for hot dogs. I'm still digging around when I spot some salami and prosciutto wrapped around mozzarella sticks. Perfect.

Back in my cottage, I nibble on them and watch TV. There's a movie on that I hadn't gotten to see yet, so I start that, but I find my mind drifting until I don't even notice what's going on in the movie.

My thoughts flow to where they always do ... I remember the day Paisley was born. She was the most beautiful baby in the world. I'm talking gorgeous. Perfect. Some babies are ugly when they come out, all wrinkled up or their heads kinda misshapen. Not Paisley. She had the cutest little ringlets and adorable little fingers and toes. When they asked me if I wanted to hold her, words can't describe the joy I felt.

My growing up years were pretty typical. My dad's a farmer, and both of my brothers farm with him. My sister's husband works with them too. My other sister is a nurse. At first, my dad was mad that I didn't want to work the farm, but Mom talked to him and told him how honorable it is to want to help people through the medical field like my sister does. It took him a few years, but when I graduated, he and Mom were in the audience, and he hugged me and told me how proud he was of me. I finally felt like I'd accomplished what I'd set out to, being change in the world. I married a woman I met through friends, had a fairytale wedding, and set up house. The day Paisley was born was the happiest day of my life.

And then the bastard fucking my cheating wife shook my daughter to death. They said her brain had rattled around

inside her skull until she had such severe brain damage that if she'd lived, she wouldn't have been able to do anything for herself. But that fucking Imogen, swearing that it was me who shook her ... I never wanted to kill a bitch so badly in my life. I guess I never would've known what happened if she hadn't decided that she wanted to "come clean," meaning to ask for forgiveness from me for killing my child and leaving me to rot in a prison cell.

Yeah, well, the person she should be asking for forgiveness from is Paisley, and she can't. And there's a sick, twisted part inside of me that's glad she'll never have that peace. Never. I won't even begin to extend it to her, and Paisley can't. So she'll have to live with it for the rest of her life, and that suits me just fine. Sometimes I'm shocked at the hatred I feel for her, and other times, I wish I could hate her more than I already do.

The movie goes off and I'm still sitting there, nibbling on those meat and cheese sticks, wishing I could roll the clock back and protect my child, but I had to work to make a living. It wasn't my fault, and yet it still feels like it was. I wasn't there for her at the moment she needed me. I asked Ghost how he does it, how he goes on, and he said he just takes it a second, a minute, an hour, and a day at a time. That's not working for me.

It'll be daylight soon, and I'll be expected to get up and do a full day's work. I'll be worthless, but that's just how it'll be. Someday maybe I'll find the secret to moving on.

But for right now, I just can't.

TINSLEY

I HATE THIS GROCERY STORE, BUT IT'S THE ONLY ONE WE'VE got. With my list barely scratched, I keep moving from aisle to

aisle. Seems like every time I go in there, they've moved stuff around and I can't figure out where the hell everything is.

I round the end of an aisle and there's a man standing there, looking at energy bars. He seems familiar, and when I get close, I finally recognize him. They call him Bulldog out at the farm. He doesn't look up, so I say, "Hey! Bulldog, right?"

The look he gives me could wilt glass. "Yeah. Do I know you?"

"I'm Tinsley. You know, from the salon." He just stares at me. "Those in your hand? They're really good. My favorites. They taste like real blueberries."

To my surprise, he says, "I don't remember asking you."

Wow. Nice. Real nice. I'll have to be sure to ask Penny about that shit. "Oh. Well, sorry. Do your trial-and-error thing." As I walk past, it feels like he's throwing daggers with his eyes, so I just refuse to even look at him. Rude bastard.

I get the rest of my groceries and I've managed to fill my cart about half full. I get in line—there aren't self-check registers in any of our stores—and I'm waiting for Mr. Goforth from over on Staley Road to get his cart emptied and get finished. Oh, god, now he's got to dig around in all the coins from his pockets and give them exact change. Holy shit. I'm going to be here all night. That's when I happen to notice who's behind me.

Bulldog. And he has two things.

Fuck him. I'm not letting him in front of me. He can stand there with his measly two items and rot for all I care. I start to put my stuff out on the conveyor when Mallory, the girl at the register, points behind me. "Hey, he's only got two things. You want to let him—"

"No. I do not." There's no room for miscommunication there. It's plain that it's not going to happen.

"Uhhh, okay," she mumbles and starts ringing up my items. I can feel him fuming behind me, but I don't give a fuck. That rude sumbitch can just stand there.

When I'm finished and everything's in my cart, I smile at Mallory. "Thank you, honey. See ya later."

"You too, Tinsley. Have a good evening."

And I just can't help myself. I spin to look at Bulldog and say, "And you have a good evenin' too."

"Bitch," I hear him mutter.

I level my gaze with his. "Asshole." And I walk right out of the store.

Well, that felt good! I'll get his story later. Right now, I'd just like to flatten his tires and put sugar in his gas tank.

But that would be a waste of perfectly good sugar, and that sour dickhead ain't worth it.

CHAPTER 2



Bulldog

WHO'S MY NEXT VICTIM?

I figure Reboot would be a good choice. He's always laughing and cutting up, and he can take a joke. He probably won't make a big deal out of anything I say.

We're all sitting there at dinner, shooting the shit. "How ya feelin', Iz?" Paddy asks Izzy.

"Pretty good. I start physical therapy next week for my shoulder."

"That's great!" The smile Paddy gives her is genuine, and I can tell he really cares.

"Yeah, that's good." Bear tucks back into his steak as soon as the words are out.

Hollywood looks up. "Hey, Ghost, did you want to go to Taylor's tee-ball game Saturday?"

"Yeah, Ghost, come to my game! I'm gonna hit a home run!" Taylor announces, and everybody laughs.

"Okay, okay. If somebody can help Izzy while I'm gone."

"I'll do it," Reboot offers.

"Thank you, Reboot," Izzy says, her fork still in her hand. "I probably won't need much. You'll help me get showered

and dressed before you leave, won't you, honey?" she asks Ghost.

"Of course. You can go over to the lodge and hang out so if you need something, there'll be somebody around. You can even nap over there."

"Yeah, I'll make sure she gets some rest," Reboot assures him.

I'm trying to think of something to compliment him on and I'm drawing a blank. Nothing's coming to mind and I'm about to give up when Patch says, "I'm trying to figure out which one of you should work on that order for Gatewood House. They want something really nice."

Okay, here goes. "I think Reboot would be a good choice. He's been doing some nice work."

All conversation stops, and I know they're all staring at me, so I keep my head down. After what seems like forever, Reboot says, "Thanks, Bulldog."

"You're welcome." I refuse to look at any of them. They're probably wondering what the fuck is wrong with me. Hell, I'm wondering what the fuck is wrong with me.

"I think that's a good choice. Reboot, you wanna take it?" Patch asks.

"Sure. Doing something like that for Gatewood House would give me a leg up in my reputation." Gatewood House is a local historic site for the county, and they host a lot of events. Having a piece in their collection would be a great boost for anybody.

"Then it's settled. I'll give you the specs and let you—" Patch's phone starts to ring, and he pulls it from his pocket and looks down at it. "Hang on. Gotta take this. Be right back."

We just keep on eating and talking, with Bear adding that he thinks Priest has been doing great work with some of the handle wraps, and we're all engrossed in what's going on around us when the door opens and Patch walks in. There's zero doubt that something is terribly wrong. "Patch? Patch, what is it?" Paddy asks, his voice trembling.

Penny's on her feet in an instant and beside him. "Babe, what's wrong? Has something happened?"

His face is slack and his eyes are wide. I'm a little afraid he's going to faint when he finally mumbles, "Mindy's dead."

"What?" Penny almost shrieks. "What do you mean, Mindy's dead?"

"She's dead. That was Mitchell on the phone."

"What happened?" Reboot asks.

"Car accident. Killed instantly." His phone starts to ring again and he looks down at it. "Oh, Jesus." And back out the door he goes. This time, Penny follows him.

We all sit there, stunned. There was no love lost between Patch and Mindy, but she was the mother of his kids, and he never ran her down or treated her poorly. I've heard him say a thousand times that the failure of the marriage was his fault, not hers. He never held any ill will toward her.

When he comes back inside, he looks just as bad. "Fiona." We all watch as he drops into a chair. "She's beside herself. Said Makoa ... fucking Joshua ... She said he's going to be calling me. I—" His phone rings again, and this time, he doesn't go outside. "Hello?" Now his face is starting to turn red, and I'm a little afraid. Something horrible is happening. "What? What the fuck are you talking about? Oh, no. You can't ... Well, that's a fucking dick move, asshole. Can you twist the knife a little? You're the poorest excuse for a human being that I've ever seen. I have to what?" Patch sits there, his mouth open, listening to the person on the other end of the phone. After a few seconds, he says, "Oh, yeah. She kept your ass up and did everything for you. Yeah. Sure. I'll come take care of it. Don't put yourself out." He hangs up without saying goodbye, then makes another call, and when it's answered, he says, "Hey, go get your sister. No, right now—go get your sister. I know, but there's no ... I'll be there as fast as I can get there. I'll take care of it. Just go get her. Right now. Go, Mitchell. Bye." Then he sits there, silent and still as a stone. Nobody's moving. Matter of fact, we're barely breathing.

“Babe? What’s going on? Who was that?” When he doesn’t answer Penny, she kneels down in front of him, her hands on his knees, and looks up in his face. “Patch, talk to me. What’s going on?”

“That was fucking Joshua. He told me he doesn’t want Fiona in his house and I’ll have to come and get her.”

I think we’re all in shock. “He can’t do that,” Priest says.

“Well, he can and he has. I sent Mitchell to get her, but where the hell is she supposed to go? She can’t live in his dorm room and ... Oh, shit. He can’t stay at school there. I can’t afford that university. Mindy was paying for all of that, and that asshole said if I wanted her buried, I’d have to come do it myself.” His terrified face turns to Penny. “What the hell do I do?”

“We’re gonna have to go get them, babe. They’ll have to come back here. There’s no other way.”

“Yeah, but I can’t ... I mean, that’s expensive and ... Holy shit. What the fuck is happening here?” Patch whispers. “I can’t move there, and they’re not going to want to come here, but—”

“They don’t have a choice. They have to come here. You—we—can’t pull up stakes and move to Hawaii. For one thing, there’s no way we could afford it there. And besides, your life is here. They can come here and make a new life, but you’re not a kid. You’ve worked too hard for this. I’m not going to watch you throw it all away,” Penny tells him, and I can tell that she means it.

“She’s right, Patch. You’ll just have to go get them,” Priest says in agreement.

“But where ... how ...”

“Hey, my cottage is empty now. They can stay there. No reason why they can’t,” Hollywood points out.

That’s the moment it finally hits me. My family is in crisis. There’s a lot at stake here, and it’s time for all of us to man up. *Throw him a bone*, I hear my mind whisper. “Hollywood’s

right,” I say and nod toward the smaller man. “His cottage is empty, and it’s big enough for both kids.”

“Mitchell’s not going to want to come back here. I mean, he’s a junior in college. Where the hell will he go here?” We’ve all noted how ragged Patch has started to look in the last few weeks, but now it’s even worse. “I just don’t know—”

“Hey, we’ll think of something,” Penny says as she takes his hand. “We’ll work it out somehow. But right now, we need to make plans to go get them and bring them back here.”

His head swivels and he looks right into her face. “I’m not bringing them back here without help, and there’s only one way you can help me with them. I want us to get married before we go to Hawaii. That way, you can make decisions too. You’ll be their stepmother. I’ll just feel better if I know that you’ll be there if—”

“Yes, babe. That’s not the proposal I’d always hoped for from you, but it’ll do. Let’s go file for a license.”

In his usual kind and compassionate way, he cups her cheek and kisses her forehead. “I’m sorry. I know that’s not very romantic, but I just feel like—”

“No, no. It’s fine. I understand, and I agree. Come on. We need to start making plans. First things first. Gotta book our flights.” She hops up, takes his hand, and helps him to standing. “There’s no time to waste.”

As they start out the door, he stops and turns. “Hollywood, you’ve been taking care of the business all along, so I feel good about that. Ghost, you’re in charge of the helicopter. Reboot, you know more about the day-to-day running of this place, as well as the way the shops work. I’m counting on the three of you to help out and keep things running. I’ll be back as soon as I can get back.”

Reboot nods. “It’ll be fine, cap. We’ve got this. You just do what you need to do and we’ll be here when you get back.”

“Thanks.” He steps through the doorway, but before he lets the door close, he looks back at all of us. “You guys know I love you. Say a prayer for me, wouldja?”

“You got it. We love you too,” Priest assures him, and we all watch them go.

As soon as they’re well out of earshot, Reboot looks around at us. “Holy fuck. Who does that? Kicks out a kid whose mother just died?”

“Somebody who didn’t love her the way her mother thought they did,” Bear answers.

“Yeah. That’s exactly right,” I say in agreement.

Hollywood shakes his head. “This is horrible. Just horrible. I feel so sorry for those kids. And Patch has to go there and bury her? I mean, really. That guy lived off her income and work all this time and won’t even *bury her*? What kind of asshole is he?”

“The worst kind,” Priest says, shaking his head as well. “The absolute worst.”

We all sit there, stunned. Patch’s world is upside down, and there’s nothing we can do to help him except be there for him.

That doesn’t seem like much but, right now, it’s about the best anybody could do.

THEY HAD TO LEAVE IMMEDIATELY, SO THEY FILED FOR A marriage license and they’ll get married when they get back. Who’s coming back? Three of them? Four? We have no idea. *He* has no idea. We got into a huge discussion last night about the kids, and it was firmly decided that they’ll take Hollywood’s cottage. Penny and Patch talked about living in her house with them, but he wants to be at the farm, and we want him here. One cottage isn’t big enough for the four of them, so they can stay in Hollywood’s for the time being. Fiona’s seventeen, so at best she’s only got one more year, and then she can do whatever she wants. I could be wrong, but I have a feeling that she’ll run as fast and far as she can to get away from here.

They didn't want us to stop what we're doing to take them to the airport, so they drove to Nashville themselves in Penny's car. I hated that, but he wanted us to carry on as usual.

They've been gone for about two hours when the tone goes off. "App STAR base, this is central dispatch. Request by Knott County Sheriff's Department for search and rescue assistance, over."

"Roger that, central dispatch," Reboot answers. "Location of staging area? Over."

"App STAR, report to Sheriff Stafford at the old Hindman Settlement School on Troublesome Creek. Over."

"Roger that, central dispatch. ETA, twenty minutes. Over and out." He turns to face all of us. "Okay, guys. Here we go. Let's make Patch proud."

We're out the door and on the way in ten minutes. Unit one is a man short, but we're not really worried about it. I'm with Reboot, and he'll be calling the shots, so I feel pretty confident in our abilities.

We get to the site to discover that the lost person is a surveyor. People just can't understand that up in the mountains, compasses can be deceiving, and the shadows and other signs people look for are altered by one mountain behind another. The creeks are the lowest points, so if he was going in that way, he was deep at the base of the mountains. And I can guarantee he's not local, he didn't take a local with him, and he didn't even ask a local anything about it. He's probably from Lexington or somewhere.

"Does anybody know where he was trying to survey? Or for what?" Reboot asks the sheriff.

"Said it was a property owned by somebody named Flynn," the sheriff says.

"Do you know where that is?"

"No. I mean, I know it's around here somewhere, but I'm not sure where."

“Do you have access to the coordinates he was using?” Reboot asks.

“No. He’s got all the paperwork with him. I tried to call his company, but he’s an independent, so he’s the only one with the paperwork.”

“What about his client?” The sheriff shrugs. “So we have no idea.” Reboot turns and looks at the rest of us. “Okay, there are only a few ways he could go, and we’re going to follow those.”

“Shouldn’t we call his client?” Ghost asks.

“If we keep this up, it’s going to get dark on us, and right now, we have plenty of daylight. Team one, head north. We’re going southeast. Report back every five minutes. Channel sixteen alpha.”

“Roger that, captain,” Ghost says, then stops. “Sorry.”

“Eh. It is what it is,” Reboot says and we all turn to go. This doesn’t feel right without Patch. Nothing feels right without Patch.

Fifteen minutes later, team one finds the surveyor with a sprained ankle. They radio Knott County Fire and have an EMT waiting when they carry him out. In almost no time, we’re back home. As we unload from the Jeeps, Bear looks at Paddy. “Not as smooth as usual,” Bear mumbles.

“Hey, cut him some slack. This is his first time to be in command. He just needs some experience,” Paddy replies.

“I thought he did fine,” Priest adds. “Can you do better?” Bear doesn’t answer, so I know how he feels about that. He doesn’t want the responsibility.

“How ’bout all of you just be supportive? How ’bout that?” Hollywood snaps.

“How ’bout you remember that opinions are everybody’s right,” I remind him.

Hollywood rolls his eyes. “You notice he didn’t put you in charge.”

That makes me spin to face him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just what I said. He didn’t put you in charge, so how ’bout you just follow the lead of the person who *is* in charge?”

“So now you’re the boss?”

“No. I’m the voice of reason,” Hollywood says, emphasizing every word like I’m deaf. “What do you think Patch would say if he found out you’re all criticizing Reboot? Don’t we all have to prove ourselves here?”

“You didn’t,” I sling at him. “You just brought your little pretty boy ass in here with your checkbook in your back pocket and sniffed up the right pantleg.”

Hollywood is holding his turnout coat and his tool belt, and he drops it on the ground. “You got some kind of statement you want to make? Hmmm? Just fucking say it. Quit dancing around it like you’re afraid.”

“I’m not afraid of shit, especially not from you,” I hiss through clenched teeth. I’ve been waiting for this day for some time, and it’s finally here.

“Hey!” We all turn to find Reboot standing there. “You got criticism for me, you bring it to me. You take a swing at each other, you’re both out. I’ll drive you to town and drop you off myself. I’m going to let this time slide, but I walk in on another round of this and I’ll be sure Patch knows. He’s been really, really lenient with you guys when it comes to behavior. I’m not that guy.” Then he steps right up to me and peers into my eyes. “And you—get your shit together. I’m fucking sick and tired of your attitude. We all are. I don’t know what your problem is, but Patch has been coddling you and—”

“Who you calling coddled?” I bark back.

“You. I’m calling you coddled. He’s extended more grace to you than I will. From this point forward, you’re on notice. Step out of line and it’s over.”

“What’s going on?” Ghost asks as he marches up to the group.

“Bulldog running his mouth,” Hollywood says as he picks up his stuff and heads to the kitchen. “Nobody needs this shit.”

“I’m ashamed of all of you.” The voice startles me, so I spin to look around and find Audrey standing there, hands on her hips. “Our leadership is in crisis, and what do you do? You fight like a bunch of ten-year-old schoolyard kids. It’s pathetic. Act like grownups. All you have right now is each other, and if you fracture that, you’re lost. It’ll be over. Man up and act like you’ve got some sense.” After a moment to take a turn glaring at each of us individually, she spins on her heel and heads back to the kitchen.

I’m about to say something really snarky when Priest says, “He should’ve left her in charge.”

“I’ll say. Everybody do your thing,” Reboot says. “Audrey will have dinner in a little bit, and we’ve got a lot of time to make up for tomorrow. We’ve lost today, and we’ve got work to do.”

“Copy that,” Bear mutters and heads toward his cottage. One by one, we scatter and go to our own spaces. I’m still mad, but I’m also a little scared. What if something happens to Patch? What if he decides to stay there? What will we do?

That’s a question I don’t have an answer for, but from where I sit, we don’t have enough discipline to carry on by ourselves. And that’s really sad.

I’VE BEEN WORKING ALONG FOR A COUPLE OF HOURS WHEN I sense somebody beside me and check to my left to find Ghost standing there. “Hey. Something wrong?”

He shakes his head. “No. I kept forgetting to tell you, so I figured I’d do it right now while I’m thinking about it. I took Izzy to the salon the other day and Micah had a flyer on the window. He’s selling his bike.”

I lay down my tools and rest my hands on my anvil. “Yeah? What kind?”

“I don’t remember now, but in the picture it looked like a good-looking bike. I knew you’d mentioned how you used to have one, and I thought maybe you’d like to check it out.”

“Yeah. Thanks. I’ll do that.” A bike. That would be awesome.

We work on through the week and, thank god, we don’t have any more calls. I’m grateful for that. Patch calls every day and checks on us. I don’t think it’s that he doesn’t trust us. I think it’s more that he feels responsible for us and feels like he’s letting us down. Every day, whoever talks to him tries to tell him that it’s fine, but I’m not sure he understands how much we want him to do what he needs to do.

Saturday is bright and sunny, and I decide I’ll go down to the salon and see if Micah’s working. I’m pretty sure he is because so many people can’t come in during the week. I take one of the SUVs and head that direction.

When I get to the shop, I can see all kinds of activity through the windows, so I hop out and step up to the glass. The flyer is right there, and lo and behold, it’s a Harley Davidson Heritage Softail Deluxe, and it’s a thing of beauty. It’s about ten years old, and the price is really good. Doesn’t say how many miles on it, but it looks brand new.

When I open the door, the bell on it jingles, and everybody turns to see who’s coming in. Tinsley’s standing there, working on some woman’s hair, and she shoots me a look of disgust, then goes on with what she’s doing. I stroll straight through to the back where Micah is cutting an older man’s hair. He greets me with, “Hey, Bulldog.”

“Hey. I was looking at the flyer. Actually, Ghost told me about it. The bike?”

“Oh, yeah. That thing’s sweet. I love it, but we’re expecting a baby, and the old ball and chain doesn’t want me on a bike.”

That’s confusing. I always thought he was gay. “Well, that’s a shame.”

“I know. I’ve tried to tell him that I’ll be careful, but you’d have to know Gill. He’s sure I’m going to kill myself on it.” Okay, apparently he *is* gay, so now I’m not sure about the baby thing, but I’m not going to ask. Some things I’d just rather not know about.

The women up front are laughing at the top of their lungs, and it’s kinda annoying. “They always that loud?”

“Oh, yeah. That’s just how it is. If you spend that many years trying to talk over a blow dryer, I guess it makes you sound like that.”

“Right. So could I see it sometime?”

“Sure. I’ll be home all day tomorrow if you want to come look. I haven’t had any other interest, so if you need financing, take your time and look around for somebody to get a loan from.”

I can hear Tinsley’s voice above everything else, and it’s starting to wear on my nerves. “Gotcha. Okay, I’ll give you a call tomorrow and make sure you’re still free,” I tell him and reach for his business card, then slip it in my shirt pocket. “How many miles does it have on it?”

“Less than four thousand.”

Oh holy shit. I’ve found a unicorn. “Great. I’ll give you a call tomorrow.”

“Talk to you then. Thanks, Bulldog.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you.” I turn to leave, and the laughing and chattering is louder than before. As I step past them, I look over at Tinsley. “Fucking hell, you’re loud and obnoxious,” I growl at her.

She stops and stares at me. I think she’s just going to take it, but then she says, “Oh yeah? Well, you’re rude and mean-spirited.”

“Whatever,” I toss back as I open the door and step outside. Nutty bitch.

Tomorrow I’m going out to look at a bike. It would be so sweet to have one to ride through these mountains, and I laugh

to myself as I wonder what the locals thought of Micah on it. They're not the most progressive bunch, and I'm thinking his life here hasn't been all easy street.

I stop and eat at Hank's because I really, really like their burgers. They're thick and juicy and carry all the trimmings in every bite. When I finish there, I start back to the farm, but the day is so pretty that I hate to just go back there. I've never really paid that much attention to things up and down the highway, and for the first time, I notice a cemetery on the right near the Troublesome Creek bridge. It looks very old, so I slide into the little pull-off in front and get out.

Wandering through the grave markers, I realize my initial assessment was correct. This place is ancient, like back into the early eighteen hundreds. One big marker has a man's name on it: Cain Nichols. To the right of it is a smaller stone that has the name Willa Sinclair Nichols, and it says she was his wife. Then I do the math. Cain lived to be seventy-two. Willa was born two years after him, and she died when she was thirty-one. On the other side of his stone is a marker with another woman's name on it, a Bethany Lawrence Nichols, and it identifies her as his wife. She was fifteen years younger than him, and she died when she was twenty-eight. That's when I notice the smaller markers.

To the left of Bethany's stone, in a straight line, are five small markers. Each has a name on it, and they have a birth and death date. I start subtracting, and I realize not a single one of them lived to be more than three years old. Three of them died well before they were six months old.

That's when I check on Willa's side, and to the right of her stone are eight of the same size markers, all children. The oldest was eight; the youngest was stillborn. Only the eight-year-old boy died after Willa; the rest died before she did. All of Bethany's died before she did.

Two women. One buried five children; the other, seven. How many other children did they have? Cain Nichols lost thirteen children. *Thirteen*. I know that back then, children weren't loved or doted on by their fathers as a general rule, especially in extremely religious farming communities, and

they often were born simply to be farm labor. But thirteen children? I can't even begin to fathom that, and it makes me wonder how many actually made it to adulthood, if any at all.

How did those women stand it? Was there an outbreak of yellow fever? Smallpox? Dysentery? Were they malnourished and the babies couldn't thrive? And the women died so young too. Did Cain remarry after Bethany? If he did, that wife wasn't buried near him. Maybe when he lost Bethany he figured he wasn't meant to be married. Or maybe the things he'd seen and experienced were so horrific that he didn't want to go through that again. The pain had to be unbearable.

I squat down to brush some dirt off the marker of the baby who was stillborn, and when I do, I notice something. It's surrounded by clover. My hand skims across it, the white flowers and the green lobes, and I think about better days, days when I didn't have the cares I have now. One more glance and I see something.

A four-leaf clover. I've never found one before, so I pick it and look at it. It looks like all the rest except for that fourth lobe. Is it Paisley trying to tell me something? Nah. It's just a clover.

After I've tucked it into my wallet, I climb back into the SUV and pull out onto the road toward the farm. When I get there, Priest is outside grilling steaks, and the other guys are inside making sides of different kinds. I remember the clover and pull it out of my wallet, then just drop it onto the table. One of them will find it, and maybe they'll enjoy seeing it.

I've opened the refrigerator to pull out a beer when I hear a voice say, "Where did this come from?" The voice is Ghost's, so I turn to see what he's talking about.

It's the clover. No one says anything, and he asks again, "Where did this come from? Who put this here?" Is he mad? I can't tell, but I say nothing. Everybody's shaking their heads and looking at each other, and when Paddy looks at me, I just shrug.

At that very moment, Izzy walks into the building, looks at Ghost, and steps up to the table. "Whatcha got, babe?" she

asks him quietly.

“It’s a four-leaf clover,” he answers in barely more than a whisper, and I can see his lower lip trembling.

“Did one of you leave this here?” she asks, but no one says a word. I’m not fessing up to it. Finally, she takes his hand, the one without the clover in it, and kisses the back of it, then smiles up at him. “Kiana left that for you, babe. She’s proud of you and she wants you to know that she’s watching you and she’s happy for you.” Then she wraps her arms around his midsection and presses her cheek to his chest.

Ghost rests his cheek on the top of her head and I watch in amazement as a long tear rolls down from his eye into her hair. He doesn’t say anything, just hugs her to him, and they sway gently as they stand there, two people surrounded by a roomful of others and yet totally alone in a private moment that nobody here understands. The look on his face is total peace.

Kiana. That was his daughter. I don’t know what the clover means, but it must be significant.

“Uh, anybody want to help me with the greens?” Bear asks, and there’s a burst of activity, even as Ghost and Izzy stand there, oblivious to everything going on around them. Instead of going out the main doors, I step across the room and go out the small exit door on the back of the building. As it closes behind me, I lean back against the wall, one foot up on it, and take a long swig of beer. I stopped at a cemetery, picked a weed, brought it back, left it on a table ... and somebody’s heart was touched. How did that happen?

As I drink my beer, I hear the guys talking in the kitchen, and I know the food’s coming to the table. Above the racket is Taylor’s little voice, and I try to smile. By all rights, that woman and child should’ve died, but they didn’t. Now they’re here with a big family, food to eat, shelter, and clothes to wear. I’m not envious of their happiness. I know it’s hard to tell from the outside, but on the inside, I’m happy for them. There’s no hope for me having something like that. It’ll never happen.

Priest has outdone himself again. The steaks are amazing. I don’t tell him so. Which is kinda stupid, given that it would

definitely qualify as one of the exercises Baxter gave me, the complimenting people thing. Hasn't gone great so far, but I'm hopeful, if I can become somewhat serious about my therapy.

It's seems odd to see Audrey eating with us and not cooking. It's her day off, but she chooses to spend it here with all of us. We all sit down to eat, and everybody's chatty tonight. Most everybody is talking about what they did today. I'm sitting there eating, saying nothing, when I hear a voice call out, "So, Bulldog, what did you do today?"

The voice is Reboot's. When I answer him, I don't smile. "Went into town."

It's silent for a bit before he asks, "Yeah? This trip have a purpose?"

I nod. "Yep."

There's a frown on his face when he asks, "Well? Are you going to share it with us?"

"I'm supposed to tell you every damn thing I do?" I just can't help myself. The snark slips out.

Ghost gives me a look like I'm stalled in front of him on the freeway. "We're all talking and sharing. Would it kill you to join in?"

I look around the table at all of them. Everybody's just waiting. When the silence has become totally uncomfortable, I say, "To look at a bike."

"Now see?" Reboot singsongs. "That wasn't so hard." I just glare at him from under my eyebrows.

"The bike I told you about? Micah's?" Ghost asks.

"Yeah. I'm going tomorrow to look at it."

Hollywood nods and smiles. "That sounds good. Nice one?"

I start telling them about it and I watch as their jaws drop. "So I guess I'll go see it tomorrow."

"You've gotta buy this," Bear says.

“That deal’s too sweet to pass up! Less than four thousand miles? You gotta get that,” Ghost tells me.

“Why? You think I’m gonna let you borrow it?” I ask them both.

“No. Just so you can enjoy it. We all need something we enjoy,” Ghost answers.

My snark generator kicks in. “Oh? Do you have something you enjoy?”

“Yeah.”

“And what’s that?”

Ghost grins. “Spending time with Iz.”

Figures. *Rub it in, asshole*, I want to say, but I don’t. “And what about you?” I ask Bear.

“Sitting around dreaming up ways to kick your ass,” Bear says matter-of-factly.

That makes me snicker. “How’s that goin’ for ya?”

“Pretty damn good. I’ve already come up with thirty-four ways, and I think thirty-five has just about presented itself. I’d watch my back if I were you.” There’s not a hint of a smile on his face, and for a minute, it occurs to me that watching my back might not be such a bad idea.

“And you know what would happen if you kicked my ass, right?”

He nods. “Yeah. And that’s not enough of a deterrent for me. I’d enjoy it far too much.”

That riles me just a little. “You threatening me?”

Bear tips his chair back and folds his arms across his chest. “That depends. You gonna keep acting like an asshole?”

“Most likely.”

“Then yeah. Apparently it needs to be a threat.”

“Wow. That’s really going to endear you to me.”

“Oh, right. Because that’s a factor in everything I do. Am I endearing myself to Bulldog? Right now, the bank of I Don’t Give a Flying Fuck has a very high balance in checking and savings.” I’m a little taken aback. These are the most words I’ve ever heard Bear string together. Then it occurs to me that, under those circumstances, maybe I should take him seriously.

“Guys, please. I know Bulldog is, um, challenging,” Priest says.

I roll my eyes. “Wow. That’s about the nicest thing anybody’s ever said about me.”

“How else would you describe yourself?” Paddy asks.

I just stare at him. What the fuck kind of question is that? “I’m a god damn delight.”

Paddy lets out a little chuckle and in under fifteen seconds, the whole room is laughing. Except for me. I’m not laughing. I was totally serious. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes, and that question about me describing myself was about the dumbest thing I’ve heard in a long time.

How would I describe myself? The guy nobody wants, needs, or loves. The guy whose life means nothing. The guy who can’t forgive anybody else and can’t forgive himself. The guy who’s not looking for anybody to forgive him. I’m trash scattered along the side of the roadway. I’m the mildew ring in the toilet bowl. I’m the moldy pizza in the back of the refrigerator just waiting to be thrown away.

I’m nobody.

CHAPTER 3



Tinsley

IT'S BEEN A LONG WEEK, A REALLY LONG WEEK, AND I JUST need some way to unwind a little. There's a little roadhouse over in Hazard that I go to sometimes, and tonight looks like a good night. It's Thursday—two more days until my weekend—and I figure treating myself to a decent meal can't hurt anything.

They're busy, really busy, and that's unusual. When I step inside, I notice a huge table at the back, and I'm surprised. There are a bunch of cops back there. Some are state, some are county, and a few are Hazard city. I see Preston back there. He and I went to high school together. When he sees me, he lifts a hand in greeting, and I wave back before taking a seat over in the corner.

“Whatcha drinkin’?” a little waitress who can't be more than nineteen asks me.

“I'll just have a Diet Coke.” I watch as she walks away and I really want to shake my head. These poor kids who can't get away from here ... What am I saying? I'm one of them.

She comes back and takes my order. As soon as she walks away, I pull out my phone and start playing Sudoku. I'm not real smart, but I do try to keep myself sharp by doing things that'll challenge me. It seems like the volume hops up suddenly, and I look up to see a bunch of the guys from out at Iron Oak Farms wander in and sit down with the cops. That's

an interesting combination. The server, who I've learned is named Lacey, has brought my dinner and it looks real good—pork loin, sweet potato, and green beans. Oh, and rolls. They have good rolls. I cut into the loin and put a piece in my mouth. Just as I start to chew, I hear a voice.

“Hey. What are you doin' here?”

Well, fuck me. “Last time I looked, I could go pretty much anywhere. You're the one with restrictions,” I snap and refuse to look up at him.

“What the fuck, Tins? You cut off my cable.”

“Your cable? I was payin' that bill, and I'm not payin' no more. Pay your own damn bill.” He thinks he's God's gift to women, and I've got news for him. He's like the Dirty Santa gift that you just can't get rid of.

“You didn't have no right!”

“Look here, asshole, I had every right. Get that bitch Sheila to pay for it.” The fork is almost to my mouth when something hits my hand and it goes flying.

I'm on my feet in a second. “You piece of shit! Did you just slap my fork outta my hand?”

“I'm-a slap a lot more than that!” Before he has a chance to come back at me, I pick up my plate and cram the whole thing into his face. Food goes everywhere, and there's sweet potato up his nose.

He reaches for me, but before he can grab me, somebody yanks him away, and I look up to find him standing there, flailing around, as Preston holds his collar tightly. “Lenny, as I recall, there's an EPO out against you. You're not supposed to be near Tinsley.”

“I just came in here to eat! I weren't doin' nothin'!”

“No, she wasn't doing anything. You came straight to her table and started harassing her. Now you listen to me. If you want to stay and eat, you and your *friend*,” I hear Preston fairly spit, “can go right over there and sit down. But you stay

away from Tinsley. She wasn't bothering you, and you've ruined her dinner."

"Good! Bitch! Somebody needs to teach you some manners!" Lenny's yelling as Preston more or less tosses him to the side. I almost laugh when Preston rounds on him and points a finger at him, but doesn't say a word. Lenny yells, "Okay, okay! I'm a-goin'! But you better stay away from me!"

"I was nowhere near you before, and I won't be again if I have a say. You stay away from me. And quit trying to get me to pay for your shit. That's over."

He's still grumbling and muttering when Preston steps up to me. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Just shook up a bit."

"Come on over here and sit with us." When I don't move, he says it again. "Tinsley, come sit with us. Come on. It's fine. You're welcome over at our table."

"Th-thank you," I stammer.

"No problem. Hey, Lacey, can you—"

"No. I don't want to be no trouble," I tell him, shaking my head.

"You're not. Come on. Lacey, another dinner for Tinsley, and this one is on me." Preston's hand presses into the small of my back as he guides me toward the table where all the men are talking and laughing.

To my surprise, Izzy is there too with Ghost. "Hey, Tinsley! Good to see you!"

"Good to see you too," I tell her as I take a seat. Preston sits down beside me, and on the other side is Mike Yeiser. I went to high school with him too.

"Who was that guy?" she asks and points toward Lenny.

"My ex-husband. Asshole." Lacey sets another Diet Coke in front of me, and in a couple of minutes, I have a new plate. But I feel so awkward. Nobody really wants me here. They're

just tolerating me because it's their job. And that's when I look up and see him, that Bulldog guy. Oh, great.

Looks like it's a night when I can't get away from assholes.

I'm lost in thought when I hear a voice say, "So, Tinsley, what are you up to these days?"

It's the guy they call Paddy, and he's always so kind and friendly. "Oh, you know the usual, just—"

"Just making a scene wherever she goes." Bulldog's comment takes me completely by surprise, and I feel flustered. I didn't really think he'd snipe at me with everybody else sitting here, but apparently he has no shame. Or brakes on his mouth.

"Hey, dude, not cool," I hear Mike say, but all I really want to do is go home. My night was ruined the minute Lenny walked in, and this asshole is just making it worse.

"What? Seems like that's what she does," Bulldog adds.

I just stand and grab my bag. "If y'all will excuse me, I think I'm gonna head out for the night. Thanks for inviting me to sit with you."

Izzy is shaking her head. "Tinsley, don't let—"

"It's okay, Iz. Really. Y'all have a good night. I need some sleep anyway." I'm on my way out of the building when I feel a hand on my arm and turn, fully expecting it to be Lenny, but it's Izzy. "Tinsley, what's going on?"

"Look, I appreciate you following me out to check on me, but I think I've had about all I can stand for an evening."

"That's just Bulldog. He doesn't mean anything by it."

"Oh, yeah? He came into my salon—*my salon*—and called me loud and obnoxious. That was after he'd been nasty to me at the grocery when I was only trying to help. I really don't need that, Iz. As you can see from what happened in there, I don't need another man trying to tear me down. I've had enough of that." My feet can't move fast enough as I turn and make my way to my car.

“But Tinsley! Come on back!” I just give her a backhanded wave and keep walking.

There was absolutely no way I was going to let him see me cry, but once I’m in my car and on the road, the tears start. I’m so fucking sick and tired of men treating me like I don’t matter, like I’m worthless and just a problem to be dealt with.

I’d only managed to get one bite of my dinner before Lenny showed up, and only two at the table with everybody else when Bulldog ruined the rest of my evening. I’m still hungry, and I don’t even care. Swallowing would be impossible with the way I’m crying. It only takes me a minute to wash all my makeup off, slip on my pajamas, and climb into bed.

And once again, like pretty much every night before, I cry myself to sleep.

BULLDOG

I’M IN MY OWN COTTAGE, JUST MINDING MY OWN BUSINESS, when somebody knocks. The door opens to find Reboot, Bear, and Priest all standing there. “What now?”

“A word,” Reboot says, and all three glare at me.

“Yeah. So what’s the word?”

“Step out here.” Is this a challenge? I’m not planning to deck Reboot, but I will if I need to.

I’m barefoot, but I step outside and stand there. “What the fuck do you want?”

“I understand you said something really rude to Tinsley Hancock last night,” Reboot says, and I watch as Bear folds his arms across his chest.

“I was just stating facts.”

“Oh? Were you stating facts when you insulted her in her own salon? In front of customers?”

“The woman is frickin’ loud as a foghorn!”

“Do you remember what Patch drummed into all of us?”

“Brush our teeth and say our prayers before bed?” I ask, shrugging.

Reboot’s hands are resting at his waist, and he looks down at his feet, then up at me from under his brows. “Okay. This is how it’s going to go. You’re going to go to her house, knock on the door, and apologize to her.”

“I’m not going to—”

“Oh, yes.” Reboot’s voice is a little louder than usual. “You most certainly are. You’re going to her house, apologize to her, and after that, if you can’t be nice to her, just stay away from her. She walks in, you walk out. She sits down at a table, you get up and leave. But if there’s anything Patch drummed into us—*anything*—it’s that we’ve got to get along with the locals. And what you did last night ... It made us look bad in front of all those law enforcement people, people we have to get along with and work beside. Not only that, but it hurt her, and from what I’ve seen with my own eyes and heard from Izzy, Audrey, and Penny, Tinsley is a nice person. She’s kind to the little old ladies who come in there and kind to the kids who are afraid or upset because they don’t want to get their hair cut. She’s a good person. She helped out with Hollywood and Audrey’s wedding. Hell, she did Audrey’s makeup for free. Didn’t charge her a thing. Just wanted her to look beautiful on her big day.”

“Oh, so now she’s a saint.”

“God damn it!” It’s the first time I’ve seen Reboot sort of lose it. “Okay. It’s like this. You’re going over there. You’re going to apologize. You’re going to be sincere. You’re going to leave her alone after that. And if none of that happens, or any step is left out, I’m calling Patch. I hate to bother him while he’s in the middle of what’s going on in Hawaii, but I’m sick and tired of this. You’re like a giant eleven-year-old bully

who just can't seem to get his shit together. Do it. Tomorrow, first thing. Or your days here are numbered. I can promise you that." Without another word, he turns to leave, but before Bear and Priest leave, they both stare at me. Bear turns and follows Reboot.

But Priest still stands there, his eyes locked with mine. "You're carrying too much pain. You need to let that go. Life won't get better for you until you do. The sad part? Your worst enemy isn't these men here, or the man who killed your daughter, or your ex-wife, or the prison system. Your worse enemy is you. And you're too blind and stubborn to even see that." Priest turns and makes his way down the porch steps, but at the bottom, he turns back to me. "You're sabotaging yourself. This time, it's not your ex-wife's fault, or her boyfriend's fault. This time, it's all on you." Then he walks away.

I just stand there and watch them go. They're right and I know it, but why can't I admit that to them? Why can't I even admit it to myself? That my behavior is reprehensible? That I'm not fit for human companionship?

Fuck it. Tomorrow morning I'll go do lip service. Maybe that'll make them happy. But it won't make me one bit happier. Nothing will.

TINSLEY

IT'S GOING TO BE A LONG DAY. MY SCHEDULE IS FULL. Saturday is always the older ladies wanting a wash and set and occasionally a perm, but today is nails, nails, nails, then a bride. That's hair color and cut, nails, and a pedicure. Tomorrow when I finish everything else, I'll go to the venue, do her hair and makeup, and stick around for touch-ups when it's time for photos.

I'm putting half-and-half in my second cup of coffee when somebody knocks on my door. I swear to god, it had better not be Lenny. But when I look through the peephole, I'm stunned—and furious. There's enough force in my opening of the door that it slams the wall behind it and I glare at the man standing on my steps. He looks appropriately startled. Good. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I just need to say I'm sorry. That's all." Not another word, just turns and heads back to his SUV.

"Oh, no. You hold the fuck up. What do you mean, 'I'm sorry. That's all.' Sorry for what? And what possessed you to come over here and knock on my door?"

He turns around, but he makes no effort to come back up toward the steps. "I'm sorry. You know, for being an asshole."

"No. Not good enough. You need to tell me what you're apologizing for."

"I just did when I—"

"No-no-no. That's no apology. Who put you up to this? Patch is gone, so who was it? Reboot? Priest?"

That face is empty for a few seconds before he says, "They said if I didn't, they'd call Patch and tell him what I'd said."

I cock a hip and cross my arms over my chest. "Oh, yeah? Which time?"

"Uh, the only one they know about is what I said at the salon."

"No, they also know how you talked to me last night at the roadhouse."

"Uh, yeah, okay, sorry for that too."

I sigh and shake my head. "Oh my Jaysus. You're a real piece of work, you know that? A cocky, smug, smartass bastard, too damn proud for your own good."

"So I've been told."

"I don't know who told you that, but they weren't lying. You know, I'm embarrassed for you."

His chin juts downward and his brow furrows.
“Embarrassed for me?”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

“I’m not embarrassed about anything.”

“You definitely are.”

“What am I embarrassed about?”

Is he kidding me? “You’re embarrassed that your old lady was screwing around on you and you didn’t even realize it. And you were working and supporting her and your baby, and she was doing that to you. Yeah, you’re mad about what she did to you with prison and all and what the guy did to you and to your baby, but you’re really embarrassed and your macho pride is bruised. *That’s* why you’re so angry and taking it out on me. I’m a convenient verbal punching bag.”

There’s a look on his face that I can’t read, and he spins without another word, but I just can’t let it go. “Yeah, you just go on. Come back sometime to the salon and pick on the loud, flashy hairdresser whose ex-husband broke her heart and beat her up every chance he got. After all, I’m nobody. I don’t matter.” He’s reached the SUV, and he turns to look at me. “Fuck you, Bulldog.” I expect retaliation, but there is none. He just climbs into the SUV, starts it, and takes off.

It’s just a ten-minute drive to work, and the door to the salon has barely closed behind me when my phone rings. “Tinsley’s Trim and Tease, Tinsley speaking.”

“Tinsley, it’s Audrey.”

“Hey, Audrey! How ya doin’, girl?”

“Hey, can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“What did you say to Bulldog this morning?”

So they were *all* in on it. “You knew he was comin’ over to my house, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. Reboot told him to go apologize to you and make it heartfelt.”

I snort. “It was a lot of things, but heartfelt wasn’t one of them.”

“Okay, but did you say something to him?”

“Uh, well, yeah. I’m not sure what—”

“Tinsley, something ... He’s not himself. He came back and went straight to his cottage. Reboot and Priest have been over there to talk to him, and he keeps yelling for them to go away. He won’t come out. Usually, he’d be out on the porch, gaming for a fight, but this ... this is different.”

“He pretended to apologize to me and I called him out. Told him I knew why he’s such an asshole.”

“What’s your theory on why he’s an asshole?”

“Because he’s embarrassed.”

“Embarrassed?”

“Yeah. His ex-wife, well, she was his wife, cheated on him. The guy she cheated with killed his baby. Then his cheatin’ ex-wife was more concerned with keepin’ her boyfriend out of prison than she was her own husband. And that embarrasses him, that she’d think so little of him. Hell, it would embarrass me too. His pride is beyond bruised. It’s crushed.”

There’s silence for a few seconds before I hear Audrey say, “Oh holy shit. I bet you’re right. I bet that’s what it is. We’re all thinking he’s angry because he was in prison, and all the while he’s not really angry. He’s humiliated. Wow. You should be a counselor.”

“I am, honey. I’m a hairdresser, remember? We hear it all, and I do mean all. Us and bartenders. We’re the sticky little bandage strips that hold society together.”

“Thanks, Tinsley. I appreciate the insight. I think I need to go talk to Reboot. But I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Sure, honey. No problem. Have a good day.”

“You too. Bye.”

I stand there by my chair, thinking. Did I hit on something? It that really why he's the way he is?

I guess time will tell.

BULLDOG

IT'S FRIDAY. OH, YAY. THAT MEANS I GET TO SEE SHAGGY. Correction: I have to see Shaggy today. That's closer to the truth. It took me three hours to calm down after I came back from that bitch's house, and now this.

Halfway through the day, the shop door opens and Ghost steps in. He looks around until our eyes meet, then nods. That's my signal. I'm the next victim.

By the time I make it to the lodge, Shaggy has gotten up to make himself a glass of something. Looks kinda like lemonade, but not. He glances up and points to the back, so I head to the office. I've barely made it into the room and taken a seat when he steps in and closes the door. "So, how are you today?"

"About the same as always."

"Mad at the world, huh?"

See, this is what I hate about counseling. He does everything he can to push all my buttons, and it works. And I feel powerless to do anything about it or to react differently. I've asked him before why he has to make me mad and he always says, "I don't *make* you anything, Kevin. You allow yourself to be mad." I have no idea what that really means. It's just gibberish.

This time, I glare at him. "What do you mean?"

"I hear you've had a run-in with somebody from the community."

“I wouldn’t call it a run-in. I just spoke the truth and she didn’t like it.”

“So that’s what you call it, speaking the truth. I think we talked about this, not saying anything if you can’t say anything nice.”

“Yeah, but I chose not to put that into practice.”

“Oh, well, that’s an improvement. We’ve gone from ‘you made me’ to ‘I chose not to.’ At least you finally got that part right.”

“Thank you. I’m working on myself for the good of all of us,” I say with the appropriate smirk.

I could’ve done without his eye roll. “Yes, yes. I see that. So let’s talk about something else. How did you feel when Paisley died?”

Well, that’s an abrupt about-face. “How do you think I felt?”

Shaggy shakes his head. “No, I need *you* to tell me how *you* felt, not me tell you how I think you felt. I need you to tell me.”

“I was hurt. I was grieving. My heart was broken. I was angry.”

“You really loved her, didn’t you?”

“More than anything in the whole world.”

“And you loved Imogen that way too.”

Aha, Shaggy, I see what you’re doing there, my brain mutters. “Yeah.”

“And then she cheated on you.”

“Yeah.” Where is he going with this?

“How did that make you feel?”

“I was hurt. I was angry. I was ...” Something flits through my mind, but I shut it down immediately.

“Go on.”

“That’s it.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Well, if there’s more, why don’t you tell me? Because I don’t know what you’re fishing for.” I’m getting a bit frustrated now. What does he want from me?

“Didn’t it make you feel a little, I dunno, embarrassed? That you weren’t enough for your wife and she needed somebody else?”

Oh holy shit. What the fuck? “You’ve been talking to a certain hairdresser, haven’t you?” I bellow.

“Hairdresser? I don’t know who you’re talking about.”

“Oh yes you do. That big mouth at the salon—”

“Salon? What salon? I get my hair cut at the barber shop over in Hazard.”

“Who did you talk to? What did they say to you?” Now I’m yelling and I don’t care. He must’ve talked to somebody.

“Kevin, calm down. I don’t know what you’re talking about. It’s a natural feeling when—”

“You talked to *somebody*! Who was it?”

“Kevin, just stop. Listen to yourself. I’m a psychologist. It’s what I’m trained to do, read other people’s emotions. Any man whose wife cheated on him would wonder why he wasn’t enough, what the other guy had that was better. It’s common for men whose wives cheat to feel that way.”

“But I don’t ...” I can’t finish the sentence. It’s like some kind of wound has been opened in my chest and something is spilling out, something hot and acrid and putrefied.

“If you don’t feel that way, why do you look so panicked since I’ve mentioned it?”

“Because ... Because ...” I can’t make myself say the words.

“Because admitting it makes you vulnerable.” He stops for a few seconds before he speaks again. “Kevin, this is a safe

space. What we talk about in here goes no further. You can say whatever you need to. I am bound by the duty to report, but that's only if I truly believe you're a danger to yourself or others, and so far, I haven't seen that out of you. Patch trusted you enough to give you a gun, so he must think you're okay. You need to get it out. That's the only way you're ever going to heal."

"I'm never going to heal because my baby is dead."

"I get that, but that's grief. I'm talking about the way you relate to others and to yourself. You need to heal so you can do that."

Why do I feel so raw? Like somebody just lit me on fire? I have to say something, but I'm not sure what. And before I realize it, I just blurt out, "She flaunted it to everybody. Everybody knew. Everybody but me."

"That had to be embarrassing for you."

"It was like she was fucking around on me and making fun of me at the same time."

"I can see how it would appear that way."

"Are you saying I imagined it?"

"No. I'm saying I can understand how it would look like she was making fun of you."

"Right."

"Kevin, I'm going to tell you a truth that you need to understand. She didn't do it to make fun of you, embarrass you, or humiliate you. I'm fairly certain you didn't even cross her mind." Is that supposed to make me feel better? I'm about to really lose it when he says, "The only person on her mind was herself. Not you, not Paisley, not the guy she was cheating with. Just herself. And I'd venture a guess that she's still that way."

"So you're saying her cheating had nothing to do with me?"

"It had absolutely nothing to do with you, Kevin. It had to do with her. She needed that to feel sexy and desirable and

important and special. It was all about her. *She* was the one lacking, Kevin. Not you.”

That’s the instant when the lightbulb clicks on in my head. It *was* her. It was all her. I was fine. There was nothing wrong with me, nothing that would make her be unfaithful. That was on her, all of it, and not something that I did or didn’t do. I was a good husband, a faithful one, and a damn good dad. A peace washes over me, and I recognize it. The last time I felt that peaceful was when I was holding Paisley. I’m lost in thought when he asks, “You okay?”

“Uh, yeah. Is it okay with you if I go on? I need some time alone to think about this.”

“Sure. And remember that you can call me anytime. If I can’t talk to you right then, I’ll call you back, okay? But I think you’ve turned a corner, Kevin. I really do. And don’t be afraid to talk to some of the guys about this. The only reason they don’t want to be around you is because of how abusive you’ve been to them. They want to love you and include you in this family you’re all building.”

It only takes me a split second to understand that he’s right. I *have* been abusive to the guys. As I wander out of the office and back up the hallway, I’m still thinking about everything that’s been said. I’ll call them all together tonight and we’ll have a sit down.

I’ve got a lot of apologizing to do.

I SPENT THE AFTERNOON IN MY COTTAGE, FACE DOWN IN MY pillow, either screaming or crying. Now I’m sitting in the lodge with my new family gathered around me, and it’s terrifying, but it has to be done. “And that’s it. That’s all. And I’m really, really sorry for the way I’ve acted. It’s going to take me more time to get my shit totally together, but I’m working on it.”

Priest’s hand comes to rest on my arm. “Nobody here has their shit totally together, brother. We’re not asking you to be

perfect. We're just asking you to be human and to treat us like humans."

"Yeah, nobody here is against you, man. We all want you to feel like you're part of this, to be part of it," Reboot says and lays a hand on my shoulder. "Nobody hates you. We hate the way you've acted, but not you. There's a difference."

"I came here for a second chance and I didn't take it. And I want to. I really do. But I don't know how."

"This is how you start," Paddy says with a tiny smile. "You get real with yourself and the people around you."

"Yeah, okay. I'll work on that."

Priest smiles and claps a hand on my other shoulder. "Baby steps, brother."

Baby steps. That's all I know how to take. Then something crosses my mind. "Hey, there's something I need to do. I won't be gone long, but I really need to do this."

"Yeah, okay. Take your time," Ghost says.

"Thanks. I'll be back in a bit." I've got some business to take care of and I hope I can keep my nerve up.

First, I drive past her house, but that little blue car with the woodgrain panels isn't there, so I head on into town. Sure enough, it's sitting down the block from the salon, so I park and go in. She looks up when I step inside, but she doesn't say anything. "Hey!" I hear a male voice call out, and Micah waves.

"How's it goin'?" I ask when I walk up beside him. He's cutting some old guy's hair, and he's doing a really good job.

"Goin' good. You decide on the bike?"

"Yeah. I definitely want it. I've got an application in at the bank and if they don't approve it, I'll try somewhere online. I'd like to go with them and keep it local, but with my history, that might be hard to do."

"I hear ya. It's okay. Like I said, nobody else has looked at it. Do me a favor—run up there and take the flyer off the

window. Just bring it back here. I'll keep it in case you decide you don't want it for some reason." What he means is if I find out I can't get the money, but I'm cool with that. The guy needs to sell the bike, and if I can't buy it, he absolutely should sell it to somebody else.

I have to pass her on my way to the window, and I peel the flyer off carefully, then head to the back. She never looks at me. "So I'll let you know as soon as I know something," I tell Micah as I hand him the flyer.

"Sure thing. That's fine. If I can do anything to help move it along, let me know. Who'd you talk to down there?"

"Um, some lady named Hodges?"

"Yeah, Marilyn. I've known her for years. I'll call down there and put a bug in her ear. Maybe that'll tip her over the edge."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate that. Talk to you soon."

"Yep. Thanks, Bulldog."

"You bet." I start back toward the door, and I don't know how to do this. When I get close enough, I stop and watch. In the mirror's reflection I see her look up at me, then look back down at what she's doing. All I can think to do is say something positive. "You're doing a great job on that. Her hair, I mean. Nice." Wow. I've seen horses with broken legs that weren't that lame.

She doesn't say anything, just glares at me in the mirror's reflection and keeps working. When I don't move, she finally stops what she's doing and turns. "Do you want something?"

"Actually, I want to talk to you. When you have a minute."

She stands there for a few seconds before she says, "I'm busy."

"I see that. I'll wait out front if that's okay."

If I had to label the look on her face, I'd call it supreme irritation. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

“Suit yourself. I’m not rushing on your part.”

“Wouldn’t expect you to.” I don’t know anything else to say, so I head for the door. There’s a bench out in front of the window and I sit down to take in the sights.

Across the street, there’s a little shop with handbags in the windows. The sign says it’s called Amy’s Accents. Next to it is a larger store with some clothes in the windows, and it’s a consignment store, Martha’s Re-Re-Repeats. That’s kinda clever but very hard to say. Beside that is a vacant lot where it looks like a store used to be but it was torn down for some reason. The fire department is right next door to that, and the guys have one of the trucks out front, washing it. To my right and next door to the salon is Perry’s Sporting Goods. Somebody told me it’s the only store in town that carries shoes, and that doesn’t surprise me. This isn’t much of a town, but it’s trying.

The lady who’s been sitting in Tinsley’s chair steps outside and glances at me as I sit there. “Nice job. It’s very pretty,” I say, wondering if she’ll call me a name and spit on me.

Instead, she smiles. “Thank you. I didn’t know about the color, but I think I like it.”

“It’s perfect for you. Makes you look ten years younger,” I say with a small grin. I’m not lying. It really does make her look younger.

“Thanks. I hope my husband likes it. Nice talking to you,” she says and crosses the street to get into a Cadillac sedan.

I’m so taken with watching her get into the car and looking at the sedan’s color and lines that I don’t realize the door has opened behind me until I hear a female voice say, “Now, what the hell is so important that you’d come to my business?”

“I just wanted to tell you that you’re right. About me. And the embarrassment thing. My counselor said the same thing to me earlier, and he was right too. I never really thought about it. So thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Anything else?”

“Yeah. I really am sorry for the way I’ve been acting toward you. You haven’t done anything to me. I apologize. Really.”

“Apology accepted. Now I’ve got to get back to work.”

She turns to walk away, so I try to salvage the conversation at least a little. “That lady who just left here? Her hair looked great. You did a good job.”

Her eyes are dead when she stares into mine and says, “I hope you told her that, because I don’t give a fuck what you think.” The bell on the door jingles as it closes behind her, and I sit there, a little shocked. That was not the reaction I thought I’d get, and there’s nothing left for me to do except go back to the farm.

“Get your errand done?” Ghost asks as I step into the shop.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Sure, brother. Anytime.” He flashes me a little smile and goes back to work.

We finish out the day, and I shower and dress for dinner. Audrey’s made a great meatloaf, and she’s paired a green bean casserole and some scalloped potatoes with it. Everybody has seconds, and we’re a happy bunch of guys by the time we’re finished. “So, how’d your errand go today?” Priest asks, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

“Not exactly as I expected, but well enough.”

“What happened?”

I tell them all what I did, what was said, and finish with, “And she seemed to not really care. Even a little rude.”

“You were rude to her for no reason, Bulldog. She won’t forget that. Best thing you can do now is just leave her alone. Speak politely when you see her, but don’t expect her to be your friend. She’s not having any of that,” Bear explains, and for the first time I see the man he really is. He’s not a big dumb oaf. He’s very thoughtful and insightful.

“True. Guess that’s how it’s gonna be.” It’s my fault, all my fault. I can’t expect to make a friend of Tinsley now

because I set out to make an enemy of her before I even knew her. She didn't deserve that, just like I don't have the right to expect anything from her now.

Seems that old saying is true. You reap what you sow.

CHAPTER 4



Tinsley

THREE TIMES NOW I'VE PASSED HIM IN THE GROCERY. AND three times now I've managed to ignore him. It's just a generic greeting, a hey-Tinsley-how-ya-doin' kinda thing, but I say nothing. I've been kicked around enough by men in my lifetime. I don't deserve that anymore. I didn't deserve it to start with, and I sure don't now.

"What'll it be, beautiful?" McKenzie asks me as she saunters up to me behind the bar and grins.

I laugh. "Well, thank you! I don't even need a drink. You just made me feel better."

"Nah, you still need a drink."

"You're right. I do. And if I wasn't straight, we'd have one together." That makes her laugh. "Soooo ... Think I'll have a Bacardi and Coke."

"Comin' right up." As she goes about pouring my drink, I look around the room. The one thing I hate about this place is the lounge lizards who hang out here. What I'd give for a hotel bar. They'd have somewhere else to hang out and I wouldn't have to put up with them.

I've been sitting there for about five minutes when I hear voices and turn to look. Sure enough, in the back corner of the bar at a huge round table is about half of the guys from out at Iron Oak Farms, and damn it, Bulldog is one of them. Ghost

and Izzy are with them, but I really don't feel like making small talk, so I just pretend I don't see them. That's when I feel a presence on my other side and turn to find a guy two inches from me. "Oh! Sorry. Didn't see you there," I mumble from inside my glass.

"That's okay. Just sitting this close to you is good enough. Already getting me hard. How 'bout you? Wanna get outta here?"

"No. I'm almost ready to go home." There's very little of my drink left, and I'm fighting the temptation to guzzle it and run.

"So does that invitation include me?" he asks. The guy's not drunk, and I'm wondering how obnoxious he'd be if he was, because it's bad enough with him sober.

"I didn't extend an invitation. I just stated a fact. I'll be goin' home soon."

"I'll gladly come and keep you company."

"Buddy, I've got a battery-powered boyfriend who can do the job twice as well in half the time. Thanks but no thanks."

"How do you know that if you won't give me a chance to let you experience my skills?" He's moved closer and I'm starting to get a little creeped out.

"Um, how 'bout you back up about ten inches. You're kinda in my personal space," I snarl.

"How 'bout I get all up in your personal space? I bet your personal space is tight and wet," he whispers, leaning in toward me, and I've had just about enough. And that's when he does the absolute wrong thing.

He wraps his hand around my upper arm.

"You should probably take your hand off me," I hiss and watch McKenzie spin to look.

He's leering now. "You and I could have a lot of fun if you'd just give in."

“Sir, you need to back away from the lady,” McKenzie says, and I see her hand slip under the counter. I don’t know what she keeps down there, but I’m pretty sure this guy is going to be in a world of hurt in a few seconds.

“How ’bout you mind your own business?” he barks at her.

“My customers *are* my business, and if you’re harassing one of them, that really *is* my business.” I can see it now, and it’s a sawed-off shotgun. Totally illegal to have a weapon in a bar in Kentucky, and sawed-offs are illegal regardless, but I don’t think McKenzie gives a fuck about laws right this second.

“I said shut up, bitch,” he growls at her, and I see her hand twitch. Awww, hell. Shit’s about to get real up in here, and to think I’m at the center of it. Fuck me.

“Sir, I think you need to take a step back,” I hear a male voice say, and the tone is calm but menacing.

The greasy guy’s lip curls up as he focuses on the owner of the voice—Bulldog. “And who do you think you are?”

“I’m the fella who’s going to tell you only one more time to step back from the lady and walk away.”

“It would be in your best interest to do that,” another voice says, and this time, it’s the really huge guy. They call him Bear for a reason.

The asshole shrugs and glares at both men. “Oh, so you’ve got a crew to strong-arm anybody who dares to come in here to try to meet somebody nice?”

“No. We’re just some concerned citizens who don’t want to see anyone harassed unnecessarily,” Bear explains. The guy starts to say something, but Bear stops him cold. “I killed a man when I was nineteen years old. Just think of all the ways I’ve learned to kill people since then.”

“He’s not kidding,” Bulldog adds. “He could snap you in half and never break a sweat.”

“What’s going on here? Need some help, guys? Three of us can toss him faster and farther than just the two of you.”

Ghost steps up to the men and glances around. “He bothering you, miss?”

I shrug. “He was, but I think he just pissed his pants.” Then I wink at McKenzie before I speak to the man again. “You do realize there’s a shotgun trained at you under the bar, right?”

That’s the moment when he finally gets the message. “Fuck all y’all. Come in here and try to make some lady’s night, and this is the thanks I get.” He drops a twenty on the bar and turns to leave, but halfway to the door he looks back one last time.

“Nothing to see here,” Bulldog assures him. “Just keep walkin’.” As soon as the door closes behind him, the wiry knifsmith steps up beside me. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. Thanks.” Is this his way of trying to get me to talk to him? Because it’s not going to work. “Sorry to bother y’all.”

“You weren’t bothering us,” Ghost says quietly. “Search and rescue is all about taking care of people, and you needed protecting at that moment. That’s what we do.”

“Well, actually, what y’all do is chase down idiots in the woods,” I point out with a grin.

“Yeah, that too, but we’re not going to let some guy strong-arm a lady in here if we can help it. Izzy would kick my ass if I did that.”

“Yes, she would,” I say in agreement, laughing, and wave toward her.

“Come on over and join us. She’d love that.” He motions toward their table across the room, but I shake my head.

“Nah. Thanks for the invitation, but I’ll just stay here. I’m almost finished and then I’m going home. But thanks again.” All three men nod and turn to go, but Bulldog turns back to face me. “Need something?” I ask, trying to keep my voice as flat as possible.

“Not really. I just hope you know I was sincere when I said I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure you think so.”

There’s a look in his eyes that I can only describe as defeat as his shoulders fall and his head tips downward. “You have a good evening, Tinsley. See ya around.” I watch as he shuffles away, hands buried in his front pockets, until he makes it back to the group and I go back to my glass.

I know he’s looking for redemption. Aren’t we all? But he won’t get any from me. I won’t hold any ill will, but I also won’t cut him any slack. I’ve done that with men before.

And it always bites me in the ass.

BULLDOG

INSTEAD OF GOING BACK TO OUR TABLE, I STEP OUT THE BACK door of the bar and around the corner. The guy who was bothering Tinsley is standing outside, looking around like he wants to do something he shouldn’t, but I give him a little while.

“What are you doing?”

I spin to find Ghost standing right behind me. “I’m watching this motherfucker to make sure he gets the hell outta here.”

“And if he doesn’t, you’re going to do what?”

“I’m ... gonna call the cops?” I hope that’s the right answer.

“Yeah. But in the meantime, you can just watch him. As long as ... Oh, no, motherfucker, just don’t.” I jerk my head toward the parking lot to see what he’s looking at.

Tinsley has a plate on the front of her car with her name on it, and the guy is circling it. “That’s making me very

uncomfortable,” I whisper.

That’s when I realize that Ghost has his phone to his ear. “Yeah, this is Marvelle Connors from out at Iron Oak Farms. We’re at Ginger’s Place, and there’s a guy here who was bothering one of the female patrons. He’s out in the parking lot now, and it looks like he’s thinking of doing something to her car. Could you ... Yeah. Thanks. We’ll keep an eye out. Thank you.” He punches his phone’s screen. “Cops are on their way.”

“And in the meantime?”

“In the meantime, we watch him, and if it looks like he’s going to do something to her car, we just approach him. We don’t engage him other than verbal. You understand?”

“Yeah.”

“I mean it, Bulldog. I know you’re gaming for a fight, but—”

That kinda pisses me off. “Who says I’m gaming for a fight?”

“We don’t have time to ... Oh, hell naw.” Ghost starts that direction when we see the asshole squat between the cars. “Wanna tell me what the hell you’re doing down there?” he asks as we walk up on the man.

“None-a your fucking business, nigger. Get the hell outta here.”

I can see steam coming out of Ghost’s ears. “What did you say to me?”

“You heard me, boy,” the guy spits back.

“Ghost,” I whisper. “Cops.” Two cruisers roll up in the parking lot.

“Fellas, what’s going on here?” As soon as he comes into view, I sigh with relief. It’s Matt, the deputy sheriff we all know.

“This guy was harassing Tinsley, and now he’s out here monkeying with her car,” I blurt out.

“I ain’t doin’ nothin’!”

Matt shines his flashlight downward. “Oh, so her tire just let the air out of itself. Convenient. I think we need to go to the office and have a little talk.” Matt looks up at the other officer. “Cuff him and put him in the back of the car. I’m going in to talk to Tinsley.”

“Got it, sergeant.” Bitching and carrying on the whole time, the man has his hands cuffed behind his back and the other deputy leads him away.

“What the hell ... Who did that?” a female voice shrieks.

Matt turns to stop her. “Tinsley, just calm down. He’s in the back of the cruiser right now and—”

“Calm down? How the hell am I supposed to calm down? This asshole let the air outta my tire! Who does that? What can you charge him with? Whatever it is, double it. Throw the book at him. I swear to god, a girl can’t even go to a local waterin’ hole without some asshole givin’ her trouble. This is ridiculous. *It’s ridiculous!*” she screams toward the cruiser.

“I know, I know. We’ll take care of it,” Matt assures her. “You wanna press charges?”

“Hell yeah, I do. Absolutely.”

“Then you’ll need to come down to ... Oh. Guess you can’t ...”

I interrupt. “Got a spare?” She shakes her head.

Ghost holds out his hand. “Give me your keys. Bulldog and I will get your tire aired up and bring your car over.”

Tinsley eyes both of us. “You sure?”

“Yeah. No problem. Don’t mind at all,” I assure her.

“Can I get a ride with you?” she asks Matt.

“Sure. Come on. He’s in Bryant’s cruiser, so he can’t bother you.”

“Thanks.” She starts toward the cruiser, then turns. “Thanks, guys.”

Ghost gives her a little nod. “You bet, Tins. See you in a bit.”

We watch as she climbs into Matt’s cruiser and they roll away. “Okay. Gotta get a jack and get this wheel off, and we’ll take it down to the convenience store and air it up.” Ghost throws open the back end of the little Pacer and pulls out a jack and a tire iron. Would’ve been nice if there’d been a spare to go along with it.

I’m already moving back toward the bar. “I’ll run in and tell them where we are and what we’re doing.”

Thirty minutes later, I’m behind the wheel of Tinsley’s little car, Ghost right behind me in the SUV. We pull up in front of the sheriff’s office and I hop out. “Be right back.” As soon as I step inside, I can hear her and Matt talking. “Tinsley?”

Her face appears around the corner, peering as though she was expecting a package, but she heads straight to me as soon as she sees me. “Get it fixed?”

“Yeah. No problem. Here’s your keys.” As I place them in her palm, our fingers brush, and there’s a sensation I’m unfamiliar with that shoots through my skin.

“Let me get my bag and I’ll pay you—”

“There’s nothing to pay. The air was free, and so was our labor. So you’re ready to roll.”

“Thanks. Please tell Ghost I said thanks to him too. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Try to have a decent rest of your evening.”

“Will do.” And she disappears down the hallway.

“She said thanks,” I tell Ghost as soon as I climb into the SUV.

“I’m just glad we were there. I get the feeling that she can take care of herself, but still, that guy ... I hope this teaches him a lesson.”

I shake my head as we roll along. “I doubt it. Dickheads like that rarely learn their lesson.”

“Until someday when somebody fucks him up good and then it’ll be all their fault. I know how this plays out,” he says.

“Yeah. Me too,” I reply.

Me too.

TINSLEY

I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS. WHY CAN’T A GIRL JUST GO OUT AND have a decent night and a drink without somebody fucking with her? Now I’m sitting in a sheriff’s department, talking to a deputy about some asshole who tried to sabotage my car. Who does that?

And then I hear, “Tinsley?”

I hop up and peek around the corner to find Bulldog standing there. “Get it fixed?”

“Yeah. No problem. Here’s your keys.” Instead of just dropping them into my palm, he places them gently, and our fingers brush. Something passes through me, some kind of current, and I’m hoping he’ll leave soon. I really don’t want to know what it is.

I break the spell when I say, “Let me get my bag and I’ll pay you—”

“There’s nothing to pay. The air was free, and so was our labor. So you’re ready to roll.”

“Thanks. Please tell Ghost I said thanks to him too. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. Try to have a decent rest of your evening.”

“Will do.” He’s standing there like he expects something else, but there’s nothing here for him. I appreciate his help, but

that's it. That's all. I just turn and make my way back to the conference room.

I finish giving Matt my statement and he assures me the guy won't bother me anymore. Thank god. Sure enough, when I step outside, there sits my car, so I climb in.

And I have to adjust everything. Bulldog's not that tall, but it feels like I'm sitting in the back seat! I slide it forward, check all my mirrors, and take off.

I've been home for about thirty minutes when my text pings and I grab my phone. Izzy.

Just checking on you. Did you make it home okay?

She's so sweet. I'm so glad she and Ghost worked stuff out. He's a nice guy too.

Yeah, and thanks for checking. Please tell Ghost I said thanks too. I appreciate his help.

Three little wavy dots and then a ping.

You're welcome. Hope you get some sleep and have a pleasant evening. Night.

I send back a smiling emoji and set my phone down. I've been here all my life, but nobody has been as friendly to me as Penny and Izzy. Audrey was always here, but she hid herself away in her embarrassment over her situation, a situation that shouldn't have been. Regardless, I didn't really have friends until they came along. The women here think I'm either too flashy, or too loose, or too flirty, or too ... whatever. I dunno. They've just never liked me. My dad was the principal at the high school, and they hated me because of that. My only friends were boys, and that made me the school slut. Never mind that I didn't sleep with them. Everybody just assumed I did.

And then there was Lenny. What a piece of shit. Enough about him.

Out of the blue, I think about that instant when Bulldog's fingers brushed mine. What was that? It was ... weird. Not bad. Just weird. "Okay, Tinsley," I tell myself aloud, "it's time

for bed. Forget about all that stuff. Not important.” Teeth brushed, face washed, lotion slathered on, and pajamas on, I turn out the light and curl up under the covers. But for the first time in a long time, I don’t feel like crying myself to sleep. A group of men, guys I barely know, came to my aid tonight. They wanted to keep me safe. I really don’t know how to feel about that, and the fact that Bulldog was in the mix makes it stranger still. It feels like I might actually get a good night’s sleep tonight, knowing that somebody out there cares about me, even if they barely know me.

There’s light creeping in around the blinds, and I sit up and stretch. There’s somebody beside me, their back turned to me, and I pivot and smile. “Hey, sleepyhead!”

He rolls over and ... it’s Bulldog. I watch him stretch and yawn, and then he smiles up at me. “Hey, beautiful. Good morning.”

“Good morning to you too. Want some coffee?”

“I’d love some coffee. I’d love for you to cuddle up beside me even more.” His arms wrap around me tightly and he pulls me close, my cheek pressed to his chest. I’m so warm and comfortable, and I feel so loved. A minute later ...

I wake with a start and look around. It’s a little after two in the morning, and there’s no one there. I’m alone. But it seemed so real ... What the hell was that about? Might as well go to the bathroom while I’m awake, so I shuffle in there, do my business, and head back to bed. The sheets are cool now instead of warm like they were while I was in the bed, and it’ll take a minute to warm them back up.

And while I lie there, thinking about work and my parents and my pitiful savings account, Bulldog crosses my mind again. Why would I have a dream with *him* in it? That makes no sense at all.

The next thing I know, I’m waking up and it’s about seven. I didn’t have another dream, thank goodness.

But in some ways, that makes me sad.

After a leftover donut from two days earlier and a cup of coffee, I step into the shower, get myself squeaky clean, and go to the closet to find something to wear. I've got a cute little dress that I wear a denim jacket over, so I choose that. I'll wear my ankle boots. They'll be cute with it. Then I rummage around and find the perfect jewelry. Well, it's not actually rummaging. I keep my jewelry very neat. None of it is worth much, but it wasn't free, so I try to take good care of it.

Another cup of coffee, followed by brushing teeth, and then out the door. It's barely eight o'clock, and my first client of the day is due at eight thirty. I have a rechargeable Bluetooth speaker on my dash and I use my phone to play music. The sun is shining and it's pretty out, so I find a Beatles channel and start listening to that. I love their music.

I'm about halfway to the salon when the front of my car starts to feel funny. In less than a minute, I realize something is really wrong. Didn't they get the lug nuts tight enough on the wheels? There's a pull-off near the red barn up ahead, so I pull in there and hop out.

And the tire's flat. It's the one they took off last night, and I wonder what happened to it. I'm thinking about what to do, and I remember that I let my membership to the auto club lapse. Great. Now I have nothing to fall back on. All I know to do is call the salon and see if one of them can come and get me. The phone only rings once and Marguerite picks it up. "Tinsley's Trim and Tease. Marguerite speaking."

"Hey, Margie, it's Tins. I've got a flat. Can you or Micah come and pick me up?"

"Uh, we've both got clients in our chairs and your first one is here."

"Shit. Okay. I'll figure something out. Please tell her what's happened, okay? And I'll get in touch with her and reschedule her as soon as I can."

"I'll tell her. I'll call you when one of us finishes and if you're still stuck, we'll come pick you up."

“Thanks, Margie. Bye.” Now what the hell do I do? I look in the back end of the car, but I’m reminded that I don’t have a spare. Then I remember ... My dad always intended to get one, but he never did. Wow. Thanks, Dad. Then I hear it—the whine of a motorcycle. Oh, shit. With my luck, it’ll be some surly biker who wants a roll in the hay in repayment for getting me some help. That’s my luck.

I see it race past, and then in a few seconds, it crests the hill coming back toward me. As it draws near, it slows and pulls in, and it isn’t until the guy pulls his helmet off that I realize who it is.

Well, fuck me runnin’. Ain’t this my lucky day?

BULLDOG

“HERE’S YOUR NEW TAG, SIR. YOUR TITLE WILL COME IN THE mail in about ten working days.”

“Thanks.” I wander out of the courthouse and put the plate on the back of the bike, then fold the registration papers up and put them in the compartment under the seat with the loan papers. That’s it. It’s mine. I’m really glad I got a motorcycle designation when I took my driver’s license exams here in Kentucky. One of the guys at a local dealership offered classes, and I took one hoping I’d eventually get a bike. That little leap of faith paid off today.

I love this bike. Everything about it is impressive. Micah let me have the helmet, and even though I don’t want to wear one, the guys told me if they caught me without one, they’d kick my ass. In other words, they care. That’s refreshing. It might have something to do with the fact that I’m not currently acting like a total asshole. Who knew?

I set out from the courthouse in Hindman, stop at a convenience store to fill it up with gas, and take off. The whole thing took me less time than I thought it would, so I can

get back to the farm at a pretty decent hour. It helped that I took care of the loan yesterday and was standing at the courthouse when they opened the doors this morning.

It's a beautiful day, the kind of day that's perfect for riding, and I set out through the foothills to get back to Mallie. There aren't many cars out on the road today, although I meet a few school buses. The feeling I had that first day when I walked out of the prison was exhilarating. This is as good and maybe even better.

I lean into the big sweeping curve and then the smaller one. The sensation of flying intensifies as I power up the hill and when I start back down, I pass a gravel spot. There's a car sitting there, and I recognize it immediately, so I go down until I'm in a good straightaway where I can see traffic, turn around, and go back. When I slide into the gravel behind the car, I can see the front tire—flat. Well, shit. It's the same one we worked on last night. The car door opens and before she can speak, I say, "Hey."

"Hey."

"Tire's flat."

She rolls her eyes a bit. "Uh-huh."

"That's the one we aired up last night."

"Yep. It is."

I'm already to it, and I unscrew the cap off the valve stem. "Damn it."

"What?"

"It was dark last night and we just aired it up. Looks like that joker damaged your valve stem and all the air leaked out. Then when you drove it, it really shot out. The wheel will have to be taken off, a new valve stem put in, and aired back up. Won't take long. I can put the spare on instead ... Oh, that's right. No spare."

The blush that spreads across her cheeks makes it look like they're on fire. "Nope."

I sit there for a second, thinking about all the options. “Okay. Get on.” She just stands there and stares at me. “Get on the bike.”

“There’s no helmet for me.”

I hand her mine. “I can do without one until I can get you to ... You were on your way to work, right?” She nods. “Yeah. It’ll be fine. I’ll take you and drop you off, and then I’ll get one of the guys to come help me with your car.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I don’t have to do anything, Tinsley, but I want to. Let me take care of this. Let’s get you to work. I’m smart enough to know that you work for yourself, so you need the money, and the longer we stand here arguing, the later you’re going to be, so let’s go.” I start the bike and wait.

It takes her a few seconds to decide, and then she climbs on behind me. “Did you lock the doors?” I yell above the engine’s noise.

“Yeah,” she yells back.

“Okay.” With a couple of twists of the throttle, I pull out onto the roadway, and the forward momentum pulls her backward. In seconds, her arms clamp around my ribcage, and I throttle up and take off.

It’s not long before we pull into the space in front of the building, and she hops off as soon as I’m parked. When she hands the helmet back to me, I smile. “See? Safe and sound.”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

She’s almost to the door when I say, “Uh, keys?”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry.” Once I have her keys in hand, she turns and goes back to the door. Without another word, she opens it, steps inside, and it closes behind her. I can see her through the glass, talking to somebody and gesturing, and I’m wondering if I got her here fast enough to save an appointment. I’m sure she can’t afford to miss a single one.

Before I pull away, I call Reboot to ask him to send somebody. By the time I get back to the car, Ghost is there,

and once we get the wheel off, I park my bike there by her car and ride with him to the garage. Forty-five minutes later, we've got the wheel back on, and I return her car to the salon with him following. The bell on the door jingles as I open it, and they all turn to look. "Keys," I say and hold them out to her.

"Thanks. What do I owe you?"

"I told you before, nothing. Sorry we didn't catch that last night."

"It's okay."

"No. It's not. Something could've happened to you because of it, and that would be on us. So I'm really sorry."

"Eh. It's okay. I'm fine, you're fine, everybody's fine. No worries. And thanks again."

"You're welcome."

My hand is on the door when I hear her say, "Hey, Bulldog?"

I wheel to look at her. "Yeah?"

"Guess I'll see you around?"

"I'm sure you will."

"Okay. Bye."

When I climb into the SUV, Ghost is grinning. "What?"

He lets out a little chuckle. "Looks like the two of you are actually getting along."

"Let's just say there aren't any barbs being slung and leave it at that." I can't tell him what I'm really thinking.

Because what I'm really thinking is that Tinsley Hancock is different from the other women around here. She's smart and fast on her feet, and she's spunky. I like spunky. So will she see me around?

Yes, Tinsley. You absolutely will.

“THIS IS REALLY NICE,” BEAR MURMURS UNDER HIS BREATH.

“Yeah. Beautiful,” Reboot says in agreement.

“Thanks. I think I got a really good deal on it.”

“I think you did,” Ghost says. “I was surprised when I pulled up and saw it. I wasn’t sure what I thought it would look like, but this wasn’t it. It looks brand new.”

The smile on my face must be a mile wide. “Might as well be. Less than four thousand miles on it? Yeah. That’s brand new.”

“Very nice. Which of us gets to drive it first?” Paddy asks.

I laugh loudly. “None of you!”

“Wow. Just not gonna share, huh?” Hollywood asks, laughing.

“No plans to!”

We finish the workday, clean up, and head to the kitchen to eat. We haven’t been in there ten minutes when Reboot’s phone rings and he answers with, “Hey.” Everybody gets quiet. With a tap on his screen, he says, “Okay. You’re on speaker.”

“Hey, guys,” Patch’s voice calls out. We all answer with various greetings. “Everybody okay?”

“Yeah, we’re all right,” Reboot answers. “How are you? And Penny? And the kids?”

“We had Mindy cremated so we could bring her back without jumping through all the paperwork hoops. Had a memorial service for her a few days ago. All of her coworkers and friends showed up. Oh, except Joshua. I guess as soon as she wasn’t supporting his ass anymore, showing some respect was a little too much.”

“Seriously?” Paddy says.

“Actually, Fiona says they’d been fighting a lot, so maybe they were splitting up anyway. That would explain why he didn’t want Fiona in the house anymore.”

“True,” Hollywood says. “So what’s left to do?”

“Mitchell is having a fit to stay. Wants to at least finish the school year. I told him if he wants to stay, he has to find a way to pay for school because I just can’t afford a college in Hawaii. I can’t. But Fiona doesn’t have a choice. She has to come back with us.”

“And?” Bear asks.

“She’s fucking livid. Says she hates me, she hates Penny, she hates Kentucky—”

“I wasn’t aware she’d ever been in Kentucky,” Priest says.

“She hasn’t. She hates it on general purpose, mostly because it’s where I live. She called Mindy’s folks, but they told her they’re not coming to Hawaii so she can stay there either. Besides, their health isn’t great. We’re going to send Mindy’s ashes to them so they can bury them in the family cemetery. I told them I’d pay for the marker. There will be some life insurance money, and I want that divided between the kids. I hope it’ll help Mitchell with school.”

“That would be best. So when are you guys coming back?” Reboot asks.

“We’ll be back day after tomorrow. Probably late evening. Flying into LAX and then Nashville mid-afternoon, so we’ll have to get something to eat and drive up. Hope nobody’s stolen Penny’s car,” he says with a chuckle.

“Yeah, no shit. We’ll be here waiting. Hang in there, captain,” Paddy tells him.

“And tell Penny we said hi,” Bear calls out.

“She can hear you. Say hi to the guys, babe,” we hear Patch say.

“Hey, everybody! See you soon!” her voice calls out.

“Miss you!” Audrey calls from the other side of the room.

“Miss you too!”

“Okay, guys. Gotta get off here. Gotta find food and help Fiona get her stuff packed up so we can ship it. See you in a couple of days. And guys?”

“Yeah?” Reboot replies.

“Thanks for carrying on. And for the support. It means everything to me.”

“We love ya, captain. Just take care of yourself and we’ll see you soon,” Hollywood assures him.

“Love y’all back. Bye.”

“Well, I guess I know what I’ll be doing tomorrow,” Audrey mumbles.

“Yeah?” Reboot asks.

“I’ll be cleaning up your cottage real good,” she says and points to Hollywood.

“Uh, yeah. And we need to be ready to repaint the cottage, maybe put down some new flooring or something. You know, something for a girl,” I say, thinking about how unfeminine the cottages are.

“We can do that. Okay, everybody, finish your dinner and let’s get some rest. Sounds like things are about to get really hectic,” Reboot says.

There’s an angry teenage girl coming to live with us. This’ll be so much fun.

I can hardly wait.

CHAPTER 5



Bulldog

“HAVE YOU HAD TIME TO REALLY THINK ABOUT WHAT WE talked about last time?”

I nod. “Yes. And I think it’s true. I was really, really humiliated by what Imogen did. It affected everything, especially the way I see myself. And it had years to really dig into my brain. When you’re sitting in prison for something you didn’t do, you start to wonder, did I really do it? Am I lying to myself? Am I not remembering things as they really were? What’s wrong with me? The self-doubt is overwhelming.”

Shaggy smiles. “I can see how that could be. Self-talk is powerful, and if yours is negative, it affects every part of you. How do you feel about that now?”

“It’s a relearning process. I have to unlearn the bad ways and relearn the good ways. That’s hard when you’re used to hearing that internal voice telling you that crap over and over.”

“It is. What have you learned about yourself over the last week?”

That’s a really good question, one I hadn’t thought of. “Um, I think that I’m actually a pretty good person?”

“What made you come to that conclusion?”

“Because I’ve really put myself out there to apologize to people for things I did or said that I shouldn’t have.”

“Let’s not say shouldn’t have. That was valid. It was what you were feeling at that moment. It was just that the feelings were skewed. You’re apologizing for the person you didn’t want to be and trying to be the person you want to be. Did I get that right?”

“Yeah. That’s pretty much it.”

Shaggy sits there for a minute with his pencil scratching on the paper before he looks up and smiles. “Kevin, you’ve made a remarkable amount of progress in a very short time. You should be very, very proud of yourself. Have you done something for yourself as a reward?”

“Ummm ... I bought a motorcycle.”

“Oh my god! That’s great! A nice one?”

“Oh, yeah. Really nice one.”

“And are you proud of it?”

Nobody’s ever asked me anything like that before. “I am. Very proud of it. I got a good deal on it, I helped somebody who needed to get rid of it, and I’m enjoying it. Plus I think a couple of the other guys are jealous, and I know I shouldn’t like that, but I do.” I can’t help it—I’m grinning like an idiot.

“Normally I wouldn’t say wanting somebody else to be jealous is a good thing, but in this instance, good for you! You have something to be proud of, something to show for your hard work. Good job.”

“Thanks. Be sure to walk over to my cottage and look at it before you leave.”

“I’ll do that! And as you know, I can’t tell anyone what we talk about here, but David is going to ask about your progress, and I’ll have something great to tell him.” The sound of his pencil scribbling on the notepad is annoying, but at least he’s writing good stuff about me to tell the parole officer, Mr. Grady. “Is there anything else you’d like to talk about?”

How to put it? “Okay, so, let’s say you said some stuff to somebody that was really rude. And let’s say that you did it more than once. And then let’s say that you apologized to

them even though you didn't mean it, and they called you on it. Then you apologized to them and you really meant it, but they still don't really accept your apology. Then what? What's next?"

"Well, I'd say there has to be time for them to understand that you really are sorry. They need to see that in action, not just hear the words. You'll have to work on that."

"I already am."

"Then it's just a matter of time. At some point, either they'll see that you're telling the truth, or they'll be too scared of being hurt to be around you even though you've proven yourself. Either way, you just have to accept it. You originally set the tone by being rude to them, and if they never want to be around you because no matter what you do, they still think you have the propensity to keep being rude and hurtful, then you'll just have to accept that that's how it is. You know that saying about first impressions? Well, that's what you'd be dealing with in this instance."

"So there's a chance that you could never really get through to them?" The thought makes me feel a little sad.

"Unfortunately, yes. There's a real possibility that you'd never be able to."

"I see." That wasn't the answer I wanted. I wanted to know that at some point, she'd understand that I meant what I said and we could be ...

What? We could be what? Where am I going with this? Is that something I'd want to pursue, or is that just ridiculous to think that—

"Kevin? Where'd you go? You're lost in your head. Care to share?"

"Uh, no. Not yet anyway. But I will. Later. Maybe." Or maybe never.

Now my job is to figure out how to reach Tinsley. I don't really want anything other than to have her not hate me. Right? I'm not sure. All I know is that I'm really, really sorry for hurting her that way, and I want her to know I'm not going

to do it again. And now I understand that telling her isn't really going to do it.

I've got to show her.

TINSLEY

I HEAR PATCH AND PENNY ARE ON THEIR WAY BACK WITH HIS daughter. What's her name? Fiona. That's it. Pretty name. Can't wait to meet her.

Three people have walked in off the street today and wanted services. I couldn't do it because I'm already booked, so I'm standing here, looking at the station across the room. I could rent out a space to somebody else and get another cosmetologist in here. I'd make a little more toward rent and they could pick up some of the walk-ins. I'm not sure how to find that person, but I can try.

The door jingles again and I turn. When I do, I get the shock of my life.

It's Bulldog. And he's got a ... wheel? What the hell?

"Hey, Tinsley." He looks so proud of himself. Well, this is fucking confusing as hell.

"Hey. What's up?"

"Can I have your keys? I got this for you."

Have I fallen into some alternate dimension where nothing makes a damn bit of sense? "Uh, what ... Why do you have a wheel?"

He grins. "It's a spare! You don't have one, so I was at the junkyard looking for a part for a tractor at the farm and I decided to look for a wheel that would fit your car. And then I took it and had a tire put on it. So now you've got a spare, and I can put it in the back end of your car."

I have no idea what to say. "Uhhh ..."

“I know it’s kind of a weird gift, but it’s something you need, and when I thought of it, it made sense.”

“Why would you buy me a gift?”

His smile fades as he stands there, the tire leaning back against his legs. “It’s kind of a ... I guess you’d call it a peace offering?”

“A wheel?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s something that you really do need.”

“But a ... wheel?” My brain just can’t wrap itself around this.

“It’s really not safe for you to be out there on the road without a spare. I mean, the night that guy flattened your tire, I found out that you have a jack, just not a wheel and tire. And now you do. Have a wheel and tire, I mean.”

What is wrong with this guy? This is the weirdest thing ever. “Uh, okay. Thanks.”

“Can I have your keys? I’ll put it in your car.”

He just stands there, and I realize if I don’t give him my keys, he’s just going to keep standing there. “Yeah, sure.” They clang together as I dig them out of my bag, and I hand them to him.

“Thanks. Be right back.” He runs out the door, rolling the tire along with him, and I watch as he opens the back of the car, pulls up the deck mat, puts the tire in, and closes it all back up. Then he steps back inside. “There ya go,” he says as he hands my keys back. “You’ve got a spare.”

“Yeah. I’ve got a spare.” I’m so confused. “Why would you care if I have a spare?”

“Because I don’t want anything to happen to you.” I see some pinkness spread across his cheeks before he adds, “You know, just because you don’t have something as simple as a spare tire. That would be a shame. At least this way you have one.”

“Yeah, right. Okay. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. See you around.” Just as I think he’s gone, he stops in the doorway and turns back to me. “By the way, your hair looks nice like that.”

“Um, thanks?”

“You’re welcome. Later.” I watch as he crosses the street, puts his helmet on, and climbs onto that big bike. The sound of the engine roaring to life shakes the glass in the salon’s windows, and in a few seconds, he’s gone.

“Whoo-weeee, you’ve got an admirer!” Marguerite calls out.

“You shut up,” I say and point at her, frowning.

“Girl, you know you want that!” She’s laughing as she goes to the back to get something from the storage room.

Is she right? Do I want that? I don’t really know what to think. I want to say no, but that might be a lie, and a big one at that.

Yeah. I just might want that.

PATCH AND PENNY ARE COMING HOME TONIGHT, AND AUDREY and Izzy invited me out to the farm to welcome them home and meet Fiona. They say she’s an angry teenage girl. I say she’s a sad teenage girl who just lost her mom and is forced to come to Mallie, Kentucky, to live. That’s enough to make anybody hateful.

They haven’t arrived yet when I get there, so I set about helping Audrey and Izzy finish up dinner. The guys have wandered in and out, but I haven’t seen Bulldog. I don’t know where he is, but I’m sure he’s around somewhere. At just that moment, I hear the loping of the engine on the big bike outside. The door opens and I get a look at something I never thought I’d see.

There stands Bulldog with two huge bouquets of roses. One is red and one is yellow. “Hey, Audrey, you got something

for me to put these in?" he calls out.

"For you to put what ... Holy lord, Bulldog, what are these?" she asks as she stops dead in her tracks.

"I got the red ones for Penny and the yellow ones for Fiona. They say yellow roses mean friendship, and I think she could use some friends right now." He's smiling and obviously proud of himself.

"Oh, my, that's so kind of you! I know they'll appreciate them. Let me see ... I think I've got some vases in here somewhere." Audrey disappears into the kitchen, and that's when he turns and sees me standing there.

"Hi, Tinsley."

"Hey, Bulldog." *Throw him a bone*, I tell myself. "That's a really nice thing to do."

"Thanks. I just wanted them to know we're glad they're here. That's all."

Audrey comes running out with two vases. "Okay, I think these will do. Come on over here to the sink and let's try to get them sorted out."

"Thanks." Without another word, he follows Audrey to the sink and they stand there, talking and laughing as they arrange the flowers in the vases.

I hear somebody yell, "They're here!" and everybody starts moving toward the door. We spill out onto the lawn as the little sedan pulls in, and two tired adults and a startled-looking young woman crawl out of the car. There are hugs and kisses all around for Patch and Penny, but I watch as the teenager stands in the midst of all the activity, looking completely bewildered.

I push my way right through the group, walk straight up to her, and hold out my hand. "Hi. You must be Fiona. I'm Tinsley."

You'd think my hand was on fire the way she hesitates, but then she takes it and grips it weakly. "Hi. Are you married to one of the guys?"

“No. I’m a friend of Audrey and Penny’s. Izzy too. I own a salon up in town. Come on in. Need to use the bathroom? Wanna throw some water on your face? I can show you where the bathroom is or get you somethin’ to drink.”

“Uh, yeah. I could use a trip to the bathroom and something to drink.”

“Okay. Right this way. Come on.” I wait as she weighs out her options. Apparently she decides I’m not an ax murderer because she follows me into the kitchen. I show her the bathroom, then head to the fridge to get her a soft drink.

“Where’s Fiona?” Penny asks when she sees me, her face lined with worry.

“Down the hallway in the bathroom. She looked a little strung out, so I asked her if she wanted to splash some water on her face. Poor kid. She looks all tuckered out.”

“We all are. It’s been a stressful trip.”

“Well, y’all ain’t got nothin’ to worry ’bout now. We’re all here and we can help you. Patch doin’ okay?”

“He’s really, really tired. I’m a little worried about him. Think I might take him to the drugstore in Hindman tomorrow and get him a B12 shot.”

“Oh, that would probably perk him right up! Good idea. Now, you go get somethin’ to eat and drink and don’t mind Fiona. I’ll keep an eye on her and help her if she needs anything.”

“Thanks, Tins. You’re a good friend.” We hug, and I give her an extra pat on the back. She looks like she’s just wrung out, poor thing.

The rest of my evening is spent keeping Fiona company. She doesn’t talk much, just kinda sits there like she’s in shock. It’s almost eight o’clock before she asks, “Where am I going to sleep?”

“Oh, honey, you’ve got your own cottage!” For a brief moment, she seems to brighten. “It used to be Hollywood’s and it looks like a man cave right now, but they’re going to

paint it and put down new flooring if you want, and get you new bedding and art for the walls.”

“Would you come with me to pick some out? I don’t think Penny likes me very much.” She’s glaring in Penny’s direction, but Penny is oblivious to Fiona’s heated gaze.

“Sure, but I can tell you now that Penny loves your dad, and if she loves him, she loves you too. You’ll see. She’s a wonderful person. Never met a better one. You’ll be fine.”

“They’re saying I have to go to Knott County High School. I mean, really? Some redneck school?”

Time this kid gets a lesson in manners. “I went to school there. So I’m a redneck?”

“Uh, no. I mean, I—”

“Look, honey, this is the hand you’ve been dealt. If there’s anything I’ve learned in life, it’s that we play the hand we’ve been dealt and we make the best of it. Yeah, it’s not always what we want, but it’s usually what we need, whether we like it or not. And there’s somethin’ to be learned from everything. Everything. So pay attention and learn somethin’. And know this: Your daddy loves you. You done broke his heart by the way you’ve treated him. He wanted to be a daddy to you, but you just pushed him away. Even though he should be mad and maybe even hate you, he don’t, ’cause he’s your daddy and he’ll always love you. Now, you just give him the same kind of chance he’s givin’ you and you’ll see that things could be a lot worse.”

“I don’t know how they could be worse.”

“You miss your mama. I get it. Course you do. But this is your life now, and you gotta figure out how to live it the best way you can right here. I mean, look at Dolly Parton. She grew up in the hills of east Tennessee, about the most backward place on earth, and look where she is now! She made the best of it. You can too. Come on. Get your bags and I’ll take you to the cottage so you can settle in.” We head out the door and I give Patch a knowing nod as we leave. He knows what I’m doing, and I do believe he’s thankful.

Hollywood said he got the rest of his things out of the cottage a couple of hours ago, and he left the front door unlocked. We step inside and when I flip the switch by the door, a lamp on an end table comes on. The bed is made and everything is neat and orderly. “Okay, so you got a fridge here, and a little kitchen with a microwave. Over there is the bathroom and the washer and dryer are in there. And that there is the little livin’ room area so you can relax and watch TV without havin’ to sit on the bed. There’s pots and pans in the cabinets. Dishes too. Silverware in the drawer. Towels in the bathroom. Cleanin’ stuff in the linen closet in there too.”

She turns ’round and ’round, looking at the room. “I think I kinda like this blue. Navy blue. It’s nice. What color is the bathroom?”

“I think it’s a light blue in the same family.”

She snaps on the bathroom light, looks around, and turns it off. “Yeah. This is good. I like the floor too. Looks like wood, but it’s not.”

“Nope. It’s not. Sturdy though. And easy to keep clean.”

“Yeah. That’s a pretty big closet,” she says and points to it.

“Yeah, it’s a nice size. Should have plenty of room in there.”

“Is there cable and internet?”

“Yep. I don’t know the passwords. It’s not really cable though. It’s a bunch-a streamin’ services. And a few of the guys have some of their own that they pay for above and beyond what Patch gives ’em.”

“Cool.” She’s still prowling, looking here and there. She opens one of the dresser drawers and smiles. “Nothing in there.”

“When Hollywood says he’s done somethin’, he’s really done it. The only way he left anything behind is if it fell behind a piece of furniture or somethin’. He’s real thorough.”

“Yeah. I see that.” She finally turns to face me, and I’ve never seen a child her age look so weary. “I’m sorry, but I’m

really tired. Is it okay if I go on to bed?"

"Sure! I'll just let myself out. I'm sure Hollywood will give you the keys tomorrow mornin' at breakfast. Penny takin' you to register you for school tomorrow?"

"I dunno. Doubt it. Dad will probably have to do it, but I wish they'd—" A knock at the door interrupts her. "Wonder who that is." I just shrug.

The door opens to Bulldog with the yellow roses. "Hi, Fiona. Just wanted to bring these over to brighten up the cottage. I hope you'll like it here. We all think very highly of your dad. He's a great guy."

"Uh, thanks. This is really nice. Thank you. I'd ask you in, but I'm going to bed."

"That's fine. Just wanted to drop them off and tell you again that we're glad to have you here. If you need anything, ask anybody here and we'll try our best to help you."

"Thanks. I will. Night."

She's about to close the door when I say, "Hey, Bulldog, wait up! Honey, I'm goin' on. You go to bed. See you sometime soon."

She shoots me a weak smile. "Yeah. Good. See you soon. Night."

"Night, honey." I haven't even made it off the porch when I hear the door click behind me, and then the sound of the lock being turned.

Bulldog's waiting at the steps. "Did you want something?" He's not being snotty, just conversational.

"I just wanted to say thanks for being so nice to her. She's havin' a rough time, and the last thing she needs is somebody makin' her uncomfortable or being confrontational or mean-spirited."

"I'd never do that to her. She's just a kid—a kid who doesn't want to be here."

“Yeah. She said as much. Called Knott County High School a redneck school.”

“Oh, did she?”

“Yeah, and I told her I went there and asked her if I’m a redneck.”

He snickers. “Bet that got a quick response.”

“It did.”

“So ...” It’s like he’s fishing for something to talk about. “How’s that tire holding up? Still holding air? No problems with it?”

“No. None at all. Thanks for that.”

“You’re welcome.” We walk along in silence, and then he tries again. “Glad Penny’s back?”

“Oh, yeah. I missed her. She’s a sweet lady.”

“Yeah. She is. And she’s good for Patch. He really loves her.”

“Yeah, well, she really loves him.”

“That’s good. Everybody needs that.” A silence falls again.

We’re almost to the kitchen before he reaches out and touches my arm. He doesn’t grab it; he just touches it lightly, enough to get my attention, and I stop in my tracks. “Listen, Tinsley, I’m really, really sorry for the way I treated you.”

“Yeah. You’ve already said that. And I’ve already forgiven you. Let it go, Bulldog.”

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t. I feel horrible about it. That’s not who I am. I’m a nurse, for god’s sake. I help people. And I was really rude to you. Hell, I’ve been really rude to everybody for months. Can I at least try to make it up to you?”

I know where this is going, and I’ve got to shut it down. “That’s really not necessary.”

“I know, but it would make me feel better.”

Right. Because it’s all about you, I want to yell, but I don’t. “You already made it up to me with the spare.”

“No, I mean something nicer. Let me take you to dinner. I’ll be on my best behavior and do my best to show you a good time.”

“No.”

“No? Just like that? But I’ve told you over and over that I—”

“Look, Bulldog, it’s nothing personal. Really. It’s just that I’ve been treated that way by a lot of men in my lifetime, and I don’t want that again.”

“But I won’t treat you like that again.”

“You say that now, but down the road somewhere, you will. I’m not sayin’ all men are like that. I’m sayin’ that every man I meet is like that to me. I don’t know if I’m a magnet for it, or if I don’t know what the hell I’m doin’ and pick the wrong men, or if there’s somethin’ wrong with me and I trigger it, but they all treat me that way, like I don’t matter.”

“You matter to me.”

“Yeah, until I don’t do what you want or give you what you want. And then you’re like all the rest.”

“I’m not like that, Tinsley,” he says, and I can hear the frustration in his voice.

“You may think that, but you’ve done it before, and I have every reason to think you’ll do it again when I’m not whatever it is that you want at the moment.”

“Can you at least let me try to show you that I’m telling the truth?”

“No. I can’t be somebody’s experiment in self-improvement. I’ve been down that road and it’s far too painful. I’m sorry. I just can’t.”

“What about the other day when I was giving you back your keys and our fingers brushed?” Oh, shit. No. No, no, no. This can’t be happening. “I felt it. I know you did too. Don’t try to deny it. I can see it all over your face.”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin’ —”

“Who’s lying now?”

I have to escape somehow. This can’t happen. I can’t get involved with this guy and have him kick me around and to the curb in a few months or years. I just can’t. “I’m not lyin’. I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yeah, you just stick with that story, but we both know the truth. There’s a reason why I’ve been floundering for so long, bitter and angry, and it was *you* who said the magic words and made me realize what was going on in my head. You’re the one who put me on the path to finding myself. You can’t stand there and deny that there’s something between us. And frankly, I want to find out what it is.”

There’s a tightness in my chest and my heart is beating out of control. “I’ve gotta go. I’ve got work in the mornin’, and I have things I have to do when I get home, and—”

“Okay, okay. I give up.” Then he grins. “For now. But I won’t stop trying, Tinsley. I can promise you that.”

“Great. Okay. Well, gotta go. Nice talkin’ to ya.” Fuck me, that sounds ridiculous. Without another word, I dart into the kitchen, start grabbing my stuff up, tell Penny and Patch goodbye, and head out the door. But just before I walk out, my eyes glance around until they find him. When his gaze meets mine, he smiles.

I am so fucked.

BULLDOG

WHAT THE HELL IS WRONG WITH ME? I CAN’T BELIEVE I SAID all of that, and yet, for reasons I don’t understand, it feels good, even though it was terrifying. I was honest, the kind of honest that gets you ripped wide open and your guts trampled, but I did it anyway. Why?

I keep telling myself it's because I'm sorry for the way I treated her, but I know that's not it. Maybe that's partly it. Why is it so important to me that she not hate me? Because I've hated myself for so long. That's the only answer I can come up with. Why I've hated myself, I don't know. Maybe I think I was too stupid when I didn't catch on to what Imogen was up to. I'm not sure.

But the rest of the truth is that I admire Tinsley. It took me awhile, but I finally figured out that she's not loud or obnoxious. That's a persona she wears at the shop to make people feel happy and involved. She likes to include her clients in the process and entertain them at the same time. Who wouldn't like to have their hair cut and styled by somebody who's as entertaining as Tinsley? She's super funny and a total pro at the one-liners. Her zingers are masterful. And yet she's not hurtful. Well, unless you're hurtful to her first.

And I was. I own that. The things I said to her shouldn't be said to anybody, much less somebody who's trying hard to earn themselves a living. It embarrasses me to know that I was so thoughtless and callous. I remember that first time in the grocery when she was trying to be helpful and I told her I hadn't asked for her advice. That was totally uncalled for. Worse yet, she was right—the ones I was holding were the best of the ones I bought. She was willing to share her experiences with me to make my experience better. It wasn't meddling. Nobody could call it that. But that's how I reacted.

I've been around Audrey and Penny long enough now—not to mention Izzy—that I understand not all women are like Imogen. Penny would never cheat on Patch, and Audrey worships the ground Hollywood walks on. Izzy's a lot less demonstrative, but you can tell from the way she looks at Ghost that she's crazy about him.

That's all I want. I want a woman to look at me that way. When she looks at me, I want her to see all her tomorrows, and I want them to be bright and promising. I'm not sure how that could be as long as I'm an ex-con working at a camp for homeless guys. No, that's not how Patch envisions it, but that's

pretty much what it is if we're all honest. We had nowhere else to go and nobody else wanted us. We wound up here because it was our last and only option, along with being our best option. I'm not trying to negate what's going on here at the farm. It's incredible, and I'm proud to be part of it. But everybody in town knows how we came to be here, and that's a lot for a woman to have to live with, knowing she's with somebody out here.

Yet Audrey and Izzy don't seem to be bothered by it at all. I have to say, Tinsley doesn't seem like the type who cares what anybody thinks, and that could work in my favor. Plus the dating pool, being what it is around here, is pitifully small, and Tinsley's available. At least I think she is. So now I have to ask myself the hard question. Even if there were two million women around, would I still be attracted to her? The question might've been hard, but the answer is easy.

Yes. I'd definitely still be attracted to her.

What the hell am I doing, contemplating a relationship? I have zero business doing that. Then I remember something. My sentence was vacated. I was exonerated. The only reason I'm meeting with the parole officer is because Patch wants it that way, but I didn't commit the crime I was accused of. I was hurt, betrayed, lied to and about, cheated on, falsely imprisoned, and treated like shit in prison because they hate child killers. How many times did I have the shit beaten out of me? How many times did guys try to rape me? Torture me? Kill me?

Don't I deserve some happiness? Somebody who'd love me, or at the very least care about me and not treat me like shit? My only crime was believing that a woman loved me. And that makes me a little afraid. If I was fooled once, I could be fooled again.

The difference here is that everybody in this community knows Tinsley. They know all about her. They've known her all her life. And if there's something really wrong with her, somebody will tell me. Not only that, but if I understand correctly, she was treated like shit too by her ex-husband. That

kind of thing makes a woman appreciate a good man when she finds one. The reality hits me like a sledgehammer.

I'm a good man. I've never intentionally hurt anybody in my life except with my words, and I've regretted every scorching syllable I've said to anybody. Nobody here means me any harm, and I've finally gotten that through my hard head. I'm making up for it, atoning for it. I can do that. I can make a good life for myself here.

The only thing that would make it better would be to have a good woman beside me. Tinsley could be that woman. I know she could. And I could be that man, the one who treats her right and makes her happy. My mind's made up.

Tinsley is the prize at the end of the race, and I'm gonna run like hell and win it even if it kills me.

CHAPTER 6



Tinsley

“HEY, IT’S FIONA. I HOPE IT’S OKAY THAT I GOT YOUR number from Audrey.”

I smile. “Of course, honey. Call me anytime. What’s up?”

“Could you go with me to the big store in Hazard tonight to get some stuff? I need a few things, and I was hoping to get some stuff for my cottage too.”

Even though I know what she’s going to say, I have to ask anyway. “What about Penny? Doesn’t she want to go with you?”

“But I want to go with you! You’re more fun,” she whines. Nothing grinds on me more than a whiney teenage girl, and yet I know she’s going through a lot.

“Tell you what. You ask her. If she says it’s okay, tell her to call me and tell me. Then you can call me and tell me what time to come.”

“Yay! Okay. I’ll ask. Thanks, Tinsley!”

“You’re welcome, baby. Talk to you soon. Bye.”

I put my phone down and go back to Mrs. Morgan’s hair. I don’t know why she wants it this color. It’s ugly as sin, and yet she likes it, so orange that it looks like it’s on fire. Ugh. I hope she’s not telling people who’s doing it for her. I’m just

trimming it up when my phone rings again and I look at the screen: Penny. I'll call her back as soon as I'm finished.

Twenty minutes later, she answers on the first ring. "Hey, Tins."

"Hi! Sorry I couldn't talk. I was with a client."

"That's okay. I figured that was the case. So, I hear Fiona called and wants you to take her shopping."

"Yeah, and you know what I told her. That's your place, Pen, not mine. You should take her."

"Right now, she's so hostile that if you don't mind taking her, I think that would be better. So, two things. One, come tonight and eat dinner before you take her."

"Sure. Sounds great."

"And two, please set aside a couple of hours on Sunday. Be at the farm at two o'clock. Is that okay? Can you make it?"

"Uh, sure. What's up?"

"One of the judges is coming out to the farm and Patch and I are getting married."

"Oh, god, Pen! That's amazin'! I'll do your hair and makeup if you want. I'd love to."

"Thanks, but it's nothing fancy. Just us and all of you guys. I'm not buying a dress or flowers or—"

"Oh, no. You're gettin' a dress and flowers and a cake. I'll make sure of it. All of it. You make plans to go with me on Saturday. Me and Audrey will take you and Fiona and we'll all go shop for a dress and stuff. I'll make the arrangements for a cake and the flowers."

"Tinsley, you don't have to do that."

Now I'm whining. "I want to. Please? Please let me do this for y'all. You're my friend, and I wanna see you have a lovely afternoon weddin', okay? Please?"

She starts to laugh. "Okay! I'll let you. Sounds good. Hey, Tins?"

“Yeah, babe?”

“I love you.”

“I love you too. Closest thing to sisters I’ve ever had, you, Izzy, and Audrey. I’ll see ya tonight.”

“Good. Five thirty. Talk to you this evening. Bye.”

“Bye.” I stand there and hold my phone to my chest. Penny and Patch are getting married! That’s so awesome! Who’s she going to choose as her maid or matron of honor? Me? Oh, it should be Fiona! Let the girl feel invested in the relationship. I’ll talk to Penny tonight at dinner and suggest it.

I get finished about four thirty, run home, shower to get the smell of haircolor off me, and put on a cute dress. I almost slip on a pair of heels, but then decide on flats. Minimal jewelry—I’m not trying to impress anybody.

Am I?

Oh, lord. I’ve gotta get my head on straight. I go into the bathroom, brush my hair back, and put it in a big clip. Good enough. Makeup? I decide that just a little mascara and a little lip gloss will be fine. Okay, maybe some blush, but just a little. One last look in the mirror and I’m ready to go.

When I get there, the guys are straggling in from their cottages after their post-work showers. I don’t see Ghost, so I bet he’s already in the kitchen with Izzy. She’s been staying out here ever since the crash, and they’re saying she might get the immobilizer off next week. I know she’ll be glad. That thing really has to suck.

“Hey, Tinsley,” I hear a voice say and turn to find Patch right behind me.

“Hey!” He gives me a hug, and it’s like getting a hug from my brother. Talk about a great guy, he really is one. “How ya doin’?”

“Okay, I guess. Sent Mindy’s ashes off to her parents today. But I opened them and kept a little bit. They make jewelry now with ashes in it, so I’m having something made for Fiona and Mitchell.”

“That’s really nice. I think they’ll appreciate that.”

“Yeah. A necklace for Fiona and a wide cuff bracelet for Mitchell with a glass thing in the middle that has the ashes in it. Made into the glass. Not like a bottle or anything.”

I can’t imagine a college boy wearing something like that. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll like that.”

“I think so. He dresses kinda ... Honestly, Tins, I think he’s gay. He’s never said, but I’m pretty sure.”

“Oh! Has Fiona said anything about it?”

“No. She barely speaks to me. I love that child, and she just freezes me out.”

“I’m takin’ her shoppin’ tonight.”

“That’s what Pen said.”

“I’ll talk to her. Don’t you worry. She’s gonna see you in a whole new light,” I assure him and lean over to give him a peck on the cheek.

He gives me a weak smile. “That would be nice.”

“Hey, Tinsley!” I spin to find Reboot walking up behind Patch and me. “How ya doin’?”

“Good! You doin’ okay?”

“Yep. Had a good day. Finished a blade! Pretty happy about that.”

“I bet.”

We step into the kitchen to find all kinds of activity going on. Audrey’s stirring something on the stove, and Hollywood and Taylor are setting the table. The little boy insists his dad is doing it wrong and keeps moving the silverware. Hollywood eventually quits fighting it and just lets it go. They’re so cute together.

Bear and Paddy are already there, putting ice in glasses. Penny and Izzy are laying dinner rolls out on a baking sheet, and I hustle over to see if I can help, but they send me over to Priest. He’s pouring up pitchers of tea made in the two big

coffeemakers. Honestly, I never thought of making it that way, but it's pretty darn smart.

Then I realize something. I haven't seen Bulldog anywhere. That's weird. Against my better judgment, I'm about to ask where he is when the door opens.

The guy who steps into the kitchen isn't the one I'm used to seeing in ripped-up jeans and tank tops. He's wearing a form-fitting pair of camel-colored jeans with a dark green shirt tucked into them. It's apparently long-sleeved, but he's got the sleeves rolled up, and there's some kind of tan-colored print on the shirt, very faint. Around his waist is a woven belt, and he's wearing a pair of oxfords in the same dark brown as the belt. His dark hair is slicked back, and his beard is trimmed to perfection. I've never been curious about the designs in the sleeve covering his left arm, but for some reason, now I am. But those eyes ... To my horror and delight, they seek me out immediately, and the little smile on his lips tells me I wasn't imagining it. He was indeed looking for me.

"Uh, you got something else you need to do?" Priest asks me with a grin.

"Nah. Nope."

Now he's laughing at me. "Girl, I thought I could trust you to be truthful, but you're lying out your ass."

"What are you—"

"Aww, hell, just go talk to him. You know you want to." I look into Priest's eyes and find them smiling back at me. "Go on. I got this."

"You sure?"

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Go on. He didn't dress up for none of us, I can tell you that." He's still chuckling when I step away, and I watch with curiosity as Bulldog just kinda hangs out by the door, not moving into the room, just standing there.

By the time I reach him, he's moved a few steps forward, but he's still standing in the general vicinity of the door. Hoping to make a quick exit? I dunno. I just know that the Bulldog I'm seeing right now isn't the Bulldog I'm used to.

I'm within a few feet of him when he grins and says, "Don't you look pretty?"

"You're lookin' kinda pretty yourself," I answer.

"Yeah? I try sometimes. I figured if we were having guests, I should make an effort."

"Guests? What guests?"

"I guess you have a point there," he says as he shrugs. "You're more like family than a guest. That's a good thing in my book."

"Thanks. I don't know if everybody else feels that way about me but I—"

"They do. Everybody here thinks very highly of you, Tinsley."

"Including you?"

"Including me." His eyes flit about as he rubs his palms together, a gesture I recognize as nervousness, then nods toward the door. "Step out here with me for a minute?"

I don't answer, just duck out when he opens the door, and when I hear it close behind us, I turn to face him. "What's up?" Wow. How original of me.

"Look, Tinsley, I just want you to know that I meant everything I said to you. Plus you should know that I've been doing a lot of soul-searching, a lot of thinking, a lot of remembering and letting go. I'm not just doing this lip service. I'm actively working on being a better person, and most of that is because of you."

"Because of *me*? How is it because of me?"

"Because." Before I can process what's happening, he moves toward me and grasps both of my hands in his. The feeling that passes over me is ... comfortable. Safe. I feel like I can trust this guy. "Because looking into your eyes gives me the courage to tell myself that I deserve better than what I had before. I deserve to be with somebody who'll appreciate me, somebody who'll be faithful to me, somebody who actually wants to be with me. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying I'm

great. I'm just saying that I'm a good person. I realize that now. And I didn't deserve to be treated like I was before. I know for a fact that you're not that kind of person, Tinsley. I bet I can go into town and ask anybody I see, and they'll all tell me what a fine person you are."

"I bet you're wrong."

He tips his head ever so slightly to the side. "Why? Why would anybody say anything nasty about you?"

"Because they've all known me all my life, and when I was in high school, all the kids thought I was a slut. But I wasn't. Back then I just liked makeup and dresses and heels and jewelry, and I liked lookin' nice and fixin' myself up. The girls hated me. It didn't help that my dad was the principal. That was more than enough. But yeah, they didn't like that I tried to doll myself up, and they hated me. Most of my friends were guys, and that made them even surer that I was a slut. A huge slut. I mean, what was I supposed to do when the girls wouldn't have anything to do with me? So if you ask around, some of the people here will tell you that I'm a slut, but I'm not. I mean, I like sex and all, but I'm not fallin' into bed with every guy I see." *Holy shit, shut up, Tinsley*, I hear my brain scream. Why the hell did I say that? Sheesh. "But I married Lenny, and I wanted a home and a family, kids, white picket fence, all of that. And all I got was a world o' hurt. So then I was the beat-up old lady of an asshole drunk. And I'm talkin' too much and I should just shut up." I can feel tears pooling in my lower lids, and I do not want to cry in front of this guy. I'm trying to trust him, but I'm afraid he'll take that as some kind of weakness and rip me a new one.

"Tinsley." I can't meet his gaze. I just can't. "Tinsley, look at me. Hey. Up here." He gives my hands a squeeze, and that's the moment my eyes jerk upward.

He's smiling, but not in a way that makes fun. It's a gentle smile, one that looks ... kind. Compassionate. "You listen to me. You're a fine lady. Everybody that I know, that I've met, thinks you're a wonderful person. Penny and Audrey and Izzy love you, and I know enough about those three that if they think you're okay, then I know you are. Some guys would say,

‘Let’s take it slow,’ or some shit like that. I’m not going to. I don’t care if we take it fast, slow, six months to a first kiss, or fucking each other’s brains out in two hours. I want whatever you want. I want to give you whatever you need.”

Something crosses my mind. “How long has it been since you were with somebody?”

A tiny bit of pink spreads across the tops of his cheeks. “Since the last time I was with Imogen.”

“You mean, when you got out, you didn’t ... like, find somebody to just ... You didn’t—”

“No, Tinsley. I didn’t. I’ve never been that kind of guy. You may not believe this, but Imogen is the only woman I’ve ever been with. We started dating in high school and just stayed together for the duration. Sometimes I think that’s what was wrong. She never got the chance to sleep around and get all of that out of her system. Me, I didn’t need to. I was happy with her. I thought we had a good life. Apparently I was wrong. But that doesn’t change the fact that I’m not a guy who shops around and runs through women like light beer. You’re no slut? Well, I’m no man whore. I’m just not. If I’m with somebody, as far as I’m concerned, it’s a commitment. And that’s not going to change.”

“You didn’t like ... I mean, she was cheating on you, but you didn’t find somebody to cheat with so you could pay her back or—”

“Tinsley, there was no retaliatory sex. I was already in prison by the time I found out what had really happened. Besides, I wouldn’t have done that anyway. I just told you, that’s not who I am. Never have been, never will be. I don’t use women that way. Look.” He gives our joined hands a little shake. “I’m willing to take a chance on you, to take a chance that you don’t hold grudges and really have forgiven me for being such an asshole.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, well, you really were an asshole.”

“I know. I admit that. But are you willing to take a chance on me? I’m not going to make you a bunch of promises

because I fully intend to show you that I mean what I say. But I can tell you now, if you give me your heart, I'll take care of it like it's the most precious, fragile little bird egg on the planet, and I'll be waiting for it to hatch so we can both hear that bird sing. You don't have to decide right now, of course. You can—"

"Bulldog?"

He tucks his chin a little and gives me the side-eye. "Yeah?"

"Would you please just kiss me?"

I expect him to rush me, back me up against the wall or something, but instead, he holds my chin with his finger and thumb, leans in, and presses his lips to mine ever so slowly. There's no pressure, no tongue, none of that stuff, and this is the fucking sexiest kiss anybody has ever given me. I mean, like in the history of mankind, nobody's ever given anybody a kiss sexier than this one. My skin is tingling from the top of my scalp to the soles of my feet. Holy smokin' hot hell, I don't want this to ever end.

When he pulls back, I feel a tear trickle down my cheek, and he wipes it away with the pad of his thumb before he gives me another little peck and smiles at me. "Stop that cryin', girl. I want your days to be sunny from now on." I can feel myself really starting to tear up, and I sniffle just a little bit, my head hung and my eyes closed.

And just like that, a pair of warm arms wraps around me and pulls me in close. All I can do is cry into his chest, and I feel like an idiot. One of his hands slides up my spine until it rests on the back of my neck and I'm totally overwhelmed. It takes me a second to figure out what it is, and when I do, I cry harder.

It's relief.

Oh my god, what's happening here? It seems like I should say something, but while I'm trying to figure out what it should be, I hear him whisper, "Hey, babe, it's okay. We've got a long way to go, but I'll meet you halfway. Matter of fact, I'll

take an extra mile. That's only fair for the grief I gave you before."

It's taking everything I have to get myself under control. "Your name's not Bulldog."

"It's Kevin. Kevin Wade. And your last name is Hancock."

"How'd you know that?"

A little chuckle vibrates against my cheek. "Um, it's on your business cards. Is that your ex's last name?"

I draw back and look up into his face. "No. I took my family name back with the divorce. Can you tell me about your ex?"

"We've got all kinds of time for that, and yes. I'll tell you everything. Anything you ask. Total transparency. But right now, we've got dinner with our big family in there." He's rubbing my upper arms as he talks, and it feels so good.

"Yeah, and then I've got a shopping trip."

"Tell ya what. You take Fiona shopping and when you get back, instead of heading straight home, come over to my cottage. We'll have some snacks, sit and talk. Sound good?"

"Yeah. Sounds good. Do you want to come with us to shop?"

"Nah. That'll draw too much attention."

Is he ashamed of me? "You don't want anybody to know?"

"It's not that. It's just that if it doesn't work out, it'll be awkward, and no matter how we leave it, they'll all feel weird about it."

"Oh. I hadn't thought about that."

"Yeah. I can almost promise you that Patch would prefer it that way."

"Probably. So can we sit together at dinner?"

His hand slides under my chin and tips my face up to feather a little kiss on my lips again as he laughs. "Of course."

Why couldn't we? Unless you planned to be all over me, and then we probably shouldn't."

"I can control myself. Can you control yourself?"

Now he's outright laughing. "I'm gonna do my best!"

This is going to be an interesting evening.

OH MY GOD. THIS GIRL ... SHE CAN FLAT OUT SPEND SOME money. I talked her into letting Penny come, and then Audrey wanted to come, so it's the four of us. I thought she'd say to just forget it when they wound up with us, but she seemed okay with it. Izzy declined. I think she knew where this was headed and wanted no part of it.

Now they're looking at clothes instead of home goods. This was *not* what we were supposed to be shopping for. Fiona has a whole cart full of stuff, and I watch Penny's eyes. Finally, she says, "Honey, I think you need to pare this down. Like, two dresses and two pairs of shorts and two tops. Your dad is gonna kill us both if I buy all of this stuff for you."

"Hey," I bark, "what happened to sheets and comforters and drapes and art for the walls?"

Fiona ignores me. "Okay, if I put back this dress and only get one, can I still get the shorts and tops and this pair of shoes?" she asks, holding up a pair of wedge sandals.

Penny nods. "Yeah, okay. That's fine."

"Hello? Drapes?"

Audrey glances at me, and while Penny and Fiona keep negotiating clothes, she sidles up to me. "You're really on edge. What's going on?"

"Nothing. I'm just—"

"Don't tell me nothing, girl. I know tense when I see it. Did something happen?"

“No.” Do I dare tell her? What if I just hint? “Uh, no, but maybe it will later.”

It’s just not soaking in. “Something’s going to happen later?”

“Maybe.”

“Whaaa ... I don’t understand. You mean after we leave here?”

“I mean ...” I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I mean after we get back to the farm.”

“After we get back to the farm? I don’t ...”

“Um, I may be staying for a while.”

“Is something wrong at your place?”

“No, Audrey. Nothing is wrong at my place. It’s just ... It’s lonely there.” She’s still staring at me, her brow all wrinkled downward. “Oh, for god’s sake, Audrey. Me and Kevin. Maybe. I’m—”

“Kevin? Who’s ... Bulldog? Oh my god, *Bulldog*?” she whispers far too loudly.

“Shhhh! Keep it down! Yes. Me and Bulldog. Um, Kevin.”

“Oh holy lord! When did all this happen? I thought you guys hated each other.”

“You know what they say about that fine line between.”

She rolls her eyes and chuckles. “Yeah. Obviously.” Without missing a beat, she claps her hands together. “Okay, ladies. Let’s get to the real reason why we’re here. I’ve got to get back and get Taylor ready for school tomorrow.”

“Okay, okay,” Fiona grumbles as Penny turns the cart toward the linen department.

An hour later, we’ve got a comforter with gray and blue clouds on it, gray drapes, a gray rug, and a couple of pieces of artwork for the walls. The bathroom already has navy towels, so those are fine. She finds a shower curtain with gray and

blue seashells on it and a little framed sign for the bathroom wall that says *Wash your booty!* It's cute.

By the time we get back to the farm, it's about nine, much later than Audrey really wanted to be gone, but Hollywood's already got Taylor ready for bed. He's a good guy, that one. When he meets Audrey at the kitchen door, you'd think they hadn't seen each other in weeks the way he kisses her. It's so cute.

Good thing this car has a pretty good-sized cargo deck in the back. Rather than struggle to carry all the crap they bought, I drive over to Hollywood's old cottage and help Penny and Fiona unload everything. When that's done, Penny hugs me and wanders across the lawn to their cottage. Then I realize something.

I don't have Kevin's phone number. And I don't know for sure which cottage is his. Shit. Shit, shit, shit. I can't go over to the kitchen and ask Audrey without waking Taylor. I can't ask Penny without Patch finding out, and I think Kevin wanted to avoid that. Damn it, what do I do?

I know he heard us come in. He had to. It's not like we were being quiet. I drive over and park by the lodge, then shut off my car and sit there. If I don't find him, he'll think I don't want to see him. If I start knocking on doors and get the wrong one, somebody will figure out what's going on. It's not like they have their names on them, damn it.

I'm still sitting there, trying to figure it out, when there's a ping on my phone. I pull it out and check it. It's a number I don't recognize, but I smile when I see the message.

Hey, where are you? I heard you guys come in.

That makes me chuckle.

Sitting in my car over by the lodge. I don't know for sure which cottage is yours. They all look the same in the dark!

Three wavy dots appear, and then the message pops up.

Does this help?

I'm about to ask what he means when I see a door open on a cottage. The light inside frames the silhouette of the person in the doorway, and he steps out onto the porch to lean against one of the posts.

The car door makes very little noise as I close it gently and begin to make my way across the lawn. I'm about two-thirds of the way there when I step in a hole, pitch forward, and fall flat on my face. Two seconds later, a pair of strong hands grabs me and lifts me to my feet. "Damn, baby, you okay?" he whispers.

"I think I scraped my knee," I whisper back.

"Come on. Let's get inside where I can see it." I hobble-walk to the cottage, his arm around my waist, and climb the stairs slowly.

"Sit down there and let me look. Ouch. You got it good." He's already set about getting a wet cloth and some first aid stuff. "Let's clean that up and get a bandage on it. It'll be fine. It's just a scrape. But it's bleeding pretty good, and it's got junk all in it. Don't want you getting an infection."

"Because that would be just my luck. Old Grace here," I mumble.

"Eh. There are mole hills all over this lawn. We try to shovel them full every time we find one, but those little bastards are fast. Shovel four in, the next morning there are six or seven hills." I let out a hiss as the cloth skims over my knee. "I'm sorry. I know it hurts," he says from his kneeling position on the floor.

"Not bad. Just stings."

"Okay. Ointment." He smears something on it. "And now a bandage." I feel the pressure of his fingers pushing on the adhesive parts of the bandage. "All fixed up." When he stands, he reaches for my hands and helps me to standing. "Come on over here and let's at least try to relax." He's wearing one of his tanks and, lawd have mercy, a pair of gray sweatpants. Somebody throw me in a tub of ice water. I'm seriously thinking of making a dive for the bed.

Instead, he leads me to the sofa. “Want something to drink?”

“Yeah. Just a bottle of water, if you’ve got it.”

“Sure. Here ya go.” When he comes back, he’s got my water and a soft drink for himself. “So did you get a lot of shopping done?” I tell him about the trip, and he laughs from time to time. “Hard to keep ’em focused, huh?”

I snort. “Oh, almost impossible.”

“Well, sounds like she got the most important things she needed. Buy anything for yourself?”

“Nah. I don’t need anything.”

“Everybody needs something.”

I shake my head. “No. You don’t know me well enough to understand. My trailer is paid for. My dad told me that because my brother didn’t want it, I could have it. It was my grandma’s. So I don’t have rent or a house payment. My car ... Dear lord, that thing’s been paid for since my senior year of high school. But I have utility bills. I don’t own the building the salon’s in, so I pay the rent on it from the rent Micah and Marguerite pay me, plus a little of my own money, and there are utility bills there too. That cuts into my income, plus I’ve gotta have gas, and a little food. I’m gettin’ by, but I ain’t gettin’ rich.”

“I had a healthy savings account until I bought the bike, but most of it went to the down payment on that.”

“What are you going to drive in the winter?”

He shrugs. “One of the SUVs, I guess. Usually if I’m going somewhere, one of the other guys is going too, so I can justify taking one of the farm’s vehicles.”

“Makes sense.”

We sit there for a few minutes until I finally ask him, “So, you have parents?”

“Yeah.”

“Where are you from originally?”

“Dyersburg, Tennessee.”

“Where’s that?”

“Northwestern Tennessee.”

“Oh. And your parents are there?”

“Yeah. My dad farms about eight hundred acres of our family farm.”

“Wow! Siblings?”

“Yeah. Two brothers. They both work on the farm. Two sisters. One’s husband works on the farm, and she keeps the books for it. My other sister is a nurse, like me.”

“Oh. That’s nice.”

“Yeah. She’s older, and I’d listen to her talk about her job. Made me think I’d like to do it, and I was right. I loved it, everything about it.”

“What kind of nursing did you do?”

“Started out just on the floor. Did a stint of about five years in surgical recovery and thought I’d like to do surgical assisting. But a job came open in the emergency department. They liked me down there because they needed a guy when the drunks started coming in during the wee hours of the morning. I kind of transitioned from there to triage, and from there, started working with the MEDEVAC crew. I did a few flights with them, and I was working on my certification to be a flight nurse when everything went to hell.”

“That’s a shame.”

“Yeah, but now I get to use my powers for good instead of wrangling drunks on the weekends,” he says with a snicker, and I laugh. “Ghost pointed out the thicket of scrub where Izzy and Brett were hiding, but I was the first one to find her. I was just glad to be there and find her alive.”

“I bet.”

“I know your dad was the high school principal. What about your mom?”

“She’s a teacher too. Still teaching. Third grade. Been in the third grade for about thirty years. The running joke is, ‘Hey, Mom, how long before you graduate? You’ve been in the third grade for almost thirty years.’ Makes her laugh every time.”

“I bet. And you have a brother?”

“Yeah. He doesn’t live here. He’s a logistics engineer, and he moved to Louisville right after college. Worked at the UPS hub for years but Amazon recruited him, and he works in one of their facilities out in Shepherdsville now.”

“I hear those are huge.”

“They are.”

There’s another lull in the conversation, and I lean toward him. When I do, he wraps an arm around my shoulders and we sit there, my head resting on his pec, his hand drawing little circles on my upper arm. It’s nice. But I just can’t stand it anymore. “We’re grownups, right?”

“Yep.”

“Are we gonna ...” I point toward his bed.

“I don’t want to push you. Do you want to?”

“Uh, yeah.”

He rears back and his eyebrows shoot up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. We’re not little kids, Kevin. If we both want to have sex, we should have sex.”

“Okay then. Because I do. Want to.”

“Good. So do whatever you’ve gotta do and I’ll do whatever I’ve gotta do and ... Damn. I don’t have anything with me.”

“I’ve got an extra toothbrush you can use.”

“Hairbrush?”

“No. Don’t you have one in your bag?”

“No.”

“You’re a hairdresser and you don’t have a hairbrush in your bag? Don’t you think that’s a little weird?”

“Not really.” That makes him laugh. “What? I don’t sit around preening all day.”

“Woman, you are so funny.”

“What? What’s so funny? I brush my hair before I leave home. I’m not expectin’ to spend my afternoon in a wind tunnel. I do my hair in the mornins’ and when I get home, it typically looks just like it did when I left. Except for that one day when the hose on the sprayer got twisted, and I was trying to untwist it, and accidentally hit the trigger, and sprayed my face full of water. My makeup ran, and my hair was drippin’. All day long, I looked like a drowned rat.”

“Don’t tell me. You don’t carry a bunch of makeup with you either.”

“Nope. I told you, everybody thinks I’m all fixy, and I was when I was younger, but now I’m not. I’m pretty simple. I’m not wearin’ a lot of makeup right now, as a matter of fact.”

“Yeah. I know. And you don’t need it. You’re beautiful without it.” Before I can argue that point, he leans over and kisses me. It’s another one of those soft, slow, sexy kisses like before, but this time, he tips his head to the side and really goes in for the kill.

Oh my Jaysus, I want him so bad. When his hands slide down to grip my waist, I feel everything in my panties combust. Instead of reaching for him, I grab the hem of his tank and pull it up until he raises his arms to let me pull it over his head and throw it on the floor.

Holy fucking hell, that chest ... those arms ... I run my hands down the smooth skin until I reach his nipples and give them a little tiny tweak. “Oh, girl, you’re killin’ me here.”

“Go brush your teeth or whatever you’re gonna do and I’ll go after you.”

“Yes, ma’am!” I watch as he hustles across the room and the bathroom door closes. It only takes him a couple of minutes before he trots back out and goes straight to the bed.

“Okay. Your turn.” As soon as the door closes behind me, I hear him call out, “I left that toothbrush out for you.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.” Sure enough, there’s a green toothbrush lying there, still in the package, so I rip it open, brush my teeth, and grab another cloth. First I use it to clean my face up a little, and then I drop my dress and wash my lady bits and my pits. I’ve still got my underclothes on, though. He came out with his sweatpants still on, so ... whatever.

When I open the door, the lamp on the bedside table is on and he’s already in bed. The sweatpants are on the floor, and so are his boxer briefs. Yes! It’s happening! I come sashaying across the room to the other side of the bed and slip in. I can see his bare hip as I flip up the sheet to get in, but that’s about it.

My head barely hits the pillow before he reaches for me and locks his lips to mine. We both taste of peppermint toothpaste, but he’s got this scent about him, something sweet but musky. It’s soothing. The kissing goes on for a while, and then he slides his hands down my back and unhooks my bra. As soon as the air hits my nipples, they harden, and his fingers grab one of them immediately, kneading, twisting, and pulling just a little. Oh, damn, I need him.

And when I reach across and run the tip of my finger up his length, I nearly die. I need it so bad, and he’s so hard that it’s bound to hurt. His lips have found my other nipple, and I’m in heaven. “Hey, babe?”

“Um-hum,” he answers, a nipple still in his mouth, and the vibration from his voice sends a jolt straight to my clit.

“I wanna suck you.”

“No. The first time we’re together, we’re really together. I’ll get you off, and then you’ll get what you need. We both will.”

That sounds pretty fucking amazing to me.

CHAPTER 7



Bulldog

SHE'S MAYBE A C-CUP? HER TITS AREN'T HUGE, BUT THEY'RE gorgeous, with large, hard nipples the color of a pink peony. If her pussy's that same color, damn, it'll be beautiful.

"I wanna suck you," she whispers.

"No. The first time we're together, we're really together. I'll get you off, and then you'll get what you need. We both will." I slide my hand down her soft, firm belly and down into her underwear. "Get those off. I want to take a tour of the art gallery."

That makes her laugh, and the panties appear momentarily, then fly onto the same pile with my underwear. "There ya go."

That's the moment I throw the sheet off, and she gets the full view. I can't say that my manhood is huge, but it'll get the job done. The look she gives me after she's taken in the view tells me she wholeheartedly approves. "Like it?"

"Want it."

It seems to surprise her a little when I rise up on my knees, climb between her legs, and press them apart. "Fuck, girl, your cunt's just about the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"More beautiful than my face?" she asks and laughs.

"You're the whole package, babe." I slip a thumb under both labia and spread her open. "My oh my. Look at that."

Pretty in pink.”

Her arms are draped across her chest like she’s embarrassed. “Um, I’ve never had a guy stare at my hey-nonny-hey-hey before.”

“Why not? It’s pretty as can be. Can’t wait to be in there.” I climb back over, lie down beside her, and kiss her again, this time letting my fingers wander down until I can dip two into her channel and bring them out wet. It’s time to work that little magic power button down there and get her going.

Holy hell, she’s sensitive. A couple of times I think she’s going to push my hand away, but she doesn’t. She’s really writhing against me, and every couple of strokes, her hips jerk just a little. It’s not going to take much to make her scream. My free arm is wrapped under her torso, and it’s long enough that I can grab a nipple, even though I have to pull it to the side. Deep, hot, tongue-filled kisses with strokes that mimic the ones I’m using on her nipple seem to be what she wants, and it’s about time for the finale, I do believe. I grip the nipple more tightly and kiss her harder, pinning her head to the pillow, then ramp up my strokes.

It only takes a few seconds and she screams against my lips, her hips pumping and the rest of her body shaking. Damn, she’s coming like a freight train. When I release the kiss, she’s gasping for air. “Stop, Kevin. Please? Stop?”

“You don’t want another one?” I ask her as my teeth nip her nipple.

“No. Not right now. I ... I don’t think I can stand it.”

So I stop. I don’t want to, but I don’t want to push her. I do so enjoy a little orgasm torture, but not the first time around. Maybe not even the second or third. That’s for couples who trust each other implicitly, and we don’t know each other that well yet. I check her again with one finger. Yep—soaking wet.

On my knees between her legs again, I press her thighs up and slide right in. There’s a hiss that tells me I’m doing it right. “Oh, god, Kevin. Yeah. So good.”

“Yeah, it is. Damn, you’re tight.”

“Yeah, and you’re hard. Mmmm. This is so good.”

My hands slide from her thighs to her belly, then up, and I tease her nipples mercilessly. “Fuck, girl, your tits are pretty.”

“So is your chest. So damn sexy.” I can feel her squeezing and releasing my cock, and it’s like the best massage I’ve ever had in my life. Yeah, I know, it’s been awhile, but I don’t remember it ever being this good. And Imogen never talked to me like this when we were having sex, but I gotta say, it’s a turn on. Tinsley knows how to please.

I rock her. I pound her. It’s harder and harder to hang on, but I do. More than what I want, more than what I need, I want her to have what she needs. If she’s never had a hero, I want to be that guy. It takes everything I have to keep from just hunching into her like an animal, but I’ve got to get this right. It’s about her—it’s all about her.

“Oh, god, Kevin. Oh, damn. I’m, I’m, I’m ... Ahhhhh.” The pulsing around my length is almost more than I can stand, but it tells me that I’ve done my job right. That’s it for me, all she wrote, and I empty into her like there’s no tomorrow.

Her nipples poke into my chest as I drop on top of her, my arms wrapped around her and hands clutching her ass. I’ve never been this satisfied in my life. “Damn, baby, I think you were tryin’ to kill me,” I groan, still panting.

“I think *you* were trying to kill *me*,” she scolds. “Nobody’s ever made me come like that before. Nobody. I’ve gotta give myself a breather, but I want more of that.”

My hands press into the mattress and I lift my torso, then roll over to lie beside her, and she curls into me. Arms wrapped around her, I kiss her forehead softly. And then something crosses my mind, something I wish had crossed my mind an hour earlier. “Fuck me.”

Her head snaps up and she stares into my face. “What?”

“No condom. Fuck. You’re on the pill, right?”

“Uh, yeah.” With a sigh, she buries her face in my chest again and I kiss the top of her head.

“Okay. I told you how long it had been for me. I assume it had been a while for—”

“Several years. There’s not exactly a huge stable of men around here that I’d wanna be anywhere near, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. I do.”

We lie there in the darkness, arms wrapped around each other. I’m just soaking up the warmth of her skin and relishing the snippets of the last hour in my mind. We’ve been still and quiet for probably twenty minutes when she says, “I guess you’ll want me to go home.”

“I don’t want you to go home, but I think you need to before everybody catches on. When we’re all settled into the relationship, I want everybody to know. But for now, we need to be discreet.”

She kisses the tip of my nose. “Yep. Discreet.”

“It won’t be long. From what I can tell, we’re compatible in the sack,” I say with a chuckle.

“Yeah. I’d say.” A finger traces the edges of my lips, like she’s trying to commit their shape to memory, and I kiss the tip of it. “So on Sunday I’m supposed to be here at two o’clock for—”

I hear static and the speaker on my wall crackles to life. “This is central dispatch. App STAR, Knott County Sheriff’s Department requests your services for missing person. Meet their units at Parker’s Market. Repeat, sheriff requests you meet their units at Parker’s Market. Over.”

Reboot’s voice is the one I hear responding. “Central dispatch, this is App STAR base responding. ETA to staging area in twenty. Repeat, ETA to staging area in twenty. Over.”

“Roger that, App STAR base. Over and out.”

What the hell? I can’t believe this. Tinsley’s eyes find mine. “You don’t have to—”

“Yep. Gotta go.” I lean over and give her a big kiss, then leap out of the bed. “Don’t have time to shower. I’ll be able to

smell your perfume this way anyway.” I’m snatching and grabbing, pulling on my underwear, brush pants, and turnout coat, and grabbing my bag. “I’m sure by the time I get back you’ll be gone. But if we can’t see each other every day, I’d like to at least talk on the phone. That is, if you want to.”

“I absolutely do.” She’s sitting up in bed, the sheet draped over her and her arms wrapped around her bent knees.

“Okay. Gotta go. Lock the door behind you, please.” I give her another kiss and stare into her eyes. “Tonight was amazing. Can’t wait for an encore.”

There’s a wicked smile on her lips. “Me either. And let me know you’re okay, please.”

“Will do. Bye, babe.” By the time I get out the door, the other guys are pouring out of their cottages and we’re all headed to the Jeeps.

We tear out of the drive and slide onto the street. Just as we do, Priest turns to look at me. “Wasn’t that Tinsley’s car over by the lodge?”

“I dunno. Was it?”

That’s got Paddy staring my way. “You guys looked like you were getting along okay at dinner.”

“Yeah. I apologized to her and she accepted my apology. So it’s all cool.”

I look up into the rearview mirror and see Reboot looking back at me. “And you expect us to believe you’re just friends?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

There’s a grin splitting his face. “Hate to tell you, but your stealthy ninja skills are failing you. I saw you kiss her outside the kitchen.”

“Whaaaa?” Priest barks. “I knew she wanted to talk to you by the way she was looking at you, but I had no idea ...”

“You’re kidding! You kissed her?” Paddy gushes.

I'm shaking my head. "Jesus fucking Christ, can't a guy have a little privacy around here?"

"Not if you're going to have PDAs right out in the open," Reboot points out.

"Look, it's not weird, so don't make it weird," I warn.

"Nobody said it was weird. We're happy for you. Both of you. That's so cool." Paddy seems very excited that I might have something going with Tinsley. I mean, that I do have something going with Tinsley. But he doesn't know that. Or maybe he does.

Reboot stares at me in the rearview mirror again. "Where is she, in your cottage?"

"Can we please drop this?" I'm not just losing the battle. There's a very distinct possibility that I'm losing the war too.

"No. We can't just drop it. You and Tinsley. Wow. I thought you hated each other." It appears the whole concept is blowing Priest's mind.

I can't believe this. "Look, it's not like we're making a big deal out of it."

"No, but we are," Paddy says and laughs.

"Yeah. Exactly what I was afraid of. And which one of you is going to run and tell Patch?"

There's a small chorus of "not me" and "hell no" and "not my place," and I think I at least got through to them with that.

We roll up to the staging area behind unit one and Reboot parks the Jeep. Nobody says anything as we grab all of our gear and head toward the little cluster of people. "What've we got?" Patch asks as everyone converges.

Sheriff Stafford shows us a photo. "This is Mabel Granger. Her daughter said she went out the back door about seven o'clock to feed her cats. At about eight, the daughter realized Mabel hadn't come back, so she went outside and checked around but didn't find her anywhere, and the cats weren't around either. She tried calling her mom's cellphone, but it was in the house. She's not old by any means—she's barely

sixty—but she has some balance problems, and Tina is worried that she fell.”

“Where do they live?”

The sheriff points across the field. “Right there. Tina found one of her slippers about halfway across the field, and the other one right here. That’s why we decided to start here, because we know it’s a place where she was.”

“Have you already canvassed the neighborhood?” Patch asks.

“Yep. Nobody’s seen her, although one of the neighbors said his dogs were having a fit at a little after seven.”

Patch nods and turns to us. “Okay, guys. Unit one, we’ll take that trail to our left that heads north. Unit two, take that trail to our right that heads east. There’s a small pond in there somewhere. Am I remembering that right, sheriff?”

“Yep. And Tina said Mabel doesn’t swim, so if she fell in, it could be disastrous.”

“Okay. We all know what we’re doing. Pay special attention to the lighting. If your lights start to fail, don’t wait—return here immediately.”

“Roger that, captain,” Reboot says.

“Okay, men, let’s go see what we can find.” Patch, Ghost, Hollywood, and Bear take off to our left, and Reboot, Priest, Paddy, and I head down the trail to the right.

We walk along, sweeping the brush and grasses on either side of the trail with our lights and calling out Mabel’s name. We’ve been at it for about ten minutes when Priest says, “So, okay. Back to you and Tinsley. Have you—”

“Could we talk about something else? Or not talk at all?” I ask.

“Oh, no. We’re going to talk about this,” Reboot says, as though I have no say.

“Are you serious about her?” Paddy asks.

“Yes.”

“Have you done the deed?” Priest wants to know.

“Yes.”

“You planning to make this permanent?” Reboot asks.

“I don’t know. We don’t know. We’re just getting it off the ground. Could we just concentrate on searching?”

Paddy won’t give up. “How long has this been going on?”

I’m gonna make them sorry they’ve asked. “Actually, we’d just finished with our first fuckathon when the tone went off.”

“Wow. Could you be a little more crass?” Priest says, disgust in his voice.

“Me? You’re asking me about something that’s extremely personal and really none of your business, and you’re calling *me* crass? Isn’t that a bit hypocritical?”

“No. We’re just interested in your wellbeing,” Paddy says with a snicker.

“Yeah. Right. I call bullshit on that. You just want to live vicariously through my sex life. Bunch of perverts.”

Reboot stops so fast that Priest runs right into him. “What the hell, man?” the elder in our group asks.

“Listen,” Reboot hisses. We all grow quiet, and there’s this sound. I should know what it is because it’s familiar, but I can’t place it.

“What is that?” Paddy whispers.

“I dunno, but I feel like I’ve heard it before,” Priest says.

“Me too,” Reboot agrees.

I whisper, “That makes three of us.”

“There’s no stench in the air, so it’s not wild boar,” Reboot notes as he moves closer. The sound is getting louder when he holds up a fist, signaling us to stop. After a couple more steps, he trains his light on the sound.

I see two golden orbs shining in the light.

“Holy shit. Retreat. Retreat. Quietly,” Reboot whispers loudly, and we all turn and make our way back up the trail as fast as we can without running. “Stop.” We listen, but the sound is faint. “He’s not following us. That’s good.”

“What was it?” Paddy asks as we start walking again.

“It’s a fucking black bear sitting in the middle of some human remains.”

“Oh, god,” I murmur as my stomach pitches.

“Ugh. Poor Mabel,” Priest mumbles.

Paddy seems a little stunned. “That’s horrible. I mean, totally horrible. Yuck.”

We’re about halfway back when Reboot finally dares to use his radio. “Central dispatch, this is unit two. We’ve found the MP. Repeat, we found the MP. We need KDFWR and the coroner at the staging area. Over.”

“Roger that, App STAR unit two. Requesting both now. Over.”

We step out into the clearing just as unit one does. “I heard your transmission. What the hell is going on?” Patch asks.

Reboot stands there, panting. “Bear. In the middle of a pile of human remains.”

“Holy shit. He didn’t follow you, did he?” the sheriff asks.

“No. He’s, um, busy.” Reboot stands there for a few seconds, then runs toward the tree line. We can hear the sounds of him retching, and he’s an EMT, so it must be bad. When he’s finished and rejoins us, he says, “I think I saw some cat remains too, so I’d say the cat ran away, Mabel followed it, the bear got it first, and then it got her. Maybe she tried to intercede on the cat’s behalf. No way of knowing. I just know it’s a particularly gruesome scene.”

Patch looks a little green around the gills. “God. Sounds like it. Was it right on the trail?”

“Yep. Can’t miss it.”

“Okay. We need to stay long enough to help KDFWR find it and then we can help the coroner’s office get in there. Let’s hang out for a bit.” There’s a big rock just feet away, and Patch takes a seat there.

It takes us over an hour to get everything sorted out. Reboot flatly refuses to go back in there. Priest says he will, but I can tell he doesn’t want to. I don’t want to either. Paddy has disappeared, and I’m guessing he’s somewhere nearby, listening and shaking. He’s not the bravest of the group, but he’s a great hoist operator. Everybody’s got their place in the pack, but I don’t think his is as a bear hunter. Bear decided he definitely wanted to go with them. He wants to see his namesake, even if it’s munching on a neighbor.

What a night. I went from having what had to be one of the best sexual experiences of my life to a gory, horrifying scene that I’ll never forget. Granted, on the former, I haven’t had that many with anybody other than the bitch who shall not be named. And the latter—thank god, no previous experience there at all. I’m ready to call it a day and the sun hasn’t even come up.

Nobody says anything on our way back. Weariness and what’s left of Mabel have at least spared me from more grilling. Reboot pulls the Jeep into the equipment shed beside the other one and we all pile out. I can see the lights on in the kitchen, so I don’t even ask. I just head that way. Apparently everybody else has the same idea.

We all get a cup of coffee and sit down. I know there’s going to be a debriefing on this one. Sure enough, Patch starts. “Okay, team members, what did we learn from this experience?”

“Well,” Reboot starts, “we learned to listen and pay attention.”

“Good. And you also learned to retreat when necessary, and quietly if it’s important.”

“Roger that,” Paddy mumbles.

“What else?”

“That the *only* part of the operation that’s really our responsibility is finding,” Hollywood says.

“Does everybody agree on that?” Patch asks.

“Nope,” I offer. “It’s our job to render aid if there’s any sign that the individual is alive and needs it, even if we initially think it’s a waste of time. Of course, this one ... In *most* cases, it’s true, though.”

“Right. And it’s also important not to put ourselves in the path of unnecessary harm. That’s what would’ve happened tonight if you’d gone any farther. There was nothing you could’ve done for the MP, and trying to do anything more could’ve given us the same result for you that she met up with. I know I’ve used this example before, but when you’re on an airplane with a child, they always say if the oxygen masks fall, put yours on first. If you’re unconscious, you can’t help the child. Does that make sense?” Everybody nods. “Anything else?” I’m on pins and needles. I’m expecting one of the guys to say something just any minute.

And it’s not who I thought it would be. Patch stares straight into my eyes. “Anything you’d like to tell us, Bulldog?”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so.”

He side-eyes me with his lips pursed. “Sure about that?”

“Uh ...”

“That was Tinsley’s car at the lodge when we left, wasn’t it?” When I say nothing, Patch says, “So, how many of you guys know what’s going on?” Reboot, Paddy, and Priest raise their hands.

When I say nothing, Bear barks, “Okay, so what the hell did I miss?”

I sigh—loudly. “I know how you three know. How did you find out?” I ask Patch.

“I just figured it out on my own.”

“I call bullshit. Hollywood?”

“Uh, Audrey and I don’t have secrets between us.”

I stare at the ceiling and shake my head. “It wasn’t your secret! It was mine!”

“Apparently it’s nobody’s secret,” he answers.

“And you,” I say, looking at Ghost. “Don’t tell me. Izzy told you.”

“Nope. I’m with Patch. I’m not blind or stupid.”

“Would somebody *please* tell me what the fuck is going on?” Bear yells.

“Bulldog and Tinsley,” Reboot crows, obviously proud of himself.

“You and ... Wait. You hate each other,” the mountain of a man responds with a look of total disbelief on his face.

“Apparently they didn’t hate each other enough to not fall into the sack together,” Hollywood says with a smirk.

I’m about to say something when Patch says, “Okay, okay. Enough. Let’s try to be supportive, okay? Everybody’s been supportive of me and Pen, Hollywood and Audrey, and Ghost and Izzy. We should extend the same courtesy to Bulldog and Tinsley.”

“Thank you,” I mutter.

“And don’t try to pull a fast one on us again. You know we always find out,” Patch warns.

“Yeah, yeah. I know.” I’m so damn tired. What time I was in bed last night, I wasn’t asleep, and then stomping through the woods, and then a bear, and a crunchy lady, and emergency services, and an inquisition over coffee. “I didn’t realize so many people drank coffee while they’re grilling. I thought beer was preferred.”

Reboot starts to laugh, and pretty soon, the whole room is laughing. Even I have to laugh at myself. “Look, the only reason we weren’t going to say anything is because if it doesn’t work out, it’ll be awkward for everybody, and we wanted to spare you guys that.”

“Oh, it’ll work out fine,” Reboot says with a grin. “You’re both horrible at lying and too stubborn to give up if things get rocky.”

“Oh, ha-ha-ha. Very funny.” But he’s right. We are both very stubborn.

Well, she’s more stubborn than I am. But she’d say the same about me, so I guess we’re a good match, if for no other reason than that.

Everybody finishes their coffee and disperses. As soon as I’m alone, I send Tinsley a text message.

We’re all safe and sound. Found the lady. Being eaten by a bear.

There are three wavy dots and then she answers.

WTF? Really? Ugh. That’s gross.

Makes me laugh.

Yeah? Well, if you think it sounds gross, you should’ve been there.

I laugh again when I get her response.

Thanks, but I think I’ll take your word for it. Get some sleep. I’ve got to. Got a full calendar tomorrow.

My reply is short but sweet.

I’ll be thinking about you.

I almost send a heart emoji with it, but that’s just not my style. Or is it? I’m not sure how I feel about her just yet, but I know I want to see her. Like, right now. This minute. And I can’t. I think about Patch, Hollywood, and Ghost sleeping next to their own women, and I wonder what that would be like with Tinsley. Is she one of those who wears a beauty mask to bed and scares the hell out of me the next morning? That would be my luck.

Right now, I’m dead on my feet and it’s almost three in the morning. I’ll drag myself out of bed in a few hours, go see what Audrey’s got for breakfast, and get to work for the day.

Those blades won't make themselves.

TINSLEY

AFTER WORK I DRIVE STRAIGHT OVER TO THE FARM, AND I'M at the kitchen door when I meet him coming. The first thing he says is, "Where's your car?"

I point over toward the lodge. "Parked it over there."

Kevin shakes his head. "Go get it." I start to ask something when he says, "Look, they all know."

"Did you tell 'em? That's not what we agreed on!"

"I did not. They guessed. Something about the way you were looking at me in here last night?"

"Ooooo, who figured it out?"

He laughs. "Um, pretty much all of them?"

"Great. Just great. Did the girls give me up?"

"Uh, no." I can tell he's lying, but that's okay. He's trying to preserve friendships, and that's admirable, even if he is lying.

We're all sitting around the table when I ask, "So how'd it go last night?"

"It was really cool," Bear says. "So there was this lady and she went missing, and unit two went to look for her, and—"

"Could we ... not talk about this ... at the table?" Paddy stammers.

"But it was so cool," Bear repeats. "I mean, we don't see many bears in these parts, and—"

"Stop! Please stop. Please? Oh, gawd." Paddy covers his mouth with his napkin and runs down the hallway.

Bear stares after him, then looks back at us. “What’s wrong with him?”

“Okay, y’all, I’m with Paddy. Let’s not talk about this at the table,” Ghost says. Must be pretty bad.

And then I remember what Kevin said. There was a real bear. “Oh. I think I just ...”

“Yeah. Not hard to figure out,” Priest says.

“And so she was ...” Every man sitting at the table nods their head at me. “Oh. Well, um, okay then.”

“Yeah. Nightmares,” Reboot says.

“Bad ones,” Priest adds.

“Got it.” Now my barbecued chicken leg looks kinda suspicious to me, and I’m not sure I can eat it. I hear a sound and look at Kevin. “What are you laughin’ about?”

That little chuckle turns to full-blown laughter. “I’m just watching you staring at that chicken leg!”

“Yeah. Don’t think I can eat it now.”

“I’ve got some leftover ribs in the—” Audrey offers, then stops. “Oh. That won’t be any better, I guess.”

“No. Maybe worse,” Hollywood says in agreement.

“Sooo, how ’bout them Cats?” Reboot asks, a wicked grin on his face.

“What, no barbecue sauce jokes?” Kevin quips, grinning as he shakes his head.

It takes us a few minutes, but there’s finally a conversation that goes in a completely different direction, thank goodness. And then I notice something.

Fiona hasn’t said a word. I take that as my cue to draw her into the conversation. “Fiona, baby, what did you do today?”

She cuts a look at Penny and then back at me. “Went to the high school and registered for classes.”

“Yeah? That’ll be good. You’ll make some friends.”

“I don’t want any friends. At least not from here.”

“Why not? Everybody needs friends, girl. Especially when you’re livin’ in a new place.”

“I can’t imagine that any of these kids will have anything in common with me.”

“I dunno. I mean, you like clothes, right?” She nods. “And shoes, and bags, and makeup?”

“Yeah.”

“And boys.” She stares a hole through me. “Oh, I’m sorry. You one a-them, you know ...” I’m not sure how to phrase that so it won’t be offensive.

“No. I’m not a lesbian, or non-binary, or any of that stuff. I like boys. Just probably not the boys here.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, every school has a football star and a basketball star and a baseball star. Every school has a cute guy, and every school has a nerdy but charming guy. Every school has mean girls and sweet girls and nerdy girls and smart girls and girls who are just invisible. All schools are just alike.”

“No, they’re not. Our school in Hawaii had an aquatic center.”

“Well, this-un here’s got a rifle team, and an archery team, and an equestrian team.”

One eyebrow hikes up. “You mean, like horses?”

“Yep. They got ’em. Horses.”

“Oh. Well, that’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah. They’re kinda a feeder team for the K Bar C Ranch.”

“The what?”

“The K Bar C Ranch. That’s the rodeo team for University of Kentucky. Sometimes our kids go practice with them.”

“Wait. Rodeo? You don’t mean like fox hunting and horse shows? You mean rodeo? *Rodeo*? Oh, wow. That’s redneck.”

“Yeah? Well, take a look at what bull riders are makin’ these days and tell me how redneck a couple million dollars is.”

“A couple million dollars?” The girl is clueless.

“Yep. I mean, hell, girl, some-a them rodeos give out two-million-dollar prizes. It’s a big deal.”

“But I couldn’t ride bulls,” she says, red-faced.

“Actually, you could, but I wouldn’t recommend it. But you *could* barrel race and breakaway rope. They have events for women. And yeah, there are rough stock riders who are women.”

“Rough stock? What’s—”

“Bull riders, bronc busters. Bareback bronc busting and saddle broncs. Other stuff too. I heard a rumor that they’re lookin’ at usin’ a smaller breed-a cattle for women’s steer wrestlin’. And women can rope as good as a man, sometimes better.”

Fiona turns to Patch. “Could I get a horse?”

“Now, Fiona, wait a minute. That would be something we’d all have to agree on as a group and then—”

“I’d agree to it,” Priest chimes in.

“Me too,” Reboot agrees.

“I don’t think there’s a soul here who’d say don’t get Fiona a horse,” Kevin says.

“Gah, you guys are no help at all,” Patch mumbles. “We’ll talk about this later.” He looks up at me and scowls. “Thanks, Tinsley.”

“Hey, I’m just tryin’ to help! Your girl here don’t wanna be in Mallie, but there are all kinds-a reasons why she should be! I’m just tryin’ to point a few of ’em out. That’s all.”

“I know.” Patch slumps back in his chair and stares at his plate. “This has been really hard.”

“We know that,” Kevin says and takes my hand. When he grips it, I don’t feel quite as much like an outsider. “You and Mindy weren’t married anymore, but she was still Fiona and Mitchell’s mom, and you were responsible for everything. It’s hard, but we’re all here for you.”

“Yeah. All of us,” Paddy echoes.

“Thanks. Fiona, baby,” Patch says and turns to his daughter, “we’ll talk about this. There are a lot of things we’d have to do to take that on, and you’re only going to be in school here for a year. You leave and we’re stuck with a horse? I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Okay, Daddy. Sorry.” She looks like she might cry.

“Hey, I’m sure there’s a way to do it. Let me ask around, okay? Maybe somebody has a horse they’ll let you use so you don’t have to buy one. I have a lotta clients who might know somebody like that,” I offer, and I see her perk up.

“Thanks, Tinsley,” she says with a little smile.

“Aww, you’re welcome, baby. I’ll do what I can.”

The meal is over, everything is picked up and cleaned up, and it’s time to relax. Kevin takes my hand and leads me down to the creek. There’s a bench down there and even though it doesn’t look very comfortable, it’s sturdy, and we have a place to sit. His right arm drapes across the back, so I sit down on his right side. In a split second, that hand is draped over my shoulder, so I reach across my body and grasp it with my left. “Have a good day at the salon?”

I nod. “Yep. It was a good day. Everybody was on time so I wasn’t running late, and Mrs. Simpkins came in and her hair looked great when she left. She always complains, and even she said it looked great. That’ll never happen again. You?”

“I’m dog tired from last night, but I’m working on a longsword, and it’s turning out nicely. I’m doing some stamping on the quillons, so it’ll be really pretty.” I guess I give him a funny look because he says, “Quillons. Cross guard. That thing between the blade and the grip.”

“Oh. Like a flat bar.”

“Yeah. The sword is steel, but I’m making the quillons out of brass. Nice contrast.”

“It sounds beautiful.”

“While you’re out here Sunday afternoon I’ll show it to you. It’ll be closer to completion by then.”

“I’d love to see it.”

“You will.”

We sit there in the silence, the only sounds being natural ones—the leaves rustling in the breeze, peepers, a couple of bullfrogs, birds. We’ve only been there for about fifteen minutes when I notice the sun dimming. “Uh-oh,” Kevin mutters.

“What?”

He turns his phone around. On the screen is the local radar, and there’s a huge storm front coming. “Looks like it could be bad.”

“I’ll say. Anything we need to do beforehand?”

“Yeah. You need to go ahead and move your car in front of my cottage. I need to make sure all the windows in the shop are closed, and we need to tell everybody else that there’s a storm coming, in case somebody hasn’t noticed.”

“Got it. I’ll tell everybody in the kitchen and the lodge as I go to get my car.”

He leans over and gives me a peck on the lips. “Good. Meet you back at my cottage.”

It makes me laugh to say it, but I’m walking on air the whole way over there. I open the kitchen door and tell everybody inside, then watch Hollywood head out toward the shops to help Kevin batten down the hatches. There are only a couple of the guys in the lodge, and I tell them. Then I get my car and move it over to the cottage with the two tires on the driver’s side in the grass as I park. I can walk straight to my car door by coming down the walk. The door to the cottage is open, so I step inside with my overnight bag.

The bed is made and all the dirty clothes are picked up. There's an empty drink can on the table, so I throw that away. There's an apple core in the sink, and I run it down the disposal. Next, I change from my work clothes into a pair of shorts and a tee—no bra. Hate the damn things. I brought a pair of cheap flip flops, and I'll use those as slippers. I've just settled down for a bit when the door opens. "Get everything taken care of?"

He starts shucking clothes and in a couple of minutes, he's changed into a pair of lounge pants and a tee. "Yeah. Only two windows were open, so we closed those. Checked that all the doors were secured. I think it'll ride out the storm, but I just looked, and we're under several watches. Mostly severe thunderstorms and flash flooding."

"Does the creek flood?"

"Yeah, but it's never flooded up here."

"First time for everything," I answer flippantly.

"Nope. All that flooding we had when the thing happened with Penny, and we never had a problem with the cottages. They were fine. If it flooded very often, they wouldn't still be here after all these years, so we figure they're safe. Never had any reason to think they're not." He picks up the TV remote and turns it on. "Anything on that you usually watch?"

"Yeah. *Detective Devious*. It's one of my favorites."

"*Detective Devious* it is." He flips the channel, gets up, and comes back with a bag of chips and two drinks. We sit there happily munching on chips and watch TV for the hour that the show is on. When it's finished, he asks, "Another one?"

"That's the only one I watch. I read mostly."

"Yeah? What do you read?"

I can feel my cheeks getting hot. "Um, all kinds of things."

It's a wicked grin on his face. "You read romance novels, don't you?"

"Well, uh, I—"

“There’s nothing wrong with it. Admit it.”

“Yeah, okay. I read romance novels.”

“Do you read the Hallmark kind, or the racy ones?”

“Um, I like the racy ones.”

“You know, they did a study that said women who read racy romance novels have happier partners. Did you know that?” he asks, that grin widening.

“No. I did not know that. Makes sense though.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

“I’ve learned a lot from some of those novels.”

“Yeah? What did you learn?”

I turn and flip until I’m sitting astride his lap, facing him. “Why would I tell you when I can show you?” Before he has a chance to answer, I lean in and press my lips to his.

Whew. What a kiss. It takes on a life of its own, and I couldn’t be happier. In no time at all, his hands have traveled up my ribcage under my tee and are cupping my breasts. Every time he tweaks my nipples, I squirm a little, and I can feel him smile against my lips. When I feel like he’s getting a little too comfortable, I hop up, but when he tries to stand, I press him back down on the sofa. “Nope.” The look on his face when I kneel between his knees and yank down his waistband is priceless. Two seconds later, his boxer briefs are pulled down below his manhood. “Oh, that’s pretty.”

I hear him snicker. “I have a pretty cock?”

“You do. A very pretty cock. And trust me, I’ve seen some ugly ones.” I tip my head sideways and lick up the underside to listen to him hiss. “Oooo. You like that?”

“Oh, yeah. What’s not to like, babe?”

“You’re gonna like this even more.” My tongue probes the slit in the crown, and then I open my mouth and take him right in.

His head drops onto the back of the sofa and his eyes close. “Damn, girl. I’ll be lucky if I last two minutes.”

“No, you’ll last longer than that. I won’t let you come too soon.” I set about sucking, licking, teasing with my tongue, and he’s fighting the feeling, I can tell. Occasionally, he grabs my head and holds me down on him. Some women would get mad, but I don’t. I like it. Means he’s really enjoying it. Tasting him, feeling his hardness against my tongue, is something I’m glad to give him and myself. Men love looking down and seeing their woman swallowing their cum. It’s the most powerful, intimate thing he can give me.

Five minutes later, I start stroking the base with a twisting motion while I fuss over the crown and the upper part, and it isn’t long before he yells out, “Son of a bitch!” and fills my throat full. When I turn loose and look up at him, he’s staring down at me. “Did you swallow that?”

“Well, fuck yeah. Not letting it go to waste! Why would I do that?”

“Geez. Never had a woman do that before.”

“This is your life now. Get used to it.” I lean over it and take it in my mouth again.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting you hard again. Unless you’re finished.”

He chuckles. “Oh, no. I’m nowhere near finished.”

“Good. Let’s get it going then.”

It takes me almost no time and he’s hard as a rock again. I stand, strip off my clothes, and wait while he does the same. As soon as he’s finished, he sits back down, and I sit back down astride him again, this time dropping slowly onto his cock. “Ohhhhhh,” he moans. “Damn, girl. What do you want?”

“I want you to watch me.” Reaching between us, I start to stroke myself, and I see his eyes go wide. “What?”

“I’ve never had a woman do that either. Want me to do it?”

“Nah. You just take care of my tits and we’ll be fine.” I’m controlling my response this time, and I can make myself last longer than he could. I get close, so close, and then I back off. Those rough thumbs on my nipples are replaced with his mouth on one, and I’m so needy that I’m lightheaded. “Oh, fuck, baby,” I mumble as my finger keeps stroking. My little nub is swollen and tender, and I’m thinking about how it would feel to have his tongue on it when I clamp down and my belly muscles spasm. “Oh, god, yeah. Yeah, baby. Ohhhh, mmm.” Wiggling just a little when I’m all the way down, I let the head of his cock press into the end of my channel and I’m overwhelmed with the sensation. “Oh, damn, I’m so full.”

“You’re gonna be full again.” His hands slip under my ass and he stands with me still impaled on his dick. By the time we get to the bed, I’m almost crawling out of my skin. “Hang onto the headboard, babe. I’m gonna fuck you like you’ve never been fucked before.”

He wasn’t lying. It’s a fucking epic fuck. I’ve never been pounded that hard in my life. Just as I think he’s losing all control, he slows his strokes. Then he picks them back up, and I know what he’s doing. He’s trying to make it last as long as he can.

But when he starts speed fucking me, my body just blows apart. The orgasm is amazing. My hands will hurt tomorrow from gripping the headboard, and I don’t even care. I’ve never wanted a man as much as I want him, and the way he looks at me tells me he wants me just as badly. When he turns loose, I feel the warmth and wetness, and I know I’m his. He’s marked me, and he can break my heart. I just pray he doesn’t.

Kevin rolls us to our sides, still linked, his hardness growing soft inside me. “Damn, Tinsley, girl, you’re really something.”

“So are you.” My fingers stroke through his hair, and from time to time, I run them through his beard. “I’ve never been with a guy with a beard before.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s so soft.”

“Well, it won’t feel that way the first time I eat that gorgeous pussy. It’ll drive you crazy.”

“Mmmm. Can’t wait.” He sighs and runs his fingers through his hair. “What?”

His eyes close and he sighs again. “Last night ... I’m worn out.”

“You should get some sleep. You’ve gotta get some work done tomorrow.” Close by I hear a crash of thunder.

“Sure you don’t mind?”

I just laugh. “Mind? Hell, I’ll be lucky if I can walk in the morning!” I see him smile. “So do I have to leave?”

“Nah. They all know you’re here now. Why bother?”

“Yeah. My thinking exactly. Maybe tomorrow night you can come to my place ...”

“I can’t, Tinsley. If the tone goes off—”

“Oh! Yeah. I never thought about that.”

“I have to. If I want to stay here, that is.”

My lips brush his before I give him a kiss that’s a little deeper and hotter. When I pull back, I smile. “I want you to stay here at the farm.”

“Good. Because I really don’t want to leave.” Those words are whispered, and when I open my mouth to say something in response, I just close it and smile.

He’s sound asleep.

CHAPTER 8



Tinsley

BREAKFAST IS EATEN AND THE GUYS ARE ALL GONE TO THE shop. I've gotta go get in the shower and get ready for work. Penny, Audrey, and Izzy are still there with me. "So when do you get your immobilizer off?" Penny asks Izzy.

"Next week if everything goes okay."

"Good." Penny stands and takes her plate to the sink. "Ladies, I hate to leave good company, but I've gotta go get Fiona off to school."

"Yeah, and I've gotta get ready for work. I'll walk with you." After I've scraped and deposited my plate, we walk out of the building together.

Careful to wait until we're fifty feet or so away from the kitchen, I decide I have to say it. "Uh, I have somethin' I need to talk to you about."

"Oh yeah? Sounds serious."

"It is." Might as well just blurt it out. "I lied."

"You lied? About what?"

"Kevin didn't have any condoms, and he asked me if I'm on the pill. And I said yes. But—"

"But you're not?"

“I am! But I ran out, and I went to the pharmacy, and they said they’d have to call my doctor to get a refill. And the doctor’s office said they can’t refill my prescription until I’ve come in for a yearly exam. And I had a huge heatin’ bill back in the winter that I begged ’em to divide up into payments, so I’m havin’ to pay that, and I really can’t afford a trip to the doctor. I just can’t.”

“So you’re not on the pill.”

“Not right now, no. But that stuff stays in your system for a while, right? Or—”

“Tinsley, you can get pregnant from missing one pill.”

My heart is pounding out of control. “Really?”

“Yes, honey. Really. That’s why they say to take them every day at the same time. And if you’re not taking them ... Did you tell Bulldog?”

“No.”

“You need to tell him.”

“I can’t.”

“Yes. You can. You tell him what you just told me. It’s that simple.”

“No. It’s not. What if he gets mad?”

“He may. But he deserves to be told.”

“I know, but I don’t want to mess this up right at the beginnin’.”

“It’s going to be *really* messed up two months in if he finds out you lied.”

“What if we get some condoms, and then if somethin’ happens, I say somethin’ must’ve gone wrong with my pills and—”

“Tinsley! No. You have to be honest.”

“I know, I know. Fuck me. I get into a decent relationship and now this.”

“Look, he won’t be happy, but he won’t be mad if you go ahead and come clean. But if you wait—”

“I know. I need to tell him. I’ll tell him after the weddin’.”

“After you’ve had sex another twenty times? Don’t you think that’s a bad idea?”

“I dunno!” I whine. Yes, I sound like a spoiled teenage girl, but I don’t care. “I just don’t want him to get mad at me!”

“How about if I asked Patch to be there? Or both of us?”

“That’ll make him mad because he’ll feel like I violated his privacy.”

“Do you really think he’ll get mad that easily?”

“Okay. Not mad. Upset, I guess. Somethin’ like that.”

“Look, I can’t tell you what to do, and I won’t tell him for you or violate your trust. But you’ve got to tell him, honey. That right there ... That’s reason for him to want to stop seeing you altogether.”

“No! I can’t have that! I lo ...” I stop in my tracks.

“You love him, don’t you?”

“I think I do.”

“I think he loves you too, based on the way he looks at you. And his wife lied to him and cheated on him. That’s a deal breaker, sweetie. You’ve got to tell him.”

“Okay, okay. I just have to look for the right time.”

“I agree with you on that. Now, I’ve gotta get Fiona off to school. You figure out how to do it and you tell him. Promise me you’ll tell him.”

“I’ll tell him.”

“Good. See you later.” She heads off toward Hollywood’s old cottage, but just before she steps inside, she turns back to me and mouths, *Tell him*.

Yes, ma’am. I guess I should.

BULLDOG

“WELL, SON OF A BITCH!” I’VE BEEN WORKING ON THIS BLADE for two days and it just snapped right off. “Shit, shit, shit.”

“Did you check the temp on the annealing oven?” Patch asks.

“No. Guess I should.” When I check it, I groan. “It’s about nine eighty. Is that low enough to—”

“Yes. It is. I’m going to have to figure out why it keeps dropping, and I’m really sorry. Just check it from now on before you use it.”

“Wish I’d known.”

“Yeah. I think we may have to buy another one. I got it used, and I think it was mostly worn out before I got it.”

“Can we afford that?” I mean, I have no idea what we can or can’t afford.

“Hey, Hollywood!” Patch calls out across the shop. “Can we afford a new annealing oven?” Hollywood grins and gives him a thumbs up. “Guess that answers that question. We’ll get it ordered. You’re closest to it. Just remind anybody you see getting ready to use it.”

“I’ll try.” I can’t believe it. Two days’ worth of work and I’ve got to start all over again. I might actually be able to salvage a dagger out of what’s left. Guess I can try that.

Three hours later, Audrey shows up with our lunch—ham and Swiss on homemade rye with lettuce, tomato, and some kind of sauce that tastes like maple syrup. She made homemade kettle chips too, and they’re fantastic. When we’re all finished, she loads up the tub and heads back to the kitchen. Work keeps going, and sure enough, by the end of the day, I’ve got a fairly good-looking long dagger underway from the

remnants of the longsword. “Wow. That’s good work, Bulldog,” Patch says, looking over my shoulder.

“Like it?”

“Yeah, and somebody else will too. You should be able to get a pretty penny out of that one.” Patch looks it over carefully. “Technically, it’s called an anelace.”

“Never heard of that.”

“Look it up. They’re pretty.”

“Do we have a website up and running yet?”

“I dunno. Izzy’s working on that since she can’t work right now. Last time I checked, she said it was coming right along. Biggest challenge is going to be getting good photos.”

Then I think of the artist in the mix. “Can Penny take them?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll sure ask her.”

“Hey, Priest,” I call out, “I think I’m going to want a wrapped grip on this one.”

“Let’s see.” I hold it up. “That’ll be nice. Works for me.”

“Need a scabbard?” Paddy calls down.

“Yep. With a loop.”

“Gotcha. Let me know when I need to measure for it.”

“Will do.” Now that I’m really looking at it, it’s going to be nice, much nicer than the longsword.

At a little after four, I let it cool and turn off the annealing oven. Patch is turning everything else off, and Paddy’s shutting down everything in the loft. When we all walk out, it’s together. Even Bear had come through the shop to quit for the day.

I’ve been in my cottage for maybe ten minutes when I hear a car door and peek out the window. Yep—it’s Tinsley. The front door is unlocked, but she raps gently on it. “Come on in.”

“Hey, babe,” she says with a smile as she drops her bags on the sofa.

“Hi. Have a decent day?” As soon as she’s standing right in front of me, I give her a quick, hot kiss.

“Yeah. Another full calendar. Seems like everybody’s havin’ their hair done right now.”

“That’s good. You can use the work, I’m sure.”

“Yeah. I can. I’ve got an old electric bill on a payment plan and I’m tryin’ to get it paid off before it all starts again this winter, and I need to go to the doctor too, but there’s just no money for it.”

My eyes go wide. “Wait ... There’s no money for the doctor? Is something wrong?”

“No, no. It’s just that ...” I get the feeling that something is off. “It’s just that ... Remember the other night when you asked me if I was on the pill?”

Now I’m a little scared. “Yeah. You are, right?”

“Well, yes and no.”

Oh, no. Uh-uh. I won’t tolerate lies. “It’s either yes *or* no. There is no yes *and* no.”

“Okay ... So, see, I went to get my prescription refilled, but the pharmacy told me that they had to call my doctor to get my prescription renewed. So they called the doctor’s office, but the doctor’s office told the pharmacy I’d have to make an appointment to be examined before they can refill my prescription. And I don’t have money to go to the doctor.”

“Let me get this straight. We’ve had unprotected sex twice and you’re not on the pill, and I didn’t have any condoms?” She nods. “First off, why did you lie to me?”

“I didn’t mean to. I thought the prescription would be ready the next day. I didn’t know this was going to happen.”

“Yeah, but missing just one—”

“I know. But I didn’t know that. I thought they were, you know, kinda in your system for a while or something.”

I sit there for a couple of minutes, eyes closed, thinking. When I finally open them, I stare right into hers. “Okay. First

off, from now on, if I ask you a question, I expect you to tell me the truth. That's a deal breaker for me, Tinsley, after what happened with Imogen."

"I know, and I'm sorry. I just didn't think it would be this kinda ordeal to get them."

"I get it. And if you need to go to the doctor, you can go. I'll pay for it."

"No, you shouldn't—"

"I insist. It'll benefit me too, and besides, I want to make sure you're healthy. I should've known you didn't have insurance. Most people who are self-employed don't, but I hadn't thought about it."

"True."

"And second, I'm responsible too. I should've had condoms, and I didn't. Honestly, I don't think I ever dreamed we would ... um, that soon. And I haven't bought any because I thought you were on the pill. So I need to go get some tonight after dinner. You can go to the doctor as soon as you can get in, and that'll be that."

"Okay. And I'm really sorry, Kevin. Really, really sorry. I didn't mean to lie. I didn't think I was lying. It just turned out that way." Tears are collecting in her lower lids and her nose is turning red.

"I get it. So let me take a shower, we'll go eat, and we'll drive into town and get some condoms. Maybe we can get a milkshake or something while we're there." I stand and start stripping off my clothes, feeling her eyes on my skin. I hope she appreciates what she's seeing because if she lies again, she'll never see my cock another single time. I don't want to make her cry, and yet I have to draw a line. "But know this: You lie to me again and that'll be it. I can't do that again."

"I know, and I'm really sorry."

"I'll just be a couple of minutes." Down to my boxer briefs, I saunter right up to her and give her a deep, open-mouthed kiss. Then I break it and lean back. "You're just too good to be true, girl." The tension in my muscles starts to

release as I head into the bathroom, and I really, really can't wait for that shower. And dinner. And the trip to town. Because I know what comes after that.

Me.

TINSLEY

I SHOOT PENNY A TEXT.

I told him. He took it much better than I expected. We're going to get condoms after dinner. And he's going to pay for me to go to the doctor.

Three wiggly little dots appear, and then her reply.

I'm proud of you. See you at dinner.

I send back a smiley-face emoji, pull off my shoes, and sit down on the sofa. After standing all day long, they ache, and I'm hoping maybe he'll rub them when we get back tonight. Of course, that's not all I want him to rub, but I doubt it'll take a lot of begging to make that happen.

Dinner is great, but I feel guilty for eating there. I'm not contributing anything, and Audrey's doing almost all of the work. Hollywood and Penny both help her, and Izzy does what she can. When I ask to help, Audrey says, "No. You've been on your feet all day." That much is true.

As soon as we're finished, Kevin tells Patch and Ghost that we're going to town and we'll be back shortly. I figure we're taking the bike, but instead, he pulls out one of the SUVs and drives that. We go to the drugstore, pick up condoms, sit at their soda counter and have milkshakes, then head back to the farm. And I remember something. "Hey, can we run by my parents' house for a minute? My mom got me something and I keep forgetting to pick it up."

He side-eyes me. "You sure you want to take me to your parents' house?"

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Isn’t it kinda . . . soon?”

“Do you consider us in a relationship, or are we just fucking around?”

He grins. “Oh, we’re definitely in a relationship.”

“Then yes. You can come to my parents’ house. We don’t have to make a big deal out of it. I’ll just tell them you’re my friend.”

“With benefits,” he adds.

I can’t help but laugh. “No. I’m not telling them that.”

“So how straightlaced are they?”

“Not very. Pretty progressive.”

“Okay then. I’m game.”

We pull up and he gets out, then comes around to open my door, probably in case my parents are looking out the window. The warmth of his hand on the small of my back as we near the porch makes me smile. There’s not a chance to knock on the door before it opens. “Hi, honey!” Mom gushes and hugs me. “Who do we have here?”

“Mom, this is Kevin. Kevin, this is my mom, Cynthia.”

“Nice to meet you, Kevin,” Mom says and holds out a hand. I swear to god, I’ll laugh my ass off if he kisses it, but he doesn’t.

“Nice to meet you too, Mrs. Hancock.”

“No, just Cynthia, please. Chuck, we have company!” she sings out, and I want to die, but Kevin’s grinning.

“Hey, baby!” my dad crows and wraps me in a bear hug.

“Hey, Daddy! This is my friend, Kevin. Kevin, this is my dad, Chuck.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

“You two come on in,” Mom says. “We were just getting ready to watch some TV, but we’ve got time to visit.”

“Oh, no. That’s okay. We’ve gotta get back so he can get some rest before work tomorrow. I just stopped to get that lemon balsamic you found when you were in Lexington.”

“Oh, yeah! I’m glad you remembered it. Hang on a second,” she says and scurries off.

“Get ready for work, huh? What do you do, Kevin?”

“I’m educated as a nurse, but earning-wise, I’m a bladesmith.”

“A bladesmith! That’s an interesting vocation. What kind of blades do you make?”

“Well, today I was working on a longsword, but the annealing oven wasn’t as hot as it should’ve been, and it broke off. So I spent the rest of the day turning it into an anelace.”

“Anelace?”

“Yeah. It’s a type of long dagger. From the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.” Somebody’s been doing research, I see.

“Oh, that’s very interesting. So you sell these?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How much can you get for something like that?”

“Between the dagger itself, the leather wrapping on the handle, and the scabbard, plus it’ll have a brass guard ... Probably about six hundred dollars.”

“Six hundred dollars? Wow! That’s some dagger!”

“Yeah, handmade blades are extremely expensive.”

“Sounds like it! So where do you sell them?”

“Most of them are custom orders through word of mouth, or repeat customers. Lots of reenactors, armorers, people like that. Oh, and for Renaissance festivals. Those people love blades.”

“Do you have a website?”

“A friend’s working on one. We’re hoping to have a store on the property at some time for people to come and visit, buy, take tours of the shops, all of that.”

“Where is this?”

“Iron Oak Farms over in Mallie.”

I see something pass over my dad’s face. “I’ve heard about it. The formerly incarcerated.”

“Who’s formerly incarcerated?” my mom asks as she rejoins us and hands me the little bag with the bottle of balsamic vinegar in it.

“I am, ma’am.”

Mom and Dad look at each other and then back at Kevin. “I see. So you’re finishing your sentence there?”

“No, sir. We have to be released before we can be considered to come there.”

“And you finished your sentence?”

“No, sir. I was exonerated. My record expunged. Vacated. They discovered that I hadn’t done what I’d been accused of.”

“Oh, my! Hopefully you weren’t in there for long,” Mom says.

“Eight years.”

Can I just say how proud I am of Kevin in this moment. He didn’t even flinch. Wasn’t the least bit ashamed. Jumped right in. A sense of pride fills my chest.

“Oh my goodness! That’s a long time! What were you accused of?”

“Killing my baby daughter.”

To my shock and amazement, my mother reaches for Kevin’s hand and takes it in hers. “Oh, I’m so very, very sorry. Losing a child is a horrible thing. What happened?”

“My ex-wife was cheating on me and one of her boyfriends shook Paisley. Shaken baby syndrome. She wasn’t

even a year old.” His face is stony now, and I can tell that talking about it hurts a lot.

“That’s horrible. Is the farm a good place to start over?” my dad asks.

“The best. Our captain is a great guy, and it’s becoming more like a family every day.”

“And you guys got that helicopter! I saw that on TV, with the governor and that Walters guy from Louisville.”

“Yep. It’s a special thing. I’m part of our medical team for MEDEVAC flights.”

“That’s amazing. Well, don’t let us keep you, but it’s good to meet you, Kevin.”

“You too, sir,” he says and shakes my dad’s hand. Then he nods to my mother. “And you as well, ma’am.”

“Come back and see us. We’ll play board games or something. Right, Tinsley?”

“Sure. Sounds good. Night, guys.” I kiss them both, hug them, and we’re on our way. As soon as we’re in the SUV, I turn and sigh. “I’m so sorry about that.”

“No, that’s okay. They’re just curious. I don’t blame them. A guy shows up with your daughter and you want to know as much about him as you can.”

“Yep. That’s them. But I’m really sorry she asked you about Paisley.”

“It’s okay. Sometimes it actually helps to talk about her.”

By the time we get back to the farm, we’re laughing about something we both saw on social media. We go in, change into sleepwear, and sit down to relax. “Do you think you could rub my feet?” I ask, afraid of his response.

“Of course. You’ve been on them all day. That’s hard. I wear heavy, supportive shoes with steel toes, but you wear cutesy little things that probably don’t have much padding. I’m sure it’s uncomfortable after a while.”

“Sure is.” The words are no more out of my mouth than he reaches down, grabs my ankles, and stretches my legs out across his lap. Those big, strong hands are magic. “Ohhhh, gawd, that feels so good.”

Kevin laughs. “Good. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I must be doing it right.”

“You are, believe me.”

Thirty minutes later, we’re both naked on the bed. “Oh, my god, babe, your tongue is magic,” I say as I watch his face, from just below his nose up, between my legs. “Damn, you’re good at this.”

“Good foot rubs, good pussy snackin’. I’m good at all kinds of things,” he says and goes back to work.

“Ahhhh, ohhhhh. Mmmmm, yeah. Oh, just like that.” I grab a handful of hair and pull, and he doubles down. “Oh, my god, Kevin, you’re gonna send me through the ceiling.” Instead of saying anything, he just reaches up and pinches my nipple hard.

My body cuts loose and vibrates all over. It goes on and on until I grab another handful of hair and pull his head up. “Stop. I can’t take any more.”

“Okay. I was willing ...”

“Oh, I know.”

Seconds later, I hear a little ripping sound and a snap. He’s laughing when he says, “Okay, I’m properly suited up.”

“Good. Time to ride, cowboy.” He forces his way into my pussy and I see stars. “Oww. Tight.”

“Just like I like it,” he whispers through gritted teeth.

“Me too.”

Ten minutes later, I lie there, my arm thrown up and over my head, panting. “Holy shit. You outdid yourself.”

The wheezing he’s doing tells me he’s out of breath too. “Damn well did. You got yourself a roughrider, babe.”

“I’ll say.” Something crosses my mind. “So when do I get to meet your parents?”

“I dunno.” There’s a weird quality to his voice, one I can’t figure out.

Then it hits me. “Do you and your parents ... not get along?”

It’s quiet for a full minute before he says, “You know how there’s this girl you know, and everybody whispers around town that she’s a slut? And when you hear it, you know she’s not, but you try to distance yourself so nobody thinks you’re a slut too?”

I roll my eyes and sigh. “I was the girl everybody thought was a slut.”

“Okay, then. Didn’t you have girls who’d been your friends growing up but when people started making accusations like that against you, they dropped you because they didn’t want to be associated with those rumors?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, my parents are those girls.”

“I don’t understand. You’re their son. And they know you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Yeah, but I spent several years in prison. In their way of thinking, I became a criminal *because* I was in prison, not being in prison because I was a criminal. Does that make sense?”

“Not to me.”

“It does to them. They always believed in my innocence, but the people around them didn’t. They supported me through all the legal wrangling and after I went to prison, but they paid a price in the community. There are people even now who won’t speak to them because of me.”

“That’s fucking ridiculous. You didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Doesn’t matter.” We lie there, and I curl up against him. He’s felt unloved and alone, and I don’t ever want him to feel that way again.

“So do you not see them at all?”

“Yeah. I see them. Just not often. I haven’t been to see them since I came here.”

I can’t believe this. People make no sense to me. “Have they come here to see where you live and what you do?”

“No. The last time I talked to my dad, he asked me how I was doing in prison camp.”

“You’re not serious.”

“Fraid so.”

The hair on his chest parts as I swirl my finger through it. “Then we need to go see them.”

“I’m not sure I want to do that.”

“We need to go see them.”

“If we went, you’d need to really, really dress down. I’m talking frumpy. No makeup. Hair in a ponytail. Flats. Little to no jewelry. They’d need to see you as a plain jane, trouble-free match for me. It would need to look like I was settling instead of finding the kind of woman I want. That’s the only way they won’t be nasty to you or me.”

“Then we won’t go see them.”

His palm presses against my cheek and he smiles down into my eyes. “Tinsley Hancock, I’m falling for you, and I’m not the least bit upset about it.”

“Same, babe.” This time when he kisses me, it’s tender and passionate. He breathes into me, and when I exhale, I breathe into him. It’s heady and reckless. In minutes, we’re doing something new.

We’re making love.

This is something I’ve never really done with any man, and it makes me feel so whole and complete that I can’t

imagine doing anything else. We move against each other, a graceful, erotic dance, and I can't get enough. We kiss and we touch, all slow and sweet, and I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I'm falling in love with this man.

We finish and lie there in each other's arms, a peaceful pair of mourning doves in their nest. When he holds my face in his hands and looks down into my eyes, it seems the most natural thing in the world to say. "I love you," I whisper.

Those beautiful hazel eyes search mine, and then he whispers back, "I love you too."

My world is right. Kevin Wade is the man I'm supposed to spend the rest of my life with, and I'm thrilled. "Did you set your alarm?" he asks me.

"Yes."

"Good. Let's get some sleep. There's nothing I like better than waking up with you beside me."

"I feel the same way." I gather his beard in my hand and pull his face to mine. "I just want to be here with you." And I really do.

Forever.

CHAPTER 9



Tinsley

I QUIT SCHEDULING CLIENTS ON SATURDAYS. ALL I GOT WERE church ladies in their eighties who wanted their hair washed and set for Sunday morning, and they don't want to pay anything. I could literally work all day long for five dollars a head, and I'm not doing that. I don't care how happy it would make them.

I spend all day with Audrey and Izzy, planning for the next day. We found out a few hours ago that the Walters and the governor won't be staying. Instead, they'll be flying in on one of the state's helicopters and then flying back out when the wedding's over.

The big surprise is that the Eagle Point guys are coming—all of them, plus their girlfriends and wives. They'll drive in, stay for the wedding and reception afterward, and then drive back. It'll be a long day for them, but they figure if they do that, they won't miss any calls, or at least maybe only one.

Neither Penny nor Patch invited their families since it was going to be such a small affair, so they won't have any family here except Fiona. Mitchell can't come because flights are so expensive. The only townsfolk they've invited are the Ramages and the sheriff. Otherwise, it's just us, the Walters, the governor and his wife, and the Eagle Point guys. We're doing finger sandwiches, loaded potato skins, stuffed

mushrooms, a big crudité platter, a huge charcuterie spread, loads of fruit, and shortbread cookies, Penny's favorite. The only decorations will be fresh flowers, and John Henry's wife, Marla, owns a florist shop, the one where Nikki used to work before she met Tony. Even though Marla retired a few years back, she likes doing the work. She graciously said she'd like to do the flowers as her wedding gift to Penny and Patch, and that's fine with us. And one of my clients made the cake. It's absolutely gorgeous.

An hour before the ceremony, I find Penny in their cottage. Patch spent the night in the lodge because she insisted he couldn't see her that day. I think that whole thing is silly, but it's their wedding and their marriage. "Hey, sweetie, about ready for your makeup?"

"Yep, and thanks for this, Tins. I want it really, really simple. Nothing special, just a little more eyeliner, bigger eyelashes, and more brow so they show up good in the pictures."

"You got it, babe." I set about fixing her up and when I'm finished, I ask her, "Is that what you had in mind?"

She turns and smiles. "Exactly! Thank you!" I get a hug, which is better than money coming from Penny.

We hear the door open, and she darts behind me. "Anybody home?" a female voice calls out.

"Yep. In the bedroom." Penny opens the door to find Marla standing there, and she's got the most beautiful bouquet I've ever seen in her hands. All I manage to squeeze out is, "Oh, my."

"Oh, Marla! They're beautiful! Don't you think so, Tins?"

"Oh, absolutely!" *Achoo!* "They're just ..." *Achoo!* "Gorgeous." *Achoo!*"

Penny stares at me. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothin'. I just ..." *Achoo!*"

"It's the lilies, isn't it?" Marla asks, a knowing smile on her face.

“Uh, yeah. I ...” *Achoo!* I’m really, really ...” *Achoo!*

“Allergic. A lot of people are. I’ll just ...” Marla’s looking around and I’m dabbing at my eyes.

“No, no. I’ll just go. You look lovely, sweetie. I’ll see you ...” *Achoo!*” That sneeze is so violent that I almost fall down.

“I got it. Go. Before you blow your brains out,” Penny says, laughing.

“Bye!” I’m almost running to the door, and as soon as I get outside, everything’s fine. Lilies are beautiful but, damn, they’re hell on me.

I get back to the kitchen to find that everything’s pretty much ready. Ghost and Paddy went earlier to get several large bags of ice, so there’s plenty of that. We’ve got paper plates, plastic flatware, and plastic cups—Penny and Patch insisted on that stuff so there wasn’t a lot of cleanup. But we did splurge on some pretty wedding napkins. I insisted. They matched the plates, so I thought it was a nice touch.

Bulldog’s just hanging around, trying to stay out of the way, but occasionally I sneak a look at him and he’s looking back, grinning. Damn, that boy is fine looking, and he’s even finer naked. I don’t care if that’s sexist, it’s true. They talked about taking Patch out for a boy’s night last night, but he squashed that pretty quick. Said he’d been married before and there was no need for that. I’m sure they would’ve had fun, but ultimately, it was up to him, and that wasn’t what he wanted. The poor man has been under so much stress that I’m sure he really doesn’t feel like partying. I wouldn’t if I were him, regardless that he’s happy to be getting married.

Penny did ask Fiona to be her maid of honor. I figured the girl would say no, but it was like she jumped at the chance. Audrey and Izzy offered to help her get dressed, fix her hair, all of that stuff like I’ve done for Penny. I have no idea who Patch asked to be his best man. Guess we’ll find out.

The door opens and a rowdy chorus of, “Hey, look who’s here!” breaks out as the guys from the Eagle Point team file

into the building, ladies on the arms of the men who have them. They're a good-looking crew. Ethan asks where Patch is, and the tall man heads to the lodge to find him. One of the women turns and asks, "What's that sound?" We all stop to listen.

"It's the rest of our guests!" Hollywood sings out, and we're all moving as one out the door and headed toward the helipad. Sure enough, the big black Bell is hovering over the field and in seconds, it's on the ground. The doors open and Tony, Nikki, Vic, Laura, the governor, and his wife all climb out. There's back slapping and hugging all around, and when Nikki reaches me, she grabs me and hugs me. "Hey, Tinsley! Look at you! You look amazing!"

"You do too, honey. You're the cutest thing I ever saw!"

"I'm glad I look okay. I didn't want to wear heels, so I feel a little underdressed."

"For this crowd? Nah. You're perfect."

"Are John Henry and Marla here yet?"

"Oh, yeah. They've been here for a couple of hours. Marla's done a fantastic job on the flowers."

"Good! I want to go see the bride. Can you take me?"

I smile and take her hand. "Sure. Come on."

The next twenty minutes are spent in Patch and Penny's cabin with Nikki and Penny. I love being with the Walters bunch. They're fun and they're so down to earth. The governor's wife, Evie, and Laura are like that too. Penny's deemed the most beautiful bride ever by the three of us, and then Nikki smiles. "I think it's time. Honey, I wish you and Patch every happiness in the world. If you're even one tenth as happy as Tony and I are, then you'll live the dream. Oh, and we need to speak with both of you privately after the ceremony."

"Uh, okay. Is something wrong?"

"No. We'd just like to give you a gift from us and we'd rather not do it in front of everybody else."

“Oh. You don’t have to—”

“No, but we want to.” She gives Penny a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “We think the world of the two of you, and I hope you know if there’s anything you need, you can always come to either of us.”

“Thank you.” Penny’s eyes are welling up, and I think mine are too. These are wonderful people, and this farm is so blessed to have them as benefactors.

As soon as Nikki is gone, I give Penny a huge smile. “I think it’s time. You ready? No, girl, don’t do it.”

Her eyes are full of tears. “Oh, Tinsley, I’m so happy.”

“Good. I won’t be if you mess up that makeup, girl. We ain’t got time to redo that!” That makes her laugh. “Come on. Let’s go.”

When we get to the lodge, I can hear music already playing. “I think they’re waitin’ on us! Come on. Do you know who Patch’s best man is?”

“No. He didn’t tell me.”

I pull the door open slightly and peek in. “It’s Ethan!”

“That makes sense. They’re good friends.”

“I really thought it would be Reboot because he’s been here the longest. Or Tony. He really thinks a lot of Tony.”

“He does. I had no idea who it would be.”

“So, you ready?”

“Yeah. Go on in and sit down. Then cue the musicians.”

I give her a kiss on the cheek. “Love you, sweetie.”

“I love you too.”

When I slip through the door, a couple of people turn to look, and one of them is Kevin. He motions for me, and I slide into the seat beside him. It only takes me a second to catch the eye of the guy playing the guitar, and I nod to him. He seems to understand and starts a song ... I don’t know the name of it, but they use it a lot in weddings. Patch and Ethan come in

from the hallway, and Fiona follows them and steps to the other side of the judge.

When Penny opens the door and steps in, everyone stands, but I instantly turn to try to catch a glimpse of Patch. What I see sends a sense of relief flowing over me. That tired, haggard look he's been wearing has been replaced with a glow that tells me he loves her to eternity and back, and I'm overwhelmed with love for both of them. They've been so kind to me, and they both deserve so much happiness. They state their vows, simple things but full of emotion, and then the judge leads them through the exchange of the rings. In just a minute or two, he says, "By the power vested in me by the great Commonwealth of Kentucky, I pronounce you a married couple. You may kiss to seal your vows."

The minute their lips touch, the room explodes in applause, and if you've never heard that many big, brawny guys—Eagle Point, our guys, Tony, Vic, and John Henry—cheer and yell, then you haven't lived. At one point, I'm pretty sure the roof is going to come down around us. There's so much laughter, so much happiness, that I could stand right here forever in the midst of it and soak it in. Everyone is smiling, and I don't see enough of that these days.

The rest of the afternoon is spent eating and laughing and dancing. The guitarist was nice, but they hired a local DJ to do the reception, and we're all dancing and having a good time. At one point, Paddy asks me to dance, and I let him lead me out onto the dance floor. And by damn, the guy can dance! I've never had that much fun dancing in my life.

Everything's starting to wind down, and I haven't seen Penny and Patch in a few minutes. The governor and his wife—they instruct me to call them Ted and Evie—have been standing there with me for a few minutes, laughing and talking, when I see Penny come running out of the hallway and out the side door. "Could you 'scuse me for a minute?" They both nod, but I don't wait to hear their answer, just take off out the door behind Penny.

When I step out, she's leaning up against the back of the building, sobbing. "Baby! What's wrong? What happened?"

“Tony and Nikki gave us our wedding gift.”

“What was it? A trip to the gallows?” I ask with a chuckle.

“No, Tinsley.” She dabs at her eyes and then her nose. “They’re taking us to Italy. To *Italy*. I can’t believe it! They’re going with us, and we’re going to stay in Tony’s aunt and uncle’s estate. From what Nikki says, it’s a frickin’ castle. They said if we wanted them to go places with us, they’ll be glad to go and translate, or we’re welcome to just go wherever we want on our own, but they want to be there for us in case we feel like we need them. They’ll give us a whole *wing* of the castle! Oh my god, I don’t believe it! We’re going to Italy!”

“Oh, Pen, that’s amazing! Is Patch happy?”

“I think he’s in there having a come-apart. He was so shocked. He tried to tell them it was too much, but they both said it wouldn’t be costing anything except the airfare and food because we’d be staying with the Cabrizzis, and I ... I was just so shocked! We both were. It’s amazing.”

“They’re amazing people. That’ll be a great honeymoon.”

“Patch told them we couldn’t go until Fiona’s all settled, and they said that was fine. Said she’s welcome to stay here with Audrey and Hollywood, or she could come and stay with Vic and Laura or John Henry and Marla. I just ... Tinsley, I feel like I’m living in a fairytale.”

“You pretty much are, and I know who your fairy godmother and godfather are,” I say with a laugh.

“Yeah, no kidding. I should get back in there. I just had to find a place where I could compose myself.”

“I think you have. Come on, honey. Let’s go back in so we can spend whatever time they still have here with them.”

We step through the door to find the DJ playing a salsa, and Vic and Evie are dancing. Ted and Laura don’t seem to mind, and I swear, that great big Italian and that little bitty blond woman are tearin’ up the dance floor. It’s pretty frickin’ skilled. Turns out Rocky is a good dancer, and Talon too.

We see off the four Walters and the Chapmans—that's Ted and Evie—and Marla and John Henry leave shortly afterward. All of the Eagle Point guys and their women pass around hugs and kisses before they leave. The DJ packs up, and we set about cleaning everything up, shooing Patch and Penny out the door. Even though they're not going on their honeymoon anytime soon, the guys all chipped in and got them a room at the Hazard Hotel so they can have a quiet, private night. It surprised them, and I think they were really touched. Patch has become everybody's big brother, and Penny has become their big sister. When it comes to love, around here they get as good as they give.

As soon as I step inside Kevin's cottage, I kick off my shoes and drop onto the sofa. "Whew. I'm beat."

"Yeah. Me too. It's been a long-ass day," he says, joining me by collapsing right beside me.

"It was fun."

He nods. "Yes. It was."

"Good to see everybody."

He nods again. "Yep. It was."

I giggle. "Wow. That Vic ... I love you, but if he ever splits up with Laura, you're on your own, buddy."

He chuckles softly. "Oh, wow. That's nice. We're not even married and you're threatening me with divorce."

"For him? You bet. If that's what they grow them in like in Italy, I wish I was going there."

"Yeah. That was a great wedding gift, huh?"

"Yes, it was. They're so generous. Such great people."

"You know what I want?" He turns to face me and wraps his arms around me, letting me fall sideways onto his chest.

"No. What?"

"I want to go to bed. And I don't necessarily want anything other than to sleep. I'm worn out, and I know you are

too. Let's just get some sleep. We've both got to hit it hard in the morning and—"

"What's this 'we both' stuff? I'm a cosmetologist. We don't work on Mondays."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot. Wow. Lucky you."

"That's okay. I have to make up for it the rest of the week."

"Well, then, I guess you get to sleep late tomorrow morning while I have to get up and hit the ground running. All the more reason to go to sleep." I'm laughing. "What? I'm not as young as I used to be, woman!"

"You're thirty-nine! You're far from old."

"I feel like I'm sixty. Come on. Let's get to bed. Somebody has to actually work tomorrow."

I pat him on the head like a child and singsong, "Oh, bless its little heart. Okay. Bed it is."

He wasn't kidding. We lie there, curled up together, and he doesn't make a move to press me into having sex, just cuddles with me. At some point before I fall asleep, it starts to rain, and I love the sound on the roof. I'm in a big, comfortable bed with a gorgeous guy who loves me, his arms around me, and I'm not sure what else I could possibly want.

This is definitely enough.

BULLDOG

I'M WORRIED.

Ever since Tinsley told me about the mix-up with her birth control pills, I've been worried. There can't be any babies. I don't think my heart could handle that. We haven't been together long enough for me to know when her periods are, and I'm not sure if I should stop at the drugstore and buy a pregnancy test or not.

She called, and the doctor's office doesn't have an opening for two weeks. That's a long time. Until then, we've got to be really, really careful. Matter of fact, I won't be truly comfortable until she's been back on the pill for at least two months. I know it hasn't been that long since she was taking them, but still ... Can't be too careful.

I leave the shop after the workday and I'm surprised to find she's not in my cottage. Her car's not around either, so I shoot her a quick text.

Where are you?

It only takes a couple of seconds for her to answer.

I didn't have that many clothes there, so I'm at my place doing laundry.

I send another one.

Are you coming back for dinner?

Three wavy dots and then her message.

Yeah. If they're not dry, I'll bring them with me.

Good. I want her here with me. I send her back a smiley face that's blowing a kiss. That's good enough.

It's almost time for dinner when the damn tone goes off. "This is central dispatch calling App STAR base. Come in, App STAR base. Over."

Patch's voice rings out over the box in the kitchen. "Central dispatch, this is App STAR base. Over."

"App STAR base, assistance requested for rescue. See Fire Chief Ramage at the staging area off Troublesome Creek in the city park. Over."

"Roger that, central dispatch. App STAR base with an ETA of approximately twenty minutes. Over and out."

I look around. Patch is the only one of the guys not in the kitchen, so the rest of us take off to our cottages to get our stuff. When I come out of mine, he's already at the Jeeps, and we divide up into our units to head out.

There's a first responder bus from the fire department in the staging area when we pull in, and Chief Ramage is right there in the midst of everything. "What've we got?" Patch calls out as we approach Arlen.

"Lady says her dog ran off into the woods. Her husband followed it in and she didn't think much about it. But it's been three hours and he hasn't come out."

"What's his name and which direction did he go?"

A tearful woman stands there with a tissue in her hand. "His name's Leon, and the dog's name is Princess. He'd follow that damn dog into hell if it was going there. I don't understand why they haven't come back."

"Okay, guys," Patch says. "Unit one will take the trail. Unit two, this trail comes out on the road about two miles that way," he says, pointing on farther down the road. "You'll see it when you get to it. Drive down there and let us know when you're there. We'll head in from here and you from there, and we'll meet in the middle."

"Copy that, cap," Reboot says. "Okay, guys, let's go."

We all pile in the Jeep and head out. We've gone about half a mile when I hear Paddy say, "Well, that was easy." When I lean over and take a look out, there's a man walking toward us on the road.

With a dog.

"You wouldn't by any chance be Leon, would you?" Reboot asks as we pull up beside him.

The poor old guy is winded and looks like he's about to keel over. "Yeah. I'm Leon."

"Would you and Princess like a ride? Your wife has been looking for you."

"Yes, sir. I sure would. I'm not sure I can get back there under my own speed."

Reboot turns and looks at Priest and me. "Can you guys walk back?"

“Sure,” Priest says, and I nod in agreement.

“Okay. Help them into the Jeep and we’ll see you back there.”

In a couple of minutes, we find ourselves walking back up the road toward the staging area. “At least we weren’t out in the woods for sixteen hours,” Priest mutters.

“Agreed.”

“You and Tinsley doing okay?”

“Yeah. We’re doing great, actually.”

Priest slaps me on the shoulder and smiles. “Good. Everybody deserves to be happy.”

By the time we get back to the staging area, Patch and Unit One are packed up and ready to go. “Had a good outcome,” he says.

“Yes. We did. Just luck,” Reboot answers. “What did he say?”

Patch is trying hard not to laugh. “He didn’t get a chance to say anything. His wife ripped him a new one. I mean, she tied into him, and he won’t be able to verbally sit down for a week.” A couple of us snicker. “Yeah. He’s in big trouble.”

“Well,” Paddy says, “at least he didn’t get eaten by a bear.”

Patch starts laughing. “Yeah. At least there’s that!”

The Jeeps roll into the equipment shed and we unload everything. I can see Tinsley’s little car up at the kitchen, and I know she’s there waiting for me. For the first time, I realize there’s a chance I’m going to have somebody who’ll be there waiting for me every day, and that makes me smile. Well, I might be waiting for her. She might be working later. But whatever. Same thing.

Dinner is good, but being here with her later is so much better. We move together so well, and I swear to god, I believe we might actually look like we’re in a porn movie. That’s one of the things I love. Tinsley’s all about doing whatever. Sometimes we fuck like dogs, and other times, we just make

love, soft and sweet and relaxing. I don't think I've ever been around anybody so easy to be with, and I don't mean just sex. I mean anything. Just a person who's companionable and comfortable to be around.

We're laughing and cutting up when my phone rings, and I check it. It's fucking Imogen. I'm not answering it. She can just go to voicemail and then go to hell. "Who was that?" Tinsley asks.

"Nobody. It was nobody."

"Does nobody have a name?"

"Yeah, and you don't want to hear it."

"Why? Oh. Is it her?"

"Yeah."

She tips her head slightly sideways. "What could she possibly want?"

"Babe, she calls me every so often, crying and begging me to forgive her. I absolutely, positively hate hearing from the bitch, and I really don't want to talk about her. It's been a pleasant evening, and I want to keep it that way."

"Okay." We sit there for a few seconds until she asks, "But wouldn't you like to know what she wants?"

"No. I wouldn't. And if you're so curious, I'll let you answer the phone the next time she calls."

That grin looks positively wicked. "I could have some fun with that."

The laugh I let out is nothing but unfiltered sarcasm. "Oh, I bet you could."

She's grinning. "Yeah. Hide and watch."

"Nah. I think I want to hear it all. Every snide, sarcastic word of it.

"Did she leave a voicemail?"

"I dunno." I poke around on my phone to look. "Yeah, she did. She doesn't usually do that."

“What did she say?”

I hit the speaker icon, then the arrow, and Imogen’s voice fills the space around us. “Kevin, I really need to talk to you. There’s something I need to tell you. Please call me back. Please? Thanks. Bye.”

“You callin’ her back?”

“Fuck no. Whatever she has to tell me can’t be all that important. There’s nothing between us, and I’m not interested in anything she’s doing or anything that’s happening to her. Just not.”

“Well, okay. I’m just curious. Aren’t you curious?”

“No. What I’m curious about is how you wanna do it tonight. Doggy-style? Cowgirl? Reverse cowgirl? In the shower? I’m sure you wanna mix it up.”

She’s laughing. “Oh, yeah. I’ve thought about that all day. How limber am I? Can I stand on my head? How ’bout if I roll up in a ball like an armadillo? What about that?”

“Oooo. Armadillo sex. Kinky. I like it.”

“Oh, almost forgot. I have a doctor’s appointment on Friday.”

“Wow. That was quick.”

“They had a cancellation just before I called and they asked if I wanted it. The client I had in that time slot is somebody who’s been comin’ to me for years and I knew she’d let me reschedule her, so I took it. I’m goin’ to get my pills.” When she leans in and kisses me, I grab her and hold her to me. We’re in the home stretch.

Friday can’t come soon enough. We’ll have to be careful for a couple of months, but after that, we’re golden.

I can’t wait.

IT'S BEEN A CRAZY WEEK. THE GUYS HAVE BEEN WORKING hard to get a couple of orders finished and I've been totally booked. I'm looking forward to my appointment, and then I can spend the weekend with Kevin. Being around him is heaven.

On Friday morning, I make sure I wash all my extra special places, because I'm pretty sure they're going to want to look all up in them. I make it through lunch at work, then grab a sandwich and swallow it whole on the way to the doctor's office. Once I'm signed in at the front, I sit down to wait.

Sure enough, after the nurse talks to me and gets all my health information, she gives me a paper gown and throw and leaves me to undress. Damn, I hate this part. Once I'm all decked out in two-ply, the door opens and a man walks in. "Good afternoon, Ms. Hancock. I'm Dr. Joshi and I'll be taking care of you today. Can you tell me why you're here? Are you having any problems?"

"No, sir. I was wantin' more birth control pills, but the pharmacy said you guys told 'em I'd have to have an exam before you'd send the prescription."

"Yes, ma'am. We require an exam every year before we can give a new prescription. Delia, can you please help Ms. Hancock lie down on the table and get her feet into the stirrups. Very good. Okay, so we'll start with a breast exam. Do you do self-exams every month as recommended?"

"When I remember."

"That's the answer most women give." He opens the front of my gown and starts to press around. And he's really pressing.

"Owww!" I snap.

"They're tender?"

"You're pressing really hard."

"I assure you, Ms. Hancock, I'm not pressing hard at all. Now we'll do the pelvic exam. Delia, please scoot the light

over here.” He trains the beam on my lady bits and I wait while he lubes up one of those spreader things. I don’t remember what they’re called. “This will be a little cold, but not bad. You’ll feel some pressure.” It’s nothing like the pressure I feel when Kevin and I are having sex, so it’s not a big deal. “It says in your information that you’re sexually active.”

“Yes.”

“Is this occasionally or frequently?”

“I have a boyfriend.” That’s the first time I’ve called Kevin that, and it sounds weird to me.

“I see. Do you use protection?”

“Yeah, especially since I didn’t have any pills.”

“Good, good. I’m going to feel of your internal organs. This will cause some pressure for just a minute or two.” With two fingers stuck into my va-jay-jay, he presses upward while he pushes down on my tummy with the other hand. When he’s finished, he snaps the gloves off. “Delia, could you help Ms. Hancock sit up, please?”

“Sure. Here we go.” First I scoot back, then I sit up.

“I should tell you, we can’t prescribe birth control pills until you’ve taken a pregnancy test.”

“Why?”

“Because pregnant women shouldn’t be taking birth control pills.”

“I’m not pregnant.”

“Well, we need to know for sure. If you’ll get dressed, Delia can show you to the bathroom across the hallway and give you a specimen cup. When you’re finished, you can sit back down on the table in here and when we have the results, we’ll be back.”

“Okay.”

Five minutes later, I’m sitting on the table, my legs swinging. It seemed cold in here in the little paper gown, but

with my clothes on, it's really comfortable.

Dr. Joshi steps into the room with the nurse right behind him. "I'm sorry, Ms. Hancock. I can't give you a prescription. The test turned out positive."

I could've sworn he said the test was positive. "What? What did you say?"

"I said, the test turned out positive. You're pregnant."

Oh. My. God. No. This can't be happening. Kevin's going to ... I don't know what he'll do. God only knows. "So, what do I ..."

"You need to make another appointment and we'll get you on a routine prenatal schedule. In the meantime, you can take the maternity vitamins they sell at the discount stores. They're just as good as the prescription type. Any questions?"

So many questions. Millions of questions. Unfortunately, this doctor can't answer a single one of them. "Uh, no. Thank you."

"Just check out at the front desk and we'll see you soon. Nice meeting you." He shakes my hand, and I find that odd. This guy just rammed his fingers up into me, and now he's shaking my hand.

At the front desk, they make me an appointment for a month from now, and I take the little card. The doctor's name on it isn't Joshi. "Excuse me. Why is this some other doctor's name instead of Dr. Joshi?" I mean, hell, we already know each other intimately now. Don't want to perpetuate that slut image.

"Dr. Joshi does mostly gynecology work. Dr. Ingmara does our obstetrics work."

"Oh. Thanks." I pay the fee, which is surprisingly low, and step outside.

That's when it hits me. I'm pregnant. How the hell am I going to tell Kevin? He's going to throw an absolute fit, and I don't think I'd blame him. Will he break up with me? Tell me

he never wants to see me again? I know he loved Paisley—still does. Wouldn't he love another baby? Couldn't he?

Then a shudder runs through me. What if he doesn't want it? What if he insists I get rid of it? I can't do that. I'm forty-one. This may be my last chance. If he doesn't want to be with me anymore, it'll be my only chance. Could I do all of this on my own?

Then I realize something important. Regardless what happens between me and Kevin, Iron Oak Farms is my family. They all love me. The guys tell me constantly how happy they am that I'm there with them. Penny, Izzy, and Audrey are my sisters. When I'm there, I feel like I'm home. And I know for sure they won't abandon me. That's not the kind of people they are.

But what about Kevin? I feel so stupid for not telling the truth when he asked that night. I've smoke-screened and talked about how I thought it stayed in my system, or I thought I'd have them by the next day, but I know the truth. He asked me straight up—*straight up*—if I was on the pill, and I said yes. And that was a lie. If he doesn't want to be with me anymore, it's nobody's fault but mine.

When I get to my car, I pull out my phone and open the pictures app. There's the picture from the night before. I handed my phone to Taylor, and he took the picture, Kevin and me eating the spaghetti Audrey made, sitting facing each other, a strand of spaghetti stretched between us, *Lady and the Tramp* style. We look so happy—*he* looks so happy. When he's happy, his eyes sparkle, or at least they look that way to me. I think of it as "the look of love." But when he's mad, they flash, almost like lightning. I've seen it when he got aggravated at something or somebody said something that pissed him off.

What will I see when I tell him about this? Will I see that look of love, the sparkle in his eyes, the little smile wrinkles at their corners? Or will I see the flash of lightning that comes before the thunder? Will I feel his wrath?

Like a foreshadowing, the screen of my phone is wet, and I realize it's my tears. My whole world may explode with happiness, or it may implode into cinders and ash, the wasteland of a relationship that had so much promise, torched by a lie. Which will it be?

Only one man knows the answer to that. And pretty soon, I will too.

IT'S BEEN TWO WEEKS, AND I JUST CAN'T BRING MYSELF TO DO it, to tell him. I've been waiting for the right moment, that time that just begs to be filled with something important, and it simply hasn't happened. Truth is, I'm going to have to make that time. He's got to know, and the sooner the better. But the time I spend with him is so precious, so filled with happiness and love, that I can't stand the thought of letting it go.

And did I mention that I've been spared the dreaded morning sickness? I don't know how I got so lucky, but it hasn't been an issue. Sometimes I wish I was suffering from it, because that would force me to tell him, or he'd just guess. Instead, it falls on me to open up and be honest. I really don't feel like adulting anymore.

I'm helping Penny and Audrey clean up from dinner—Izzy's not feeling well because she hurts from physical therapy this morning—but we're all working along when suddenly, I feel the room tilt, and I stumble. I'm reaching for anything, a chair, a countertop, the table, the edge of the sink, anything that will help keep me from crashing, and I wind up plopping down on my butt with a mighty *oomph!* Penny's on one side of me instantly, Audrey on the other, and they're nothing but moms in that instant. "You okay?" Penny asks. "You don't look so good."

"Yeah, you look a little pale," Audrey says. "Let's get you up in a chair." When I'm standing, Penny turns loose long enough to drag a chair over to me. Once I'm sitting, Audrey's back in front of me. "You okay? Hurt anything?"

There's a little sarcastic chuckle that slips from my lips. "Nothin' but my pride."

"You've seemed a little off for a few days. You okay?" Penny asks.

"Uh, yeah. I'm fine. I'm just ... tired."

Audrey smooths my hair back from my face. "Maybe you should go to the doctor."

There's no hiding it, at least from them. "I did. Two weeks ago."

Penny's brows spike. "And you're okay?"

"Yeah. Or I will be in about seven and a half months."

I watch as their jaws drop. Penny's the first one to get her shit together and ask. "You're pregnant?"

"Yeah."

"Does Bulldog know?" Audrey asks quietly.

"No. I haven't worked up the courage to tell him."

Penny glares at me. "Look, you've already lied to him once. You need to—"

"You lied to him?" Audrey fairly shrieks.

"No! Not intentionally anyway." *And you're lying again, Tinsley*, I hear a little voice say, but I just forge ahead. "Look, I'm gonna tell him. I am. But I'm just tryin' to find the right time—"

"Oh, no. You need to tell him pretty damn soon." Penny stands up straight and looks down at me, her eyes two burning embers. "Pretty damn soon, Tins. He needs to know."

"I know, I know. I'm gonna tell him, I promise. I just don't want it to be a day when he's had a rough time or had somethin' go wrong. That's all."

"Okay. But I'm going to ask you again in two days, and if you still haven't told him, I'm going to have to tell Patch. And you know what he's going to say."

“No! Please don’t do that! I’ll tell him! I promise! Just give me a few more days, okay? Please?”

“Okay. I will.” I sit there for a second, my mind spinning. It has to happen. It’s just a matter of when.

We keep working until the kitchen’s done, but not before Penny pours me a big glass of pomegranate juice and insists that I drink it while I’m working. That does make me feel a bit better. From somewhere out on the farm I hear voices, and I figure the guys are playing some kind of game, or laughing and talking about a sports team, or something. They like to entertain themselves that way, and it makes me happy to see him laughing and sharing good times with all of them. But then I hear something I didn’t expect to hear.

The sound of Kevin’s bike rolling out of the drive, the big Harley motor loping as it passes at a pretty good clip and disappearing into the night. Before I can stop myself I mutter, “What the hell?”

“Where’s he going?” Audrey wonders aloud.

“I dunno. Maybe he’s going for some snacks or something,” Penny offers.

Audrey stops and stares at her. “Why? I’ve got plenty in here. There’s more than enough. Unless it’s something they shouldn’t—”

Her sentence is cut short by the opening of the door, and Patch walks in. There’s a look on his face that I can’t even describe. It’s like he’s been punched in the gut. Penny’s the first one to reach him. “Babe? You okay? What’s wrong? Something’s wrong. What’s happened?”

Like some kind of sad sentinel, he stands there, motionless, then looks down at her. “Bulldog’s gone.”

I have to be mistaken. It sounded like he said Kevin’s gone. “What?” I whisper.

“He’s gone. Packed up his stuff. I don’t know what happened, but that bitch of an ex-wife of his called him and said something to him, and he said he has to get out of here.

Said he's got to go somewhere to sit and think. I'm not sure what that means, but that's what he said."

I breathe out a huge sigh of relief. "Oh. He'll be back in a couple of hours, I'm sure."

"Tinsley, he packed his stuff. He's gone. I was trying to talk some sense into him but he was already carrying his duffel stuffed full of clothes, and then he left. I don't know when he's coming back, or even if he's coming back. He's been meeting with the parole officer because I insist on it, but his sentence was vacated. He's under no obligation to the penal system, and he doesn't have to answer to anybody but me. Now that he's gone, he doesn't answer to anybody but the cops if he does something wrong."

All the air has left the room. I can't find any to suck in. This sound comes from my mouth, something inhuman and foreign, and I'm on my knees, my mind spinning. I feel hands on my shoulders and my arms, but I don't want any comfort. I don't want any words. I just want Kevin. Right now. This minute. There's a scramble to get to my feet and I'm grabbing my phone from the table, hands shaking. I punch the familiar contact and wait, but it goes straight to voicemail. "Hey, this is Bulldog. Leave a message and I'll get back to you."

"Babe, it's me. It's Tinsley. Please, god, please call me back. I know you're drivin' right now, but please, call me back. Please? You have to come back. You just have to. There's somethin' I need to tell you, and it's important. It's really, really important, and you're gonna kick yourself if you don't come back so I can tell you, okay? Okay? Please? Please, Kevin, come back. Okay. I'll talk to you later. I'll talk to you later, right? Okay. I love you. Bye." The screen of my phone has a picture of the two of us on it, and I just stare at it for a few seconds before I drop the phone on the table and start to bawl.

A pair of big, strong arms wraps around me and for a second, I think it's him. Then I realize it's Patch. "It's okay, honey. We're all here. I'm sure he'll cool off and come back. It's okay. Until then, you've just gotta keep the faith."

“Yeah. Keep the faith.” What the hell did Imogen say to him? It had to be something really, really bad for him to go off the deep end like this. Then I realize I don’t even have the bitch’s phone number. If I did, I’d call her and tell her to leave him the fuck alone once and for all. That he loves me and he doesn’t want to talk to her. That he’s going to have a new daughter with me. Or a son. Doesn’t matter. That’ll shut the bitch up.

My world has ended. And I didn’t do a thing to make it happen.

CHAPTER 10



Bulldog

BEAR, PADDY, PRIEST, AND I ARE SITTING OUTSIDE, TALKING about the fair that's coming to the county in a couple of weeks. Tinsley will love that. I'm gonna take her and I'm gonna win her one of those huge teddy bears. She'll show that sucker off like it's a Gucci bag. I can see her now, cotton candy on her nose, laughing and walking along in pair of those pretty little shoes she loves. Wedges? I think that's what they're called.

And then my phone rings. Fucking Imogen. She just won't leave me alone. "God damn it. I've gotta take this, guys." They wave me off and keep talking. If I talk to her now and tell her to fucking quit calling me, Tinsley will never know and I won't have to answer a million questions. As soon as I clear the door of my cottage, I bark into the phone, "What?"

"That's no way to greet me."

"Jesus, what do you want? You've called me a million times in the last few days. What's so fucking important?"

"I need you to do something for me."

"You've got to be shitting me. I'm not in the business of doing anything for you, Imogen. Nothing. Period."

"Look, I know you're still mad at me, and I know—"

"You don't know shit. I'm not doing anything for you. Nothing."

“Please, Kevin! Listen to me! It’s really, really important!”

“What’s so important? I haven’t had shit to do with you for a very long time, and suddenly, there’s this really important thing you need me to do for you, so you just call me up and—”

“Kevin! Shut up, please and listen!”

That makes me furious. “What did you say to me?”

“I’m sorry, but I really need you to listen. This is very important. Very.”

“What is so god damn important that you think you can tell me to shut up?”

“You know that picture I sent you of you and Paisley?”

“Yeah. What about it?”

“I need that back.”

What the hell? “You need it back? Why?”

“Because. I just need it back.”

“I’m not sending it—”

“I’ll send you another one. A better one. A bigger one.”

“I don’t want another one. This one is fine.”

“No. I really, really need it back, Kevin. I’m not kidding. It’s really important. A matter of life and death.”

“Oh, for god’s sake, don’t be so fucking dramatic.”

“I’m not! It really is. Please, Kevin, just send the picture back to me. In the frame. And I’ll send you another one, I promise. But I need it soon.”

“I’m not sending you anything, you hear me? Stop calling me.”

“There’s something else I need to tell you.”

I let out a huffed sigh. “What?”

“I’m pregnant.”

There’s a sensation inside me that I can’t even explain. It’s like somebody’s injected molten lava into my veins and it’s

powering through my body. I can feel beads of sweat cropping up on my forehead, and there's a wave of nausea that engulfs me. "What did you say?"

"I'm pregnant. I'm going to have a baby. And if you don't—"

"You think it's a good idea for you to have a baby when you let somebody kill mine?"

"I didn't let him, Kevin. You know that. I was too scared to—"

The edges of my vision are darkening, and I can feel myself shaking. "Look, you unholy bitch, don't you *EVER* call me again, do you understand? Do not call me, do not write me, do not talk to my family, do not come here. Never, *never* contact me again for any reason, do you understand me? Or I swear to god, I'll hunt you down and kill you myself. I don't ever want to hear your voice, see your face, or hear your name again, or so help me god, I'll fuck you up so badly that nobody will recognize your corpse. Do you hear me?"

"Kevin, please, I—"

"Shut up and go to hell, you ignorant piece of shit. You can't love another baby. There's something broken inside you, and I'm not going to wait around to see if it can be fixed. Have an abortion. Nobody deserves to have you as a mother."

"Kevin! That's—"

I don't wait to hear what else she's got to say because I don't give two shits and a fuck what it is. I can feel the walls getting closer and closer to me, the ceiling dropping, and I can't breathe. I have to get out of here. My duffel is in the closet, so I grab it, start stuffing clothes in, and when it's about as full as it can be, I pick up the picture, the one Imogen wants back. She can't have it. It was a happier time, a dad and his baby daughter smiling into the camera with no idea of the dark days ahead. I slip it in, along with my checkbook and my address book, and head out the door. I turn one last time in the doorway and look around. This was a happy place. With Tinsley here ...

I can't tell her goodbye. I can't even see her. If I do, I won't leave, and I'm no good for her, not with this rage inside me. I pull the door closed behind me and I know I'm closing this chapter in my life. It's over. I won't be back here. Somewhere out there is a place I can go that won't remind me of Imogen and her bullshit or of Tinsley and her gentle smile. That's where I have to go. I have to find that place.

I pound down the steps and head to Patch's cottage, praying Penny's not there. Paddy, Bear, and Priest are calling to me from out on the lawn, but I ignore them. "Hey," Patch says as soon as he opens the door, but I guess he can look at my face and see that something's wrong. "What's going on, bud?"

"I'm leaving. I've gotta get out of here. Tell everybody goodbye for me, please."

"Bulldog, what's going on? What are you talking about? Where are you going?"

"I have no idea. I just have to get out of here. Fucking Imogen ..." I can't even say the words.

"Your ex? What about her?"

"She's fucking *pregnant*, Patch. She's going to have another baby. Another baby to kill, just like she did Paisley."

"Bulldog, you don't know that. Maybe she's changed and—"

"She hasn't changed," I spit. "She's the same selfish, self-centered, self-involved bitch she's always been. Here." I hand him my phone. "I won't be needing this anymore. If I don't have it, she can't call me, and I never want to hear her voice again."

"But Bulldog, you—"

"Won't have any of your numbers. I know. But thanks for all you've done for me, Patch. I needed somebody, and you were there. And the rest of the guys."

"But what about Tinsley? She loves you, man. You can't just—"

“I’m no good for her. She needs to know that. Maybe I’ll be in touch in a few months. I dunno.”

“Where will you go?”

“I have no idea, but it’ll be a place I’ve never been before with people who don’t know me. That’s just best. Bye, Patch.”

He grabs me and hugs me and for a minute, my resolve wavers. “Love you like a brother, Bulldog. Please don’t do this.”

“I love you like a brother too, but I’ve gotta go. Please tell Tinsley I love her and she should find somebody who’s good for her. Not somebody like me.” He tries to grab my arm as I turn and head down the steps, but I’m too quick. I run back to my bike, kick it started, and power out of the drive. As I pass by the kitchen, I think of Tinsley in there, helping Penny and Audrey, and the tears she’ll cry. But she won’t cry for long. She’ll just go on like I was never here.

And that’s what I want. She needs to forget about me. I’m no good for anybody.

TINSLEY

THE FIRST THING I DO IS RUN TO HIS COTTAGE. HIS CLOSET IS open and there are hangers all over the bed. I check the drawers, and most of his underwear are gone. Some of his toiletries, like his toothbrush and his deodorant, are gone. I was looking for a pen one day and opened the drawer to see his checkbook there. It’s gone.

And the picture of him and Paisley is gone.

He’s really gone. He’s taken the most important things in his life with him, except for one.

He didn’t take me.

That reality hits me like a thousand stinging bees. He's left me behind. Whatever happened, I didn't matter enough to tell, and I didn't matter enough to take. I'm just nothing, nothing more than a passing fancy, a fun time. My heart hurts and I feel so, so helpless. There's a shirt on the chair, and I pick it up and press it to my face. It smells like him, that musky, sweet scent he always wears, and when I close my eyes, I can imagine that he's still here, that his arms are around me and his warmth is against me. But it's not. It'll never be.

I sit there at his table, quiet and still, letting the scent on his shirt soak in, memorizing the sensation of the tears rolling down my face, trying to recall the sound of his voice and committing it to my memory. There's a chance he'll call me back, but deep down inside, I know that's not going to happen. I'm never going to hear from him or see him again, and I have to accept that. There's a sound behind me and I turn to find Patch and Penny there. "Tinsley, Penny told me," Patch says quietly, then kneels beside my chair. "Honey, we're all here for you. All of us. You won't ever be alone. Anything you need, we'll make sure you have it, and anything you decide, we'll support you." I nod because I can't form words. "How 'bout you stay with us tonight so you're not alone?"

"No. I need to go home. I just need to go home and sleep."

"Okay. We'll drive you. Penny can take you and I can drive your car over. But we're here for you, honey."

"I don't want you. I only want Kevin," I whisper as Patch hugs me against him, and I feel Penny move in behind me, her arms encircling me from the other side. There are friends here, family. Then I think about the baby.

If I have this baby, I'll always have a part of Kevin. He'll always be with me. Is that what I want? My decision is made that very second.

It's all I really want in the whole world.

THE COMPASS ON MY BIKE SAYS I'M HEADED SOUTHEAST. I really don't care where I'm going. Whitesburg is ahead, and I'm going to stop there and gas up the bike. While I'm there, I'll go in the discount store and get a burner phone. If I need something, I'll at least have a phone to call from.

It only takes me a couple of minutes to fill up the tank and that's done. The gas station is at the store, so I power my bike up the drive, park near the front, and wander in. Their electronics department is near the entry doors, so I head over there, pick out a phone, and pay for it. I realized that I'd forgotten socks, so I pick up a package, then head to the front. Just as I reach the self-checkout, I see a display of cards, and I stop.

There are so many pretty ones, and I sort through them. Then one catches my eye, and I pick it up. There are flowers on the front, not the cheesy kind. They look more like the ones you'd pick out of your yard, with a few wildflowers thrown in. Inside it simply says, "May sunlight and gentle breezes follow you wherever life takes you. You are loved." I pick it up and head to the checkout.

Back on the road, I keep going southeast. I have no idea where I'm going, but I figure I'll know when I get there.

My heart is hurting. I've left the love of my life behind, but she deserves so much better than me and much more than I can ever offer her. And then I smile.

I'll never have to hear that bitch Imogen's voice again.

The mountains get closer together and higher as I go, and I'm in awe of the people who built these highways. These were a major feat of engineering. The roads twist and wind. It looks like I'm about to drive off into nothingness just in time to crest the hill and see the other side. But it'll be dark soon, and I can't keep driving through these mountains after dark. I round a curve and see something I wasn't expecting because I hadn't realized I was that close. It's a big black sign with white and red graphics.

*Welcome to
Virginia
Virginia is for Lovers*

It takes me a minute to realize where I am. I've crossed the state line and I'm in Virginia. Isn't that where the Eagle Point team lives? I don't remember the name of the town, but I do remember that much. From what I can tell, I'm in a place called Pound, and in less than twenty minutes, I'll be in Wise, which apparently has a motel. Good. I'm tired.

Sure enough, I slide into the parking lot of the motel, go in, and in minutes, I have myself a room. It's not much, but it's got a bed and a bathroom, and that's really about all I need.

After I've found a burger and fries, taken a shower, and put on my boxer briefs, I sit down at the little desk in the room with the greeting card I bought. There's a pen on the desk, so I've got something to write with. I'm not sure what Tinsley's address is, so I address the card to her in care of Patch out at the farm. He'll make sure she gets it. Then I get down to business.

DEAR TINSLEY,

I'm sorry to leave you behind, but it's best for you. Imogen called me and told me she's pregnant, and the thought of her with another baby whose life will be in danger is more than I can handle. I don't know when or if I'll ever be back to Iron Oak Farms, but I do want you to know that I love you with all my heart and I'll never forget you. You were the best thing that ever happened to me, and I hope you can find somebody you can love half as much as I love you. If you can, you'll have a treasure.

Please don't hate me. My insides are all twisted up, my heart is in a knot, and my mind is a tangled mess. I thought I had come a long way in getting past everything that had happened, but it looks like I was fooling myself. I fooled you in the process and for that, I'll be forever sorry.

I love you, beautiful girl. Find somebody who can make you happy. I'm definitely not that man.

All my love always,

Kevin

THAT'S THAT. I'LL MAIL IT IN THE MORNING AND THAT'LL BE the end. Where will I go? I decide that since I'm so close, I'll find the name of that town, stop in, and say hello to the Eagle Point guys before I head out again. Maybe I'll go to Florida. I've always thought it would be nice to live in a place that's warm all year.

The bed is hard, and the neon lights of the sign out front keep shining into the room through the thin curtains. Doesn't matter. I wouldn't be able to sleep anyway. All I can think about is Tinsley and the way I feel about her, and how hurt I am that I'll never get that life I thought we'd have together. But I know that would be wrong of me. Holding her in a relationship with somebody as warped as me would be unfair. She needs to be with a guy who's not a wreck.

Morning dawns, and I get dressed and head out. Turns out the town's name is Fallport, according to what I found on my phone's browser, and it isn't that far away, so I can stop there and take one or two of the guys to lunch. It's the least I can do for all the times they've helped us.

The roads are still twisty and windy, and the scenery is gorgeous. This is a beautiful area of the country. I see the sign up ahead that says Fallport, and it won't be time for lunch for a couple of hours, so I drive on into town. There's a park down the way, and I pull in and shut off the bike's engine. There's a lady with two little kids at the far end of the playground. I just saunter around until I find a bench under a tree, and I sit down and relax, trying to take advantage of the pleasant weather. Looking down the street, I can see three old guys playing checkers in front of the post office. I bet they've done that for years.

When I've sat there as long as I can, I get back on my bike and ride a couple of blocks. There's a little diner there, and I pull in, hoping they've got coffee and a snack to hold me until lunchtime. Sure enough, it looks like typical southern fare, so I order a piece of apple pie. The server promises me she'll keep my coffee cup filled, and that's good enough for me as I wait.

There are sounds all around me, people going through their daily lives without a care in the world, and I'm sitting there trying to figure out how to even have a life. Through the window I can see a bakery, and I decide that I'll go over and get something before I leave town. I'm halfway through my coffee when I hear a voice behind me say, "Hey, Margot, just a cup of coffee to go." It's familiar, especially the accent, and I turn to look.

It's Talon.

The minute he sees me, his eyes go wide and he whispers, "Bulldog?"

All I can manage is a weak smile. "Yeah, man. How's it goin'?"

In a flash, he's across the table from me. "What are you doing here?"

"Long story," I say as the server comes back and refills my cup.

"Do Ethan and Rocky know you're here?"

"No. You're the only person on earth who knows I'm here."

"Patch?" I shake my head. "Nobody?"

"Not Patch, not the guys, not my parents. Nobody. Just you."

"Did something happen?"

I shrug. "I guess you could say that."

"So are you just passing through?"

"That was the plan, but I did hope to see you guys."

“Well, I think they’d all want to see you! Absolutely. Eat up and we’ll go find them.”

By the time my pie is gone, Raiden has walked in, and Duke strolls up and shoves his muzzle cross my leg. “Good to see you, Bulldog. What brings you here?”

“Snack time. Hungry.” I really don’t want to explain myself, but now I realize that once Ethan sees me, he’s going to want answers to those questions.

“Sticking around to have dinner tonight? We’ll show you a good time,” Talon says with a grin.

“Sure. Got nowhere else to be. By the way, where’s Ethan today?”

“He’s working on an apartment building down the street. Guy wanted the whole thing gutted, so he’s doing it a unit at a time. You should go by there. You’ll see his truck out front.”

“He’ll probably wrangle you into helping him, so be prepared,” Raiden warns me.

“I’ll help him. I don’t mind.” A little physical work would do me good. I feel like I’m going to crawl out of my skin.

When I’ve paid the check, Talon, Raiden, and Duke walk out with me, and they point down the street. “Right down there,” Talon says, and I can see the front end of a truck.

“Thanks.” It’s a pretty day, and instead of riding the bike down, I figure I’ll just walk it. The same park I saw earlier in the day is on my right as I go by, and I see two of the three old guys sitting on a bench. They eye me as I walk by, but they don’t wave or speak. So much for hometown hospitality.

The apartment building is old, but it’s brick, and I’m betting it has good bones. I can hear a hammer somewhere, so I follow the sound until I reach it. There’s sawdust everywhere when I step in, and I don’t see anybody, so I call out, “Hey, lookin’ good.”

“Uh, thanks,” a voice calls back, but when he steps into the room, his jaw drops. “Bulldog?”

“Yeah, man. How’s it goin’?”

“Goin’ good! How ’bout you?” His hand is outstretched, and I take it and clasp it for a brief moment.

“Good, good.”

“What brings you to our neck of the woods?” Feet shoulder width apart, he stands there and folds his arms across his chest.

“Just passing through.”

“On your way to ...”

“I have no idea,” I answer with a shrug. It’s true. Where I’m going is a mystery to even me. “Thought I might help you out today if you need a hand.”

He eyes me for a few seconds before he asks, “What’s really going on?”

“It’s complicated.” That’s the only way I know to explain it.

“Well, if you’ll help me with this wall in here, I’ll have time to sit down with you and we can talk. If you want to.”

“Yeah, okay.” The last time I did anything like this was when I was redoing the house Imogen and I bought, and that seems like a lifetime ago. He’s got a portable table saw, so he measures and I cut. In the meantime, he measures another, I hand him the cut one, he gives me the second one, and he nails the first one in place. In no time, we’ve got the framing done for the wall. “Well, that went quick,” I say when the last nail is hammered in.

“Goes so much faster if there are more hands. You hanging around for a while?”

“Maybe. I’ll have to find a place to stay.”

“I’ve finished two units in this building, but he hasn’t rented any of them yet. If you’d like to stay in one, I’m sure that can be arranged.”

Do I really want to do that? “I don’t want to be any trouble—”

“Nonsense. No trouble at all. I’ll call him and ask. I think I need some water. You need some water?” he asks as he heads toward the door.

“Uh, yeah. I guess I could use some water.” I follow him down the walkway on the second-floor balcony to the stairs, then amble down them and head to his truck.

There’s a cooler in the back seat of the extended cab, and he hands me a bottle of spring water. “Here ya go.” We both open the bottles and swig down half of it. As soon as I screw the cap back on what’s left of mine, he fixes me with a stare that could combust glass. “Okay, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. Just seeing the sights. Tired of the farm and all that stuff.”

“You do realize I don’t believe a word of that, right?” A shrug seems appropriate here. “Cut it out. What’s going on? Gotta be something.”

“My ex-wife.”

“She trying to sue you for something?”

I shake my head. “No. Called me to tell me she’s pregnant.”

“Ouch. I remember you telling me about your little girl and your prison sentence. That’s gotta hurt, knowing she’s having another child. But you and Tinsley, you’re ...” He shoots me a wicked smile.

“No. Not now. Probably not ever. I’m a mess, and she doesn’t deserve that.”

“Why don’t you let her decide that?”

“Because I can’t do that to her. I’m twisted up in knots. I’d finally gotten my shit pretty much together, and Imogen calls with her bullshit and screws everything up. I felt like somebody had taken a flamethrower to me and torched my whole body. I’m still so mad I can barely see straight.”

“Running away doesn’t help.”

That almost pisses me off. “I can’t stay around there and be as abusive as I was before, and I admit, I was abusive before. To everybody. And I can’t do that anymore. I’m better off alone.”

“But why did she call you to tell you she was pregnant?”

“I dunno. It’s Imogen. Why does she do anything she does? Rub it in? Thinking maybe she could use it to slither her way back into my good graces? I have no idea.”

“That’s all she wanted?”

That’s when I remember her favor. “Actually, she started out asking me to send the picture of Paisley and me back. Said she’d send me another one. I told her I wasn’t sending it back and I wasn’t interested in another one. I’d just keep that one.”

“What was so special about that one?”

“I have no idea. Makes no sense to me.”

Ethan shrugs and rolls his eyes. “Ex-wives. From what I can tell, their bite is worse than one from a black mamba and three times as deadly.”

“That much is true.”

“Why don’t you go get your bike and your stuff and then we can go over to Zeke’s bar? We can sit over there and talk, maybe have something to eat. It’s lunchtime. If you bring your bike over here, I can show you to the apartment and you can put your stuff in there before we go. I’m sure one of the guys has an air mattress he’ll let you use.”

“That would be great. Thanks.”

Walking back down the street toward my bike, I get the feeling I’m being watched, and I see several shopkeepers looking out their windows at me. The two old guys in the park are now three again, and they sound like a bunch of old women squawking, arguing about something the mayor did. It would be hilarious if I felt like laughing.

The sound of the Harley’s engine loping along rattles the windows of all the shops, I’m sure, but it doesn’t have that far to go. I had no idea Fallport was this small. I mean, it’s really

small. When I get back to the apartment building, Ethan's got a unit open on the ground floor and he's standing in the doorway, leaning against the jamb. It's not much, just two rooms and a bathroom, but that's fine. I won't be doing any entertaining anyway, and it's plenty until I figure out what I want to do or where I want to go.

After I've tossed my duffel in, we walk down to the bar. Zeke is there, and we laugh and talk for a bit, then eat a sandwich and fries apiece. When Ethan stands to go back to work, I do too. "I'll come help."

"You don't have to."

"I need to do something."

"Okay. I can't pay you much, but you were good help earlier, so I'm game if you are."

"Sounds good to me. The only expenses I have are my bike payment and food. And the little bit of rent here."

"He won't charge you. I'll just tell him you're working with me and that'll be that. If you decide to put down roots here, you can look for something else."

I'm not going to tell him right now, but there'll be no roots. I don't ever want roots anywhere. The only reason to have them is for somebody you want to be with.

And I'll never have that again.

TINSLEY

WHY DO I FEEL SO HOLLOW? LIKE SOMEBODY RIPPED ME OPEN and just scooped everything out of me? Clients keep asking me, "You feelin' okay, Tinsley? You're not yourself these days." No. I'm not myself. I don't know who I am anymore.

I go to bed every night, crying and praying that I don't wake up. Then, in the morning when I wake up, I cry because

I'm still here. The only tiny little bright spot I have in my life is this baby. Other than that, I really don't care anymore.

"Hey, Tins, remember those earrings I loaned you? The purple ones?" Marguerite asks.

"Oh, yeah. I remember."

"Could I get them back? I've got a party to go to Sunday afternoon, and they'll be perfect with my dress."

"Sure. I'm sorry, Marguerite. You know I bring stuff back. I just forgot."

"Honey, I don't know what's going on with you, but it's okay. How's Bulldog doin'?"

"Oh, he's fine." I haven't told anybody that he's gone.

It's been two weeks, and I keep hoping he's coming back. Every time I hear something that sounds like a bike, I run to the window and look. So far it's been two tractors and a spray rig rolling down the road. Patch finally broke down and told me that he's got Kevin's phone. Sometimes I still call it and leave a voicemail. I know he won't get it, but it makes me feel better to hear his voice on the outgoing message.

I ransack the trailer, but those earrings are nowhere to be found. When did I wear them last? And then I remember—I wore them out at the farm for something we did. I bet they're in the cottage, and I shudder. I haven't been in there since he left. Penny said she and Audrey went in and got the perishables out of the refrigerator, then locked the door behind them. It's sitting there exactly the way he left it, and I know it'll tear me in half to go in there, but I should give Marguerite those earrings. When I call Penny and ask if I can look in there, she tells me to come out for dinner and Patch will take me over there, since he has a master key.

I get there just as the guys are finishing their dinner. Honestly, I planned it this way. Their long faces and the way they look at me with pity drives me crazy. Audrey insists I sit down and take a load off, then loads a plate for me and brings it to me, along with a glass of tea. Izzy and Penny sit down to keep me company, but I really don't feel like talking or eating.

They ask me questions about my day, and it's hard to answer them. Nothing is good. Nothing is fun. Nothing is easy. It's all hard. It's even hard to breathe.

When I'm finished, Penny calls Patch. As soon as he steps into the kitchen, he holds up his keys. "Come on. I'll let you in."

"Thanks. See y'all later," I tell the women, and all three give me a hug before I leave the kitchen. I love them, but I don't feel like I belong there anymore. No one's done a thing to make me feel that way. I just ... do.

"How are you hanging in there, honey?" Patch asks as we walk.

"I'm not. I'm a wreck, and I'm not going to lie about it."

We step up on Kevin's porch and Patch stops me. "There's something I need to tell you, something I haven't told anybody else." I'm about to ask him what it is when he says, "Bulldog is with Ethan and the guys in Fallport."

Oh my god! He's safe! "Seriously? That's good. At least he's with friends and he's safe."

"Yeah. Ethan said Bulldog's been helping him with some renovations he's working on, and the guy who owns the building is letting him stay in one of the apartments. He's got an air mattress and that's about it, but he's okay at least."

"Yeah. That's good." I got the card he sent me, and it broke my heart. It was beautiful, but it wasn't him. I don't want a pretty piece of paper. I want Kevin.

Patch sticks his key into the lock and turns it, but he turns to look at me, an odd expression on his face. "That's weird. It felt like it wasn't locked. Have you—"

"No. I don't have a key."

"Okay." He turns the knob, lets the door swing open, and turns on the light. And we both gasp.

The place is a wreck. It's been completely torn apart. "Did he do this before he left?" I whisper.

“No. Penny and Audrey cleaned out the refrigerator. They would’ve said something if they knew about this.” He walks around a bit, staring but not touching anything. “I mean, what the hell? How did this happen?”

I’m having trouble speaking and finally squeeze out, “Could one of the other guys have done it?”

“The question would be, why? Why would anybody do this?” I’m in shock. All of the drawers are out of the furniture and cabinets and emptied onto the floor. The bed is stripped, the towels and sheets and clothes are all out of their spots, and all of the cabinet doors are open, everything removed from the cabinets and just strewn on the floor. Stuffing protrudes from the mattress where it’s been slit open, and all of the cushions on the sofa are ripped apart. Plus the sofa is turned over and the mattress has been dragged off and thrown onto the floor. It’s complete destruction.

“I don’t know. It looks like they were looking for something. And when did they do it? And how, without somebody noticing?” I’m stumped.

Patch’s eyes are still wide. “I have no idea. Unless they hit it when we all went to the fair.”

“I guess they could’ve. If those earrings really were here, I’ll just have to buy her a new pair. There’s no way I could find them in this mess.”

“Yeah. And there’s no way of knowing if anything’s gone because he took some things with him.”

The worst possible thing shoots through my mind. “Do you think he could’ve been mixed up in something really bad?”

“Bulldog? No. I don’t. Did somebody bad follow him here? Maybe, but why? He wasn’t in any trouble in prison, and there was no connection to any organizations or anything. It doesn’t make sense.” Neither of us has moved. We’re still standing there like we’re rooted to the floor, and then Patch says, “We should get out of here. I need to call the sheriff and have them come take a look.”

“Good idea.”

“And you, go home and get some rest. This is a shocker, and you don’t need too many of those.”

“I will. Thanks for letting me in, even though I wish you hadn’t now.”

“I know what you mean. I wish I hadn’t walked in here either.”

It feels like my car is ten miles away as I struggle toward it. What the hell is going on? That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever seen. What could Kevin possibly have that anybody else would want?

His heart. But I’m the one who wants that, and I’m not getting it.

CHAPTER 11



Tinsley

IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY—A REALLY, REALLY LONG DAY. MY ankles are so swollen I can hardly move my feet, and I know I'm going to have to tell Marguerite pretty soon or she's going to guess. She has two kids. She knows the signs.

There's a little place in Hazard that has good burgers, so I stop by and get a double cheeseburger, a large order of fries, a huge drink, and an enormous milkshake. I'm so hungry that I eat it all there except for the milkshake, and I take that for the drive home, which is just across town.

A stop at the mailbox yields no mail. Every day, I hope for another card from him, but there's nothing. Two flyers from stores in Whitesburg, a reminder from my dentist's office, and an offer for a free oil change from a place in Hindman. Not a bad idea, an oil change. I'll have to check on that.

On the porch, I reach to stick my key in the knob, but I drop the keys. I fumble a lot of stuff lately. When I bend over, the top of my head brushes the door, and it opens just a tiny bit. *What the hell?* my brain wonders as I look at it. I know I closed and locked it this morning when I went to work. Without thinking, I push it the rest of the way open and turn on the light.

Oh my god. Everything I own is ripped apart. Drawers are pulled out and emptied, my sofa cushions are ripped open, cabinet doors are open and their contents tossed onto the floor.

It looks exactly like the mess in Kevin's cottage. I turn just enough to clear the doorway and close the door behind me. There's the *click* from the hasp on the knob, and then a voice says, "Stay right there. Don't move and we won't hurt you. Put your hands up where I can see 'em."

Whoever it is, they're behind me and I can't see them. "Who are you and what do you want? I don't have nothin' you could possibly want."

"Where is it?"

"What?"

"Where's the picture?" That's when I notice—every picture on my walls has been taken down and knocked out of the frames. What the hell is that about?

"I don't know what picture you're talkin' about."

"Don't play stupid with me."

"I'm not! I have no idea what you're lookin' for! Looks like you've tore up every picture I have."

"I want the one of Wade and his baby. Where is it?"

I shrug, my hands still in the air. "I'm sure he took it with him."

"Where'd he go?"

"I have no idea. If I knew, I'd be there with him now instead of here." That's a lie, of course, but for once, I'm pretty sure that's okay.

"Of course you know where he is. If you don't, call him and ask him."

"I can't. He left his phone behind when he went. Don't want no calls. So I can't even call him. He's gone."

I didn't realize there were two of them until a voice says, "Now what do we do?"

"We're gonna take her with us until we can find him and make him give it back. Until then, she's just gonna have to be our guest."

No way am I going with them. If they take me, I'll never be back. They'll kill me before they'll bring me back. "Please. Please don't hurt me. I'm pregnant. Please?"

The first one laughs loudly. "Whoa! Lover boy will definitely want you back!"

"He don't know."

"That's even better! He'll be rabid when he finds out we've got his pregnant girlfriend."

"He'll never know. He's not talking to any of us. Please, just leave me here. I won't cause trouble or tell anybody or—"

"You're right, you won't, because you're coming with us."

"Please! Please don't hurt me or my baby. Please? I promise I'll—"

THERE'S SOMETHING DARK OVER MY HEAD. I CAN'T SEE anything. My hands are bound behind my back, and my ankles are bound together. I think it's duct tape, but I'm not sure. And I'm naked, and my mouth is taped shut. Based on what I can tell by wiggling around a bit, I haven't been assaulted because I'm not hurting or anything. My guess is that they hit me over the head, because I've got a bitch of a headache.

I can hear them talking in the next room, but I can't tell what they're saying. I do hear the word "money" and "find," and now I'm wondering if Patch really knew Kevin at all. Has he gotten mixed up in something horrible? It just doesn't seem like something he'd do.

Will they feed me? Take me to the bathroom? Give me something to drink? Or do they intend to hold me here and then just abandon me? It's chilly with no clothes, and I'm hungry. How long do they think they can do this?

Actually, the appropriate question is, how long can I survive it?

BULLDOG

ETHAN GAVE ME THIS WEIRD THING THAT LOOKS LIKE JUST A hoe blade on a long handle, and I'm working to bust tile out of the bathroom in the apartment he's working on. It's slow going, but it's not hard work, just time consuming.

We've been working along for a few hours when I hear Ethan's phone ring. He's got wallboard up on most of the walls, so I can't hear what's being said, and he's speaking very quietly. Guess it's personal.

Then he shows up in the doorway. "Bulldog, there's somebody on the phone who needs to talk to you."

"Who? Nobody knows I'm here." He doesn't speak, just holds out the phone, and I take it. "Hello?"

"Bulldog?"

"Patch? How did you—"

"Ethan called me to let me know you were there and safe, but we have a problem."

I glare at Ethan. He betrayed my trust, and that's not cool. "Then it's your problem, not my problem."

"No. It's your problem. Tinsley's missing."

Something in my stomach torques. "What? That's not possible."

"She is. Marguerite called Penny. Tinsley hasn't been at work in two days. When Marguerite went over there to look around, the place was totally tossed. Somebody had ransacked it."

"What?" None of this is making sense. "What about Lenny?"

“Bear and I tracked Lenny down. He’s an idiot and an asshole, but take it from me, he’s genuinely concerned about her.”

“What about the guy at the bar who was harassing her?”

“I put Matt and Preston on that. He’s not a local. Lives in Huntsville. Was passing through, working for a cable company. He spent the night, harassed her, they picked him up, and they let him go when he told them he’d be out of town the next morning and they’d never see him again. So far as we know, he was true to his word. Preston checked and his employer said he showed up for work the next day in Charleston, West Virginia.”

“Then who—”

“And there’s something else. Two weeks after you left, Tinsley wanted to look for something in your cottage that she thought she might have left. Your place was tossed. Everything’s been ripped apart, tossed around, just destroyed. And now hers. What the hell is going on? What did you get yourself into?”

“Nothing! I didn’t get myself into anything! I don’t know what’s going on. Who could’ve done this?”

“If you don’t know, then we’re fucked, because none of us know.”

“Was there anything missing?”

Patch snorts a little. “Who can tell? Everything’s torn apart. There’s no way of knowing if anything’s missing or not. Unless you had something taped under a drawer or between the mattress and box springs or—”

“No! I didn’t have anything anybody would want. I don’t understand this.”

“By the way, I got a call from your dad a couple of weeks ago. He said he needed to talk to you and it was important. I didn’t think it was anything that grave, but now I’m not sure. I didn’t tell him I knew where you were, just told him you’d left and I didn’t know if you’d be back. He begged me to tell you

to call him if I heard from you. So you need to do that. Call him. Maybe he knows something.”

“Okay. I’ll give him a call. And thanks, Patch. I’ll let you know if he has anything important to say.”

“I’ll talk to you soon.” The call ends, and I’m left standing there, stunned.

“What’s happened?” Ethan’s voice sounds far away and kind of garbled. “Is everything okay? You don’t look too good.”

“No. Everything’s not okay.” I punch around on my phone until I hear ringing on the other end.

My dad’s voice answers, “Hello?”

“Dad, it’s Kevin.”

“Oh, thank god, Kevin! Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Patch said you needed to talk to me.”

“Yes. Please tell me you know where you were two Fridays ago and there’s somebody who can back you up.”

That’s an odd thing for him to say. “Uh, yeah. I was with some friends all evening. One of them is standing right here.”

“Are you somewhere around here?”

“No. I’m in Virginia.”

I hear him sigh on the other end of the phone. “Oh, thank god.”

“What’s going on?”

“Imogen’s dead. And they wanted to know where you are.”

A buzzing sound sets up in my ears. “Imogen’s *dead*? Seriously? When? How?”

“Bullet right between the eyes. Said she died instantly. And her place was torn apart.”

Oh holy shit. In this particular moment, that sounds way too coincidental. “Look, Dad, if the cops come back, give them this number. It’s my new cell number. And tell them to

call me. I'll be glad to talk to them, and my friends will be glad to vouch for me. I've gotta go."

"Kevin, what are you mixed up in?"

"Nothing! Why does everybody keep asking me that?" I bellow into the phone. "I haven't done *anything* wrong! I've gotta go. Bye." I hit END and just stand there, not sure what to do next.

"Did I hear you say Imogen is dead?" Ethan asks. "That's your ex, right?"

"Yeah. Somebody murdered her. And somebody ransacked her place, mine, and Tinsley's, and Tinsley is missing."

Ethan's jaw drops. "What? What are you going to do?"

"I don't know what to do. What the hell is going on? None of this makes sense." It takes me a few seconds to digest everything I've been told, and then I know what has to happen. "I've gotta go back. I have to. I have to find Tinsley."

"You're not going alone. Some of us will go with you. I'll call Rocky, and we can load your bike in the back of my truck and head out in an hour. Can you be ready by then?"

"I can be ready in ten minutes." I've got to get back. Whoever is doing all of this, they have Tinsley. If I can't figure out what's going on, she may be gone forever.

And I will have made the biggest mistake of my life, the one I won't live through.

TINSLEY

"WHAT DO WE DO WITH HER?" THEY'RE STANDING RIGHT OVER me, talking, like I'm not even there. People have done that all my life, and it pisses me off royally.

"We've gotta keep her long enough for him to hear her voice over the phone. Then we ... I dunno. We can just get rid

of her.”

“We could just record her.”

“Nah. If he talks, she’s gotta be able to talk back. Otherwise, we’ll never get that picture.”

What’s with picture they’re talking about? I don’t really understand what’s going on. If they’d just take the tape off my mouth, I might be able to tell them what they want to know, or at the very least tell them something that would get them arrested. That’s what I really want. But not until they turn me loose.

“Can you see from here?”

“Yeah. That camera works real good. I can see who’s coming and going, so if he shows up, I’ll know. Then all we have to do is call that place and they’ll put him on the phone.”

This whole thing is so confusing. They still haven’t said anything that would give me an idea what they want except for that picture. It’s just a picture of him and Paisley, and the only other person who’d care about it is Imogen. Patch said Bulldog left because of something she said when she called him the last time, but what does the picture have to do with it? I don’t get it.

“We could do the same thing to her that we did to that idiot ex-wife of his.”

“Oh, god, that bitch was irritating. At least she won’t bother anybody anymore. I can’t believe she couldn’t give us the numbers.” Imogen? What the hell did they do to *her*?

“Don’t worry. We find that picture, we’ll find what we’re looking for. And it’ll all be ours. And Franco can have his plate back so he’ll shut the fuck up.”

“We don’t get that plate back and he’ll kill us.”

“Yeah. That’s why we have to get it back.” Plate? What? Does he collect plates from the Franklin Mint or something? Is it Elvis? Or Dolly?

None of this makes sense. There are footsteps coming closer to me, and then the door opens. Something pokes me in

the side, hard, and I let out a little groan. “Well, she’s still alive. We should probably give her some water though or she’ll die on us.”

“You want some water?” I nod wildly. If I don’t get something to drink pretty soon, I don’t know what will happen to me. “You gonna behave? I’ll have to knock some sense into you if you don’t.” I nod more and wait. “Okay.” His footsteps disappear, and I’m afraid he’s just left me to rot. Then I hear them coming toward me again. “I’m gonna sit you up. I’ll take the hood off, then the tape over your mouth. I’ll be behind you, and I’ll hold the glass and help you drink it. But I swear to god, if you start making a bunch of noise or act up, I’ll kill you. You understand?” I nod again.

The hood comes off and I look around. It’s dark in here, and I’m not sure where I am. Some kind of abandoned building. It smells horrible in here. Then I spot something, an old sign, and I recognize it immediately. This is the old McGinty’s Packing Company. Years and years of pork was processed here. That means we’re still in Knott County. “I’m taking the tape off. You scream and you die.” Then he rips it off. Hurts like a motherfucker. The glass touches my lips and I drink greedily. I’ve gotten half of it down when he pulls it away.

My voice is nothing more than a hoarse whisper. “If you’ll tell me what you’re looking for, maybe I can help you find it.”

“Oh yeah? And what do you *think* we’re looking for?”

“I don’t know. Some kind of picture. I’m not sure.”

“Yeah. That picture of that Wade guy and his little girl.”

Nothing about this makes sense. Why do they want that?
“He took it with him.”

“Where is he?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you do. You’re his main squeeze.”

“He left me. He’s gone. And he took that picture with him.” Then I understand. “It was you who tore his cottage

apart, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, just like we did your tin can." My head hurts so badly that I'd forgotten all about that.

"I didn't have it. It was never at my house. It was in his cottage, and if you didn't find it, that means he has it with him."

"And he's where?"

"I told you, I don't know."

"I'm done with this." A piece of fresh tape gets slapped onto my mouth and the hood comes back down over my head. "Now shut up and stay put." Like I could go anywhere if I wanted to.

Right now, the idea of my soft bed and smooth sheets sounds really good. Will Kevin come back? Or is this the end for me? I guess time will tell.

BULLDOG

WE COME ROLLING IN, LEAVING A CLOUD OF DUST IN OUR wake. It's Ethan, Rocky, Drew, Talon, Raiden, and me. Oh, and Duke—because Raiden's not going anywhere without that dog. Zeke and Brock were asked to stay behind so they can alert the Eagle Point team if something happens there. I feel guilty because they've all come to help me, but I'm thankful for their friendship.

The guys roll out of the kitchen to greet us, and I get hugs and back slaps. When that's all finished, Patch grabs me by the arm. "I need to talk to you. In private. Ethan, can you come along with us?"

"Sure."

All three of us pile into the little storage area on the far side of the dining hall, and Patch closes the door. "You wanna

tell me what the hell is going on here?" he snarls at me.

"I wish I knew. I have no idea. But I do know my ex-wife is dead."

His jaw drops. "What? Imogen is dead?"

"Yeah. That's what my dad said. Cops are looking for me to talk to me. Somebody shot her right between the eyes."

"Holy shit." That's the moment when he drops into his chair and stares at me. "And I'd say they have Tinsley."

"They definitely have Tinsley. I'm sure of it. But why?"

"Think, Bulldog. There's got to be something we've missed."

"There's nothing that I can think of."

"Imogen called you to tell you she was pregnant."

"Well, no. I mean, she told me that, but that's not why she called."

"Why then?"

"She wanted that picture of me and Paisley back. Kept insisting that I send it back, she needed it, it was important, and if I'd just send it back, she'd send me another one, a bigger one. I told her to fuck off."

Ethan's brow furrows. "What's so special about that picture?"

"I have no idea why she—"

"Wait!" Ethan and I both spin to look at Patch. "You didn't tell me that before. It's something about that picture."

How did he come to that conclusion? "But what?"

"Because I told you they tossed Tinsley's place."

"Yeah?"

"And every picture was ripped out of its frame. Every one of them."

Ethan's eyes go wide. "Oh my god. Do you have that picture?"

“Yeah. It’s in my duffel. Let me go get it.” I’m at a dead run when I leave the office, and I dart out, grab my bag, and come back. “It’s in here somewhere,” I tell them as I rummage through my clothes and toiletries. “Here it is.”

“Open the back of it,” Patch says.

My hands are shaking as I move the little clips on the back and lift out the cardboard with the easel attached. And there, inside the back, is a slip of paper. On it are numbers.

374

R31 L9 R19

I point to the series of numbers. “That’s obviously the combination to a padlock. But what’s the other number?”

Patch shrugs. “Safety deposit boxes don’t have padlocks.”

“Storage units do though,” Ethan points out.

I shake my head. “Yeah, but they usually have a letter along with a number. You know, like 12B. This one doesn’t.”

“What if it’s a locker?” Patch asks. “Like at a bus station?”

That gets another head shake from me. “There’s no bus station in Dyersburg.”

“A school?” Ethan guesses.

“She wouldn’t have access to a school. Besides, they usually issue their own locks.”

“Okay,” Patch says, still musing, “what about a coffee shop?”

“No.”

“A church’s activities building?”

“Uh-uh. Nope.”

Ethan perks up. “A gym!”

“Imogen?” I let out a little snort. “Please. She’s never seen the inside of a gym.”

“Think, Bulldog.” Patch is sitting there, drumming his fingers on the desk. “Is there somewhere she went that

would've had lockers? Somewhere she really liked, or went often?"

Somewhere she liked or went often ... that had lockers ... It hits me like a ton of bricks. "Oh my god."

Patch leans forward. "Where?"

"When she was pregnant with Paisley, every time I had a day off, she drove me crazy wanting to go to the mall in Memphis. She loved going down there to look at baby clothes and baby furniture and maternity clothes. It was constant. 'Kevin, can we go to the mall this weekend?' 'Kevin, what days are you off? I want to go to the mall.' She was relentless."

"And they have lockers?" Ethan asks.

"Yep. They sure do." The sound of the phone ringing out in the dining hall fills the space and in a minute, I can hear Audrey's voice.

There's the sound of feet running in the hallway, coming toward us, and her head appears in the doorway. "Patch, there's a guy on the phone. Won't tell me who he is, and he says it's an emergency."

"I'll be right back." I watch my captain disappear out the doorway and Ethan and I both sit back in our chairs. But there's no time to settle in before Patch yells, "Bulldog! Get out here!"

"Yeah?" I snap as I slide into the big room.

"It's for you." There's a look on his face that tells me something's wrong.

I take the receiver and very quietly say, "Yes? This is Kevin Wade."

"Mr. Wade. Just the man we needed to talk to. You've got something I want. And I have something you want."

"First off, if you hurt one hair on her head, I swear to god, I'll hunt you down and kill you."

The man laughs, and it's a sickening sound that makes me want to vomit. "Uh, it's a little late for that. But you might be able to get her back if you give me what I want."

"Okay, so what do you want?"

"You have a picture in your possession and I need it."

"Why do you need a picture of me and my child?"

"You ask too many questions. I want that picture. You understand?"

"It's in my bag somewhere. I'll have to look for it. In the meantime, you'd better let me talk to Tinsley or you get nothing, understand?"

"I'll give you a pass on punishment for you and your demands and I'll let you talk to her, but only for a minute." I can hear some scrambling around in the background, and then the sweetest sound I've heard in weeks.

"Kevin? Kevin, it's me. Please tell me what's going on. I don't understand what this is about."

"It's not about you, babe. I'm gonna get you away from them, but it might take me a little bit, okay? But you remember that I'm gonna find you and bring you back to me."

"Kevin, please, give them whatever they—" There's a yelp like she's hurt, and then no more voice.

"You understand, Wade? Get me that picture or your girlfriend will be your late girlfriend. You've got one hour." And the phone goes dead.

"I've got to give them the information or they'll kill her," I whisper. "Oh, god. I don't want to, but I've got to."

Patch is already writing things down. I'm not sure what, but I'm sure it's important. He hands a slip of paper to Ethan. "Could you call him, please? That's Bulldog's dad. Get the number of one of the detectives in Dyersburg working on Imogen's case." Ethan nods and darts out into the hallway, then Patch turns his attention to me. "The first thing we're going to do is call the detectives in Dyersburg and give them

this information. They can go to Memphis before these guys can get there and lay a trap for them.”

“Okay. Okay, that’s a good plan. That works.” My mind is running ninety miles an hour.

“Kevin, there’s something I have to tell you.”

“Okay.” The tone of his voice sets everything in my body ablaze. Something’s wrong. I can feel it.

“She hadn’t worked up the courage to tell you before you left, and she couldn’t reach you after you left, but you need to know this.” He hesitates for a few seconds, and I’m trying to brace myself. “Kevin, Tinsley’s pregnant.”

Everything’s spinning. “Whoa, buddy. Sit up. Audrey!” Ethan yells. “Bring him some water!”

“Here ya go,” I hear her say in just a few seconds, and they pour some down me.

I get three swallows down and look up at Patch. “She’s pregnant?”

“Yeah. She went to the doctor to get her prescription renewed and they made her take a test before they’d fill it. And yeah—she’s pregnant.”

“Nothing can happen to her,” I whisper. “Nothing. I have to get her back. I have to get them back.”

“We’re gonna do everything we can to make that happen, bud.” Patch already has the phone in his hand. “Yes, this is Patrick Scott. I need to speak to Detective Mike Melber. Yes, I’ll hold.” He sits there for a few seconds, and then he says, “Detective Melber, this is Patrick Scott in Mallie, Kentucky. We spoke on the phone earlier. I’ve got some information that ...”

I don’t care about any of that. Tinsley’s pregnant with my child. My baby. The love of my life and my baby are out there somewhere and I don’t know where. I have to find them. Otherwise, my life will be over anyway.

“Okay, that was the detective working on Imogen’s case,” Patch says, interrupting my thoughts. “They’re going to the

mall in Memphis to see if they find anything. He'll call as soon as they get there and look. For now, there's nothing we can really do."

"I have to give them that information, Patch. I don't have a choice."

"You can't give them that information until the detectives have gotten there. If you give it to them, they'll head straight there."

I'm thinking out loud when I say, "Yeah, and it takes almost eight hours to get to Memphis from here. But it only takes about two hours to get to Memphis from Dyersburg. The cops will still have plenty of time to lay a trap for them. In the meantime, they'll have the info, and maybe they'll give Tinsley back to us."

"Okay. I'm going to call the detectives and put them on notice. Once the hour is up and they call back, they've got roughly seven and a half hours to do whatever they're going to do." Patch dials again, but I can't do this anymore. I've got to go outside and get some air. Suffocation is right around the corner for me.

I step out the back and lean up against the wall. Everything in my vision is swimming and I'm not sure I can stay standing. Then I hear the last voice I ever expected to hear.

"Hey, man, it's gonna be okay."

"You don't know that," I mumble toward Hollywood.

"I remember when we couldn't find Audrey and I was scared shitless. I know how this feels. There was absolutely no reason for me to think we could find her, but we did. You have to believe, Bulldog. If she doesn't have somebody in her corner who believes we'll bring her back, she's doomed."

"Man, I fucked up so bad—"

"We all do sometimes. What we do next is what defines the kind of man we are. And I've seen the kind of man you really are, Bulldog. No matter how much shit you've given me, you're a good man."

I look at this guy. I've hated him ever since I came there, but I remember the day I found out he'd signed his entire corporation away to his cousin and was content just to live here with us and work to make his life better. The respect I've come to feel for him is immense. "Thanks. And thanks for caring. I don't deserve it, but I appreciate it."

"We all deserve somebody who'll stand beside us. You've got a whole army. Yeah, it's small, but it's mighty!" he says with a smile. "We won't rest until we know where Tinsley is."

I spend the next forty-five minutes pacing. Will they call back? Will they just walk away and leave her somewhere? Have they already killed her? The guys are all sitting around or, as my mom would say, sitting on ready and waiting to go. Then the phone rings, and I dart to pick it up. "Hello?"

"Wade?"

"Yes."

"You got that picture?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Bring it to us. And don't try anything funny. Only one of us is coming. The others will be with her. If you cross us, she dies. Understand?"

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. I just want her safe."

"Okay. The meeting spot is behind the old Fowler Tire & Lube. One o'clock. Be there and have that picture."

"Can I please speak to Tinsley?"

"No. You'll just have to wait." And the phone goes dead. I check my watch. It's twelve twenty-eight.

"Wish we had time to get one of the LEOs to insert a chip into the wood of the frame," Ghost says.

"No time. I've gotta get on the road or I won't get there in time."

"I'll call Preston and see if he can have some surveillance," Patch says and grabs his phone.

“Tell them to please be careful. Please? Nothing can go wrong or I’ll never see her again.” I grab the picture, its back reattached, and jet out the door toward my bike. This has to go off without a hitch.

Less is unacceptable.

TINSLEY

“YOU LET ME KNOW AS SOON AS YOU HAVE IT,” I HEAR ONE OF the men say, and there’s the sound of a heavy door closing.

Weighty footsteps come toward me and stop right at my nose. “Okay. Time to make you into a tamale.” There’s a sound like something snapping and then billowing, and I feel air move across me. “Straighten out your legs!” I do the best I can, and I can feel his hands on me. “This’ll be fun.”

He starts to roll me, and I realize that he’s rolling me in something. I’m not sure what, but it’s not crinkling, so I have to assume it’s not plastic. It’s some kind of cloth, and it’s rough. Maybe a drop-cloth? Or a tarp? I can’t tell. He’s working at my head and then at my feet, and I finally figure it out. He’s wrapped rope around both ends and tied it.

He wasn’t kidding. I’m a human tamale.

“Can’t load you until he gets back with the car, but then, off you go.”

Here I lie. I can barely move. I can barely breathe. I haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday, or at least I think it was yesterday. I haven’t had anything to drink in hours, and no promise of more. And there’s no way out.

When I doze off, I have a little dream. It’s Kevin and a little girl, and I think it’s Paisley. Looks like the picture he has of the two of them. And she’s so precious. I’m there too, and I reach out and touch them ... and wake up. There’s movement all around me, and then I’m rising off the floor. Actually, I’m

kind of swinging, and I realize they're holding the ends of whatever this is to move me. In a minute, they start to swing me vigorously, and one of them says, "One ... two ... THREE!" I'm airborne for just a few seconds, and I land with a *thud* and hear something slam shut.

Some time passes before I hear the vehicle start, and I realize I'm in the trunk. It bumps along, and then I can tell it's going upward. And upward. And upward. Where are they going? It's horrible in here, and something's poking me in the side. Probably some kind of junk these lunkheads drag around with them.

After what feels like forever, we stop, and I hear the trunk lid open. "Hurry up. We've got to get on the road or Franco will have our heads." They drag me out, raking me along the top edge of the trunk like I'm nothing. There's some struggling, and then I feel hands on my legs and back.

I roll. I can't use my hands so I can't stop myself, and then I think to draw up my knees. Sure enough, that stops me, and I lie there, banged up and bruised up. For all I know, one wrong move and I could go straight down and off a bluff.

No light can make it through the hood, but I can hear. The sound of the breeze is all around me, leaves rustling quietly. It's a little chilly, but not a lot. At least I'm not exposed, even though I'm still naked inside my wrapper. After I listen a little more closely, I determine that there's no sounds of water in a stream, so apparently I'm not near a creek. I'm just here, in nature, lying wrapped in something, waiting to die.

And I'm pretty sure that's what I'm going to do.

CHAPTER 12



Bulldog

WHEN I PULL UP, THERE'S NO ONE THERE, SO I RUN AROUND the back. There's no one there either. In a couple of minutes, though, I hear something behind me and turn to find a guy in a ski mask standing there. "You got it?"

"Is this what you want?" I ask and hold out the frame.

He snatches it out of my hand. "Yeah. Exactly." And he just turns to walk away.

"Hey, wait! Where's Tinsley? You told me—"

"Yeah, well, I lied." I grab him from behind by the shoulder and spin him, but he pushes me off. "Remember what I told you. I don't come back and she dies."

"You've already killed her!" I scream at him.

"Why would I do that?" And then he does the one thing that sinks my heart into my boots.

He laughs.

I squat there in the dust, my elbows resting on my knees and my head in my hands, and think. What do I do now? I really have no idea what's next. There's no sound of a car or anything like that, so I have no idea how he got here and how he's leaving, but I don't dare follow him.

I climb onto my bike and head back to the farm, knowing all that's left for me to do is wait. That's all I know how to do.

And I pray I don't have to wait too long.

An hour passes, then two. Then three. I'm losing my mind. It starts to get dark, and so do my chances of finding her. I know we'll never find her in the dark. Matt comes by to check on me, but I really don't have anything to say. They don't know where to even begin to look, so mounting a search is pointless.

Penny and Audrey have made sandwiches, and they bring trays full of them around, but I can't eat. "You're not doing her any good if you aren't strong," Penny tells me with a soft hand on my arm. I just shake my head.

When the phone rings at a little after ten, we all jump, and I lunge for it. "Hello?"

"This is Detective Mike Melber. I need to speak with Kevin Wade."

"This is Wade."

"Mr. Wade, they took the bait. Two men showed up a little while ago at the Memphis Galleria. They went straight to the lockers, opened the locker, and took a bag out of it. Memphis detectives followed them to their car."

"Wait. What was in the bag?"

"Fifteen million dollars and a set of counterfeit plates."

My voice is barely a whisper. "Holy shit."

"Yeah. Now we see why they wanted that bag so badly. Now agencies all over the country are sitting on a dozen or more counterfeiters to see which one pops up, because when these two guys tell their boss what happened, he's going to be waiting for that money, and if they don't bring it, he's going to go after them. That could lead us to him too."

"But how do we find Tinsley?"

Somebody is speaking in the background and he answers, "Just a second. I'll be right ... Mr. Wade, I don't have an answer for that. It'll have to be left up to your local law enforcement. We can't tip our hand until we've caught their boss, so there's nothing I can do. I've gotta go, but I'm pretty

sure we're going to get these two guys for murdering your ex-wife. Take care, Mr. Wade, and thanks for helping us." And the phone goes dead. I stand there with it in my hand, staring at it like it's on fire.

Patch's voice rings out. "What did he say?"

"The guys went to the mall and got the bag. The cops had already looked in the bag. Fifteen million dollars and a set of counterfeiting plates." They all stare at me. "And they want the guys to lead them to the boss."

"And what about Tinsley?" Penny asks.

"Basically told me good luck." I'm still in shock.

"You're gonna get some help," Izzy says and pulls out her phone. "Hey, it's Bruce. We've got a situation and we really need some help." I know who she's talking to—Commander Grummond, her boss at Kentucky State Police Post Thirteen.

"What can we do?" Priest asks.

"I have no idea."

"Okay. Let's think about this," Rocky says. "You heard her voice, so she was still alive at that point. And they were somewhere nearby because he met with you. What's nearby? Where could she be?"

"None of us know the area well enough," Reboot answers.

"Think. It can't be a motel. Any noise she made would be heard by somebody else. It has to be someplace that's abandoned."

"Well, there's the tire and lube place where I met with them, but that wouldn't make sense."

Raiden shakes his head. "No. That can't be it. Someplace that's abandoned, and that doesn't have a lot of traffic, so no one would see them coming and going."

"There's that old elementary school between Hindman and Spider," Hollywood offers.

“But that’s right on the edge of the road. Not secluded enough,” Paddy points out.

We all fall silent again, thinking. “There are way too many old mines out here,” Hollywood mumbles.

“Yeah. But cell service would be nonexistent in one of those, and they’ve been calling. So that can’t be it,” Patch points out.

Bear looks up. “I went by a place where there was a huge building back off the road. Now I can’t remember what it was.”

“Do you remember what part of the area you were in?” Patch asks.

“No. What was I doing that day?” The huge man sits there, staring at his hands. Finally, he perks up. “I remember. It’s out off Beaver Creek Road.”

“Yeah!” Paddy’s back straightens. “It’s a big building. I know the one you’re talking about. Sign is red and yellow, but all faded and part of it missing. I don’t know what it is.”

“But I know somebody who would.” Patch picks up his phone and hits a contact. In a second, he says, “Hey! Yeah, we think Tinsley may have been held out at a building off Beaver Creek Road. Big building, red and yellow sign that’s really weathered, abandoned for quite some ... Yes. That’s the one. Can you ... Thanks, Matt. Thanks so much.” He glances around at us. “McGinty Packing Company. Processed meat for years. They’re going out there to check it out. Good work, guys, but we need to keep thinking about it. That may not be it.”

Everything is swirling around me, all kinds of ideas and voices and thoughts, and I’m having trouble staying focused, not to mention that I’m exhausted. A soft voice whispers in my ear, “Honey, come with me.” Tinsley?

But it’s not. It’s Audrey. “What?”

“I could really use some help in the kitchen. Can you come with me?”

“But I ...” I babble, motioning around.

“I know, but this won’t take long and it’ll give you a break.” When I don’t rise, she says, “Come on, Bulldog. Let’s go.”

“Go with her,” Patch says and points.

“But—”

“Anything happens and one of us will come get you. I promise.”

In the kitchen, I put away all the dishes in the dishwasher. Then I reload it. After that, I gather up all the kitchen linens and take them to the laundry area. I’m about to ask for another assignment when my phone rings. It’s the deputy. “Hello?”

“Hey, Bulldog, it’s Matt. I just sent you a picture. Can you identify it?”

“Hang on.” I pull my phone down, open my texting app, and see a number I don’t recognize at the top, so I open that and look at it. In that moment, I’m not sure how I feel. “That’s her jacket, Matt. Tinsley was there.”

“Looks like she’s not anymore, but I have to believe that, as fast as they got that picture from you and got out of town, she’s not far away. I think you guys should mount a search for her.”

“Roger that. Thanks, Matt.” I’m already on my way out the door, and I can hear Audrey’s footsteps behind me.

When I burst into the lodge, everybody turns to look. “Matt just texted me a pic from the meat packing house, and Tinsley was there. They found her jacket. He wants us to mount a search.”

“Where the hell do we start?” Bear asks.

“I have no idea, but it’s the middle of the night and we’ve all been up all day. I know it feels impossible, but everybody needs to get a little sleep. Be at the Jeeps at six o’clock with all of your equipment,” Patch instructs everyone. “Catch as much shut-eye as you can and we reconvene at six. And guys, we’re gonna find her. It’s just a matter of when.”

And that's the part that bothers me.

TINSLEY

IT'S SO QUIET OUT HERE. I CAN'T HEAR CARS OR PLANES OR anything. Nothing. But it's gotten really cold, and I'm afraid to move. I need to in order to ball myself up in a fetal position and try to retain some body heat, but if I do, I may start rolling again and end up god only knows where, so I don't dare.

Whether or not I'm sleeping or unconscious, I'm not sure. I just know that large chunks of time start to disappear. In my dreams, I see Kevin and Paisley. I see Lenny—fuck him. I see my mom and dad, and they're giving me a present. That's nice. Then there's a dream where Marguerite is wearing a Carmen Miranda fruit hat and swing dancing with Bear. That's entertaining. After that, I have a nightmare about faces, white faces in a dark background, more like masks, and they're staring at me and poking at me with white gloves, the kind that Mickey Mouse wears. It was terrifying, except the glove part is really, really stupid.

Even though I can't tell what time it is, it seems to be getting warmer, so I have to believe it's daylight, or at least dawn. I've peed myself at least twice, and I'd give anything to brush my teeth. All kinds of scenarios pass through my head. Kevin rescuing me and unrolling me to tell me he's sorry and he'll never treat me that way again. My mom baking me a birthday cake, that apple and cinnamon thing she always made that I loved so much. Grandma Peters hemming a little dress for me. My life in a slow-motion movie, playing out in my head for the last time.

I don't know how long I've been lying there when I hear something. It sounds like something moving through the brush, something large. Next thing I know, I'm being dragged along, bumping over sticks and rocks, and I'm too weak to

make much noise. Maybe they've had a change of heart and decided to let me go.

The dragging levels out, and suddenly, it's very warm. Maybe I'm in the sun! I lie there, and I feel something here and there on my body, like somebody checking to see what's in a package before they open it. Whoever it is, why haven't they said anything? I don't know whether to make a ruckus or lie still and wait. There's another sound, kind of a snuffling sound. Is that a wild pig? Oh, dear god, don't let it be. They're mean as hell.

It keeps on touching me, and it feels more like hands, not a pig's snout. What the hell is going on? Being still is hard with something poking and prodding, but I manage. I've just about convinced myself that everything will be fine when the snuffling gets louder and I hear a sound. It sounds kind of like my grandpa's old bull, kind of a bellow, but also kind of a growl ...

Oh. My. God. It's a fucking bear.

BULLDOG

EVERYBODY CONVERGES AT THE STAGING AREA AND THE HEAD of the dirt mountain road, and I'm surprised at the number of searchers who've shown up. Raiden's taken Duke and they've gone with Bear and Priest to find Matt and get Tinsley's jacket to see if they can get enough of a scent for Duke to track. We talk about it for ten minutes, and the decision is made. Hollywood, Ethan, Rocky, and Talon will divide into two teams and head out. We've called in reinforcements, and there are eight KSP troopers standing there, waiting for orders. Patch polled them, and three of them actually have some experience in search and rescue with volunteer fire departments in their communities, so he divides them up and puts them with our guys and Drew. Boyle County's search and

rescue team from their fire department showed up too, and I'm thankful for that.

Patch, Ethan, and the Boyle County captain, Richard Auburg, are coordinating. We've got six teams ready to go, and when everybody's been given their marching orders, Patch turns to Ghost, Reboot, Paddy, and me. "We're going up. Get your go-bags and let's get on it."

Izzy comes running up to us. "Amber's got their bird in the air. Laurie and Wilford are headed in this direction."

My feet are already moving when I call out, "That's all I needed to hear." In seconds, Patch, Reboot, Paddy, and I are in the Jeep and racing back to the farm. Ghost and Izzy are in her car, barreling down the highway behind us.

"Pre-flight check completed?" Patch asks Ghost twenty minutes later.

"Roger that, captain."

"Nowhere to go but up," Patch sings out and the skids leave the ground. When we get up high enough, I can see the KSP helo about five miles away. It's a clear day, so that's not hard at all. "Ground support, this is App STAR alpha sierra zero one echo kilo yankee. Report, over."

"Roger that, App STAR air. This is ground support. Our teams are dispersed. Coverage area, fifteen acres and counting. Over."

"Roger that, ground support. KSP Air Unit Three, this is App STAR air. Do you copy, over?"

"Roger that, App STAR air. We copy. Where do you want us?"

"Use Black Mountain's north face as the line of demarcation. We'll stay on this side. You sweep that side. That sound okay? Over."

"Roger, App STAR. Perfect plan. And Patch? Tell Bulldog we're gonna find her. Over." Laurie's voice is confident, and it makes me feel stronger.

“Roger that, KSP air. Bulldog can hear you. Thanks so much. Over and out.”

“You got it. Hang in there, Bulldog. We’re gonna get ’er done. Over and out.” That gives me the first smile I’ve managed in over twenty-four hours. We’ll find her. We have to. There’s too much at stake. I mean, where will all these ladies in Mallie and Hindman get their hair did if she’s not around?

Patch works in his usual way—a grid. He knows exactly where he’s going, how far, and when to turn and work back. We’re working the east side of Black Mountain and staying fairly aloft while being low enough to see. It’s a talent, really, being far up enough to see a lot and low enough to know what you’re seeing, and Patch is a master. I hear Ghost over my comm in my helmet. “Cap, I see something right down there. About two degrees to our east.” Patch slows and drops altitude ever so slightly.

“Looks like an abandoned car.”

Paddy’s staring out the window with a pair of binoculars. “Yeah. I’m seeing it from here too.” Why didn’t I think to bring my field glasses? I’m an idiot.

“What’s that?” Reboot asks and points. “About three degrees east.”

Instead of climbing, Patch just drops a little lower and moves forward even slower. “Where?”

“Almost below us. Oh. Never mind. It’s an old refrigerator.”

“Do you think they would’ve put her in a refrigerator?” I ask over the comm.

Patch shakes his head. “Nah. Too heavy to carry. They wouldn’t go to all that trouble. Think simpler.” What the hell does that even mean?

We reach the end of our designated space, then turn and head back about a half mile farther to the east. Patch is paying attention to the instruments. Ghost is doing the same, plus trying to watch. We’re all peering out the windows, trying our

best to see something, anything, that would give us a clue, but we see nothing.

We're about halfway back on that pass when I hear Reboot say, "What the hell is that?"

"Where?" Paddy leans over toward him, glasses in hand.

"Right down there. See it?" Reboot points, and Paddy lifts his glasses. "What is that?"

"It's a couple of bears." I'm about to say something snarky when Paddy asks, "What's that with them?"

I'm staring. Reboot's staring. Ghost is staring. "What is it? You guys need closer?" Patch asks through the comm.

"Yeah. Can you get us a little closer? That would help. It's something brown and white. Kinda looks like a cow. A long, skinny cow. Weird." He's got those glasses trained at it, and then Patch holds the bird totally still. We're suspended in midair, not moving. "It's ..." I see him fiddle with the adjustments on the glasses. "Holy fuck!" Paddy never talks that way. "It's somebody or something wrapped in a sheet!"

"What?" Patch asks, his voice super loud in the headset.

"It's something wrapped in a sheet! And the bears are circling it. I don't know what it is, but we've got to get them away from it without pissing them off. How do we do that?"

"Fuck, I have no idea." I watch Patch hit the shoulder mic on his comm unit. "Central dispatch, this is App STAR alpha sierra zero one echo kilo yankee. I need to speak with a KDFWR officer immediately. Repeat, patch me in to a KDFWR officer immediately. Over."

"Roger that, App STAR air. Calling now. Over." We wait, and I don't realize I'm holding my breath until I feel a little lightheaded. "App STAR air, KDFWR Officer Ken Vines is on the line. Go ahead. Over."

"Officer Vines, this is Captain Patrick Scott of the App STAR team. I need to know how to get rid of bears. Over."

There's a moment of silence, and then a man's voice says, "Did I hear you right? Get rid of *bears*? Over."

“Roger that. There are two circling something down on the forest floor in a clearing, and I need to find a way to get them away from it so we can drop a team member to check it out. Over.”

It’s quiet again for a few seconds, and then he asks, “You got a PA system on that bird? Over.”

“Roger that. Over.” Patch looks at Ghost. “What kind of bubble gum crew does he think this is? Do we have a public address system. Do they make birds without them?”

Ghost is laughing. “I don’t think so!”

Vines’ voice comes back. “Got something that’ll play music? Over.”

Patch looks around, but we’re all digging for our phones. “Here,” Ghost says as he places his on his lap. “It’s ready to go.”

“Roger that, Officer Vines. Over.”

“Turn that thing on, crank it up as loud as it will go, lots of voices in it, and get as close to those bears as you can. Make it something loud with a good beat. If you’re going to fill the forest with music, let’s hear it! Over.”

“Whaddya got in there?” Patch asks Ghost.

Patch’s first officer grins. “Saliva. ‘Click Click Boom.’ Think that’ll do it?”

Reboot yells from beside me, “FUCK YEAH!”

“Okay, cue it up. Here we go.” Patch positions himself up above the little clearing. I don’t think the bears have even noticed us yet, but they’re about to.

As soon as the guitars grind into the intro, Patch lets the bird drop. And I mean, drop. We’re headed downward fast enough that it scares me at first. The PA speaker is cranked up as loud as it’ll go, and from where we are, Reboot, Paddy and I look down to see the bears glance up, then stare, and in seconds, they’ve raised up on their hind legs like they’re curious. But when they understand that the bird and all its noise are descending toward them, they panic and run back

and forth in the clearing before crashing through the underbrush and disappearing.

“WOO-HOOOO!!!! That’s what I’m talkin’ ’bout!” Ghost yells into our internal comms.

“Look at those motherfuckers run!” Reboot hollers.

“Paddy, get that door open and get that boom swung out. Reboot, I want you to grab those flare guns from back there. If they come back, don’t hesitate. I don’t give a flying fuck what the laws are in this state, I’m not letting my crew be eaten by a couple of bears. Bulldog, got that harness on?”

It’s already on and buckled with a carabiner attached to the hoist line. “Roger that, captain.”

“Reboot, get ready to follow him. Paddy, let ’er rip.”

“You ready?” Paddy asks me.

“Never readier.” My go-bag is attached to the harness and I’m standing in the doorway.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

I step out the door and hang onto the line. I only dangle for a second before the hoist motor kicks in and I start down, and Patch has taken us down low enough that I don’t have far to go. As soon as my feet hit the ground, I snap off the go-bag, unhook the harness, and give it a tug to watch it disappear into the bird. My bag is lying at my feet, so I grab it and head for whatever it is at a dead run.

I can hear Reboot behind me, but I’m not slowing down. When I reach the bundle, I can see that it’s a couple of bedsheets wrapped around whatever it is, and the ends are tied to keep it from unrolling. My knife is on my belt, so I snap it off and saw through the rope, not knowing what I’m going to find. A hand falls on my shoulder, and I hear Reboot say, “Brother, prepare yourself for the worst.”

How in hell can anybody ever do that?

TINSLEY

I'M TERRIFIED. IF I MOVE AROUND, IT'LL KNOW I'M ALIVE. Maybe it'll think I'm dead. I've heard animals don't want dead stuff. They want to kill and eat their prey fresh. I don't know if that's true or not, and right now, I don't care. I just want it to think I'm a log or something. I mean, I know it can smell me, but whatever.

And then, to my horror, it's clear that there's more than one. How many are there? Two? Three? Does it matter? There's nothing I can do about it anyway. I feel one of them test the cloth with its teeth, its drool making the fabric stick to my leg. Ick. Nothing short of a miracle will save me now. And that's when I hear it.

A helicopter.

Please, please let them see me down here. I mean, they won't know it's me. They'll probably think it's an old rug or a sack of garbage. Or they might not be looking for me at all. They might be doing something else, like flying somebody from an accident to a hospital. Why am I getting so excited when it's probably nothing? A million things are flitting through my mind, and few of them are positive. Except for one. I'm positive I'm in a lot of trouble.

But the sound of the bird doesn't dwindle. It sounds like it's right on top of me, and it's getting a little louder. Do they see the bears? Maybe it's hunters. I don't care. Just get these bears away from me! It sounds like it's getting closer and it's stopped over me, and I hear the bears move around. They're grunting like they're talking to each other, and I'd love to know what they're saying.

All of a sudden there's the most god-awful racket I've ever heard. It's some kind of loud music, and it would wake the dead. What the fuck? What's happening? I hear the bears scrambling around, and one of them actually steps on me as he runs over me. There's all kinds of sounds of crashing branches and leaves and then nothing except the music, if you can call it that.

Apparently I've died and gone to hell. What I'd take for some good ol' Conway Twitty right now.

I could swear I hear something that sounds like footsteps, but I can't tell because of the racket. And there's a jingling sound, like keys or something. In seconds, something is tugging at my feet, and then I feel it doing the same at my head. But it's what happens in the next moment that makes me scream.

I hear voices. And one of them is Kevin.

There's the sudden shock of fresh air on my skin and somebody yanks the hood off my head, then rips the tape from my mouth. The sun is blinding, and I squint against it. "Babe! Babe, it's me. It's Kevin. Talk to me, baby. Are you okay? Are you hurt? Say something, Tinsley!"

I crack open the eye that's closest to him and croak out, "What the fuck took you so long?"

Somebody's working on the wrappings on my ankles, but I hear Kevin say, "I'll spank your ass when I get you home, but right now, we've gotta get you out of here before Smokey and his friend come back." So there really *were* bears! I was right! He's cutting the stuff on my wrists, and for the first time, blood flows freely into them. They hurt like a sumbitch but the relief I feel is overwhelming.

"I'll check her vitals," I hear somebody say, and I peek. It's Reboot. Apparently he spots my spying because he says, "Hey, girl, you all right? Let's get your pulse and body temp, okay?"

"Uh-huh." My throat is so dry that I can barely make a sound.

"Here. I've got some water. Sit up and take a sip." Kevin's arm is behind me, and he pulls me up until I'm sitting, then presses the bottle to my lips. It occurs to me that I'm stark naked, but I really don't give a shit. I need some a drink. "Slowly, slowly. Not too fast. There ya go. Another swallow. Good girl." The bottle disappears and I open my eyes again to

see his peering into them. “How many of me do you see, Tinsley?”

“Only one, thank god,” I mumble.

“Aww, hell, she’s none the worse for wear!” Reboot crows, laughing.

“Yeah. Snotty as ever. You sit right there. Paddy’s sending the basket down and we’re going to take you out of here,” Kevin says. He’s unwrapping something shiny, and I realize it’s one of those space blankets.

“What, you don’t want everybody lookin’ at my lady bits?” I ask.

“Nope. Don’t. You hush and conserve your energy. You’ve had a traumatic experience.”

I’m too dehydrated for tears to come, but my faces scrunches up and I’m powerless to stop it. “Not nearly as traumatic as you driving away without even saying goodbye. I was kinda praying for death.”

A palm plants itself on either side of my face and he tips it up. “Don’t you say that. Don’t you *ever* say that. I’m here, and I’m never leaving again, you hear me? I’ll always be here for you, babe. Always.”

“Yeah, right.”

“You’ll see. Now let’s get you out of here.”

“I’m not riding in that basket,” I announce, surprising myself with the strength of my words.

“Yeah, you’re riding in the basket.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are. Don’t give me a bunch of shit over this, okay?”

“I’m not riding in that basket! I’ll fall out!” I shriek.

“You will not. You’ll be strapped in,” he explains. “Tell her.”

Reboot chuckles. “Tinsley, it’ll be as safe as riding a rhinoceros.”

I frown at him. “Oh, dear god, you’re terrible at this.”

He’s grinning. “I know, right? Years of practice.”

“Never mind him. You’re getting in that basket if I have to tie your hands and feet again.”

I glare at him. “You wouldn’t.”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?”

“You’d better not!”

Kevin glares back. “You’d better get in that basket and quit giving me lip.” This time when I look to Reboot, he just shrugs and points at the basket.

“Fine. I’m losing this battle, but the war’s not over. What if I jump out halfway up?”

“If the fall doesn’t kill you, I will when you land,” Kevin says, grinning.

“Whatever. Bully the hurt girl. Sounds about right.”

“Yeah. That’s me. You going up first?” he asks Reboot.

“Yeah. I’ll do the basket catch.” I watch as Reboot slips his harness back on, conveniently lowered with the basket, and gives Paddy a thumbs up. “I love this part. Makes me feel like I’m Mary Poppins!” he calls out as the hoist lifts him.

Kevin’s already lifted me, placed me in the basket, and strapped me in. “You ready?”

“No. But you don’t care.”

“I do care, but there’s no way around it. And Tinsley?”

“What?”

He leans down and presses his lips to mine, then breaks the kiss. “I love you more than anything in this world.”

“I love you too.” I watch as he connects the cables to the basket, then let out a little squeal as it lifts off the ground.

I'm about halfway up when I hear him call out, "Oh, and I'm gonna love that sweet little baby too!"

When I get outta this basket, I'm gonna kill somebody.

"WELL, YOU LOOK NONE THE WORSE FOR WEAR," SOME doctor who looks like he's twelve says. Now where have I heard that phrase before?

"Yeah, well, I just want to go home."

The door opens and Kevin steps in. "And home you shall go. There's just one problem with that."

"And what is that?"

"Both of our places have been trashed. The only option we have is to stay in the lodge or book a Caribbean cruise and head out into the sunset."

"No. I want to go home. *Home*. To Iron Oak." I stop and stare at him. "That's if I'm wanted there."

He sits down on the edge of my gurney, takes my hand, and smiles. "Everybody wants you there. *Everybody*."

"Okay. Then I'll go."

"That's good," the underage doctor says. "Because I'm releasing you."

"Thank you. I want to be released." I launch into a spirited rendition of "Please Release Me, Let Me Go," by Englebert Humperdinck. It just seems appropriate.

"I've gotta get you home. I think you've lost your mind." Kevin hands me a bag. "Here. Audrey brought these. Put them on and we can leave."

"Can you help me?" I may technically be okay, but I hurt all over.

"Of course. Be glad to." I get my panties on and he helps me hook my bra. Then I put on a sweatshirt and a pair of

sweatpants. “I can’t wait to get home and actually take a shower. I feel so grubby.”

“You’re looking a little grimy around the edges too,” he says in agreement. “But I don’t mind.”

“I won’t be grimy long.” Once we’re in the SUV, he takes off, powering down the highway toward the farm.

Three hours later, he rouses me a little. “Hey, babe. Audrey just knocked on the door and said dinner’s ready. You should probably put something on so we can go eat.” We both showered and he put on lounge pants and a tee, but I just put on panties and crawled into the bed. I’m tired and sore, and I need some sleep.

But an hour later, I’m glad I got up, got dressed, and walked over here to eat. Everybody’s talking and laughing, and honestly, I’ve never seen Kevin so relaxed and looking so happy. Talon, Drew, Ethan, Rocky, and Raiden accompanied by Duke are all here too, and some of the people from KSP. It’s a large, loud bunch, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“No. You go lie down and rest. We’ve got this,” Audrey tells me when I try to help with cleanup.

“But I—”

“No. Absolutely not. Tell her, Penny.”

Penny points toward the lodge. “No. You go get some rest. We’ve got this under control.”

“They’re right, you know. You should get some rest,” a voice says from behind me and strong arms wrap around my waist.

“Everybody’s conspiring against me,” I whine.

“I think I’m supposed to feel sorry for you, but I don’t,” he says and kisses the side of my neck. “Come on.”

It’s beautiful outside, and my hand feels safe in Kevin’s. As we wander along, I can’t help myself. “Why did you leave like that?”

“Imogen called and wanted that picture, but before she hung up, she told me she was pregnant. It totally threw me. I was blind with rage. The idea of her having another baby after she fried me by covering up what she let happen to Paisley was ... I just couldn’t handle it.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me? I was there for you, and you just pushed me away and walked.” Suddenly, that grip he has on my hand doesn’t feel that safe.

Kevin stops and steps in front of me, then takes both my hands in his. “Babe, I wish I could explain everything I’ve been through to you but, honestly, I’d rather you never have to know. Paisley’s death was rough. Prison? You don’t want to know. When they weren’t beating the hell out of me, they were planning it. There were times that I had no food for two days, that I got pinned to the wall in the shower and ... well, for lack of a better word, violated.” That makes me shudder. “Imogen didn’t bother to come see me. My parents ... sporadically. I mean, you have to understand, babe. Imogen destroyed everything I’d done with my life. Everything. Everything I thought I knew was a lie.”

“No. Your parents weren’t.”

“Yeah, but sometimes I thought they believed her, that they thought it was me who hurt Paisley. And the idea that they could believe I did it did things to me that I can’t explain. When the two people who are supposed to love you no matter what and always support you think you’re capable of something so horrible, something that would be totally out of character for you, it does something to you, Tinsley. When I came here, I trusted no one. I loved no one. I believed in no one. I had no one. It took Patch months to get through to me, and honestly, I still didn’t totally trust him. Patch Scott, the most trustworthy person I’ve ever known, and I didn’t trust him. I looked like a man on the outside, but on the inside, I was a twisted, mangled, bloody mess.” He stops and looks down at our hands, then back up at me. “That changed the day I saw you in the store. I was so rude to you when all you were doing was being friendly and helpful. It’s hard to accept

anything from anyone when all the world has done is pull your life out from under you.”

His face is so sad that it breaks my heart. “It’s not going to be like that anymore. I love you, Kevin. I love you and everything about you, even the broken, twisted, ragged parts. They broke you, but everywhere you were broken, you healed back stronger. I’ve watched you come back to life, and you saved me from death. Your life means something to everyone here, to the community, to your family, to me, and,” I say, rubbing my tummy, “to this little one in here.”

His eyes are sparkling with tears when he looks into mine. “Are you sure you want to do this, Tins? I’ll understand if you don’t want to, but—”

“I have never been surer of anything in my life. You’re my family, you and these people on this farm. This is my home. With you. Only if you’re here. And wherever you are, that’s my home.”

His hands cup my face and just before he presses his lips to mine, he whispers against them, “Then welcome home.”

BULLDOG

“SOOOOO ...” PENNY HAS CALLED US INTO THE KITCHEN. “I hope you guys don’t mind, but we went to your cottage,” she says, pointing to me, “and your trailer,” she says, pointing to Tinsley. “We went through everything and put it all in boxes. Everything. My thinking was that you can go through them one box at a time. If it’s broken, you can throw it out, or you can put it aside to remind you that you need a new one. If it’s fine but you don’t want it anymore, you can put it aside and donate it. If it’s fine and you want it, you can put it away. But that way, broken or unwanted stuff doesn’t come back inside your place, just the things you want. Does that make sense?”

“Oh, god, Pen, thank you so much! Yeah. That’s perfect.” Tinsley’s face is glowing. I can’t believe they spent time doing this for us.

“You’re welcome. Both of you. And Patch wants to talk to you about an idea he had.”

“Okay. Sounds good. Come on, babe. We need to get on this.” I stand and take her hand to help her stand. “Looks like we get a fresh start.”

Sure enough, the inside of her trailer is spotless. They even cleaned the carpets. It takes us all day, but we go through everything and find that they broke two casserole dishes, so she sets them aside to try to find new ones like them before they’re tossed. And in the process, she puts together eight boxes of stuff to donate.

When we get to my cottage, there isn’t that much. The one thing that really hurts is the fact that I don’t have that picture of Paisley anymore. That was all I had of her, and it’s gone. I have nothing to donate because I was living so simply, and they broke two of my plates, but we decide that we’ll use Tinsley’s, so the rest of mine can be donated.

While we’re working to put everything away, I look up to see Patch walk in. Without stopping my work, I say, “Hey, bossman. Penny said you wanted to talk to us.”

“Yeah. First off, this came for you.” He hands me a flat box, so I open it. When I do, it’s hard to contain my emotions, and I look at the return address. “What is it? I mean, if you don’t mind me asking.”

I hold it up, and I know who’s responsible for this. Tinsley called my mom. It’s a beautiful wooden frame with the picture of Paisley and me in it. Mom must’ve had a copy, and she had one made, framed it, and sent it to me. “Awww!” Tinsley cries out.

“That’s super nice. Your mom?” I nod. “Now, the reason I wanted to talk to you ... Mind if I sit?”

“Go right ahead.” I wait until he’s situated on the sofa and I take the chair near it, placing the picture carefully on the

table beside the recliner. Tinsley sits down on the other end of the sofa. “What’s up?”

“I was thinking about how small this cottage is, and how there’s going to be three of you in a few months.”

“We’ll make it work,” I assure him, and Tinsley nods in agreement.

“I don’t think you’ll have to. We’ve got four cottages that haven’t been renovated. I’m going to ask John Henry to work on one of them and double its size. That will give you a good-sized bedroom and another bedroom to use as a nursery. Whaddya think?” He’s grinning, and I can tell he’s happy with himself. Honestly, it’s a great plan.

“I like it. Babe?”

Tinsley nods excitedly. “I like it too! That’s a great idea. I really appreciate it. I thought I might sell my grandma’s trailer, and I can give you the money for the renovations and—”

“Oh, no.” Patch shakes his head. “If you really want to sell it, you’ll put that money in a college fund for Baby Wade. I’ve already talked to Tony, and he says that’s fine. No problem. He’ll get with John Henry and they’ll figure out how to do it. He said he thought maybe all four of the ones left should have that done to them, in case somebody else decides to, you know ... expand their family.”

“Patch, I ...” It’s hard to talk for the lump in my throat. “Thanks for always believing in me, and for always having my back. And thanks for helping me find her and bring her back here. The life I have here, I have because of you.”

He laughs and stands. “Yeah, well, when I tell you I want that kid to call me uncle, I’d better not get any lip, you hear me? I’m Uncle Patch. That’s just how it is. No argument.”

“Nope. You’ll get none from us!” Tinsley says and when she stands, she turns and hugs Patch. The look on his face tells me he loves her like a sister, and I’m so happy that I could just explode.

“She’s right. You’re Uncle Patch. I guess that gives her an Aunt Penny and makes Fiona her cousin.”

That *really* makes Patch laugh. “You know, Fiona goes on and on about how she hates it here, but between Taylor and a baby, I think she’s going to be just fine. She’ll jump at the chance to babysit, and it’ll help her feel more like family to you and everybody else here.”

“Then it works for all of us.” Before he gets out the door, I grab him and hug him. “Thank you, my brother,” I whisper to him.

“You’re welcome. That’s what brothers are for.” He slaps my back as we break the hug and makes his way down the steps.

“He’s a man among men,” Tinsley whispers as I wrap an arm around her shoulders and we watch him go.

“He sure is.”

“Hey, you said ‘her.’ Do you want a girl?”

The smile I give her should tell her how much I love her. “I really don’t care. It’ll be yours and mine, and that’s all that really matters. And now, my beautiful girl, we need to get busy. We’ve got a life to build together, and I want to get started.”

She turns to me, her arms around my waist, and grins. “And what is that life gonna look like?”

That makes me laugh. “Oh, just hide and watch!”

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So what's next? Keep reading.

COMING NEXT ...



Reboot

AUDREY'S PICKING UP THE LUNCH STUFF AS I'M GOING BACK to the forge. I've got a longsword I'm working on with Bulldog's encouragement, and so far, it's taking shape nicely. I'll be so glad when we get a website up where we can list this stuff as we finish it if it's not a commission piece.

I've been pounding on it for about ten minutes when Priest passes me, then stops, backs up, looks at what I'm doing, and smiles. "That's looking really good."

"Yeah, ya think?"

"Oh, yeah. Very nice. Looks like it's going to be nicely balanced too."

"That's my goal."

"Hey, when we get finished today, can you come see me for a minute before we get ready for dinner? I need to ask you something."

"Sure. No problem." Now I'm curious. What could he possibly want to talk to me about? I spend the rest of the afternoon wondering. And wondering. And wondering.

I can sense him right behind me as I near my cottage, so I turn at the steps and lean against the rail. "What's up?"

"You're sweet on Mavis."

Wow. That came out of left field. “What makes you say that?”

“I watched you defer to her all evening, and I saw you talking to her when we got back. What do you know about her?”

I shrug. “I know wherever she goes, disaster seems to follow. And I know she’s really nervous and skittish around people.”

Priest hesitates, and I wonder what’s going to come out of his mouth. One thing I know is that if he says it, it’s either true or he truly believes it is. “Look, I’m not a lot older than you, but I’ve seen a lot more. Twenty-eight years of hard time. I can read people pretty good. And there’s something there ... That woman endured some kind of trauma. Before you get all wrapped up in the pretty package, you’d better find out what’s inside it. Opening that up without knowing beforehand ... It could be a disaster, Reboot. A real disaster. A disaster for you, yeah, but it could be devastating for her.”

“How do you propose that I should do that?”

“I’d say get one of the other women to talk to her. See if they can pull some information out of her about her past. There’s a story there, and it’s not a fairytale, my friend. It’s a horror story. You don’t want to step into that without your boots on.” The analogy isn’t lost on me. I get it. The last thing I need is to be up to my neck is messed-up shit.

“I’ll talk to Penny. She’d probably be the best one.”

“I don’t know about that. Tinsley spends her life talking to people, entertaining them and getting to know them while she’s doing their hair. And she’s very non-threatening.”

“True. Okay. I’ll ask one of them. Maybe pull all four women together and let them figure out who should talk to her. Thanks, man. I appreciate your concern.”

“Just doin’ my due diligence. Y’all are my brothers. I owe you my loyalty, and part of that is protecting you. And sometimes, I have to protect you against yourselves.” He turns to walk away, but when he’s fifteen feet out, he stops and

turns. “By the way, you’re a good guy. If this can work out, she’ll be a lucky woman.”

“Uh, thanks.” Nobody’s ever said anything like that to me. The people I grew up with knew me as the life of the party. The people I spent my prison time with knew me as a guy who tried to be easy to get along with but would defend himself and anybody else who needed help. But none of them paid any attention to my character. Priest is different, and I’m thankful he’s here.

Before I slip into the shower, I pick out some clothes—just my usual, jeans and a tee. This tee is one of my favorites, super soft and super funny. The Eagle Point guys brought them to us one time when they were coming here. The tee is faded brown, and it’s got two huge footprints right in the middle surrounded by distressed lettering that reads “These feet were made for Squatching” with “Fallport, Virginia” right underneath the whole thing. Every time I look at it, I snicker. Instead of my athletic shoes, I pull out my Hi Buds. They’re knockoffs of a famous brand and a lot cheaper but, honestly, I don’t see how the real deal could possibly be more comfortable. These things are awesome for twenty bucks.

I’ve been in the kitchen for about ten minutes, helping Audrey fill tea pitchers, when I hear a voice say, “Hey, you’re back! Come on in!” If it’s who I’m hoping it is ...

It is. Mavis and Sarah are standing right inside the door. I’ve got a pitcher in one hand and a roll of paper towel in the other, but I manage to catch Mavis’ eye and smile, and she smiles back. The rest of the guys are pouring into the building, and Paddy and Priest set about making the two women comfortable. Another voice calls out, “Take a bow, babe!” and I wheel to look.

Izzy is standing in the doorway—without her immobilizer! “Woo-hooooo!” I yell out, and everybody is clapping and laughing. That’s when I catch a glimpse of Mavis.

She looks terrified.

I totally forgot about the noise factor, and the pitcher and paper towel are left behind on the countertop in seconds. “Hey,

you okay?”

“Uh, uh-huh. Yeah.” She doesn’t look okay.

I grab the chair next to hers and sit down. “Izzy’s been in that immobilizer for weeks now, and she finally got it off. It’s time to celebrate!”

“Oh. Um, yeah, I didn’t even notice.” Her fear was so great that she didn’t realize Izzy wasn’t wearing her immobilizer. Boy, Priest was right. I need to get to the bottom of this.

“Since you’re here, I guess you’re taking the job?” Now I’m just trying to redirect her attention to something that won’t create so much noise in her head.

“I’m not sure. Patch invited us back out so he and Hollywood and I could talk after dinner. Hopefully. If that *thing* doesn’t scream again,” she says and points to the call box.

I roll my eyes. “I hope it doesn’t. I really don’t want a replay of last night.”

“Yeah. Um, after all of that, could I maybe ... You said you’d tell me about you and prison and all that stuff. Could we maybe ...”

Oh, this is a good thing. This is a very, very good thing. I like that she’s curious about my life. “Sure. Don’t know why not. Just come looking for me.”

“All the cottages look the same.”

I grin. “Mine is the one with the string of fake fish hanging from the front porch post.”

The corners of her eyes crinkle as she grins. “Fake fish, huh?”

“Yeah. I love to fish. The guys make fun of me, but I don’t care.”

“That’s why you were at the dock that day?”

“Yeah. Just looking around. Someday I hope I can have a boat.”

There's a funny look in her eyes when she says, "Maybe you can."

"Okay, everybody. Dinner's ready. Come and get it," Audrey calls out, and Taylor runs to the door to pull the rope on the dinner bell. I think everybody's in here, but he loves to ring that thing, so who's to tell him he shouldn't?

Just like last night, Mavis gets her food and sits down beside me. The eyes I feel on me are Priest's, and he smiles and tucks back into his food. That's when it hits me.

She feels safe with me.

Oh, god, I cannot screw this up. The guys are always laughing about how small the dating pool is around here, and I haven't met another woman who's even marginally as interesting as Mavis, but if I give her a reason to feel unsafe, she'll bolt. That's obvious.

"Are you excited about maybe coming here? To work?"

"Yeah, and to live." She leans toward me ever so slightly before she speaks. "Aunt Sarah isn't in the best of health. The house needs a lot of work, and we're just not able to do it. And I think being here will help her."

"I'm sure it will. We'll all be around to help if she needs anything, and that'll be a relief to her, I'm sure."

"It will. So I hope it works out."

"Me too. For you guys."

"Thanks."

She asks me about work today, and I tell her about some of the stuff I'm doing. There's not a lot to talk about between two people who really don't know each other, but I've always been good at keeping up superficial conversation, so that works in my favor. When dinner is finished, Patch steps up behind us. "Reboot, would you mind taking care of Mavis' plate? We've got business to discuss."

"Sure. No problem. I've got it. Y'all go on."

Mavis stands, but before she leaves the table, she turns and smiles. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Anything I can do to help, I’ll gladly do.”

As I finish up, there’s chatter around the table. Tinsley is talking about some baby furniture she saw that she really wants, and I’m hoping I can find something nice to give them as a gift. My mind is drifting elsewhere when I hear Bulldog say, “We find out next week.”

“Oh, that’s awesome!” Audrey gushes, and I know what they’re talking about. They’ll find out the sex of the baby. I overheard Tinsley telling Penny how worried she is about having a girl. She’s afraid if that’s the case, it’ll throw Bulldog for a loop and send him back into all his old memories, but that’s something neither of them can control. I just know we’ll all be around to help them.

That’s what we do. That’s who we are. Iron Oak is a family, and this little one will be ours too. Watching them together makes me realize all the things I’ve lost out on over the years. Maybe it’s time to make up for lost time.

And maybe, just maybe, I have a shot at that.

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Deandra Hall is a working author living in far western Kentucky with her partner of 40+ years, crazy little dogs, and maybe a snake or two. She's written for business, industry, religious institutions, non-profits, and owned her own graphic design business, as well as working as a fiber and textile artist. When she's not writing all things romance from sweet, simple plots to explicit, erotic suspense, she can be found working out at the local gym, hiking, kayaking, reading (of course), or working on a healthy recipe. And wherever she is, chocolate is sure to be nearby.

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