

PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES



DADDY
WOLF'S

Forbidden Doctor

SERENA MEADOWS

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FORBIDDEN DOCTOR

(PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES)



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PROLOGUE



Derek sat across the fire from his brother, Scott, watching the emotions play across his face but not really listening to the story he was telling. He'd already heard it a hundred times before and could practically recite it from memory himself, but Scott was his hero, both mother and father to him for the last five years, and he wasn't about to ruin the fun they were having. It frustrated him sometimes how hard Scott had to work to keep the ranch running, and it aggravated him that at fifteen, he could do so little to help him out, and he couldn't wait to be done with school so he could work full time on the ranch.

Noticing that the fire had started to burn down, he got up and added a few more logs, hoping to stretch the night out, "Derek, we really should be heading to bed soon," Scott said, shaking his head. "You know we have to be home early tomorrow."

"I'm not tired yet," Derek said, sitting back down again. "This is the first time we've had any time together all summer. Let's just stay up a little longer."

"I'm sorry I've been so busy lately," Scott said, his face full of guilt. "I'll try to do better."

"You've been great," he said, sorry he'd ruined the mood. "I know you have a lot going on; I still think you should let me quit school to help you. I don't need a diploma to work cattle."

Scott sighed, "But you need to know how to balance the books, pay the bills, and read contracts," he said. "We've been

over this before, Derek. You need an education to run the ranch.”

He was about to open his mouth to point out that he wasn't running the ranch; Scott was. Suddenly, there was a rustling in the bushes followed by the sound of twigs cracking under someone's foot. Scott held up his hand, then slowly got to his feet and turned to face the dark forest, his body tense as he scanned the trees around them, listening as the sounds got closer.

Only a second later, a young woman came running out of the trees, her face full of fear, a look of panic in her eyes. She crashed into Scott as if she hadn't seen him, then tried to scramble away, a strangled cry coming from deep in her chest, but he held onto her. As shocked as his brother by the woman's sudden appearance, Derek could only stare as the woman collapsed into a heap at his brother's feet. His brother recovered first, swept the woman up into his arms, and carried her over to the fire, a look on his face that Derek had never seen before.

A low growl of anger escaped from Scott's chest when he saw the cuts and bruises that covered the woman's body, “Who did this to you?” he demanded.

The woman began to struggle, “Please, you have to let me go, they'll kill me if they catch me,” she said, pushing against Scott's chest. “They'll kill you too if they find me with you; please let me go.”

Just then a long howl filled the silence of the night, and when it died away, the woman began to struggle harder, “You have to let me go,” she pleaded. “You don't understand what you're dealing with.”

Another howl followed the first, and Derek felt his magic begin to stir to life in response, but he was still too shocked to move. “Who is that?” Scott asked again, his eyes glowing in the darkness. “Tell me, or I won't let you go.”

The woman looked up at Scott, then gasped, and shook her head, “No, you can't be,” she said, then seemed to deflate. “It's my father and the rest of the men in my clan. They want

me to marry a man I don't love, he's old and gross. He's already had three wives, and they all died. I don't want to be the fourth. Please don't give me back to them. Please just let me go."

Scott studied the woman for a second, the weird look on his face again, then gently set her on her feet. "What's your name?" he asked, gently brushing the hair back off her face. "I'm Scott, and this is my brother, Derek."

The woman looked up, and her eyes met his brother's, she let out a little "Oh," then said, "Natalie, my name is Natalie."

"That's a very beautiful name," Scott said, his voice strange. "Would you like to come stay with me for a while?"

Natalie studied him for a second, then nodded her head, "I would like that very much," she said. "But my father will never let that happen. He'll kill you before he'd let you take me."

"You let me worry about that," Scott said, just as four wolves stepped out of the trees. "You're on my land, so clan law is on our side."

Only a second later, the four wolves disappeared, replaced by four large men with angry faces, "What's going on here?" one of them asked, taking a few steps toward them. "Natalie, get over here right now, don't make this worse than it already is."

Although she was trembling with fear and fatigue, Natalie still managed to lift her chin and stare the man down, "I'm not going anywhere with you! I'm not getting married to that murderer, I'm staying right here with these nice men. They've offered me refuge in their clan."

The man sputtered, then began to growl, "You belong to me, do you hear me?" he barked. "No man, especially a pup like this one, is going to take what belongs to me."

"Now, you see, that's where you're wrong. Natalie doesn't belong to you," Scott said. "And if she chooses to stay here with me, that's what's going to happen, and since you're on my land, you have no power here. So, unless you want to start

a clan war, I would suggest you go back where you came from.”

CHAPTER 1



*** DEREK ***

Derek climbed the back stairs to the mud room, kicked off his boots, dropped his gloves into the worn basket on the table, then pulled off his hat and hung it up on the hook he'd always used. He paused as he did most nights and ran his fingers over his brother's hat, then Natalie's, before pulling his hand back and letting himself feel the pang of loss for a brief second before pushing it away. Keeping this little shrine to his brother and sister-in-law wasn't healthy, but Scott had left Natalie's hat right where it had been after her death, and he'd done the same after his brother's accident.

Now it seemed wrong to pack them away, and he shook his head at the idea, not ready to let them go, and turned to go inside, a smile spreading across his face as a zing of anticipation shot through him. Bracing himself for the little whirlwind who had become the entire focus of his life, he opened the door and stepped into the kitchen, disappointed when he saw only Pattie in the room. Crossing the room toward her, the smile slowly disappeared when he saw the concern on the older woman's face.

"Where's Annabelle?" he asked. "Is she sick again?"

Pattie nodded, "The poor thing, she was fine this morning, and we had a good romp outside. I thought it was going to be a good day," she said, shaking her head. "But after lunch she started complaining about a stomach ache, so I put her to bed. She's been asleep since then. I just don't know what to do. There's something wrong with that child, but no one seems to know what it is, and nothing we do seems to help."

“I’m as frustrated as you are. We’ve got that appointment next week with that specialist down in Monroe; I hope they can help us,” he said, giving her a reassuring squeeze. “Tell you what, I’ll go up and check on Annabelle. You should take a break, get off your feet for a while. I’ll finish dinner when I come back down.”

“That’s sweet of you, Derek, but you’ve been working hard all day,” she said. “I’ll compromise and sit down for a cup of coffee, but I’m making you dinner, and I won’t hear any arguments.”

He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek, “I don’t know what I’d do without you, Pattie,” he said. “I think I’ll take Annabelle a popsicle; that always cheers her up.”

“Just seeing her uncle will cheer her up,” Pattie said, a smile on her face. “Now off with you, you’re eating into my coffee time.”

After grabbing a blue popsicle out of the freezer, he climbed the stairs to Annabelle’s room and peeked inside, “Well, look who’s awake,” he said, stepping into the room. “Looks like you had a nice long nap. How are you feeling?”

The little girl shrugged, then saw the popsicle in his hand, “Like I want a popsicle,” she said, grinning at him and scooting up in the bed. “Can I have it?”

He sat down next to her and unwrapped the treat, “I was going to eat it myself, but I guess I can let you have it,” he said, grinning back at her before handing it over. “Pattie says your stomach hurt earlier this afternoon.”

Anabelle nodded, “I thought I was going to throw up,” she said around a bite, her mouth already turning blue. “It doesn’t hurt anymore, but I feel all weird and tingly.”

He reached up and felt Annabelle’s forehead, “You do feel a little warm,” he said. “Let’s try some Tylenol and see if that helps.”

“Do I have to stay in bed?” Anabelle asked, a frown on her face. “I hate being up here all alone.”

“I don’t think that’s necessary, you’ve just got a little fever,” he said. “Come on, we’ll get you set up on the couch by the fireplace, then you won’t be alone.”

The three of them ate dinner, watching Annabelle’s favorite cartoon movie on the television in the kitchen, and then he put her back on the couch and helped clean up. “She seems better,” Pattie said, switching on the dishwasher. “I think I’ll go to my room now if that’s okay. I’m only a call away if you need anything.”

“You’ve done more than enough for one day,” he said, wiping down the counter. “Annabelle and I will be just fine. When the movie is over, I’ll take her back to bed and read to her until she falls asleep. Hopefully, she’ll be better in the morning.”

It was almost midnight by the time he climbed into bed, groaning when he set the alarm for six the next morning. He lay down and closed his eyes, then let out a long sigh. He drifted off to sleep instantly, but was awakened only a little while later by the sound of Annabelle whimpering in the next room. Immediately awake, he jumped out of bed, threw on his robe, and slipped through the door that connected their rooms, then raced over to the bed when he saw the little girl tossing and turning.

Reaching out, he pressed the inside of his wrist against her forehead, cursing under his breath when he realized she was running a very high fever. “Annabelle, I need you to wake up, sweetheart,” he said, sitting down next to her on the bed. “I need you to take some medicine, and then we’re going to go see the doctor.”

Annabelle’s eyes fluttered open, but she could barely focus on him, “Uncle Derek, I don’t feel good,” she whispered. “I hurt everywhere, and I feel like I want to throw up.”

“I’m sorry you’re not feeling well, sweetheart,” he said. “Let’s see if we can do something about that.”

After giving her a dose of fever reducer, he helped her change out of her sweaty pajamas, then bundled her up in a blanket and carried her downstairs. After calling Pattie to let

her know what was happening, he ran back upstairs, got dressed, grabbed his cell phone and keys, and gave himself a few seconds to give in to the frustration that threatened to overwhelm him. There had to be someone who could help, someone who could figure out what was wrong with Annabelle, and it was time he started looking someplace besides Prospect for that person.

Salina

Salina glanced up from the computer game she was playing at her desk, then groaned when she saw the clock and wondered if there could be something wrong with it. There were still hours to go before her shift in the emergency room was over, and the minutes seemed to be ticking by more slowly with each one that passed. Getting to her feet, she walked over to the door and poked her head out, then stepped into the hallway, not sure if the complete silence that greeted her was welcome or not.

She'd spent her time working in the emergency room when she'd been a resident and had both loved and hated the frantic energy that pulsed through the department, but that had been in the city. Here in Montana, in a sleepy little hospital fifty miles from civilization, the emergency room was often empty, especially on a weeknight, and it hadn't taken her long to figure out that she was stuck there because no one else wanted the job.

Walking past the empty beds that lined the walls, she felt her frustration growing at the colossal waste of time it was for her to be there. All her talent was wasted in the silence that surrounded her night after night. She was a good doctor, she knew that, but as usual, all the head of medicine saw was that she was a woman. It was the same prejudice she'd faced her entire career, so she shouldn't have been surprised, especially in a backwater town like Monroe, but that didn't make it any easier to endure.

When she reached the nurse's station, she cast a hopeful glance at Amanda, the nurse on duty, but she just shook her head and went back to studying the textbook in front of her. With a sigh, Salina walked over to the big windows that faced

the parking lot and stared into the darkness for a while, hoping for movement on the street, any kind of movement. But nothing stirred in the darkness and she turned away with another sigh, feeling like she and Amanda were the only two people on Earth.

Choosing the darkest corner of the waiting room, she curled up in a chair with her feet tucked up and laid her head back against the stiff plastic of the couch. There were so many other places she could have been; lying on a beach, soaking up culture in the museums of France, or watching the crowds from a coffee shop in Greece after a swim in the ocean. Instead, she was here, soaking up nothing but silence and counting down the hours until she could go home to her little house, close the blinds, and sleep away another day.

She wanted to be angry with her parents, wanted to blame them for forcing her to take the position, but the truth was, she'd let herself be bullied into it, let them make her decisions once again. If the last month had taught her anything, it was that she had to take control of her life. She was a grown woman, capable of making her own decisions. It was time to break free of her mother and father. No matter how difficult it was going to be for all of them, she needed the freedom to make her own choices.

As soon as the thought entered her mind, she could hear her mother's voice, "We let you make your own choice, and look where it got you," she'd say in that condescending way of hers. "You're just not ready to be on your own, Salina. You may be brilliant, but when it comes to life, you still have a lot to learn."

Trying to block the voice from her head, she closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. When she opened them, a man was rushing through the big sliding double doors, a child wrapped in a blanket in his arms. Shrinking back into the shadows, she watched the man talking with Amanda, wondering if she should make her escape back to her office before she was noticed. But as she watched the man, something strange began to happen; her entire body slowly

began to fill with warmth, her skin began to tingle, and a thrill of attraction rippled through her.

Shocked, she gasped, then tried to make herself very small when the man turned and carried the little girl over to a chair not far from her. “Sweetheart, I need you to stay here for a few minutes while I run out to the truck,” the man said. “That nice lady behind the desk over there is going to take good care of you while I’m gone.”

Instantly on her guard, she looked over at Amanda, who was already typing on the computer, then back over at the man, anger swimming to the surface. “You can’t just leave that child here with us,” she said, jumping to her feet. “I don’t know what’s wrong with you people. This isn’t a daycare, it’s a hospital. If she’s sick, you’ll have to stay here with her.”

The man just stared at her, his mouth hanging open for a second, a strange look on his face, “I wasn’t.....I am.....” he stammered. “And she is sick.”

“Well, you can’t just walk off and leave her until her mother gets here. That’s happened too often in the past,” she said, enjoying the release of pent-up emotions. “I didn’t go through four years of college and four years of medical school plus residency just to babysit because you can’t handle being a father.”

The man’s face darkened, “I don’t know who you are, but you don’t know anything about us,” he said. “Annabelle is my niece, and I’ve been raising her since both her parents died, so maybe you could back up a little. I was just going to run to my truck and get the copy of her medical records I brought with me, but if that’s not allowed, I’ll drag this sick little girl back outside with me.”

Her anger drained away instantly, “I’m sorry.....I didn’t know.....” she stammered, then unable to look into the man’s blue eyes any longer, did the only thing she could think of and started for her office. “I have to go.”

CHAPTER 2



*** DEREK ***

Derek watched the rude woman walk away, a mixture of anger and frustration surging through him, but underneath, there was something completely unexpected: attraction. He looked over at Annabelle, who was staring at him wide-eyed, and instantly felt guilty for losing his temper in front of her. Pushing the woman from his mind, he knelt in front of the little girl. He smoothed a stray hair back from her face, wincing when he felt how hot she was, then gave her a big smile.

“I’m going to run out to the truck now,” he said. “I’ll only be gone for a few minutes, and Amanda will be right there if you need anything or you get scared. I’ve known her for a long time, and she’s a very nice lady.”

“Okay, Uncle Derek,” Annabelle said. “I’m not scared, but it is really dark in here.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, “How about you watch a few videos on my phone while you wait,” he said, handing it over to her. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

Annabelle’s face lit up, “Thanks, Uncle Derek,” she said, taking the phone.

Amanda was watching them when he stood up, “Sorry, Derek, she’s usually not like that,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “We’ve gotten stuck with a couple of kids this week. Their fathers just dropped them off here and left, and it was a huge mess.”

He wanted to ask about the woman, was suddenly more curious than he should have been about her, but stopped himself when he remembered why he was there. "I'm not dumping her on you guys," he defended himself. "I just need to run out to my truck."

"I'm not worried, we've known each other our entire lives," Amanda said. "Go get those medical records, and I'll keep an eye on Annabelle."

They only had to wait ten minutes after he got back from the truck before Amanda came to get them, "The doctor is ready for you," she said, smiling at Annabelle. "Let's go see if she can make you feel better."

In the exam room, he started to set Annabelle down on the table, but she clung to him, so he sat down on the crinkly white paper with her in his lap, the heat radiating from her little body making him begin to sweat. Only a few minutes later, there was a soft knock on the door, then the woman from the waiting room came in, a chart in her hands. She hesitated a second when she saw them, then headed straight for the sink and began washing her hands.

He watched her for a second, the buzz of attraction catching him off guard once again, then looked down at Annabelle, who was staring at the doctor with a mixture of fear and apprehension. "Uncle Derek, that's the woman who was mean to you," she said, holding him a little tighter. "Is she the doctor?"

"I think so, sweetheart," he said. "I'm sure she won't be mean to you."

The doctor turned to them, a horrified look on her face, "I'm so sorry about what I said in the waiting room," she said, her voice shaking. "I was in a bad mood, and I'm afraid I took it out on you. I've never done anything like that before, and I can promise you it won't happen again."

It was clear that she was sincere, and he felt his anger slowly draining away, "I just want someone to take a look at Annabelle and figure out what's wrong with her," he said, ignoring the little tug of attraction when the doctor finally

looked up at him. “She’s got a high fever, her stomach has been upset, and she’s been sleeping a lot more than normal.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad,” the doctor said. “Let’s take a look and see what’s going on. There’s been a flu bug going around, I bet that’s all we’re dealing with.”

He shook his head, “It’s more than that,” he said. “Annabelle is normally such a busy little girl, but she barely plays with her toys now. All she wants to do is lay around watching television.”

“That’s perfectly normal when they’re sick,” the doctor said, brushing him off. “She could also be going through a growth spurt, that will make them sleep a lot as well.”

“I don’t think you understand,” he said, beginning to get annoyed. “Did you read her medical history?”

“I glanced through it,” the doctor said, looking over at him. “I know that you’re concerned about your niece, Mr. Ambrose, but I’m sure this is just one of those little viruses and nothing to worry about.”

“I find it difficult to believe that you could be so sure just from looking at her from across the room,” he said, doing his best to keep his voice level. “I guess doctors don’t need to do exams anymore; just looking at the patient is enough.”

“I will do a physical exam, I was just trying to put you at ease,” the doctor said. “Now, if you’ll just let me do my job, this will be over for Annabelle much faster.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” he said, gently sliding Annabelle off his lap but not letting go of her hand. “I’ll be right here, sweetheart. The doctor is going to take a look at you, but I promise it won’t hurt.”

Annabelle looked up at him, her bottom lip quivering, but nodded her head, “Okay,” she whispered, then looked over at the doctor warily. “I’m ready.”

“You are such a brave little girl,” the doctor said, pulling off her stethoscope. “Have you ever seen one of these? This is how I’m going to listen to your heart and lungs to make sure

they're nice and healthy. Would you like to try it out on me first?"

Annabelle studied the doctor for a second, then nodded, "Yes, please," she said. "I have a play one at home, but it doesn't work."

The warmth in the doctor's voice as she explained to Annabelle how the stethoscope worked did something funny to him, and the feeling only became more intense the longer he watched them. He tried to tear his eyes away, but the doctor took the end of the stethoscope, slipped it under her shirt, dislodging the top button in the process and exposing her full breasts. A sharp stab of desire shot through him, and he knew that he should look away, but the animal inside him was suddenly in control.

Another wave of desire, this one making his body begin to tingle and tighten, finally got through the raw instincts threatening to take over, and he tore his eyes away, but not before the doctor looked over at him. Hoping she couldn't see the distress he was in; he shifted his weight and looked around the room like he wasn't paying any attention to them. But when he looked back at Annabelle, the doctor was still watching him, and their eyes met, sending another wave of desire racing through him.

"Oh, I can hear your heart," Annabelle exclaimed. "It's beating really fast, like you've been running."

The doctor quickly straightened up, then noticed the open button and quickly slipped it back into place, her cheeks turning pink. "Oh, well, how about that," she said. "Let's listen to your heart and see what it's doing."

Salina

Salina was relieved to put the stethoscope in her ears and concentrate on anything but the smoldering look in Derek Ambrose's eyes, suddenly panicked that history was repeating itself. Taking deep breaths, she reminded herself that being attracted to someone was just a physical reaction to pheromones. It was a normal human reaction and didn't mean that she was going to jump off the deep end again. She'd

learned her lesson the hard way and wasn't going to make that mistake again. Attractive or not, Derek was the guardian of one of her patients and completely off-limits.

Setting that boundary, even if it was only in her head, made her feel better and she was able to focus on Annabelle fully again, but found nothing wrong with the little girl except the fever. Stepping back, she wrapped the blanket around her again and gave her a big smile, then taking a deep breath, looked over at Derek, hoping her body would behave itself this time. When their eyes met, warmth flooded her body, but she ignored it, determined to maintain control, and pushed away the wave of desire that surfaced a few seconds later.

“Ummm.....besides the fever, Annabelle seems perfectly healthy,” she finally managed to say. “I think we're dealing with that virus after all. Give her something to bring that fever down, keep her in bed for a couple of days, and I think you'll see that she springs right back.”

She expected relief, but instead, Derek gave her a dirty look, “Which is what the doctors have been telling me for two weeks,” he said, his voice even, but she could sense the anger underneath. “I can't believe I drove two hours just to get the same answer I've been getting at home. This was a total waste of my time, and I'm beginning to think there isn't a doctor around who really cares about their patients.”

She was not only stung by his words, she was insulted and opened her mouth to tell him so, but she stopped, “Did you say this has been going on for two weeks?” she asked. “I don't think you told me that.”

“I would have if you'd asked,” he said. “But you were so convinced this was a virus or growing pains you didn't bother. Annabelle has been sick for two weeks. We have an appointment with a specialist next week, which I had to fight to get, but I don't think this can wait that long. If you can't help us, tell me right now so I can find someone who will.”

“It's not that I don't want to help you, but with Annabelle's symptoms, the insurance company isn't going to approve much more than some blood tests,” she said. “I can give her

something for the fever, but beyond that, my hands are tied. If she was just a little sicker, it would help.”

She regretted her words the instant they were out of her mouth, “That didn’t come out right,” she backpedaled. “I just meant that it’s going to be a fight with the insurance company, I don’t want to see you saddled with a bill you can’t pay if they refuse to cover the lab work.”

“Oh, I see, now you think I’m poor,” Derek said, making her wince. “Just because I drive an old beat-up truck doesn’t mean I’m incapable of caring for my niece.”

“That’s not what I meant at all,” she said, then let out a long sigh. “I want to give your niece the best care that I can, but I could get in trouble if I order a bunch of tests without a good reason, and I could lose my job.”

He studied her for a second, and the anger faded from his face, “I don’t want you to lose your job,” he said. “I just want to find out what’s wrong with Annabelle. She’s the only family I have left. I can’t just stand by and watch her suffer. Please help us. I don’t want to have to take her farther from home, so if the insurance company refuses to pay, I’ll pay for it myself.”

The feeling that she’d stepped back in time settled over her as he spoke the last few words, and the memory of another man telling her the same thing had her sucking in a deep breath. She didn’t answer right away, and had to take a few minutes to remind herself that this was different. She wasn’t involved with Annabelle’s uncle. They were nothing more than strangers. It was her job to help her patients, and it was clear that Annabelle had been sick too long. The fact that her uncle was incredibly handsome and made her feel funny things had nothing to do with seeing that the little girl got the care that she deserved.

Squaring her shoulders, she took a deep breath, hoping she wasn’t throwing her career away, “If you’re sure that Annabelle is sick, then I’ll trust you,” she said. “We should start with some blood tests, and it wouldn’t hurt to give her some fluids. She does look a little bit dehydrated. How about

we get the two of you up to a room and make you comfortable for the night so we can get started?”

CHAPTER 3



DEREK

*B*y the time Annabelle was settled into her room, Derek was exhausted and wished he was the one who was sick. Watching the doctor insert the needle into Annabelle's tiny vein had been pure torture, and he'd had to look away before the catheter was placed, but his niece hadn't made a peep. He was proud of her for being so brave and told her so as she drifted off to sleep just as the sun began to lighten the sky, then kissed her forehead before following the doctor out into the hallway.

"Now that her fever is down, Annabelle should sleep for a few hours," the doctor said. "Most of the blood tests should be back by later this afternoon, but I'll stop by later this morning to see how she's feeling. I'd like to send her home as soon as she's able. Most kids do better at home even if it means we have to send someone out to you for follow-up care."

"I can't thank you enough," he said, relaxing for the first time since he got home earlier that night. "You have no idea what a relief it is to finally have someone listen to me. That alone makes me feel better."

"I should have listened sooner," the doctor said, a look of regret on her face. "I just forgot that parents know their kids best. Thank you for that reminder."

"No problem," he said, smiling at her. "I might have taken out some of my frustration on you, I'm sorry about that."

"That's okay, I understand," she said. "I guess I should get back downstairs, but I'll just be a phone call away if you need

me for anything. If I were you, I'd get some sleep while you can. This place doesn't stay this quiet for long."

"That sounds like good advice," he said. "Thank you again, Dr."

"Butler," she said, holding out her hand. "I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself before."

When he took her hand, a burst of electricity traveled up his arm and through his body, bringing with it a warmth unlike anything he'd ever felt. Unable to let go of her hand, touching her awakening something primal deep inside him, he could only stare into her blue eyes as thoughts he shouldn't be having about Dr. Butler crowding his mind. She finally pulled her hand away with a little gasp, as her eyes widened with surprise before a panicked look appeared on her face.

"I really have to go," she said. "I'll come back and check on Annabelle before I go home later."

She was gone before he could say a word, disappearing down the hallway, leaving the scent of vanilla and cinnamon in her wake, her rubber-soled shoes squeaking on the freshly polished floors. Shaking his head, he told himself it was just exhaustion and gratitude making his body respond the way it had been, and let himself back into Annabelle's room, then collapsed on the little bed next to hers. He was asleep in seconds, the comforting sound of Annabelle's breathing letting him sink into a deep slumber, but he was awoken a few hours later to the sound of a man shouting just outside the door.

"I want to know who signed the paperwork to have this patient admitted," a man said. "There's no indication here that hospitalization was required. The insurance company is going to refuse to pay this claim, and I'm holding all of you responsible when that happens."

"But Dr. Morgan, we aren't in control of who gets admitted," a woman said. "We're only taking orders."

"Then stop taking orders from the wrong people," the doctor spat back at the woman. "Start getting the paperwork

ready to release the patient. We're kicking her out of here as soon as we can."

"Yes, sir," the woman said. "Right away."

Derek was on his feet when the door opened without a knock and Dr. Morgan came striding in, "Good morning, I'm glad to see that you're both awake," he said, only glancing at Annabelle. "We're going to release.....Annabelle..... right away. There's no reason for her to be here for a fever and a stomach ache. There's a flu bug going around, and if we hospitalized everyone with it, we'd be overrun with patients. I'm sure you understand that we need these beds for really sick children."

He couldn't believe the nightmare was starting all over again, "Annabelle is sick and has been for weeks. This isn't a flu bug, and it isn't growing pains or whatever other lame diagnosis you're going to give me to hustle us out of here."

Dr. Morgan finally looked up from the chart he'd been studying, "Are you a doctor?" he asked, then shook his head. "No, I didn't think so, and since you're not, I think we should leave the medical decisions to someone who is."

Just then there was a knock on the door, and Dr. Bulter poked her head in, "Oh, Dr. Morgan, good morning, I didn't think you'd be here this early," she said, a look of surprise on her face. "I see you've met Annabelle and her uncle."

A look of distaste appeared on the older man's face, "I should have known it was you," he hissed at Dr. Bulter. "Are you up to your old tricks, missy? I told you I wouldn't stand for any of your antics in my hospital."

Dr. Butler's mouth popped open, her face turned a bright shade of red, and for a moment he thought she was going to turn and run from the room, but then she squared her shoulders. "That is both insulting and unwarranted," she said. "I admitted Annabelle because she's been sick for two weeks, and I wanted to run some tests. There is nothing but good medicine going on here."

“I don’t know what’s going on here, but I would appreciate it if you didn’t do this in front of my niece,” Derek said. “Dr. Butler has been nothing but helpful. She listened when no one else would.”

Dr. Morgan snorted, then looked Derek up and down, “I bet she did,” he sneered at him. “She’s really good at that. Maybe you should ask her about it; you might want to know the kind of person you’re putting all your trust in.”

Confused, he looked over at Dr. Butler, but she looked completely deflated and about ready to cry, “I don’t have to ask her, I already know,” he said, unable to stop himself from defending her. “She’s a good doctor and a decent human being, unlike every other doctor I’ve met over the last few weeks. Now I’d like to know if you’re planning on kicking a sick little girl out of the hospital, or are you going to let her doctor treat her?”

For the first time since the despicable man walked into the room, Derek saw his confidence flagging and couldn’t help but pounce. “I’m going to assume that your silence means we can continue,” he said. “So, if you’ll excuse us, I’d like to talk to Annabelle’s doctor.”

Salina

“You’ve got twenty-four hours to prove to me this child is sick,” Dr. Morgan hissed at her as he walked by. “If you can’t.....well.....we’ll have to have a long talk about your future here with us.”

She glared at his back until he disappeared through the door and it closed behind him, then felt herself deflate, the fight completely gone as silence fell over the room. “Are you okay?” Derek asked, walking over and putting his hands on her shoulders. “That man is a.....well, you know..... he seems to have it out for you.”

“I could make you a list of all the reasons he doesn’t like me, but that would be unprofessional,” she said, then took a deep breath and turned to face Derek. “Thank you for defending me. I didn’t really deserve it.”

“Of course, you did,” he said, smiling down at her. “I don’t know what you did, and you don’t have to tell me, but no one deserves to be talked to like that. Everything I said was the truth, you did listen to me, and you are trying to help Annabelle.”

The warmth she’d begun to associate with the man started to spread through her, and she forced herself to step back from him, “And we should get back to that,” she said, forcing herself to ignore the spark of attraction when she looked up into his eyes. “We’re still waiting on the blood tests, but I’d like you to see if she’ll eat anything when she wakes up. I’d also like to keep the fluids going as long as we can, but if she’s not feeling better, that might be hard, so we’ll play that one by ear. I’m going to go up to the doctor’s lounge and get a few hours sleep. I’ll be back right before lunch.”

“Have you been up all night?” Derek asked. “Shouldn’t you go home for a while instead? I’m sure we’ll be just fine, I’m not afraid of Dr. Morgan.”

She laughed, “I wish I weren’t,” she said, then became serious. “I hate to waste any of the time we’ve been given, twenty-four hours isn’t very long.”

“We’ll be fine for a few hours while you get some rest,” he said. “Go home, get some sleep. You said yourself that the blood tests wouldn’t be done until this afternoon.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” she said, pulling a business card out of the pocket of her lab coat. “Here are all my numbers. I want you to call me if anything changes.”

After giving her instructions to the nursing staff, Salina rode the elevator down to her office on the first floor to get her purse and keys, the temptation to just collapse onto the broken-down sofa shoved into one corner so strong she almost gave in. Instead, she downed the cup of cold coffee on her desk, determined to fight through the exhaustion until she got home to her own bed. When she stepped back out in the hallway, it was clear the hospital had woken up for the day, and she put her head down, hoping no one would stop her on her way out.

She was almost to the employee entrance at the back of the hospital when Dr. Morgan stepped out of a doorway directly into her path, “Leaving so soon, Dr. Butler,” he said. “I would have thought with a critical patient in the building, you’d be hanging around longer.”

Instantly on her guard, she studied him for a second, not liking the hard glint in the man’s eyes, “I was just going to run home for a few hours to get some sleep, take a shower, and change my clothes,” she said. “I’ll be back at lunchtime to check on my patient, and her uncle has my numbers if I’m needed before then.”

“I suppose you do need your beauty sleep, although I’m not sure how much good it will do,” Dr. Morgan said, then laughed before becoming serious again. “This is just one example of why women shouldn’t be doctors. I wouldn’t need to sleep if it was my patient; men don’t need as much sleep as women do.”

She opened her mouth to argue, then realized she didn’t have the energy, “Unless you have something constructive to say, I’d like to go home now,” she said, pushing past him.

Dr. Morgan let her get all the way to the door before he spoke, “I sure hope you haven’t let your obsession with single fathers get in the way of your judgment,” he said. “It would be a shame if I had to report you for unethical behavior. I believe that would be a second mark on your record, and the medical board might decide to suspend your license.”

She didn’t reply, couldn’t trust herself not to cry if she spoke, and Dr. Morgan’s laughter followed her through the door out into the parking lot. Sliding behind the wheel of her car, she fought for control, refusing to give the man that much power, but as she drove home, she couldn’t help but fume about how unfair it all was. She’d made a mistake, she was more than willing to admit that, she’d been stupid and naïve, but she shouldn’t have it thrown up in her face over and over like she was the only one in the medical profession who’d fallen for the wrong person.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, but she was smart enough to know that it didn't make any difference. Dr. Morgan ran the hospital, there was no fighting him. She'd just have to keep her head down, do her job, and hope that would be enough to get her through until her contract was up and she could leave.

Feeling a surge of determination, she let herself into the house, then started stripping off the layers of clothes as soon as the door closed behind her. Deciding to forgo the shower for sleep, she crawled under the covers, snuggled down into the pillows with a big sigh, and closed her eyes. She was asleep in seconds, exhaustion dragging her under, but it wasn't long before she began to dream about Derek, his face sliding in and out of focus as her mind was filled with erotic images.

When she woke several hours later, she sat up in bed, shaking her head, her heart still pounding, her body still humming with unsatisfied desire. With a groan, she headed straight for the shower, trying to think about anything but the handsome cowboy who'd haunted her dreams. But as she drove back to the hospital, he was still there, still making her body warm every time she thought about him, still sending shivers of anticipation through her, and she knew that she was in trouble.

CHAPTER 4



*** DEREK ***

Derek lay sprawled out across the tiny bed in Annabelle's room, catching a few minutes of sleep while his niece watched videos on her tablet. The few early morning hours of sleep that he'd managed to get had been filled with dreams about Dr. Butler, and since then, he'd barely been able to close his eyes with all the commotion out in the hallway. After lunch, it had gotten quiet in the hospital for the first time that day, and he'd decided to see if he could take a short nap, but even in the silence, he couldn't seem to fall deeply asleep.

He was just about to give up when there was a quiet knock on the door and Dr. Butler poked her head inside. She smiled when she saw Annabelle sitting up in bed. "Well, you look like you're feeling better," she said, walking over to the bed. "Did you have lunch?"

Annabelle put her finger up to her lips, "Shh, Uncle Derek is sleeping," she said, and he slammed his eyes closed. "We don't want to wake him up."

A second later his skin began to tingle, and he cracked his eyes open to find Dr. Butler looking at him, "We'll just have to whisper then," she said, looking back at Annabelle with a grin. "I bet he's grumpy when he wakes up."

Annabelle giggled, "Sometimes," she said. "But if you give him coffee, he gets better really fast."

Dr. Butler laughed, a sound that made goosebumps break out on his skin, "I'll have to remember that," she said. "Now,

tell me what you've been up to today.”

“I woke up and had lunch, then Uncle Derek and I watched a movie together,” she said, then held up her tablet. “Now I’m watching videos on my tablet, but I’m starting to get bored. When can I go home?”

“Well, sweetheart, I’m not sure,” Dr. Bulter said. “Would you mind if I used my stethoscope to listen to your heart and lungs again?”

“Okay,” Annabelle said with a shrug. “Can I have a turn too?”

“You bet,” Dr. Butler said, smiling at her. “Do you want to go first?”

He watched through partly closed eyes as Dr. Butler examined Annabelle, keeping the little girl smiling and chatting with her the entire time, and it wasn’t long before the now familiar wave of desire washed over him. It didn’t come as such a surprise this time, but he was still puzzled. Dr. Butler was nothing like the women he was usually attracted to, and he wondered what it was about her that had sparked and held his attention.

Able to watch her without giving himself away, he let his eyes roam over her body and rest on her face, holding back a groan when his body began to tingle and tighten. Studying her closer, even though he felt his magic slowly simmering to life, he still couldn’t understand his reaction. There was nothing sexy or alluring about the woman.

She had her hair pulled back severely from her face in a tight bun that sat on the back of her head, her skirt reached almost all the way to her ankles, and under the white lab coat, she was wearing a baggy sweater that hung down below her hips. There wasn’t a drop of makeup on her face, but as he continued to study her, he noticed how her eyes sparkled when she laughed and the way her face lit up when she smiled. Feeling warmth beginning to spread through him and his magic getting stronger, he closed his eyes, not ready to face what it was telling him.

Annabelle and the ranch were enough for him. Between the two, he was busier than he wanted to be, and he didn't have time for the complications of a romance. Besides, he told himself, now certainly wasn't the time for him to suddenly decide to date someone. His niece and her health had to be his priority. He knew all too well how easily life could slip away, he had watched his family die one by one, and he wasn't going to let that happen to Annabelle.

Unable to pretend he was sleeping any longer, he sat up and stretched, "Oh, Dr. Butler, I must have fallen asleep," he said. "What did I miss?"

She turned and looked over at him, a smile on her face, "Annabelle was just telling me about her horse," she said. "I used to love to ride, although I haven't been for years."

"You like to ride?" he asked, a stab of pleasure shooting through him. "You don't seem like the type."

Dr. Butler stood up from the bed, her eyes flaring with anger, "And what type do I seem like?" she asked, then looked over at Annabelle, who was watching them. "I'm just curious."

He knew he was in trouble and wished he'd kept his mouth shut, "I just meant, you look more like..... you'd rather be sitting in a library reading a book or something," he said. "Not that there's anything wrong with that, I like to read when I have time."

She studied him for a second, "Don't let the lab coat fool you," she said, a little smile on her face. "After all, looks can be deceiving."

For a moment he thought that she was flirting with him, but a second later she became all business, "I got some of Annabelle's blood work results on my way up," she said. "Maybe we should step out in the hallway to discuss them."

He looked over at Annabelle, his heart sinking, his mind instantly assuming the worst, and felt guilty for thinking about his love life when she was sick. "That's fine," he said. "How bad is it?"

“I wouldn’t say that it’s bad,” Dr. Butler said, leading him out of the room. “But there are some elevated values, and frankly, at this point, I can’t really say why. There are still a few tests to come in, but at the moment, I still can’t nail down what’s wrong with your niece.”

“So, all of this was for nothing?” he asked, trying to stay calm. “I can’t believe we still don’t know anything. What are we supposed to do now?”

“We keep digging,” Dr. Butler said. “We’ve just gotten started. There are a lot more tests we can run; eventually we’ll get the right one. Until we do, you’ll just have to be patient.”

It suddenly occurred to him that if the doctor dug too deeply, it might expose a secret about Annabelle that needed to stay hidden. “How invasive will this get?” he asked. “I mean, are you going to test her DNA or something?”

Dr. Butler laughed, “I don’t think it will come down to that,” she said, shaking her head. “I think we’ll start with something a little simpler, like a repeat of the tests we’ve already run and a screening to eliminate a few other things, like cancer or an immune disorder.”

“Oh, okay,” he said, still not sure it was a good idea but unable to think of an alternative if they wanted to find out what was wrong with Annabelle. “I guess that doesn’t sound so bad.”

Salina

Salina sat staring at the second round of blood tests later that evening. What she was seeing still didn’t make sense to her, and now that they’d established that the results weren’t an error, she wasn’t sure how to proceed. She’d never seen anything like what she was looking at and knew that to start eliminating the possibilities, they’d have to run a lot of expensive tests. The last thing she wanted to do was put the little girl through any more poking and prodding than she had to, and Annabelle had started to improve. Her appetite was back, and she was behaving like a normal five-year-old.

As frustrated as she was, she knew that Derek would be even more upset, and she dreaded telling him, but she got to her feet anyway, aware that she only had a few hours until she had to be on duty in the emergency room. Gathering up the lab results, she stuffed them into Annabelle's file, grabbed her stethoscope, and turned the light in her office off on the way out the door. Making her way up to the third floor, she kept expecting Dr. Morgan to step out of the shadows but made it all the way to the room without seeing him.

Annabelle and Derek had just finished dinner when she came in, "It smells fantastic in here," she said, smiling at the little girl. "You must be having something yummy for dinner."

"It's spaghetti, my favorite," Annabelle said, her face covered in sauce. "I had seconds."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," she said, coming farther into the room, doing her best to ignore the thrill that rushed through her when Derek stood up. "You keep this up, and we'll going to have to send you home."

"Does that mean that you've found something?" Derek asked. "Do you know what's wrong with Annabelle?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "The results we got from the second round of blood tests were exactly the same, and to be honest, a bit confusing."

A funny look appeared on Derek's face, "What does that mean?" he asked. "What did you find?"

"Maybe we should wait until you've finished your dinner," she said, knowing that she was stalling. "This might be a long discussion."

"You could join us, there's plenty," he said, pointing over to the little table. "Pattie brought enough to feed an army."

She was tempted by the delicious aroma, but knew it wouldn't be appropriate, "No, thank you, I've already eaten," she said. "I could come back later if you like."

"Uncle Derek, I'm full," Annabelle said. "Can I be excused?"

“After we get you cleaned up a little,” he said, a smile on his face. “I think more made it onto your face than into your mouth.”

She waited while Derek cleaned Annabelle up then tucked her back into bed, “Okay, it looks like dinner is over, so let’s talk,” he said. “Do you want to go out into the hallway?”

“No, that’s fine,” she said, trying to recover from another burst of desire. “Maybe we could have a seat at the table, though. I want to show you the blood test results.”

When the dirty dishes had been cleared away, they sat across from each other and she pulled out the stack of papers. “Okay, here’s our problem,” she said, pointing to a column of numbers. “According to these results, Annabelle either has a raging infection or a problem with her immune system, but when we look at this bank of tests, it doesn’t support that diagnosis. The same thing is true if we look at it from another angle and consider that she might have a form of cancer. There’s support for that with these tests, but, again, it’s not supported with the companion blood work.”

Derek stared at the sheets spread out in front of him, then shook his head, “So where does that leave us?” he asked, looking a little uncomfortable. “Are there more tests we can run?”

“There are, but my concern is that we’re going to put Annabelle through a lot of needless stress,” she said. “One thing we haven’t discussed is her family history. Sometimes the answer can be right in front of our faces, but we don’t look in the right direction. Would you mind answering some questions about Annabelle’s parents?”

She saw him hesitate, “If you don’t know that much about her mother, I’ll understand, but it could really help me figure out what’s wrong with Annabelle,” she said. “I promise anything you tell me will be held in strict confidence.”

Derek studied her for a second, “It’s not that I don’t trust you,” he said. “It’s just really complicated, Natalie, Annabelle’s mother, well, her family didn’t exactly want her to marry my brother.”

“I see, so, you don’t have any contact with them,” she said. “That does make things more difficult, but I’d still like you to tell me everything you can about Natalie, and your brother, of course.”

“Right now?” Derek asked, shifting in his seat as if he was suddenly nervous.

“Well, the sooner we know if there’s anything in Annabelle’s family history that would explain her symptoms, the sooner we can figure out what’s going on,” she said, then reached across the table and put her hand on his arm. “Derek, I know it won’t be easy to talk about them. Loss is never easy, and we don’t ever completely heal after we lose someone we love, but this will help Annabelle. If you’re not ready to talk tonight, we could schedule some time tomorrow. That would give you some time to prepare yourself.”

Derek shook his head, “There’s no reason to wait,” he said. “But like I told you before, I don’t know that much about Natalie’s family.”

“That’s okay, we’ll fill in the blanks as best we can,” she said. “Maybe it would be easier if we start with your brother and, by extension, your family. That shouldn’t be too difficult, and I have a questionnaire that should help us stay focused on the most important details.”

CHAPTER 5



DEREK

Derek watched Dr. Butler pull a stack of papers out of Annabelle's chart, his heart sinking when he thought about lying to her, but he couldn't tell her the truth, at least not the entire truth. Exposing the magic in their blood would only cause problems, confuse the situation, and he was convinced that the shifter genes his niece carried couldn't be causing the problem. Omitting that one little piece of information was necessary if he didn't want to freak Dr. Butler out and make her think that he was delusional, so he'd just have to leave it out.

Dr. Butler flipped to the first page of the stack, "This form was created by a team of researchers at John-Hopkins medical center," she said. "The first few pages cover the father's family history. We'll start with those and work our way to the questions about Annabelle's mother."

After ten minutes of giving Dr. Butler more I don't know than answers to her questions, he sat back in his chair, "I'm sorry, I guess I really don't know that much about my family history after all," he said. "My parents were killed in a riding accident when I was thirteen, and my grandparents had both already been gone for several years, so there wasn't anyone left to talk about our family history. I didn't realize until now how much I don't know."

"I'm so sorry, that must have been really hard on you and your brother," Dr. Butler said, the paperwork in front of her forgotten. "How old was your brother when it happened?"

“He’d just turned eighteen, so almost overnight, he had a ranch to run and a little brother to raise. A couple of years later, Natalie came into our lives, and things got much better. I was there the night they met. . . . I was only fifteen, but I could see instantly that they were meant for each other,” he said, then shook his head. “I’m sorry, I got carried away, you don’t need to hear about that.”

It took her a second to answer, “That’s okay, sometimes things you don’t think are important can be,” she said. “Tell me more about Natalie. It sounds like she became a second mother to you.”

“More like the sister I never had,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “She wasn’t with us for very long, she died a few months after Annabelle was born, but she was there when I really needed her, and I’ll be forever grateful for the time I did have with her.”

Dr. Butler didn’t say anything for a long time, that same look on her face he’d seen before, but this time he saw a flash of what looked like desire in her eyes, and his body responded instantly. When her cheeks began to turn pink, he knew he hadn’t read her wrong, and a thrill shot through him, followed by the tingle of his magic as it slowly started to come to life.

She was the first one to break the silence that had fallen over the room, “Natalie must have been a wonderful person,” Dr. Butler said. “Do you mind talking about what happened to her?”

He took a second to get control of himself, and pushed the desire away, reminding himself Annabelle was what was important, “A few months after Annabelle was born, Natalie started to get weaker and weaker, she completely lost her appetite, and within a few weeks she didn’t even have the strength to take care of the baby. Scott took her to doctors all over the state, but she just kept fading away, and a month later, she was gone.”

“That must have been hard,” Dr. Butler said, her voice full of compassion. “And you lost your brother a few years later?”

He nodded, “He was killed in a car accident when Annabelle was three,” he said. “I’ve been raising her alone since then.”

“I’m so sorry, Derek, I mean Mr. Ambrose,” she said, her cheeks turning pink again. “So much loss for someone so young. Most people wouldn’t have been able to handle that much responsibility at such a young age.”

He smiled, “I wouldn’t have dreamed of doing anything different, Annabelle is family. I could never imagine sending her off to live with someone else,” he said. “Besides, she’s all the family I have left, and we belong together.”

Dr. Butler was looking at him that same way she had a few minutes before, and when their eyes met, he realized that what he was seeing was a mixture of desire and fear. “I think we got a little bit off-topic,” she finally stammered, then took a deep breath, and the look in her eyes disappeared. “Did anyone ever figure out what was wrong with your sister-in-law?”

“No, Scott refused to let them do an autopsy,” he said. “And since she died in a hospital, it wasn’t required.”

Dr. Butler was silent for a second, “I can’t help but notice that Annabelle’s symptoms are very similar to her mother’s,” she said, her voice gentle. “I think it might help if we knew more about Natalie and her family.”

“I’ve been trying not think that, too, but it’s getting harder and harder,” he said, shaking his head. “I wish I could give you the answers you are looking for, but I really don’t know that much about her family. She never wanted to talk about them. I can tell you that they’re not very nice people. When we found Natalie, she was running away from her father, who was trying to force her to marry a man who was much older than she was. She was convinced that he would kill her if she didn’t do what he said, and the bruises on her body that night were proof that she wasn’t wrong.”

“Oh, that’s terrible, I can understand why she wouldn’t want to talk about them,” she said, her face full of anger. “I can’t believe things like that still happen. Didn’t anyone try to stop her father?”

“I’m sure they would have if they’d known, but Natalie comes from a tiny little town up in the mountains,” he said, choosing his words carefully. “They’ve kept themselves isolated from the rest of the world for generations. Their values are a bit outdated, marriages are still arranged, and women are still treated like possessions instead of equals like they should be. I know it may be hard for someone from the city to understand, but there are still places in this world where progress hasn’t happened.”

Dr. Butler was silent for a long time, then two spots of red appeared on her cheeks, “It makes me so mad when I hear about things like this, but Natalie was lucky. She found you and your brother to protect her,” she said, then took a deep breath. “Derek, if these people are that isolated, it could be the source of Annabelle and Natalie’s illness, a genetic weakness that has been created over generations of the same DNA being mixed over and over.”

“You mean there might not be a cure?” he asked, his heart freezing at the thought of losing Annabelle. “I can’t lose her, Dr. Butler, she’s all I have left.”

Salina

“That’s not what I meant,” Salina said, wishing she hadn’t upset Derek. “But it would be a good place to start looking. I could compare Annabelle’s DNA to some of her other family members and see if the abnormalities we’ve found are there, too.”

“I just don’t think that’s going to be possible,” he said, shaking his head, clearly losing hope. “I wouldn’t dare show my face to any of them. They’d probably kill me before I could even speak.”

“Well, we’ll just have to find a way around that,” she said. “If we could get a sample of Natalie’s DNA, that could be a starting point. Do you have anything of hers that might have some skin cells or hair fibers on it? I’m sorry to ask, but with Natalie gone, that’s our best hope.”

Derek started shaking his head, then stopped, “Wait, her hat,” he said. “Natalie’s hat is still in the mud room hanging on

the hook next to my brother's. I've never been able to pack them away."

"That just might work," she said, another wave of desire sweeping through her when she looked over at Derek. "We need to get our hands on that hat as soon as we can."

"I could run home and get it in the morning," he said. "It's a two-hour drive back to Prospect, I'd rather not try it tonight."

"Tomorrow will be soon enough," she said, getting to her feet, needing to put some distance between them. "And if Annabelle is doing as well in the morning as she is tonight, I think we'll send her home. You could bring the hat back after you drop her off if you have someone to watch her for a few hours."

"Pattie, my housekeeper, takes care of Annabelle when I'm working," he said, getting up as well. "I'm sure she'll be more than happy to take over so I can bring the hat back to you."

"You're going to have a long day tomorrow. I should let you get some sleep," she said, becoming slightly desperate to get away from him. "I'll just slip out after I say goodnight to Annabelle. I'll come back in the morning after my shift in the emergency room to get the blood we'll need for the DNA testing."

"Well then, I'll see you in the morning," Derek said, then hesitated. "I was just wondering.....well.....you said that anything I told you was in confidence. Is that true for Annabelle's DNA results, too? I mean if you find something different or strange, you have to keep that to yourself, right?"

She was a bit surprised by the question, "Of course it would be," she said. "Patient confidentiality was one of the first things they drilled into our heads in medical school. But if there's something I should know, I wish you'd just tell me now."

Derek hesitated again, then shook his head, "It's nothing like that," he said with a shrug that looked a little forced. "I was just making sure, you know, protecting Annabelle and all that."

She studied him for a second, the feeling that there was something he was worried about settling over her, “Understandable,” she finally said, not able to think of anything else to say. “Well, I guess I should be going, you need some sleep, and I need to get downstairs.”

“Thank you, Dr. Butler,” Derek said, taking a few steps toward her. “I appreciate all the time you’ve dedicated to helping Annabelle get better.”

Trying to ignore the way her heart was pounding, she looked up at him, “I’m just doing my job, Mr. Ambrose,” she said. “I want to see Annabelle healthy just as much as you do.”

He studied her for a second, his eyes searching her face, “I think you do,” he said, smiling at her. “I’m glad we’ve got you on our side, and I think it’s about time you started calling me Derek.”

A knock on the door interrupted them and they both turned to see Dr. Morgan coming into the room, “Well, there’s the little patient,” he said, a fake smile on his face. “What an interesting case you are, missy.”

“Dr. Morgan, I wasn’t expecting you,” she said, stepping away from Derek.

“Yes, I can see that,” he said, looking between the two of them. “Shouldn’t you be downstairs?”

“I was just leaving,” she said. “Mr. Ambrose and I were just discussing sending Annabelle home tomorrow.”

“Oh, I don’t think that will be possible,” he said. “I saw the results of her lab work. We need to start some tests right away, possibly do a full body MRI. Sending her home is not an option.”

Derek looked over at her, “I thought we decided not to do all those tests yet?” he asked. “Did something change?”

“No, nothing has changed,” she said, looking back over at Dr. Morgan. “We’ve decided it’s too soon to put Annabelle through that much stress. We’re going to go a different route, explore some other options.”

“I can see I was almost too late,” Dr. Morgan said, shaking his head. “Your input on this case is no longer required, Dr. Butler. As of now, Annabelle is my patient. We’re going to start those tests first thing in the morning. Now, I believe you have a shift in the emergency room to do, so if you’ll excuse us, this case is no longer your concern.”

With a wave of his hand, Dr. Morgan tried to dismiss her, but she didn’t move, didn’t dare, afraid that she would do something very unprofessional, which was probably what the awful man was hoping for. Instead, she took several deep breaths and closed her eyes for a second, gathering her courage to do what she should have done long before, and quit.

Before she could, Derek stepped up to Dr. Morgan, his jaws clenched, a vein in his neck pulsing rapidly, and her skin began to tingle. “I don’t remember being consulted about this change,” Derek said, then a wave of what she could only describe as raw power rushed through her. “I think, as Annabelle’s guardian, that should be my decision, not yours.”

“Oh, but this is for the best, Dr. Butler is just a woman, she can’t possibly be expected to handle a case as complicated as your niece’s,” Dr. Morgan said, then lowered his voice. “There are things about her that you don’t know. I’m not at liberty to say what they are, but I will say this: you know how women are, ruled by their hearts and not their heads, and it can lead them to do shameful things, inappropriate things.”

She opened her mouth to defend herself, but Derek took another step toward Dr. Morgan, “Wow, for someone who wasn’t supposed to say anything, you just said a mouthful,” he said. “And most of it sounds like a load of bull..... I think it’s time for you to leave, Doctor. We’re not interested in having you on our case. Dr. Butler is doing a fine job, and I’d like to leave things the way they are.”

Dr. Morgan’s mouth popped open, then closed again with a snap, and he turned to face her, “Do I have to remind you that I run this hospital?” he snarled at her. “If I say I’m taking over a case, you bow down gracefully, that’s the way things work. I’m going to be watching you, Dr. Butler. I’ll be looking for

the first mistake you make, and then you're going to be sorry. Enjoy practicing medicine while you can, because before I'm done, you won't be able to get a job cleaning bedpans."

When the door closed behind Dr. Morgan, she looked over at Derek, not sure if she should thank him or curse him. "I'm sorry, Dr. Butler, I didn't mean to....." he said. "Can he really do what he said?"

She shook her head, "No, he's just bluffing," she said. "But he could make my life miserable."

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked, walking over to her. "I feel really bad."

"I can handle him," she said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. "He's not the first man who's been threatened by me and tried to punish me for it."

CHAPTER 6



*** DEREK ***

Derek held Annabelle's hand as they walked into the diner Saturday morning, the little girl practically vibrating with excitement, "Uncle Derek, do you think Connor and Zander will be there today?" she asked. "They said they'd let me play video games with them the next time we came."

"I talked to Noah and Grant last week, they'll be there," he said, smiling down at her. "But remember what we talked about? You need to take it easy today, I don't want you getting too tired."

Annabelle let out a long sigh, "I remember what you said, but I feel fine," she said, a little scowl on her face. "I don't think I'm sick anymore."

"Well, I'm glad to hear that," he said, smiling down at her. "Let's keep it that way."

They made their way through the diner to the back room where a group of single dads met each week, Annabelle dragging him most of the way, chattering about playing video games with her friends. He could do nothing more than wave at his friends as they went by, but as soon as he got her settled in the back of the room with the rest of the kids and the sitters they hired every week, he made his way back over to them.

"Annabelle looks like she feels better," Grant said. "But you look like hell."

"Gee, thanks," he said, smiling at his friends. "It's good to see you all too."

Just then Jessie slid into one of the empty chairs, “Hey, Derek, how’s Annabelle?” he asked. “I just heard that she’s been sick.”

He looked to the back of the room where Annabelle was laughing with the other kids, “She’s doing better, but the doctor isn’t happy with her blood work results,” he said. “It’s a long story, and I don’t want to bore you with all the details.”

“Hey, that’s what we’re here for,” Grant said. “Let’s get some food, and then you can tell us what’s been going on. I’m sure those dark circles under your eyes didn’t get there on their own.”

“This was supposed to be Jessie’s going away party,” he said. “I don’t want to ruin the day with my problems, it can wait.”

“Grant is right, this group was formed so we could offer support to other single dads. I may not be single anymore, but that doesn’t mean that has changed,” Jessie said. “You won’t ruin the day, forget the food, tell us what’s going on.”

“Annabelle has been sick off and on for two weeks, and the other night I got fed up with all the doctors around here blowing us off, so I loaded her up in the truck and took her over to Monroe,” he said. “After fighting with her, I finally got the doctor in the emergency room to take it seriously. She ran some blood work and found a few things wrong with Annabelle’s blood. Now she’s thinking it’s a genetic disease passed on from Natalie.

“Wow, maybe you’d better start over and go a little bit slower,” Noah said. “I only got about half of that.”

“Maybe we should get some food,” Grant said. “This sound like it might take a while.”

Over heaping plates of food, he told them about Annabelle being sick, about taking her to the emergency room and all that had followed, then sat back and let out a long sigh. “So that’s how I’ve spent the last two weeks,” he said. “I don’t know if I made a mistake or not; it’s a huge risk letting Dr.

Butler start doing stuff like mapping Annabelle's DNA, but if there is something wrong, we need to know."

"You're stuck between a rock and a hard place," Noah said, shaking his head. "But I think if I was in your place, I would have done the same thing."

"Matt is not going to be happy when he finds out you had to go out of town to get medical care for Annabelle," Jessie said. "I'm almost afraid to tell him. He finally took a vacation, and this is what happens."

"What do you know about this doctor?" Grant asked. "Do you think you can trust her if she figures it out?"

"Honestly, I don't know," he said. "I think that's what got me worried the most, but she does seem like a good doctor, and she's been fighting to get Annabelle the best treatment."

"You know, I'm sure Matt would be happy to talk to you about this, he might even know her," Jessie said. "He's supposed to stop by and pick up his house keys. We could ask him then."

Just then, Matt walked up, "Did I hear my name?" he asked, a smile on his face. "I hope you were saying good things about me."

They all laughed, "Actually, Derek could use your advice," Jessie said. "Why don't you get some food and join us? It's a bit of a long story."

After he'd explained it all to Matt, he sat silently fuming for a second, then took a deep breath, "First, I want to apologize for what happened with Annabelle. I'll be having a discussion with the entire staff about this," he said, pulling out his phone. "As to your Dr. Butler, I haven't ever heard of her before, but it sounds to me like she's been making sound medical decisions. It shouldn't be that hard to check up on her, most anything you want to know about anyone is on the internet. What's her first name?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, trying to remember, "I don't know, I don't think she ever told me. Our first official meeting was a little bit.....awkward," he finally

said, then remembered the business card in his wallet. “Wait, she gave me her card, it should be on there.”

Noah watched him, a suspicious look on his face, “What does that mean?” he asked. “What was so awkward about it?”

“Here it is,” he said, pulling the card out of his wallet and ignoring Noah. “Her first name is Salina, and there are a bunch of letters after her name.”

“Let me see that,” Matt said, holding out his hand.

Matt took the card, glanced at it then back up at him, a surprised look on his face, “She’s got a PhD,” he said, then started tapping away on his phone. “Hold on, I bet it won’t be hard to find her.”

Only a second later, Matt grinned, “Bingo,” he said. “Okay, let’s see.....”

Several long minutes passed, and he was starting to get impatient when Grant said, “Come on, Matt, you’re leaving us in suspense; what does it say?”

“Yeah, come on,” Jessie said. “You must be the slowest reader on the planet.”

“Sorry, there’s just a lot here,” Matt said, putting down the phone. “It looks like your Dr. Butler is a bit of a child protegee. She graduated from high school when she was only fourteen, college at sixteen, was doing her residency by the time she was twenty, and spent the last two years getting her PhD in genetics.”

“That can’t be right, I mean.....she looks like she’s smart, but she doesn’t act like she’s a.....” he trailed off. “Are you sure we’re talking about the same person?”

Matt flipped his phone around, “Here’s a picture of her,” he said. “I think it’s a few years old, but she looks really young.”

He sat looking at the picture for a long time, then looked over at Matt, “What is she doing here?” he asked. “She should be in some big city, not taking orders from someone like Dr. Morgan.”

Matt shrugged, “I think you’re going to have to ask her that,” he said. “When you do, be sure and tell her that if she gets tired of being treated like a second-class citizen, I have an opening for her here in Prospect.”

Salina

Salina was deeply asleep when her phone started buzzing on the night stand beside her. It took her several seconds to emerge from the dream she was having and reach over to grab it. Groaning, she forced her eyes open, swearing to herself that she was going to quit if Dr. Morgan was calling her on her night off, then froze when she saw the name on the screen.

It had been two days since Annabelle and her uncle had left the hospital, but they’d been on her mind the entire time, and when she looked at the time, she knew the call couldn’t be good news. Giving herself a second more to wake up, she held her finger over the button on the phone, reminding herself that no matter how much the man occupied her dreams, he could never be hers.

“This is Dr. Butler,” she finally answered. “Is Annabelle sick again?”

She heard Derek let out a sigh of relief, “I’m so glad you answered. I tried to call you at the hospital, and they said you were off for the night,” he said. “Annabelle’s fever is back, she’s thrown up twice since dinner, and she says that her body hurts. It feels like this is getting worse every time it comes back, and I don’t know what to do.”

Already out of bed, she started hunting for her clothes, “If this has only been going on for a few hours, I don’t think she’s in any real danger at this point, but I would like to get some blood while she’s actively sick,” she said. “I’m getting dressed right now. We could meet at the hospital if you want.”

“That’s a two-hour drive, I’m not sure it would be good for Annabelle right now,” he said. “I don’t suppose you could come to us? I have a friend who works at the hospital here. I’m sure he’d be happy to give you access to whatever you need.”

“I don’t know, we aren’t really supposed to make house calls,” she said. “And your friend could get into a lot of trouble if he gives me unauthorized use of the hospital.”

“Don’t worry about that, Matt won’t get in trouble. He’s in good with the hospital owners,” Derek said, then said the one thing that made it impossible to refuse. “Annabelle has been asking for you, I know this is a lot to ask.....”

Before she could change her mind, she interrupted, “I’ll be on my way in ten minutes,” “Send me the address so I can find you.”

When she knocked on the door of the modest ranch house a few hours later, it wasn’t Derek who answered the door, but an older woman. “You must be Dr. Butler. Thank you for coming. I’m Pattie, I’ve been taking care of Annabelle since she was a baby,” she said, ushering her into the house. “Derek is upstairs with Annabelle if you want to follow me. We’ve been so worried about her; it is so frustrating when she gets sick like this. We just don’t know what to do.”

“I understand how difficult it can be to have a sick child,” she said, instantly liking the woman. “But I’m sure we’ll be able help her; it just might take a little longer than any of us would like.”

When Pattie led her into the room, Annabelle looked pale and very small lying in her bed, but she managed a smile. “Look, Uncle Derek, Dr. Butler is here,” she whispered. “You said she would come, and she did.”

Derek looked over at her, the strain of the last few hours obvious by the dark circles under his eyes and the stubble of beard on his chin, and she had to fight off a wave of desire. Taking a deep breath, she tore her eyes away from him and approached the bed, aware of his eyes on her as she sank down next to Annabelle.

“Your uncle told me that you weren’t feeling very well again. Of course, I’m here,” she said. “Now tell me all about how you’re feeling so I can help you.”

Annabelle sighed, “My stomach feels yucky, my body hurts, and I’m really hot,” she said. “Am I going to die?”

Derek made a choking sound behind her, “Of course not,” she said forcefully. “You’re just a little sick, but we’re going to figure out why and make you better, I promise.”

“My mommy died,” Annabelle said, her voice barely above a whisper. “My daddy died too, that’s why Derek takes care of me.”

Unable to stop herself, not caring if she might be stepping over a line, she scooted up next to Annabelle on the bed and pulled her into her arms. “I’m sorry you lost your mommy and daddy, but you’re not going to die, sweetheart,” she said. “I know being sick can be scary, but you have a lot of people looking out for you, and that includes me.”

Annabelle snuggled down into her arms, “You smell good,” she said. “Will you read me a story?”

“I think that can be arranged, but first, we have to do something about your fever,” she said. “And I would like to draw a little more blood for the people at the lab.”

“They sure do like blood,” Annabelle said with a shrug. “But that’s okay.”

She laughed and looked over at Derek who was staring at her with a strange look on his face, “That is if it’s okay with your uncle,” she stammered, her body filling with warmth when their eyes met. “We have to ask him first.”

Derek got slowly to his feet, his eyes locked on hers, then walked over to the bed, “I think we should do whatever the doctor says,” he said. “She’s the one who knows best.”

Becoming more and more flustered by the second, thrills shooting through her, she forced herself to look down at Annabelle, ignoring the way her body began to burn when Derek came over to the bed. “Well then, I’ll just run out to my car and get my bag,” she said, relieved to get away for a few minutes. “I’ll be right back, and then we’ll see about that story.”

CHAPTER 7



*** DEREK ***

Derek watched Dr. Butler scurry from the room, his magic slowly beginning to surface, the urge to pull her into his arms and kiss her so overwhelming he had to force himself not to move. When she finally disappeared behind the closed bedroom door, he let out a long sigh and got to his feet, hoping to shake it off by pacing around the room. Annabelle and Pattie watched him silently, exchanging worried looks, but didn't say anything until it was clear he wasn't going to stop.

"Derek, you're going to wear a hole in that floor if you keep pacing," Pattie said. "Dr. Butler seems to have everything in hand. Will you sit down and relax? You're going to upset Annabelle."

"I'm sorry," he said, plopping down on the bed next to Annabelle. "I'm just worried about you, and.....some other things."

Annabelle studied him for a second, then sat up and put her arms around him, "It's okay, Uncle Derek," she said. "I think she likes you too."

He pulled back and looked down at his niece, "What do you mean?" he asked. "I didn't.....you shouldn't..... I don't....."

Pattie began to laugh from her chair in the corner of the room, "She may only be five, but she doesn't miss much," she said. "Even I could see it. Just admit it, you've got a thing for Dr. Butler."

He gave her a dirty look, “Even if I did, that wouldn’t be right; she’s Annabelle’s doctor,” he said. “Besides, I’m sure you’re both just imagining things.”

Before Pattie could reply, Dr. Butler was back, her cheeks pink from the trip to her car, and he had to look away when the desire rose to the surface again. Wondering why, of all the women in the world, it had to be Annabelle’s doctor he was attracted to, he steeled himself against what his body and the animal inside him were telling him. He was stronger than the desire that lately had been his constant companion, and was determined to put aside his needs so that Annabelle got the best care possible. Plus, he hadn’t forgotten Dr. Morgan’s threats; he wasn’t going to be the reason Dr. Butler got in trouble again.

“Derek, could you come over here?” Dr. Butler asked, breaking into his thoughts. “I want you to take a look at this rash I just noticed.”

He stepped over to the bed, ignoring the way Dr. Butler smelled, “She’s never had a rash before,” all thoughts of the doctor evaporating when he saw the raised bumps on Annabelle’s skin. “Does that mean she’s allergic to something?”

“Possibly,” Dr. Butler said. “Right now, I’m more concerned with this fever. I’m going to give her something to try and bring it down.”

“Do we need to take her to the hospital?” he asked, noticing another red place on Annabelle’s other arm. “She’s got more over here.”

“Uncle Derek, I’m hot,” Annabelle whined. “Can we open the window?”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Dr. Butler said. “And I bet we could talk Pattie into getting you a cold washcloth and some ice to help cool you off.”

“I’ll be right back,” Pattie said, getting to her feet. “I’ll bring you a nice cold glass of juice, too.”

After he opened the window, he sat down on the bed with Annabelle, “I’ll get some medicine together for Annabelle,” Dr. Butler said. “For now, I think we’re okay keeping her here, but if we can’t get that fever down, we may have to take her in.”

“You just tell me what you want me to do,” he said, taking Annabelle’s hand. “I’m here to help.”

“When Pattie brings back that washcloth, I want you to put it on Annabelle’s forehead,” she said. “If that doesn’t help, I’ll have you give her a cool bath, that usually does the trick.”

For the next two hours they used every method available to keep Annabelle’s fever down, finally resorting to putting her in a cool bath when nothing else seemed to help. It was a huge relief when he carried her out of the bathroom, her eyes bright and responsive like they should be, and laid her down on the bed. Dr. Butler took her temperature, then with a relieved smile announced that the crisis was over and they could all relax.

When Annabelle announced, “I’m hungry,” they all burst into exhaustion-fueled laughter.

“And what would you like to eat?” Pattie asked. “I’m sure I could whip up something for us all, maybe an omelet and some toast.”

“Oh, you don’t have to go to all that trouble for me,” Dr. Butler said. “I’d like to stay for a little while just to make sure Annabelle is fine, but then I really should be getting home.”

“You can’t possibly think about driving back tonight,” Pattie said. “You’re exhausted, and the roads are deserted. We have plenty of room here, I insist you spend the night.”

“That’s a generous offer, but I’m not sure that it would be.....appropriate for me to stay the night,” she said. “I’ll be fine, I’m not that tired. A strong cup of coffee is all I need.”

Derek studied Dr. Butler for a second, noticing the dark circles under her eyes and exhaustion lines on her face, “Pattie is right, you shouldn’t be driving tonight,” he said. “There are plenty of guest bedrooms in the house, or you could sleep on

the couch if it makes you feel better, but I'm not letting you leave tonight. Besides, if Annabelle gets worse again, you'd just have to turn around and come back, so all you are doing is saving yourself some driving."

Salina

Salina knew that it would be a huge mistake to spend the night, "Oh, I really couldn't," she said, desperately searching her mind for a way out. "Maybe I could get a room in town, then I would still be close."

Pattie shook her head, "It's three o'clock in the morning, I'm sure they're all closed," she said, shaking her head as she got to her feet. "Everything around here has been shut down for hours. Anyone who's out this time of night is up to no good; you'll just have to stay here."

"I didn't bring a change of clothes or anything to sleep in," she said, knowing it was a pathetic excuse before it came out of her mouth. "I mean.....I wasn't prepared."

"Oh, that's not a problem, we'll just pop your clothes into the washer, and you can borrow something to sleep in from me," Pattie said, waving her hand. "There are extra toothbrushes in the bathroom and a selection of shampoo and conditioner in the shower at the end of the hallway."

"Well, I guess....." she started, but Pattie cut her off.

"Good, since that's settled, I'll just pop down to the kitchen and throw something together for us to eat," she said. "Annabelle isn't the only one who's hungry."

When the impromptu meal was ready, Derek took two plates up to Annabelle's room and ate with her, leaving the two women alone in the kitchen. They were both too tired to bother with small talk and ate in silence as the kitchen clock ticked away in the corner, then cleaned up after they were finished and made their way back upstairs.

Annabelle was tucked up in bed, sound asleep, when they walked into the bedroom, and Derek was sprawled across a chair pulled up next to her, little snores coming from his open mouth. Pattie started quietly picking up their dirty dishes, then

slipped back out of the room and set them down on a little table outside the door before pulling it closed behind her.

“I don’t want to wake Derek up. He’ll stay in there all night anyway, might as well let him get some sleep,” she said. “You can have your pick of any room except the one right next to Annabelle’s, that’s Derek’s room. I’m just going to run the dishes down to the kitchen. I’ll bring something back for you to sleep in.”

“I really feel bad making you go to all this trouble,” she said, still hoping to get out of staying. “It’s really not that far home, and now that I’ve eaten, I feel much better.”

Pattie studied her for a second, “It’s really no trouble, and I know that you’re lying about not being tired,” she said, patting Salina’s arm. “I’m going to run back downstairs, I’ll just be a minute, then we can both get some sleep.”

Fifteen minutes later, Salina slipped between a crisp set of sheets that smelled like the outdoors, pulled the fluffy blanket up under her chin, and then snuggled into the pillows with a sigh. Letting the weight of her exhaustion flow through her, she closed her eyes and let the soft sounds of the night lull her to sleep, her last thought about the man snoring in a chair only a few doors down from her.

The sound of childish laughter woke her the next morning, and she sat up in bed disoriented at first, then flopped back down on the pillows when the night before came rushing back to her. She lay staring up at the ceiling for a long time, not sure if she was brave enough to come out of the bedroom, but the call of nature finally drove her out from under the covers.

After a quick glance in the mirror, she gathered her long hair up into a bun and pinned it up, then slipped out of the room and ran down the hallway, sure that Derek was going to come out of Annabelle’s room any second. The sound of the little girl’s laughter could still be heard as she shut the door, flipped the lock, and took care of business. Once she’d washed her hands, she stood at the door for a second, quickly opened it, and stepped out of the bathroom right into Derek’s arms, almost knocking them both down.

He wrapped his arms around her and steadied them both, then looked down at her, “Well, good morning, Dr. Butler,” he said, a grin spreading across his face. “I hope you slept well.”

She wondered if he was ever going to let her go, and had to fight the desire slowly creeping through her when she realized her hands were pressed up against his bare chest. “Oh, I ummm.....slept just fine,” she finally managed to say. “I think you can let me go now.”

Derek studied her for a second, “What if I don’t want to?” he asked. “What if I want to stand here just like this for a while?”

“That’s not a good idea,” she said, slipping out of his arms. “I should really be heading home.”

His eyes roamed over her body, “You might want to get dressed first,” he said. “I think you look amazing, don’t get me wrong, but some people might be offended if you go out dressed like that.”

She looked down, her face turning pink when she realized that Pattie’s sleep shirt only covered the top half of her body, and started backing toward the stairs. “Pattie took my clothes last night,” she said, so flustered she could get her mind to work. “Maybe I’ll just go look for them or something.”

Derek was still grinning at her, his eyes full of mischief when she reached the stairs and turned to run down them, her body throbbing with unanswered need. Cursing herself for agreeing to stay, she made her way to the kitchen, where she found Pattie humming to herself as she stood at the stove. The smell of coffee and bacon filled the room, and her stomach growled so loudly Pattie heard it and turned away from the stove, a smile on her face.

“Good morning, well, it’s almost lunch time, but I figured you needed to sleep,” Pattie said. “There’s coffee in the pot, the cups are in the cabinet above, the milk is in the fridge, so make yourself at home. I’ll have breakfast ready in a few minutes.”

“Oh, I don’t know if I should stay,” she said, looking over her shoulder, expecting to see Derek any second. “I was hoping my clothes were ready.”

“Not quite. They’re still in the dryer, and it will be at least thirty minutes before they’re done,” Pattie said, shaking her head, then smiled. “Plenty of time for you to have some breakfast before you leave. Now sit down, and I’ll bring you some coffee.”

Sensing that she had no choice, she walked over to the table and sat down, “Okay, you talked me into it,” she said. “But then I really need to get going soon.”

CHAPTER 8



*** DEREK ***

Derek stood at the end of the hallway watching Dr. Butler disappear down the stairs, trying to sort through the mixture of shock and desire that was flooding his system and awakening the animal inside him. He would have never imagined that under those layers of loose clothes there was a pair of incredible legs hidden from sight, and couldn't help but wonder what else the doctor was hiding. Tempted to go after her, he started down the hallway, then remembered Annabelle and went into her room instead.

Reminding himself his niece was what was important, he took a second to collect himself before putting a smile on his face. "Who's ready for breakfast?" he asked, looking around the room like it was full of people. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving, and I smell bacon."

Annabelle giggled, "Uncle Derek, I'm the only one here," she chirped. "You're silly."

He walked over and scooped her up, "You think so?" he asked, then gave her a big kiss. "I'm glad you're feeling better, sweetheart."

"Me too," Annabelle said. "Does the doctor know what's wrong with me yet?"

The thought of Dr. Butler had his body tingling again, "Let's go find out," he said, putting the child on her feet and taking her hand. "I think she's downstairs having breakfast."

Dr. Butler was sitting at the table with Pattie when they came in, still dressed in the skimpy nightshirt, a cup of coffee

in front of her. She was laughing, but when she saw him, the laughter died down, and he was sure he saw a spark of desire erupt in her eyes, but she quickly looked away. A huge smile spread across Dr. Butler's face when she saw Annabelle, but she wasn't prepared when the little girl ran across the kitchen and launched herself into her arms.

"Oh, well, good morning to you," Dr. Butler said, the shock on her face quickly turning to pleasure. "You look like you're feeling better this morning."

Annabelle nodded her head vigorously, "Lots better," she said. "Like I was never sick."

"I'll get you both some breakfast," Pattie said, getting to her feet. "We've got bacon and eggs, and I made a special trip into town and got some muffins from the bakery before you all got up."

"Blueberry," Annabelle shouted. "I want blueberry."

They were just finishing breakfast when there was a loud knock on the door, "I wonder who that could be?" Pattie said, getting to her feet. "I'm not expecting anyone today."

"It's probably just one of the guys from the barn," he said, putting down his fork. "I'll get it, you stay where you are and finish your breakfast."

"I don't know why they'd be knocking on the front door," Pattie said, sitting back down. "They usually just come in through the back door when they need you."

The knocking started up again before he could get to the front door, this time even louder and more insistent than before, and he jerked it open, ready to lay into whoever it was on the other side. But he froze when he saw Dr. Morgan standing on the porch, tapping his foot, an impatient look on his face.

Before he could say a word, the man was pushing his way into the house, "Where is she? I know she's here; her car is parked out front," Dr. Morgan said. "I told her that I'd be watching, I warned her I wouldn't stand for her tricks. I'm just

surprised a man like you would fall for her games, she's nothing but a.....”

“Hold on, you can't just come barging into my house,” he said, stepping in front of the man. “And you'd better watch what you say about Dr. Butler. I happen to like her, and this is my home.”

“Of course, you like her,” Dr. Morgan shot at him, then looked him up and down. “And my guess is you like her too much. Dr. Butler had problems in the past separating her personal and professional life, and I won't stand for that kind of behavior in my hospital.”

“I can assure you nothing unprofessional has occurred here,” he said. “Annabelle got sick again last night, and Dr. Butler was kind enough to come to us. We insisted she spend the night since it was very late before Annabelle got better.”

“Isn't that convenient, a miraculous recovery,” Dr. Morgan said, then pushed him out of the way again. “I'm going see that she loses her license. Women should not be doctors, and this is just proof of that.”

Derek realized that there was no way to stop the man short of physical violence and let him go, but he was right behind him, protesting the entire time. When he walked into the kitchen and saw Dr. Butler sitting at the table in the skimpy nightgown, a pleased look appeared on his face, followed by a look of superiority. He strolled slowly across the room, clearly beginning to enjoy himself, and stood staring at Dr. Butler for a few seconds.

“Well, will you look at this,” he said, a smile slowly spreading across his face. “I warned them, I told them it would only be a matter of time before you embarrassed the hospital. I'll be taking this to the administration and then to the medical board; you've seduced your last patient, Dr. Butler,” he said, then shook his head. “Such a shame. Not only will this look bad for the hospital, but it looks bad for the whole profession. You should be ashamed of yourself, little lady.”

Dr. Butler cringed with each word that Dr. Morgan said, and when he finally stopped speaking, Derek was sure that she

was going to start crying. The animal inside him suddenly came to life, and the urge to protect her drove him forward several feet, the need to punish the man slowly taking over. Taking deep breaths to control himself, he watched, heart pumping, as Dr. Butler slowly got to her feet.

“You’re the one who should be ashamed,” she said, two bright spots of color appearing on her cheeks. “Only a pathetic man like you would set out to destroy me. I’m sorry you can’t handle the fact that I’m smarter than you, and it’s not my fault that I’m a better doctor or a better person than you are, so you’d better back off before you find yourself in a fight you can’t win.”

“You’re fired,” Dr. Morgan screamed at her. “Do you hear me? You’re finished.”

Dr. Butler laughed, “Nice try, but I happen to know that you don’t have the power to fire me,” she said. “But I’ll save you the trouble of going to the administration. I quit, but don’t think I’m going to go away quietly. I’ll be filing a complaint against you with the medical board as soon as you leave here. Two can play at that game, Dr. Morgan.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Dr. Morgan hissed at her, then when she just gave him a big smile, he lunged at her. “You little bitch.....”

Salina

It took everything in Salina not to shrink back when Dr. Morgan came at her with his fists raised, but instead of cringing away from him, she lifted her chin and stared him down. Just as he got to her, Derek tackled him to the ground, then hauled him back up onto his feet only a second later and started pushing him toward the door. She didn’t move until they were out of the room and she heard the door slam. She collapsed into her chair and let out the breath that she’d been holding.

“I don’t like that doctor, he’s mean,” Annabelle said. “I’m glad you’re not going to be working for him anymore.”

She looked over at the little girl, feeling tears beginning to sting her eyes, “Me too, sweetheart,” she said, forcing a smile. “I’m just not sure what I’m going to do now.”

Just then, Derek came back into the kitchen but stopped just inside the door, his eyes roaming over her in that way that always made her heart beat just a bit faster. “Are you okay?” he finally asked, an intensity in his eyes she’d never seen before. “He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

She shook her head, “He would have if you hadn’t stopped him,” she said. “I don’t know what got into me, I just couldn’t take it anymore. We didn’t do anything wrong last night.”

“Any man who hits a woman isn’t much of a man,” Derek said, a little smile starting to appear on his face, his eyes beginning to sparkle. “But you sure did give it to him. You were right about everything you said, and he knew it. His physical strength was all he had left. You should be proud of yourself, Dr. Butler. It’s about time someone stood up to him, and I hope you meant it about fighting.”

“I don’t think I have any choice now,” she said, the reality of what she’d just done setting in. “I just hope it’s not going to cost me my career. Men like that have a way of coming out on top when it comes to these things.”

Feeling her eyes beginning to fill with tears again, her head starting to feel a little fuzzy with the enormity of what she’d just done, she stood up from the table, “Would you all excuse me?” she stammered, desperate to get away before she started crying. “I think I need a few minutes to myself.”

Desperate for the nearest escape, she slipped out of the kitchen door, then looked around and spotted a bench deep in the shadows of a big pine tree. Collapsing onto the worn seat, she leaned over, put her face in her hands, and let the tears come, but it wasn’t long before she began to wonder what she was crying about. Taking a deep breath, she sat up and wiped the tears off her face with the sleeve of the nightgown, a bit surprised to see that she was still wearing it.

A second later, she heard the screen door bang, and then warmth began to spread through her, and she wasn’t a bit

surprised to see Derek coming toward her across the lawn. When he got to her, she slid over on the bench and made room for him, then looked down into her lap, not sure what to say. Derek didn't say anything either, just reached over and took her hand, squeezed it, then settled back on the bench and made himself comfortable.

The warmth was back again, spreading from where their hands were clasped, up her arm and all over her body, and a feeling of comfort quickly followed it. She stole a quick glance over at Derek out of the corner of her eye. His face looked calm, but she could see the vein in his neck pulsing and knew the anger was just under the surface, and a powerful thrill of desire rushed through her, making her gasp.

Confused by the mixture of emotions, she sat up and looked over at him, "Do you want to talk about what just happened?" he asked. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, I'm not trying to pry into your personal life, but that was....."

"I'm sorry, Derek, I had no idea that was going to happen," she said, the tears back. "I shouldn't have stayed here last night, and I shouldn't have lost my temper in front of Annabelle. I'll go get dressed and leave right away."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. Dr. Morgan was way out of line, he deserved what he got and more," he said. "I'm glad you lost your temper. Annabelle needs to know that the only way to handle a bully is to stand up to them. You were brilliant, Dr. Butler."

She looked over at him, "I think maybe it's time you started calling me Salina," she said, then sighed. "Since I won't be Annabelle's doctor anymore, I don't see what it can hurt."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Why won't you be Annabelle's doctor?"

"When the medical board hears about this, they're going to suspend my license until it's settled one way or the other," she said, unable to stop a few tears from rolling down her cheeks. "I know we didn't do anything wrong, but that could be hard

to prove, and I already..... well..... I have a
reputation.....”

CHAPTER 9



DEREK

Derek couldn't help the little smile that turned up the corners of his mouth, "I'm sorry, did you just say that you have a reputation?" he asked. "I find that hard to believe, you don't exactly look like the type."

Salina looked over at him, she sighed again, "I'm not sure if that was an insult or a compliment," she said. "But I'm going to let it go, because I think you meant well."

"It was meant as a compliment," he said. "I'm on your side, remember?"

She studied him for a second, "I guess you deserve an explanation, but it's really embarrassing to talk about it, so promise me you won't make fun of me," she said, then waited until he nodded his head. "I got involved with a patient's father, and it blew up in my face in a big way. He told me that he wasn't married and I believed him. I let him use me to get his daughter better care at the hospital. I was stupid, and I believed him when he said that he loved me."

"Everyone makes mistakes," he said, hating to see the way humiliation clouded Salina's face. "You can't be the first one to make that kind of mistake."

"It wasn't that simple, not only did I abuse hospital resources and act unprofessionally," she said, then hesitated. "His wife showed up the day he was taking his daughter home and made a huge scene right in the middle of the lobby just as the hospital administrators were walking through. She accused me of abusing my power. She said I threatened to withhold

care for her daughter if her husband didn't sleep with me, and then she threatened to sue the hospital.”

“Oh, Salina, I'm so sorry,” he said. “That must have been horrible.”

“I was devastated, sure that my career was over, all because I fell for the wrong man,” she said, then looked over at him. “He used me, but I let him. I was so naive, couldn't see what was really happening. I thought I was in love; thought I'd found my prince charming.”

“But he turned out to be a frog,” he said, giving her a little smile.

“Something like that,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “By the time it was all over, the hospital was able to prove that he lied to me and most of the staff about being married, and the lawsuit was dropped, but my reputation was ruined. It's hard enough being my age and a woman, but once word got around, well.....no one wanted to work with me.”

“Did the hospital fire you?” he asked. “Is that why you're here?”

Salina shook her head, “The hospital wanted me to take some time off, get some rest, and let the rumors die down,” she said. “I let my parents talk me into coming here. They said I should keep working, that it would look terrible on my resume if I did nothing. I was supposed to come here, get lots of rest, enjoy the outdoors, work some shifts at the hospital, and give myself a chance to breathe. Instead, Dr. Morgan has me working the nightshift in the emergency room, and he takes away any patient that needs more than a prescription and makes my life miserable every chance he gets. I just couldn't take it anymore.”

“It sounds like you did the right thing quitting,” he said. “If you ask me that man is a little unstable, and just to put your mind at rest, if he decides to pursue this thing with the medical board, I can prove that nothing happened between us last night.”

She looked over at him, her face full of hope, “You can prove it?” she asked. “How?”

“Nanny cam,” he said, grinning at her. “I have one in every room where Annabelle goes. Well, except the bathroom, that would just be wrong.”

“You spent the entire night in Annabelle’s room,” she said, a smile spreading across her face. “And you have it on camera.”

“Every second of the night,” he said. “Dr. Morgan is going to be very sorry if he tries to get your license revoked. He’s going to look like an idiot, and I’m going to enjoy it.”

“Oh, Derek, I think you just saved my career,” she said, launching herself into his arms and giving him a hug. “Thank you, thank you, thank you.”

Suddenly off balance, he threw his arms around her to keep them from falling off the bench, but it wasn’t enough, and they toppled to the ground. Salina landed on top of him, her breasts pressed against his chest, her body on top of his, and thrill after thrill rushed through him, stealing his breath. With a gasp, she pushed herself off him and scrambled to her feet, her cheeks bright pink, her chest rising and falling, a look of surprise on her face.

He got slowly to his feet, the animal inside him suddenly in control, “You’re welcome,” he said, grinning at her. “What would I have to do to get a kiss?”

Salina’s eyes widened, and she took a step back from him, “Derek, didn’t you hear what I just told you?” she asked. “I can’t.....we can’t.....”

“But this is different,” he said, taking a step toward her. “I’m not married, and as of a few minutes ago, you’re no longer employed by the hospital, so I don’t see what’s standing in our way.”

“How about my professional reputation,” she said, but didn’t back away. “I’m still Annabelle’s doctor, or at least I think I am.”

He pulled her into his arms, feeling the heat between them ignite instantly, “You’re fired, Dr. Butler,” he said, then lowered his mouth to hers.

She was stiff in his arms for a second, then seemed to melt as her arms came up around his neck, and he deepened the kiss, all the days of longing suddenly released in a rush of pleasure. Salina moaned deep in her chest as he feasted on her mouth, his tongue tasting and exploring until she was squirming in his arms. Breaking the kiss, he looked down at her, then slowly let her go, the desire in her eyes making it almost impossible to step away.

When she was standing on her own, he grinned down at her, “After much consideration, I’ve decided to rehire you, Dr. Butler,” he said. “Would you like some help back up to the house?”

Salina

Salina was still too shocked by the depth of what she’d felt when Derek kissed her to reply right away, but as she stood there watching him, the grin on his face started to make her mad. The anger chased away the pounding need that had taken over her body, and she welcomed it, even as her cheeks turned a bright shade of scarlet when she thought about how she’d behaved.

“I’m glad you think what happened to me is funny,” she said, stomping past him. “Maybe I should just stay fired, because you obviously don’t respect me.”

He caught up to her in only a few steps, “I think what happened to you was horrible. You were a victim, Salina, and anyone who can’t see that is blind,” he said. “I probably shouldn’t have kissed you, but I couldn’t help myself. There’s something about you that I’m drawn to, and I guess I just wanted to see if you felt it, too.”

She stopped and stared at him, wishing he hadn’t crossed that line, “And then what?” she asked. “Did you think you would just kiss me like that, and we’d go on the way we have been?”

“I guess that means you feel it too,” Derek said, a pleased smile on his face. “That’s a relief, I was worried it was just me.”

“It’s not just you, but it doesn’t matter,” she said, then groaned when the smile on his face got even bigger. “Derek, this is an impossible situation, I can’t.....do this with you and still be Annabelle’s doctor, it’s one or the other.”

He shrugged his shoulders, “She won’t be sick forever,” he said. “I can wait.”

“How do you know I’ll even be here?” she asked. “In case you missed it, I just quit my job, and my life is a mess, Derek. The house I’m living in belongs to the hospital, so as soon as I officially quit, I’ll be homeless. I can’t be thinking about..... well.....anything else but figuring out what I’m going to do.”

“Well, I happen to have a few ideas about that,” he said, starting for the house. “You’re going to need something to wear to the barbeque tonight, unless you’re planning on wearing that nightshirt.”

She looked down at herself, her cheeks flaming again, “What barbeque?” she asked, running to catch up with him. “And what’s wrong with my clothes? Pattie washed them.”

“Nothing is wrong with your clothes if you’re an old woman,” he said, turning to look over at her. “But you’re a not, Salina. I’m sure there’s a good reason you’ve been hiding yourself in those baggy old lady clothes, and I’m willing to wait for you to tell me what it is. I just thought you might want to be yourself for a change.”

She stopped and watched his back as he walked across the yard, “I am being myself,” she said, but the words fell flat even to her as she thought about all the times her mother had lectured her about her beauty holding her back. “At least, I think I am.”

Derek stopped, turned, and looked back at her, his eyebrows raised, “Well, now might be a good time to find out,” he said, a challenge in his eyes. “There’s a closet full of Natalie’s clothes up in the attic, and I’m sure something in

there will fit you. You're a beautiful woman, Salina, it's time you stopped hiding it."

When she just shook her head, he turned and went back into the house, leaving her standing in the yard, more confused than she'd been when she came outside. Pattie was cleaning up the kitchen when she came in a few minutes later, but stopped and turned to look over at her, her face full of compassion. It was almost more than she could take; the tears were back, and she had to take a deep breath, afraid that she was going to embarrass herself even more.

"Now, we'll have none of that. I know it's been a rough day, but I think things are going to get better soon," Pattie said, smiling at her. "Derek just came through here barking orders about a barbeque tonight. He's got that look in his eye he always gets when he's planning something. I don't suppose you know anything about it?"

"Only that I'm not going," she said. "I can't just hang around here. I have to get my life straightened out. I don't have a job or a place to live right now, a barbeque is the last place I should be."

Pattie studied her for a second, "Actually, Derek might have this one right," she finally said. "You need to relax and have some fun. All those problems will still be there tomorrow."

"But I can't just pretend they're not there," she said, shaking her head. "That would be.....irresponsible."

"Let me ask you this," Pattie said. "Is there really anything you could do today that won't wait until tomorrow?"

"Well, no, but....." she trailed off.

"That's what I thought," Pattie said. "It won't hurt you to take a break, Dr. Butler, you deserve it after the morning you had."

"Please call me Salina," she said. "Dr. Butler sounds so formal considering....."

"Does that mean you'll stay?" Pattie asked, a big smile on her face. "You won't regret it, I promise."

“I don’t have anything to wear……well, I mean I do……” she hesitated, suddenly embarrassed. “Derek says my clothes look like something an old woman would wear.”

“Oh, I see,” Pattie said. “And what do you think?”

“Well, they are, but well……my mother…… she always said that beauty was a sign of weakness,” she said. “She was embarrassed by me. She thought people would assume that I was stupid because I’m pretty.”

Pattie stared at her for a second, “Honey, I have never heard anything so ridiculous in my entire life,” she said. “I don’t know what your mother was thinking, but frankly, I think she was jealous. You’ve got it all, Salina, brains and beauty, you shouldn’t hide either.”

“I don’t know, I’ve been dressing like that for a long time,” she said, suddenly nervous. “Derek said I could borrow some of Natalie’s things, but I don’t know……”

“What a wonderful idea,” Pattie said, interrupting her. “Let’s go upstairs and see what we can find right now. Natalie had excellent taste in clothes; I’m sure there will something perfect for you.”

Before she could stop her, Pattie was rushing her up to the attic, “Derek put all of Scott and Natalie’s things up here for Annabelle,” she said. “Natalie’s clothes are hanging in the closet in the back, they’re probably a little dusty, but we can fix that.”

Half an hour later, they emerged from the narrow stairs that led to the attic. Salina’s arms were full of clothes, and Pattie was gushing about how good she was going to look. Not as sure as her new friend about the change, she took everything back to her room and spent more time than she should have trying everything on, then out of desperation, made Pattie pick what she should wear.

CHAPTER 10



*** DEREK ***

Derek gave the grill one final look, then closed the lid and wandered over to where his friends had gathered around the big patio table but was too nervous to sit down. He wasn't sure what had gotten into him that afternoon, what he had been thinking, kissing Salina or challenging her the way he had. He'd lost control of his magic, let it take over, and he hoped that he hadn't pushed her too far. He was afraid that instead of pulling her in, he'd broken the fragile bond they'd formed.

He wasn't sure when Salina had become so important to him, when he'd decided that he wasn't going to ignore his attraction to her any longer, only that something had changed that morning. Annabelle was still his first priority, her health still the most important thing, but what was happening between them was real, he felt that down to the tips of his toes. No woman had ever made him feel the way she did, never felt the kind of yearning that overtook him when they were together, and if he'd learned nothing else from all the loss he'd experienced, it was that life was too short not to grab all the happiness that you could.

"Are you going to sit down or just stand there staring at the door?" Jessie asked. "You're making me nervous."

"Leave him alone," Bonnie said. "He's smitten with her."

He opened his mouth to deny it, but just then the back door opened. Pattie came out carrying a tray of food, Salina right behind her, and all he could do was stare as the two women approached them. Gone was the long skirt and sensible shoes,

and there was no sign of a baggy sweater or an oversized shirt. Instead, Salina was dressed in a flowered sundress that showed off her gorgeous legs with a full skirt that swung as she walked. Her hair hung down over her shoulders in soft waves, softening her face, and he was sure that he saw a touch of makeup.

A powerful wave of desire left him speechless when she brushed past him and put the bowl she was carrying down on the table, then stepped back, a nervous smile on her face. A long silence followed as he tried to get himself under control. He knew that everyone was waiting for him to speak, but he couldn't get his brain to work. All the blood had gone somewhere besides his brain.

"Everyone, I want you to meet Salina.....I mean Dr. Butler.....she's been taking care of Annabelle," he finally managed to say, then took a deep breath. "I'll let everyone introduce themselves."

He could tell that his friends were trying not to laugh, "I'll do the honors," Jessie said, getting to his feet. "Dr. Butler, I'm Jessie Parker, and this is my wife, Bonnie. We have a ranch on the other side of town. Bonnie works for my brother Matt at the hospital in town. She's a Physician's Assistant, so you two have something in common."

"And I'm the infamous Matt, or Dr. Parker, if you prefer," Matt said, shoving his brother back into his chair. "It's nice to meet you, Dr. Butler, I've read good things about you."

"Please call me Salina," she said, giving Derek a dirty look. "It's nice to meet you all, but I don't understand why you didn't treat Annabelle when she got sick."

"I've been gone on vacation for the last three weeks," Matt said. "Believe me, if I'd been home things would have been different, but Annabelle is in good hands, so everything worked out just fine."

"Thank you," she said, charmed by the handsome doctor. "I hope you'll be available to consult with me on the case. Another set of eyes is always welcome."

“I hope to do more than that,” Matt said, smiling at Salina. “It’s not that often we get someone with your education around here. I was hoping we could spend some time together. Maybe I could take you out for coffee tomorrow before you go home.”

“Oh, well, I suppose that would be okay,” Salina said, her cheeks turning pink. “I don’t have any other plans.”

Derek was surprised to feel a surge of jealousy shoot through him, and reminded himself that Matt just wanted to offer Salina a job, but seeing her blush that way woke the animal inside him, forcing him to take deep breaths. When he’d finally recovered, he led Salina over to a chair across the table from Matt, even though he knew he was being ridiculous. He’d never felt this protective of a woman, never felt a pang of jealousy like the one he’d just fought off, and decided it was going to take some getting used to.

Forcing himself to walk away, he went to the grill and got the steaks off, piling them onto a huge platter while they were still sizzling, then carried them over to the table and set them down with a flourish. He took his place next to Salina, feeling like it was the most natural thing in the world for him to do. They all filled their plates and fell on the meal. Other than compliments on the food, no one spoke for a long time, but as stomachs began to fill, conversation began to flow again.

They laughed and chatted over desert and coffee. Salina was more relaxed than he’d ever seen her, and he found himself watching her more than he should have. When conversation began to die down, Bonnie and Jessie got to their feet, “Derek, why don’t we give Pattie a hand cleaning up the kitchen? She worked so hard to make all this food it’s the least we can do,” Bonnie said. “That will give Matt and Salina a chance to get to know each other better.”

A look of alarm appeared on Salina’s face, “Oh, I should help too,” she said, starting to get up. “Pattie’s already done enough.”

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” he said, pulling her back into her seat. “He won’t bite, and I’ll be right inside.”

Salina

Salina looked over at Matt, who was smiling at her like he'd just won the lottery, a bit off balance by everyone's sudden departure, and managed to smile back as if she wasn't thinking about bolting from the table. Matt seemed like a nice enough guy, but it seemed a bit strange that they'd been thrown together the way they had, and she waited, holding her breath for him to speak.

"We haven't really talked about our shared interests tonight," he finally said. "Besides being a doctor, I run the hospital here in town, and to be honest with you, it's been a bigger challenge than I thought it would be. I've spent the last two years trying to bring us up to date with both our equipment and the staff. As you can imagine, staffing a hospital in a small town like Prospect can be difficult."

"Yes, I could see that," she said, starting to relax. "It must be hard to get qualified people on staff."

"Which is why I wanted to talk to you," Matt said, the smile back. "I'm hoping that you'll come work for me. I know you had some problems with Dr. Morgan. The man is a first-class jerk, so I'm not surprised, but I can promise you that working for me will be very different."

Her relief that all Matt wanted was to give her a job was so immense she wanted to laugh, "That's what this was all about, giving me a job?" she asked, then slapped her hand over her mouth. "Oops, I didn't mean to say that out loud."

Matt studied her for a second, his face full of confusion, "What did you think?" he asked, then started laughing. "Oh my gosh, you thought that I was.....well, I could see how you might."

"I'm so embarrassed," she said. "I'm not very good with people, I'm always reading things wrong.....I just thought..... I mean, you asked me out for coffee right when we met.....and then everyone left us alone.....I should have known Derek wouldn't....."

“It’s okay, Salina, you didn’t read things wrong, you just didn’t have enough information,” Matt said, grinning at her, clearly still enjoying himself. “Besides the fact that Derek is clearly head over heels for you, I’m married to my job, a confirmed bachelor, if you will. As tempting as the thought is, I’m really just interested in your brain, and there’s also the fact that I’d like to keep all my teeth.”

It took her a second to wrap her head around everything Matt had just said, “Matt, as flattered as I am by the offer, there are some things going on right now that might make you change your mind,” she finally said. “I’m sure Derek meant well, but hiring me might not be the best choice right now.”

“This wasn’t Derek’s idea, Salina, it was mine. We need someone like you at the hospital. I know I won’t be able to keep you for long, Derek made that clear, but I’ll take what I can get,” he said. “Whatever happened back in the city didn’t affect your medical license, I checked, and Dr. Morgan is an idiot, so we’re not even going to go into that except to say I’ll have your back if need be. So, what do you say? Will you come work for me?”

She didn’t know what to say at first, hadn’t expected to get a job offer before she’d even quit her other job, and wasn’t even sure she wanted another position right then. “Wow, I don’t know how to respond. I wasn’t expecting this, I haven’t even given the hospital in Monroe my resignation,” she said. “I haven’t had any time to think about what I want to do.”

“That’s okay, I understand, take some time to think about it,” Matt said. “Tell you what, instead of coffee tomorrow, how about I give you a tour of the hospital?”

Just then, Derek and the others came back out, “Well, how is it going out here?” Derek asked. “Should we start talking about where you’re going to live? Bonnie’s little house is going to be available in a week or so, and I thought maybe you could stay here until then.”

Everyone was staring at her, and she started to feel cornered, like she didn’t have any choice but to agree, “Ummm.....I don’t.....that is, I haven’t.....” she

stammered, then jumped to her feet. “Will you all excuse me.....I should go check on Annabelle.”

She made it all the way into the kitchen before Derek caught up to her, “Salina, what’s wrong?” he asked. “I thought this would be the perfect solution.”

“You thought it would be the perfect solution?” she asked, years of pent-up frustration coming to the surface. “Did I ask you to help me solve my problems? Did I ask you to find me a new job? I’m tired of everyone deciding what’s right for me. For once in my life, I’d like to make my own decision, not have one thrust on me.”

She turned and stomped away, leaving Derek standing in the middle of the kitchen with his mouth hanging open, “I was just trying to help,” he finally said, catching up to her again. “I’m sorry if I overstepped. Can we please talk about this?”

Her anger deflated, and she sighed, “I’m sorry, I get that you were trying to help,” she said. “But I’m a grown woman, Derek, I don’t need anyone to take care of me. If you’re doing this because you feel guilty, don’t, Dr. Morgan has had it out for me since the day I arrived.”

“Is that what you think?” Derek asked. “That I’m trying to get you a job because I feel guilty?”

“Well, aren’t you?” she shot back, putting her hands on her hips, then was instantly sorry when she saw the look in his eyes.

He pulled her into his arms, “If that’s what you really think, you’re not as smart as I thought you were,” he said. “I’m trying to keep you here, Salina, and not just for Annabelle.”

This time when his mouth came down on hers, she was prepared for the rush of pleasure and the warmth that spread through her, but that didn’t mean that she was any more capable of stopping him as he feasted on her mouth. Instead, she found herself swept away by the passion that roared to life between them, and when his hands began to explore her body,

she pressed herself against him, a new kind of need beginning to build deep inside her.

She was swaying on her feet when he finally pulled away and looked down at her, “That’s why I want you to stay,” he said. “Not because I feel guilty, not because I need you to take care of Annabelle, but it’s your decision, Salina, it always was.”

CHAPTER 11



*** DEREK ***

Derek pushed his half-empty plate away, done trying to pretend that he had an appetite, hating to waste so much food, but unable to eat another bite. After glancing at the back of the room where Annabelle was playing with the other kids, he turned his attention to the table full of men who were deep in discussion about the construction of a new park on the edge of town. He hadn't really been in the mood to come that morning, but Annabelle had convinced him with her big blue eyes and sad face, so he'd given in, but his heart wasn't really into it.

"Earth to Derek," Grant said. "We've been talking to you for five minutes."

"What?" he asked. "Oh, sorry, I guess I was lost in my thoughts."

"Are you still pouting because Salina wouldn't move in with you?" Grayson asked. "If you ask me, she did you a favor."

"I'm not pouting, I'm just frustrated with the whole situation," he said. "It's been almost a week, and she's barely said two words to me. She comes to visit Annabelle every day, spends time chatting with Pattie, but if I come into the room, she's gone so fast her perfume is the only reason I know she's been there."

Grayson let out a grunt of disgust, "Man, she's just a woman, there are plenty more out there, so stop chasing this one if she doesn't want to be caught," he said. "It's all just a

game anyway. She wants you to chase her, ignore her for a while, and she'll be begging you for attention."

"It's not like that, she's trying to keep our relationship professional, and I get that, but....." he trailed off, his shoulders slumping. "Well, this isn't the way I thought it would go."

"You can't have it both ways, Derek," Noah said. "She's either Annabelle's doctor or she's your girlfriend, there's really no other way. Besides, didn't she tell you when Annabelle was better things might change?"

"But in the meantime, she's acting like we're strangers, and it's driving me crazy," he said. "I guess I shouldn't have pushed her so hard, but I just wanted her to understand why I helped her get a job with Matt."

"Well, maybe you won't have to wait that much longer," Grant said. "Annabelle seems to be doing just fine, she hasn't been sick since last week, has she?"

He shook his head, "No, not at all," he said, letting out a sigh. "And that's not helping my frustration level either. One day she's running a fever and throwing up, the next she's back to her wild little self. I never know what the day will bring. I just wish it was one way or the other, not that I want something to be wrong with her."

"I guess that means you haven't gotten the results back from the DNA testing," Noah said. "That stuff takes a while, doesn't it?"

"Yeah, three or four weeks, and that's another thing I've been worrying about," he said, then lowered his voice. "I keep thinking that I'm making a mistake not telling Salina the truth. I'm afraid she's going to stumble onto something in Annabelle's DNA that's going to give us away. I can't hide it from her forever, and maybe it would be better to tell her from the very beginning, but I have no idea how to do it."

"If you want my advice, don't say a word. The less she knows, the better," Grayson said. "Women can't be trusted with secrets; they always blab, and this is a pretty big one."

“I’m not worried about her telling anyone,” he said, giving Grayson a dirty look. “Salina would never betray our trust, she’s too professional for that, but I’m afraid that if I tell her this now it will just drive her even further away.”

“It might, but lying to her isn’t going to help either,” Grant said. “But it sounds like you’ve got some time to decide. The tests won’t be back for a couple more weeks, maybe things will change between now and then.”

“I hope that you’re right, all this worrying is wearing me out,” he said. “And seeing her but not being able to talk to her or touch her isn’t helping either. I think I’m going crazy little by little.”

“You know what you need?” Noah asked, a smile spreading across his face. “A good reason to see her away from the ranch and Annabelle, someplace where she won’t have any choice but to talk to you.”

“What did you have in mind?” he asked, desperate enough to try anything.

“Well, the box supper is coming up,” Grant said. “If we could get her to enter a box, you could buy it, and bingo, you’ve got her to yourself for a couple of hours.”

His spirits lifted considerably when he thought about it, “That sounds a bit complicated,” he said, not completely sure it was a good idea. “That could backfire on me.”

“Oh, come on, Derek,” Grant said. “Love is always a risk. Are you willing to take one?”

When he and Annabelle got home later that day, he found Pattie in the kitchen, “I need your help with something,” he said, giving her a big smile. “My entire life rests on you helping me with this, so please don’t say no until you’ve listened to my entire plan.”

“Derek Ambrose, what are you up to?” Pattie asked. “I know that look in your eyes, I’m afraid to ask what you want.”

“Well, you’re on the committee running the box supper, right?” he asked, then waited until she nodded her head. “I

need you to convince Salina to enter a box. It's for charity, so I bet it wouldn't be that hard."

Pattie studied him for a second, then shook her head, "You're playing with fire, Derek," she said. "And I don't want to hear any more about this plan of yours."

Salina

Salina left Annabelle sorting through her crayons, getting ready to color a picture in the new coloring book she'd brought with her that afternoon. She made her way down to the kitchen, hoping that Derek wasn't going to be waiting there for her like he usually was. She knew that he wasn't happy with the way things were between them, but the distance she'd put in place had become necessary after the last time he'd kissed her. There was nothing she wanted more in the world than to fall into his arms again, and let him kiss her until the world melted away, but she wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

It was a relief when she walked through the kitchen door to find only Pattie in the room, and she let out the breath she'd been holding, relaxing for the first time since she'd gotten there. Going over to the coffee pot, she poured herself a cup, then walked over to the table where Pattie was busy wrapping a big empty box in colorful paper.

"Don't you usually put the gift in before you wrap it?" she asked, smiling at her new friend. "I think you're doing that backward."

"It all depends on what you're wrapping the box for," Pattie said, putting on the top. "Since this is for the box supper Saturday night, we need to be able to get into it without unwrapping it."

"What's a box supper?" she asked, sitting down at the table. "Do you really put food in a box?"

"You've never heard of it?" Pattie asked, shaking her head. "You city people, you just don't know how to have fun."

"Yes, we do, it just doesn't involve putting food in a box," Salina said, but she was curious. "Do you want to explain this

to me, or do I need to Google it?”

“Well, it’s an old tradition,” Pattie said, sticking a big bow on the box. “Single women cook a meal, put it in a box like this one, then the boxes are auctioned to the single men, and they have dinner together.”

“So, it’s like a blind date?” she asked. “That sounds risky. What if someone you don’t like buys your box? Can you refuse to have dinner with them?”

Pattie laughed, “I don’t know if that’s ever happened,” she said. “You should make a box, and you’ll see it’s lots of fun and a good way to get to know people.”

“I don’t know, I’m not sure that I’m brave enough to have dinner with a stranger,” she said. “Maybe I’ll just go and watch, see how it all works. That could be just as much fun.”

Pattie gave her a look, “Chicken,” she said. “Live a little, Salina, take a risk. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“I wouldn’t know what to cook,” she said. “There isn’t enough time to figure it out.”

“Now you’re just making excuses,” Pattie said. “You’ve got three days to shop and cook. I’ll even give you this box. I can make another one, and we can go together. It will be fun, I promise.”

* * *

Salina stood looking in the mirror, wondering how she’d let Pattie talk her into participating in the box supper and why that then required a shopping trip for a new outfit. “Hey, what’s going on in there,” Bonnie called from the other side of the door. “You’ve been in there for a long time. Do you need a different size?”

She took a deep breath and opened the door, then looked around the store before stepping out, “I don’t know about this,” she said, cringing when she saw herself in the full-length mirror outside the dressing room. “I’m not really a jeans kind of person, and this top, well.....”

“Salina, you look fantastic,” Bonnie said. “The men are going to line up to bid on your box. I don’t know why you’ve been hiding under all those baggy clothes, but that has to stop.”

“I’ve been dressing like that because I don’t want men lining up to bid on my box,” she said, then realized how it sounded, and burst out laughing. “Why didn’t that sound wrong when you said it?”

“Because you have a dirty mind, and I don’t,” Bonnie said, then laughed some more. “But seriously, Salina, what gives?”

She looked at herself in the mirror, “It’s hard enough to get people to take me seriously as it is, I mean, I’m young and a woman, looking like this makes it even worse.”

Bonnie shook her head, “That’s just stupid,” she said. “I don’t know who told you that, but they were wrong. Hiding under all those clothes just makes you look sloppy and insecure. You should be proud of both your brains and your beauty. Stop selling yourself short, Salina. Both are part of who you are, and you should show them both off.”

“I don’t know,” she said, looking back in the mirror. “Do you really think so?”

“Damn straight I do,” Bonnie said, then grinned at her. “Now we have to do something about your shoes, and I think I might just be able to talk my hairdresser into making room for you this afternoon.”

“Is there anything about me that you don’t want to change?” she asked with a huge sigh.

Bonnie walked up and stood behind her, “I wouldn’t change anything on the inside,” she said, smiling at her in the mirror. “And we’re just having a little fun with what’s on the outside.”

“Well, I guess when you put it that way,” she said, smiling back at Bonnie. “It doesn’t seem so bad.”

“Good, now I want you to try on that little black dress,” Bonnie said. “Everyone needs a little black dress, it’s a wardrobe staple.”

“I’m not everyone,” she said, then saw the look on Bonnie’s face. “Fine, I’ll go try it on, but I’m not buying it.”

When they walked out of the store an hour later, arms full of packages, Bonnie looked over at her and grinned, “The shoe store is just down the street,” she said. “That should be even more fun.”

CHAPTER 12



*** DEREK ***

Derek looked around at the men slowly gathering in front of the stage, then scanned the crowd for his friends, satisfied when he saw they were all in place. He let his eyes roam over the long table covered with brightly wrapped boxes, his gaze settling on the one about halfway across that he knew was Salina's. Reaching into his pocket, he checked to make sure the cash he'd brought was still there, then took a deep breath and told himself to calm down, the plan would work.

Unable to pace, he shifted from foot to foot, hoping he wasn't making a mistake, but it was too late to change his mind, and it was a huge relief when the auctioneer walked out onto the stage. "Okay, folks, let's get this thing started," the man said. "For those of you who don't know me, I'm Fred Myers. I pride myself on running fair and legal auctions all over the county, and this one won't be any different. Unlike my other auctions, this one is for charity folks, so let's get the bidding up and have some fun."

He was forced to watch as Fred auctioned off the first twenty boxes, doing his best to join in the fun, but his stomach was churning with nerves the entire time. When Fred finally gestured for Salina's box to be brought forward, he looked around at the crowd, pleased to see that it had gotten a little smaller, but knew that wasn't a guarantee that he'd win. Deciding to declare his intention to win the box right from the beginning, as soon as Fred opened the bidding, he topped the

first bid by fifty dollars, making the crowd start to whisper around him.

“Okay, we’ve got one hundred, do I hear one hundred and ten?” Fred barked. “Come on folks, we can’t let this go with just one bid, and this is for charity.”

A man behind Derek in the crowd called, “One hundred and twenty.”

Before the words had even died away, he countered, “One hundred and fifty.”

“The bid is at one fifty,” Fred called. “Do I hear one sixty?”

There was some chattering in the crowd, and he was sure that he heard Salina’s name, “One seventy,” the man behind him called.

“One eighty,” he said before Fred could comment, then looked around for his friends, pleased to see they were headed for the man.

“I’ve got one hundred and eighty,” Fred called, looking around the crowd. “Do I hear one ninety?”

He waited for the man behind him to up the bid, but there was just silence, and a smile started to spread across his face, “The bid is at one hundred and eighty dollars,” Fred called. “Going once, going twice, sold. Will the lucky winner come up front and claim your box dinner?”

He pushed his way through the crowd, climbed the steps up onto the stage, took the box from Fred, then waited, hoping that Salina wasn’t going to be mad. When she came out from behind the curtain, she paused for just a second when she saw him holding the box, then, ignoring the hooting and whistles from the crowd, gave him a dirty look before turning and stomping off the stage. The crowd began to roar with laughter, but he didn’t hear anything. He was too busy trying to control the surge of desire that rushed through him, watching her walk away in a pair of tight jeans.

He finally managed to get himself moving and caught up with her just as she made it off the stage, “Salina, don’t run

away from me again,” he said. “I just want to spend a few hours with you. I promise I won’t try to kiss you; I won’t even try to hold your hand.”

She turned and looked up at him, “Do you really think that’s going to keep people from talking?” she asked. “You should know better, Derek. By now, it’s all over town that we’re an item.”

“So, let them talk, as long as we’re not doing anything wrong, we don’t have anything to worry about,” he said. “I just want to have dinner with you, Salina, two friends sharing a meal. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

Salina let out a long sigh, “Then maybe you should have asked,” she said. “You did it again, Derek, you made my decision for me.”

“I didn’t really have much choice, did I?” he asked. “You’ve been running away from me for a week, Salina. I’m sorry if I freaked you out when I kissed you, that wasn’t what I wanted. Can we just start over?”

“That’s the problem, we can’t just start over,” she said. “Don’t you understand, that last kiss changed everything, I can’t forget it, I can’t stop wanting another one, and I’m afraid if I’m around you too long, I’ll give in.”

He tried not to smile, but couldn’t help himself, “How about this?” he asked, trying to keep the triumph out of his voice. “We’ll pick a spot where everyone can see us. That way if you’re tempted to kiss me, there will be too many people watching.”

“Derek, this isn’t funny,” she said, but her voice had softened. “I guess that would be okay, but you’d better not do anything like this again.”

He laughed, “Sweetheart, haven’t you ever heard the saying that all is fair in love and war?” he asked, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “I think what’s happening between us is a little of both.”

Salina

Salina followed Derek out from behind the stage and across the grass, aware that everyone was watching them and wishing that she hadn't stomped off when she saw Derek holding her supper box. It had been a gut reaction to the desire that gripped her when he'd smiled at her, and after a week of ignoring the demands of her body, she'd been afraid that she wasn't going to be able to resist the urges coursing through her.

Now, as they picked their way through the blankets already spread on the ground, she felt her cheeks growing hot, sure that everyone was talking about them. But as she looked around, she realized that no one was paying them any attention and began to relax. Dodging small groups of people, Derek led her across the grass, stopping occasionally to talk to people, their friendly smiles slowly easing the tension even more.

A few minutes later, she was surprised to hear her name being called and turned to find the owner of the local greenhouse walking toward them. "Dr. Butler, I'm so glad to see you here," Mr. Patterson said when he caught up to them. "I wanted to tell you that my mom is much better. The new prescription is working great, and she's got more energy than she's had in a long time."

"I'm so happy to hear that," she said, genuinely pleased. "I'm glad I could help, but don't forget to bring her in for her follow-up even if it seems like she's doing great."

"Don't worry, I've already made an appointment," he said. "I also wanted to tell you that I ordered those plants we talked about. They should be in tomorrow, and I'm going to give you first pick, so come by in the afternoon if you have time."

"Oh, I didn't expect you to order them just for me," she said, surprised but pleased. "I'd love to come by. Would lunch time be too early?"

"I'm there all day," Mr. Patterson said, smiling at her. "I'll see you then."

When he walked away, Derek raised his eyebrows at her, but before she could explain, the woman who ran the bakery rushed over to them. "Dr. Butler, there you are; I just wanted

to thank you for talking to my Harry. He's been so much better since your visit with him," she said. "I don't know what you said to him, but it worked. He's taking me out to dinner next weekend, and we're planning a trip for next winter. I can't thank you enough."

"It was my pleasure," she said, smiling at the woman. "Your husband is a good man, Mrs. Dempsy, he just needed someone to remind him what was important."

The woman reached out and gave her a hug, "Please call me Margie," she said, then smiled at her. "We needed someone like you in town, I hope you decide to stay."

"Oh, well....." she said, surprised. "I haven't made my mind up yet, but that's so nice to hear that."

Three more people came up to talk to her before they found an open space, and Derek spread out the blanket, "We'd better eat before we're interrupted again," he said, an amused look on his face. "Apparently I'm not the only one you've charmed around here."

"I'm sorry, Derek, I had no idea that would happen," she said, still a bit shocked by all the attention. "I didn't expect.....well.....you know.....all that."

"All that," he said, with an amused look on his face, "is what living in a small town is all about. Now let's see what's in this box. If you're as good of a cook as you are a doctor, I'm in for a treat."

"Don't get your hopes up, I'm not a very good cook," she said. "My mother always hired someone to take care of all the household chores. She said it was a waste of time and energy and that someone less.....gifted should handle those things for us."

"Wow, that's.....well, a different perspective," Derek said, lifting the lid off the box. "But I guess we all have our roles in the world."

"Don't worry, I don't think that way," she said, shaking her head. "My mother is.....well, a bit of a snob. I figured that

out when I moved away from home. I've learned to ignore most of the things she says."

Derek unpacked the food, then looked over at her, "This looks great, Salina," he said. "You have to stop selling yourself short. I haven't told you yet how beautiful you look tonight; I love your new haircut."

Feeling herself blush, she looked away, afraid of the intensity in Derek's eyes, "Thank you," she said, grabbing a plate. "Let me get you something to eat."

While they ate, Derek entertained her with stories about growing up in Prospect and managed to get her to talk about her childhood and how different it had been for her. When they finished eating, she was sorry that the night was over, but helped Derek pack up the food, then folded the blanket and prepared herself to say goodnight, doing her best to ignore the part of her that wanted him to kiss her.

"Well, I guess we should say goodnight," he said. "Would you like me to walk you to your car?"

She looked up at him, "I'm not sure that would be a good idea," she said. "I'll be okay on my own."

"You're probably right, but I don't want the night to end," Derek said, smiling at her and shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe we could do this again."

"You have no idea how tempting that is," she said. "But until Annabelle is better, I don't think we should. It's not right, and I don't want to give up being her doctor, Derek. I know this isn't easy for either of us, but it's the way that it has to be."

Derek let out a long sigh, "I just wish it wasn't," he said, his eyes locking on hers. "And I'm warning you right now, when Annabelle is better, I'm not going to hold back. We're meant for each other, Salina."

She knew the kiss was coming and did nothing to stop him even though she knew it was a bad idea, but when his arms came around her and his mouth came down on hers, she gave into the passion instead of fighting. When he released her, she

could only stare up at him, the promises in his eyes making it hard to breathe, then finally stepped away from him.

Heart pounding, she forced herself to take another step away from him, “I should go,” she said, then turned and walked away.

“Good night, Salina,” he called. “I hope you sleep well.”

CHAPTER 13



*** DEREK ***

It took Derek hours to fall asleep after he got home from the box supper. He'd achieved his goal of spending time with Salina, even managed to kiss her again, but it had done nothing but make him want her more. It was after midnight before he finally drifted off, his mind full of the same dreams he'd been having all week, his body yearning for what he couldn't have. He was in the middle a particularly arousing dream when the sound of Annabelle whimpering woke him up, and for a second, he was still lost in the passion of the moment, before he came fully awake.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said, sliding out of bed and picking her up. "What's the matter?"

"My tummy hurts, and I'm hot," Annabelle said, burying her face in his shoulder. "Can I sleep in here with you?"

"Of course, you can," he said. "Let's just take your temperature before we crawl back into bed."

Preparing himself for another battle with the unnamed sickness that just wouldn't let Annabelle out of its grasp, he carried her to the bathroom, set her on the counter, and got out the thermometer. When he saw that her temperature was only slightly elevated, he carried her back to bed, gave her a dose of fever reducer, then climbed in with her. She snuggled up next to him and was asleep in only a few minutes, but he lay staring at the ceiling for a long time, feeling her fever slowly creeping up even with the medicine.

It was the middle of the night when he realized that he needed to call Salina, “I’m sorry to call you so late, but Annabelle’s sick again,” he said when she groggily answered the phone. “I’ve already given her the medicine you prescribed, and it doesn’t seem to be helping.”

“I’m on my way,” Salina said. “Just try to keep her cool until I get there.”

Unlike the last time, he knew that it would only take Salina a few minutes to get there, so after checking on Annabelle, he went downstairs and met her at the front door. “I was just beginning to think we were past this,” he said, leading her upstairs. “Her fever is up again, and she’s complaining about her stomach hurting. I haven’t seen a rash yet, but her fever isn’t as high as it was the other night.”

When they got to Annabelle’s room, Salina paused, “She’s in my room tonight,” he said. “She came in, and I put her into bed with me.”

A funny look appeared on Salina’s face, “Your bedroom?” she asked, then took a deep breath. “That’s fine, but where’s Pattie?”

“I decided not to wake her up. She was exhausted when she got home,” he said. “But if you’d feel better, I can run downstairs and get her.”

“No, that’s fine,” Salina answered. “Let her sleep.”

She followed him into his room, paused in the doorway, took a deep breath, then went over to the bed, “Hey, sweetheart,” she said, sitting down next to Annabelle. “Your uncle says you’re not feeling very well again.”

Annabelle shook her head, then crawled into Salina’s lap, “Make it go away,” she said. “I don’t want to be sick anymore.”

“I’m trying, sweetheart,” Salina said, rocking Annabelle, tears in her eyes. “I’m sorry it’s taking so long to figure it out, I just need you to hang in there for a little longer. Can you do that for me?”

Annabelle nodded her head, “Do those people in the lab need more blood?” she asked. “I might not have very much left.”

Salina laughed through her tears, “I think they’ve got enough for now,” she said. “But I would like to take a look at you if that’s okay.”

After looking Annabelle over, Salina tucked her back into bed, “Will you read me a story?” Annabelle asked. “I like the one about the big tree.”

“As long as you promise me to go right to sleep after we’re done,” she said. “When you’re sick, sleep is really important.”

Annabelle was asleep before Salina made it to the middle of the book, and they slipped out into the hallway together, “I don’t know what to think,” Salina said, after he’d closed the door. “This doesn’t look like anything I’ve ever seen before, and the symptoms fit everything and nothing. It’s driving me crazy to see her like this and not be able to help.”

“It’s not your fault,” Derek said, pulling her into his arms and holding her even though she tried to resist. “She doesn’t seem as bad as she was the last time.”

“No, but I’m not sure that means anything,” Salina said, then looked up at him. “Derek, I’m not used to this. I’ve always been able to figure things out, and I hate the fact that I’m making this about me, about us.”

“No matter what your motivation is, you’re still doing all you can for Annabelle,” he said. “Stop being so hard on yourself, contrary to what your mother tried to teach you, no one is perfect.”

“But I haven’t done enough,” she said, pulling away from him. “I need to step back and look at this from a different angle or something. I can’t help but think that I’m still missing something, that there’s something I don’t know, an element in all this we’re not seeing.”

He didn’t say anything for a second, toying with the idea of telling her about the shifter blood running through Annabelle’s veins, but he waited too long, and the moment

passed. “Annabelle should be fine for the rest of the night. You should try to get some sleep,” Salina finally said. “I’m going to go home and do the same. I’ll call you tomorrow, and we can talk about this more.”

He felt guilty as he walked her to the door, but couldn’t imagine telling Salina the truth, and had to admit that part of the reason was purely selfish, which made him feel even more guilty. If keeping the secret was harming Annabelle’s health, he was going to have to take the risk, but he wasn’t ready to take that leap in the middle of the night when they were both tired. Closing the door behind Salina, he promised himself that he would tell her the next day, explain everything, and let the cards fall where they may.

Salina

The next morning, Salina woke early and got right to work, determined to figure out what was wrong with Annabelle, no matter what lengths she had to go to. Convinced there was something in her family history to explain the illness, she decided to start the research on Natalie and her family she’d been putting off, hoping the DNA tests alone would give them the answer. But it was becoming clear that she wasn’t going to have the luxury of waiting for multiple reasons, and it was time to put her considerable brain power to use.

Glad that she had the day off, she made a pot of coffee, grabbed a muffin from the box on the counter, booted up her computer, and got to work. It was tricky business to track down Natalie’s family, and she spent hours following one thread after another through government and genealogy websites before she’d managed to create a family tree going back several generations.

Sitting back in her chair with a sigh, she tried not to feel discouraged that it had taken her all morning to get to that point and decided it was time to take a break. Her stomach immediately started growling, and she got to her feet, realizing that she’d had nothing to eat since early that morning. After rummaging around in the kitchen, she realized that the

cupboards were basically bare and got dressed to go to the store, a chore she'd been putting off since she moved in.

She briefly considered checking in with Derek, but when she'd talked to him that morning, Annabelle was back to her usual mischief, and she didn't see the point. It would only make her want to see him more. Grabbing her purse and cell phone, she locked the door behind her and headed downtown to the grocery store, but when she pulled up, the parking lot was empty, and a sign on the door said that they were going to be closed for the rest of the day.

Frustrated but determined to get her grocery shopping done, she got out her phone and looked for nearest store, disappointed when she saw that it was half an hour away. "Well, you have to eat," she said. "If you hadn't put it off, you'd have a house full of food right now."

She winced when she realized that she was talking to herself and decided it was hunger, then started up the car and headed for the highway. It wasn't until she hit the outskirts of the little town that she realized she'd seen the name over and over during the research she'd been doing that morning. Wondering how she missed the connection, she followed the highway into Clarksville, passing the town hall, the post office, and the library before she found the grocery store on the other side of town.

The store was smaller than she'd hoped, but she still managed to fill her cart by the time she rounded the last aisle and headed for the register at the front of the building. It was impossible to miss the look of curiosity on the clerk's face as she unloaded her purchases onto the belt, and she flashed her a big smile.

"I don't think I've ever seen you in here before," the woman said. "Are you new to town?"

"I just moved to Prospect," she said. "The store in town was closed for the afternoon, so I decided to drive over here. I moved two weeks ago, and I haven't been to the store yet, so I didn't want to wait any longer."

“Bernice must be sick again,” the woman said, shaking her head. “She’s been having a rough time of it lately, poor thing, but I’m happy to have your business.”

“Thank you,” she said, smiling at the woman. “You have a nice little store here.”

The woman began ringing up her groceries, keeping a steady stream of small talk going, and Salina joined right in, happy to have the distraction. After she’d swiped her card, she started to tell the woman goodbye, then changed her mind, “You’ve probably lived here your entire life,” she said, then continued when the woman nodded. “I wonder if you’ve ever heard of the Bowman family?”

The woman’s face changed instantly, “Why are you asking about them?” she asked, her face full of distrust. “Are you related or something?”

“No, I’m not related,” she said, shaking her head. “And it’s kind of a long story. I was just wondering if you knew them. From what I’ve learned, they’ve lived here for generations.”

The woman shook her head, “Look, I don’t know who you are, but you shouldn’t go around town asking questions about them,” she said. “People around here don’t like strangers meddling in their business; just go on back to Prospect and leave it alone.”

“But I didn’t mean any harm,” she said, alarmed at how quickly things had changed. “I just wanted to know some family history, I don’t want to meet them or anything.”

The woman handed her a receipt, “Have a nice day,” she said, a stubborn look on her face. “Now, get out of here before you get me in trouble.”

She loaded her groceries in the car, then pushed the cart back inside, waving to the woman who was talking on her phone and completely ignored her. With a sigh, she got back in her car and headed home, but as she drove past the library, her curiosity got the better of her, and she pulled into the parking lot. Not quite sure why she couldn’t let it go, she went inside

and asked the woman behind the counter for any information she had about the family.

It was almost closing time before she returned the material the librarian had given her, and she didn't miss the hostile look on the woman's face as she walked out the door, but she'd learned a lot about Natalie's family. She wasn't sure it would make any difference, but the picture she'd put together of the clan wasn't a pretty one, and she couldn't blame Natalie for wanting to get away from them.

CHAPTER 14



DEREK

Sitting in his truck waiting for Salina to come out of the hospital, Derek watched the sun going down and settled in for a long wait, since he wasn't sure when she would come out. He hated having to resort to stalking her in the parking lot, but she'd been avoiding him again, and he wasn't sure why, but he planned to find out. He knew that she was frustrated at her inability to figure out what was wrong with Annabelle, but avoiding him wasn't going to help, and he was a bit disappointed that she'd more or less walked away.

It had been three days since she had spent any time with his niece other than a quick check on her once a day, and Annabelle had been asking for her. He hated to see the child suffer because of what was going on between them, and felt a pang of guilt that he'd become so involved with Salina when he shouldn't have. But it wasn't like he hadn't tried, well, at least in the beginning, but what his mind and body said were two different things, and his body seemed to have a louder voice.

Wishing his brother was still around to give him advice, he considered calling one of his friends from the club, but just as he pulled his phone out of his pocket, the back door of the hospital opened. His first response when Salina stepped outside was relief, quickly followed by a wave of desire that left him slightly breathless, but only a second later, it was replaced by alarm when two men stepped out of the shadows.

Salina was digging through her purse and didn't see them at first, but just as he jumped out of his truck and started

toward them, she looked up and let out a startled scream. The men quickly closed in on Salina, grabbed her by the arms, and started dragging her toward a big black car with the motor running on the other side of the parking lot. Changing direction, he sprinted toward the car, hoping to intercept them before they got Salina inside.

Out of his peripheral vision, he watched Salina kicking and fighting, her screams echoing off the building, but he resisted the urge to run to her, counting on the element of surprise to give him the advantage against the two larger men. His heart sank when two other men stepped out of the car, and he realized what he was going to have to do. He wasn't going to let the men take Salina even if he had to expose his secret.

“Look, lady this will go a lot easier if you just cooperate,” one of the men said. “We’re not going to hurt you. There are some people who want to talk to you, that’s all.”

“Leave me alone,” Salina shouted. “I don’t want to talk to anyone.”

“You heard the lady,” he said, stepping out of the shadows. “She doesn’t want to go with you.”

The biggest of the four men sighed loudly, “Get her in the car, boys, I’ll deal with this joker,” he said, then turned and faced him. “This isn’t any of your business, buddy. We just want to talk to the little lady.”

“Let her go,” he said, feeling his magic beginning to stir. “She doesn’t want to go with you.”

“Well, that’s not exactly her choice,” the man said. “We’ve been hired to do a job, and we’re going to do it. I don’t want to hurt you, but if you get in our way, I won’t have any choice.”

“Derek, help me,” Salina cried as one of the men tried to push her into the car.

That was all it took to fully awaken the animal inside him, and his magic began to take over, “Let her go now, or you’ll be sorry,” he said. “You’re not from around here, so I’m sure you have no idea what you’re dealing with.”

Behind him he could still hear Salina struggling, then the sound of flesh meeting flesh, “You stupid cow, that hurt,” one of the other men yelled. “No woman hits me and gets away with it.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the man backhand Salina, and he stopped trying to stay in control of the predator inside him. Only a second later, the wolf was out, the man was gone, and the instinct to protect his mate took over as he began to advance on the stunned leader. The man started backing away from him, his eyes full of fear, and he turned to face the man still holding Salina, who had frozen with his hand still raised to hit her again. He let out a long, low growl and bared his teeth at the man. He took a couple of steps toward him, pleased when he saw fear quickly replacing the disbelief.

Salina had her back to him and used the opportunity to escape from the man, but when she turned to run, she saw him and only made it a few steps before she stopped. A look of confusion appeared on her face, and she quickly scanned the parking lot, then took a few more steps before collapsing onto the ground in a heap. Suddenly torn between going to Salina and killing the four men, he hesitated long enough that they managed to get back into the car, then went roaring out of the parking lot.

As soon as the danger was gone, his magic began to fade, and the transformation back to a human happened quickly. He raced over to Salina, dropped down onto the parking lot,

pulled her into his lap, dug out his cell phone, and flipped through his contacts until he found Matt. Brushing the hair back from Salina’s face, he saw the big purple bruise already forming on her cheek, but knew that wasn’t what made her pass out.

When Matt answered, he tried to keep his voice calm, “I’m in the parking lot behind the hospital. Some men attacked Salina. She’s okay, but I had to shift to save her, and she saw me,” he said. “I don’t know if I should take her back inside.”

“I’m in my office, I’ll be down in a minute,” Matt said. “Don’t do anything until I get there.”

Salina

Salina emerged slowly from the haze and opened her eyes, her cheek throbbing with pain, not sure where she was or what happened to her. Letting her eyes slowly scan the room, she knew that she wasn't in the hospital, then saw Pattie sitting in a chair in the corner of the room. She had the vague sense that there was something that she should be afraid of, but couldn't remember what it was, and let out a long sigh.

“Oh, good you're awake,” Pattie said, putting her knitting down and getting to her feet. “You've been out for a couple of hours. How do you feel?”

“A bit disoriented, and my cheek hurts,” she said, lifting her finger to her face, wincing when her fingertips touched the sore spot. “But I don't remember what happened.”

Pattie sat down next to her on the bed and pulled her hand away from her face, “It doesn't look that bad,” she said. “I'm sorry it hurts, though. I'm going to get Matt. He's been waiting downstairs for you to wake up. Will you be okay on your own for a second?”

She nodded, wondering why Pattie hadn't mentioned Derek, but again felt the vague sense that she was scared of something and forced herself not to think. Matt knocked on the door a few minutes later, then let himself in. He smiled when he saw her, then came over and sat down where Pattie had been only a few minutes before.

“I'm not going to mince words; you had a bit of a shock earlier this evening, and you passed out,” Matt said. “How much do you remember about what happened?”

She closed her eyes, but her mind was blank, “Not anything really.” she said. “I'm sorry, there's just nothing there.”

Matt smiled at her, “That's okay, it will come back when you're ready,” he said. “In the meantime, I want you to rest. You've got a nasty bruise on your cheek, and it's going to look bad for a while. I've covered your schedule for the next few days, so I don't want you to worry about the hospital. Bonnie

and I will make sure your patients get the care they need; I just want you to focus on healing.”

She was silent for a second, “Matt, where is Derek?” she finally asked. “Is there some reason why he isn’t here? I keep thinking there’s something I’m afraid of. Did something happen to Derek?”

“Derek is fine, don’t worry,” Matt said. “He just wanted to give you some space to recover.”

Something didn’t feel right, but she couldn’t figure out what it was, and it was exhausting her trying to remember, “Just tell me what happened,” she finally said. “Not knowing is driving me crazy.”

“I’m sorry, Salina, I don’t think that’s a good idea. You’re a doctor, you know what all the latest research says, you need to let your memories come back on their own. Memory loss is just one way the body protects itself,” Matt said, his face full of compassion. “You’ll remember what happened when you’re ready. For now, maybe you should try to get some sleep, it’s still hours before the sun comes up. I promise you’re safe here, no one is going to hurt you, so try to relax.”

She let out a sigh, “I am tired,” she said. “But I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep.”

“I’ve got some sleep aids in my bag if you want one,” Matt said. “But I think you’ll find that if you just close your eyes, sleep will come. I’ll even sit here with you until you fall asleep if that would help.”

Salina was sure that she wouldn’t be able to drop off, but she closed her eyes anyway, trying her best to be a good patient, and the next thing she knew sunlight was streaming in through the window. Sitting up in bed, she brought her hand up to her cheek, wincing when pain shot through the entire side of her head, and she quickly dropped it. Knowing she was better off not looking, she got out of bed and went to the mirror anyway, gasping when she saw the ugly purple bruise on her cheek.

Staring at herself in the mirror, fragments of the night before coming back to her, she felt dizzy for a second, but took a deep breath and tried to clear her mind. Then, like a flood gate opening, the memories came rushing back to her: the four men trying to kidnap her, Derek coming to her rescue, then the wolf, snarling and growling. Breath coming in short gasps, she whimpered and slid down onto the floor of the bathroom, the image of the wolf playing over and over in her mind. As her brain struggled to make the connection that it knew was there, she tried to shut the memory down.

“Salina, what’s wrong?” Annabelle asked from the doorway of the bathroom. “Are you sick now, too?”

The look of concern on the little girl’s face snapped her out of the panic that was slowly descending on her, “No, sweetheart, I’m not sick,” she said, trying to catch her breath. “I just had a bad night last night, but I’m going to be okay.”

Annabelle come over to her, studied her for a second, then held out the stuffed toy she was holding, “You should give Mr. Snuggles a hug,” she said. “That always makes me feel better.”

Despite the turmoil in her brain, she managed to laugh, “If you think that will help, I’m willing to give it a try,” she said, taking the bear from Annabelle and hugging it to her chest. “Hey, what do you know? I’m feeling better.”

Just then, she heard Derek calling Annabelle, and before she could get up, he was peeking into the door, “Salina, are you okay?” he asked, his face full of concern. “Do you need help getting up?”

She shook her head, shrinking back from him, the fear that had been haunting her suddenly back full force, “I’m okay,” she said, hating the disappointment that appeared on his face. “Maybe you should take Annabelle back to her room now. I need to be alone.”

CHAPTER 15



*** DEREK ***

Derek paced up and down the hallway, staring at the closed door, resisting the urge to storm into the room. Salina's refusal to see him was the only thing stopping him, but he didn't know how much longer that was going to work. Pattie had been inside the room for over ten minutes, not a good sign, and he was sure that her pleas on his behalf must have failed this time, just like all the others. When the door finally opened, his heart began to pound, but Pattie stepped out with a tray of dirty dishes in her hands and shook her head.

"I'm sorry, Derek, she doesn't want to see you," Pattie said with a sigh. "I tried; I really did. Even Annabelle put in a good word for you, but she won't budge. I think she's got it in her head that if she doesn't see you, none of it happened. Every time I try to talk about it, she changes the subject. I'm out of ideas, and she's getting ready to leave."

"She can't leave," he said, walking over to the door. "Those men will be back, and we still don't know what they want. I don't care if she doesn't want to see me; someone has to talk some sense into her."

Pattie put her hand on his arm, "I know how frustrating this must be," she said. "I'm not going to stop you from going in there, I think Salina needs to face reality as much as you do, but I want you to remember that she's very fragile right now."

"The last thing I want to do is make things worse," he said, staring at the door. "But I can't protect her out there, Pattie."

“I’ll be down in the kitchen with Annabelle if you need me,” Pattie said. “I hope you can get through to her.”

Salina was packing the few things she had with her when he walked in, “I figured you wouldn’t respect my wishes,” she said, carefully folding a pair of pajamas. “Go away Derek, I don’t want to see you.”

“You’ve made that very obvious,” he said. “But I can’t just let you walk out of here. Those men will be back, Salina. You can pretend all you want that nothing happened the other night, but that’s not the reality, and deep down, you know that. Those men were professionals. They won’t stop until they get the job finished.”

“I’m a grown woman,” Salina said, zipping the bag closed but still not looking at him. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“It didn’t look like it the other night,” he said. “If I hadn’t been there, they would have taken you with them, and I promise you where they were taking you wasn’t going to be pleasant.”

“You don’t know that,” she shot back, turning away from him and walking over to the window. “They said they weren’t going to hurt me.”

“And that worked out, didn’t it,” he said. “Or haven’t you looked in the mirror lately?”

She whirled around, clearly hurt by his question, “That was mean,” she said, covering the bruise with her hand. “I know how awful I look. You don’t have to remind me.”

“You look just as beautiful as you always do, I’m just reminding you about that bruise, because you seem to think that nothing has changed,” he said, sighing. “I don’t care if you can’t face what I am. Well, I do care, but I care more about you being safe, Salina. If you won’t stay here and you won’t tell me why those men were after you, then at least let Matt help you.”

For a second, he thought she was going to agree, but then she shook her head, “I just can’t do this, it doesn’t make any

sense. The science isn't there, it's just not possible," she said. "If I think about it too much, I think I'll go crazy. Just leave me alone, Derek."

Derek let out a long sigh, his anger and frustration evaporating, "I'm sorry you had to find out about shifters the way you did. I was trying to find a way to tell you, I just didn't know how. It's not an easy thing to tell someone," he said, then took a couple of steps toward her, pleased when she didn't shrink away. "I can understand that you're having a hard time accepting what you saw; if I were you, I would too. I wish I could explain how it's possible and what makes me able to do what I can, but there isn't an explanation in scientific terms. It's magic, Salina, pure and simple magic. You can't see it, you can't touch it, but it's there, hiding deep inside me."

Tears began to roll down Salina's cheeks, and her eyes filled with pain, "I want more than anything to believe, but my brain just won't let me," she said, then turned away from him. "I think I'm going to need some more time."

"Will you at least promise me that you won't go out alone?" he asked. "I can't stand the thought of something happening to you. I would never forgive myself."

"I'll sleep at the hospital," she said. "I'm sorry, Derek, I really am, but I just can't do this."

"I can't say that I'm not disappointed," he said. "I thought you were smarter than this, Salina. I thought you, of all people, would understand how little we know about the world we live in."

As hard as it was to do, he turned and walked away, closing the door quietly behind him, his heart feeling like it was breaking, a cold spot forming deep inside that he was afraid would never thaw. He walked down the stairs and through the kitchen, only waving to Pattie when she looked over at him, then went out to the barn and saddled up his favorite horse, unable to bear watching her walk out of his life.

Salina

Standing at the window looking out over town, Salina felt more down than she'd ever felt in her life, and she knew exactly why. But like everything else in her life right then, she refused to accept the truth. Doing anything else would be taking a leap of faith she didn't think she was brave enough to take. Opening herself up to Derek's world meant thinking about life and everything in it from an entirely different perspective, and just the thought that magic was real made her feel a little giddy.

Turning away from the window, she wished that night had never happened. The bruise on her cheek had begun to heal, but the turmoil inside her had only gotten worse. With each day that passed, she missed Annabelle and Derek more, and nothing seemed to make it any better. It amazed her that they'd become such a big part of her life in only a few weeks, and she wondered how long it would be before the gaping hole in her heart healed.

Looking over at the bed shoved into one corner of the doctor's lounge, she let out a long sigh, thinking about the big soft bed at Derek's, then reminded herself that she didn't need him. Not sure if she even had the energy to put on her pajamas, she plopped down on the side of the bed and started taking her shoes off, not looking forward to another night on the lumpy mattress. She was just about to pull the curtain around the bed when the door flew open, and Bonnie came in with a huge smile.

"Oh, Salina, I'm sorry, it looks like you're getting ready to go to sleep, I'll be quiet," she said. "Mrs. Beauchamp just had her baby, a little boy, and he's as healthy as can be."

"That's wonderful news," she said, managing a smile. "I'll have to stop by in the morning and give them my congratulations."

Bonnie studied her for a second, then shook her head, "I've been trying to stay out of this, but I think it's gone on long enough. You're miserable, Derek is impossible, and Annabelle is stuck in the middle," she said. "Sit down; it's time we had a long talk."

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said. “I just want to go to bed.”

“Too bad, we’re going to talk,” Bonnie said, walking over and pushing her down onto the bed. “We’re going to sit right here and talk about shifters.”

She winced, couldn’t help herself, then looked over at Bonnie, “Wait, you know…….”

Bonnie nodded, “I’m married to one,” she said, giving Salina’s arm a little pat. “There are a lot of shifters in this part of the state. Derek isn’t the only one, and the truth is, it’s kind of normal around here.”

“Normal, you can’t be serious,” she said, staring at Bonnie. “How many of them are there?”

“Well, I’m not sure, but a couple hundred at least. This is one of the biggest clans in Montana,” Bonnie said. “But I’m not the one you should be asking.”

“Did you say clan?” she asked, unable to curb her curiosity even though she felt uncomfortable. “I’ve heard that term used before.”

“Sure, it sounds a lot better than pack, but that’s basically what it is,” Bonnie said, shrugging her shoulders. “They’re part wolf, Salina, it’s what they do. They bond together in groups to protect one another.”

“You say that like it’s not a big deal,” she said, then sighed. “I just can’t get there.”

Bonnie studied her for a second, “It is a big deal, just not in the way you mean,” she said. “I’ll admit I was a little bit freaked out when I found out Jessie was a shifter, especially since our son clearly showed signs of being one himself, so I understand how you’re feeling. But someone talked some sense into me, just like I’m trying to do with you. You might not believe it right now, but it’s a wonderful thing to fall in love with a shifter.”

“That’s the problem, I think I already love him, and that was scary enough,” she said. “I don’t know what I’m supposed

to do, I don't know what the right thing is anymore, everything feels so jumbled up.”

“Welcome to falling in love,” Bonnie said, putting her arm around her. “If you want my advice, go talk to Derek and have him explain. Once you understand better what being a shifter means, I think some of your confusion will go away. It's a gift, Salina, not a curse, and I can promise you one thing: if Derek loves you, he'll never let you go.”

“Do you really think so?” she asked, surprised by the wave of happiness that washed over her. “I miss him so much, more than I should, and it's only getting worse.”

Bonnie smiled at her and gave her a squeeze, “I think you'd better go talk to him,” she said. “I missed Jessie like that for five years before I was smart enough to come home. Don't make the same mistake I made.”

“Will you drive me over there?” she asked, a weight suddenly lifted from her shoulders. “Derek wouldn't be happy if I drove myself.”

“I think I can manage that,” Bonnie said, grinning at her. “But you'd better change your clothes and do something about your hair.”

“Do I have time for a shower?” she asked, realizing that it had been a few days.

“I'll be waiting right here when you're finished,” Bonnie said. “Now hurry up, it's getting late.”

She gave Bonnie a big hug, “Thank you for talking some sense into me,” she said, smiling at her. “I don't think I've ever had a friend like you.”

CHAPTER 16



*** DEREK ***

Derek stumbled down the stairs dressed only in his pajama bottoms, padded to the living room barefoot, grabbed the remote, and clicked the television on, hoping it would put him to sleep. It had been three days since Salina left the ranch, three long days of missing her and beating himself up for handling everything wrong. He was ashamed to admit that he'd been a bit of a jerk lately, too, but lack of sleep and heartache weren't a good combination.

Surprised to hear a knock on the door, he threw the remote down and stomped over to the door, ready to tear someone's head off for bothering him so late. When he threw open the door, Salina was standing on the porch, her face full of indecision, but it quickly turned to alarm when she saw him.

"Oh, Derek, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get you out of bed," she said. "I'll just come back tomorrow."

"How did you get here?" he demanded, looking out into the yard, instantly relieved when he saw Jessie's truck. "You should have called me."

Jessie tooted the horn, and he pulled Salina into the house and slammed the door closed, "What are you doing here?" he demanded, when all he really wanted to do was pull her into his arms. "If you've finally come to visit Annabelle, she's spending the night at a friend's house, and Pattie is gone for the night."

"I'm not here to see either of them, I came to talk to you," she said. "I'm sorry, I was such a stubborn fool, Derek, but

I'm scared, so I ran away."

"There's nothing to be scared of Salina, I would never hurt you," he said. "I know it must have been a shock, and I really am sorry about that."

She took a step toward him, "I'm not scared of you," she said, then laughed nervously. "Well, maybe I am, but not the way that you're thinking. I'm scared by the way I feel about you; I've never felt this way before, it's.....overwhelming, I feel like I'm going to be swept away by it, and I'll never be the same person again."

"Well, that's good, because I feel the same way," he said, running his hands through his hair. "I wasn't looking for love, Salina, but suddenly here you are, and everything is so complicated. Resisting the pull that you have over me is exhausting. I want to hold you all the time, I want to kiss you every time I see you, but Annabelle needs you, so I torture myself. I missed you so much over the last few days. I feel like I'm physically sick, I had no idea it was possible to want someone that much. I'm sorry if that scares you but it's the truth, and I won't hide it anymore. We're meant to be together, and I'm not going to give up until you see that too."

Salina studied him for a second, then a wave of warmth slowly spread through him as desire blossomed in her eyes, and a spark of hope came to life in his chest. "You have a lot of things to explain to me," she said, taking another step toward him. "But I think that can wait until later."

Frozen in place by the look in her eyes, he wasn't ready when she threw herself into his arms, pulled his head down, and kissed him. Passion flared to life between them instantly, days of longing came to the surface as he kissed her back, and when they finally parted, chests heaving, it was all he could do not to carry her up the stairs to his bedroom. Salina laid her head on his chest, and he pulled her closer, satisfied for the the present with her in his arms, feeling a fragile bond between them growing stronger with her acceptance.

With a sigh, Salina looked up at him, "I've played by the rules my entire life, and it's gotten me nowhere," she said. "I

may have made a mistake once before, but being with you isn't a mistake. We're both single, both consenting adults. Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean I should be held to a higher standard. I want you, Derek, just as much as you want me, and I think it's past time we did something about it."

When he didn't move, just stared down at her, she stepped away from him, then took his hand and led him over to the stairs, a coy smile on her face, and his magic began to pump through his blood. At the top of the stairs, Salina hesitated for a second, but he swept her up into his arms and carried her to his bedroom, slammed the door closed with his foot, then set her down.

He pulled her into his arms, then lowered his mouth to Salina's and kissed her until she was squirming before backing off a step. "There's so much you don't know about me yet," he said, choosing his words carefully. "But I want you to understand that this is going to change everything between us. A wolf mates for life when they find their perfect match, and that's you for me, sweetheart. If you're not ready for that, we should stop this right now before it's too late."

"I hate to tell you this, but I think it's already too late," she said, grinning up at him. "I've been waiting my whole life for you, Derek. Let's not waste any more time fighting what's meant to be."

"After tonight, you'll belong to me," he said, framing her face with his hands. "And I'll be yours until the end of time."

"I like the sound of that," she said, pulling his head down and kissing him.

Salina

Salina's heart was pounding harder than it ever had before as Derek slowly undressed her, his eyes roaming over her body as each piece of clothing joined the pile on the floor. When she was standing in only her bra and panties, he stepped back, slipped off his pajama pants, and the sight of his engorged manhood made her body begin to throb with anticipation. Thrills rushing through her, she stood with

goosebumps breaking out on her skin, waiting for him to touch her. Each second that passed made her feel more desperate.

He finally closed the distance between them, turned her around, unhooked the clasp on her bra, then slowly slid the straps off her shoulders before throwing it to the floor at her feet. Her breath coming in short gasps, she shivered when his arms came around her from behind and he cupped her breasts in his big hands, then began to tease her hard nipples with his thumb and finger. Her legs instantly turned to jelly as one wave of pleasure after another washed over her, and she leaned back against him, afraid she would crumple to the floor.

Derek spun her around in his arms, bent her back, and sucked one taut peak into his mouth, then used his tongue and teeth to tease and torment her until she was panting and desperate for more. When he finally lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the bed, his eyes were glowing in the dim light of the bedroom, but instead of scaring her, it sent a new thrill racing through her. After laying her down on the bed, Derek reached for the scrap of lace covering her hips and with one flick of his wrist, tore it off.

Ravaged by the torrent of feelings that tore through her as he lowered himself onto the bed next to her, she could only lay there as he reached down and pushed her legs open. She expected him to roll on top of her, but instead, he trailed his fingers down the inside of her thigh, then slipped one between her folds to stroke her swollen nib. Pleasure erupted deep inside her and began to spread in waves, each stronger than the next, until she was soaring over the edge, her body trembling and straining as she was swept away.

When the last wave had crested, she slowly came back to reality, but almost instantly, a new and much deeper need erupted inside her, "Please, Derek, I need you," she said. "I want to feel you inside me. I can't wait, take me now."

With a low growl, Derek slipped between her legs, spread them wider, then slowly slid inside her until he was buried deeply in her throbbing passage, then paused, giving her body time to adjust. Lost to the intensity of feelings rushing through her, she looked up to find him watching her, his eyes full of

passion, and she felt something deep inside her begin to grow. It was more than just pleasure, it was comfort, it was the warmth of love and the feeling that for the first time in her life, she was right where she belonged.

As if he sensed what she was feeling, Derek smiled down at her, "It's you and me from now on," he said. "We're bound by something more powerful than both of us."

"Just you and me," she echoed. "Forever and ever."

When he drove himself into her again, she stopped thinking and let the pleasure consume her, each thrust of his powerful hips taking them higher and higher until all she was aware of was the man above her. She felt the connection between them fueling the sensations, heightening the already powerful feelings, and she cried out Derek's name, digging her nails into his shoulders, unable to do anything but hang on.

She tumbled over the edge when Derek climaxed with one last powerful thrust of his hips and emptied himself inside her, growling her name and clutching her tightly to him. It was a long time before she became aware of the world around her and the satisfying weight of Derek on top of her, but he rolled away, making her whimper. He gathered her back into his arms just as quickly, then planted a big kiss on the top of her head with a contented sigh.

She snuggled in deeper, then looked up, surprised to see twinkling lights sparkling in the air above them, "Derek, do you see that too?" she asked. "I thought you were only supposed to see stars outside."

He looked down at her, "I think it's for us or because of us," he said. "I've never seen anything like it before, but I'm definitely going to take it as a good sign."

She looked up at him and smiled, "I'm sorry I was such a stubborn fool before," she said. "I should have trusted my instincts, but they've been wrong before."

"That's okay, we got here, didn't we?" he asked, shifting so he was looking down at her. "I feel like I've been waiting for this my entire life."

“Me too,” she said. “I just didn’t know it until now.”

“Well, I guess even someone as smart as you can learn a thing or two,” Derek said, a big grin on his face. “Are you ready for another lesson?”

“Derek, we just.....” but her words died away when his hand slipped between her legs. “Oh, I think I’m going to like this school.”

He laughed, “And I bet you’ll be a straight A student,” he said, then rolled on top of her. “In fact, I bet you’ll be the teacher’s pet.”

She didn’t respond, the pleasure had already taken her under, and it was hours before they finally fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms, their passion spent for the night. When Salina woke in the morning, the sun was just coming up, and she lay watching Derek sleep for a long time before gently waking him with a kiss. He opened his eyes, then gave her a groggy smile before pulling her into his arms, his hands already starting to roam over her naked body.

“Derek, we need to talk about those men. I think I know why they came after me,” she said. “And I think I know who sent them.”

CHAPTER 17



*** DEREK ***

Derek brought the coffee pot over to the table and poured Salina another cup, then sat back down across from her, “So even after you were warned about the Bowman family, you kept pushing it,” he said, shaking his head. “I wish you would have come and talked to me. I could have told you most of what you found out in the library and not stirred up so much trouble.”

“I didn’t plan it, Derek,” she said. “It all just kind of happened, and I doubt you could have told me half of what I found out. For instance, did you know that the women in the clan always die really young, and most of them from something similar to what Natalie died from?”

“How do you know that?” he asked, taking a sip of his coffee. “How much digging did you do?”

“Enough to know that the cause of death on most of the death certificates says the women died from wasting away,” she said. “When I saw that on the oldest ones, I didn’t pay that much attention because that term was used to describe a lot of diseases we didn’t understand back then. They stopped using it about a hundred years ago, but there are twenty women who have that listed as their cause of death in the last two decades alone. That’s too many for there not to be a connection. If we could just get some DNA from their descendants, we should be able to isolate the gene causing the problem.”

“Okay, let’s just slow down a little bit,” he said. “I know you think you’re onto something, and you might be, but there

are a few things you don't know, and even if you are right, I don't think we can just go in there and demand DNA."

Salina slumped back in her chair, "Well, thanks for raining on my parade," she said. "Are these people really that bad? Would they really deny us something so simple, knowing it could save not only Annabelle's life but some of their own?"

"Without hesitation, and they might do more to us than say no," he said, reaching out to take her hand. "Salina, these are terrible people. I'm afraid that some of the women you're talking about might have died from other causes, and that was just put on their death certificates to hide the truth."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I don't understand."

"Some clans, especially the isolated ones, haven't made it into this century or the last, for that matter," he said. "Women are treated more like a possession. They have no rights, no say in how they live their lives, they're forced to marry men they don't love, have babies they don't want, and no one thinks it's wrong to beat them. That's what Natalie was running from the night she found us. She had already been badly beaten by that time for refusing to get married. Scott had to threaten her father with a clan war to get him to leave her with us."

Salina's face had gone white, "Bonnie said falling in love with a shifter was a wonderful thing," she said. "But that doesn't sound so wonderful."

"We're not all like that," Derek said, getting up and pulling out of the chair. "Natalie's clan is still living in the dark ages. My clan appreciates women. We want our women to be strong, intelligent, and independent."

"This is all so confusing," Salina said with a big sigh. "I think I'm in way over my head, Derek."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart," he said. "But I don't think you're completely wrong. Natalie did just waste away before our eyes. You might be onto something; the problem is, I don't know how to get what you need so we can find out either way without invading their territory."

“Those men were planning to hurt me, weren’t they?” she asked with a shiver. “I can’t believe I was so stupid. I know better than to just go charging in like that, I just wanted to help Annabelle.”

“Well, the Bowmans and the rest of their clan have a lot to be worried about,” Derek said. “People around here aren’t as forgiving as they used to be. If word of this gets out, the days of everyone ignoring their crimes might come to an end.”

“What are we going to do?” Salina asked, her voice full of fear. “I can’t hide for the rest of my life, and we still don’t know what’s wrong with Annabelle.”

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you, Salina,” he said. “But I need some time to figure out our next move, and I have to let the clan know what’s going on. The leaders’ council may have some ideas.”

“Can I still go to work?” she asked. “I’ll feel terrible if I have to leave Matt and Bonnie to pick up my slack again.”

“I think if we’re careful, you can still go to work,” he said, then grinned at her. “But I’m afraid you’re going to have to stay here with me. I know that will be a huge sacrifice, but I just don’t see any other way.”

“Well, if I have to, I guess I’ll just have to suck it up,” she said, smiling back at him. “We all have to make sacrifices for the greater good.”

Salina

Salina added the last line of notes to the chart she was working on, then looked up at the clock and started cleaning up the mess she’d made at the nurse’s station. “I’m all done for the night, Ellie,” she said, picking up the stack of patient files. “I’m going to head home now. Give me a call if anything comes up.”

“Have a good night, Dr. Butler,” Ellie said, taking the charts from her. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

She hurried down the hallway to the elevators, hoping she wasn’t going to have to make Bonnie wait. She pushed the down button, then stood tapping her foot until the big doors

swung open. When the elevator stopped on the bottom floor, she slid out before the doors were completely open, then made her way down the hallway to her office, opened the door, and reached for the light switch, sure that she had left the lamp on her desk on. Before her eyes could adjust to the bright light, a hand reached out and pulled her into the office. The door slammed behind her, and she heard the lock slide into place.

“Dr. Butler, I’m so sorry that we have to meet this way,” a man said, getting up from her chair behind the desk. “But I’m afraid after the other night, there was really no choice.”

Trying to stay calm even though her heart was pounding in her chest, she looked around the room at the men standing around him, recognizing one from the night she was almost kidnapped. Refusing to let them see that she was scared, she walked slowly over to her desk and sat down, then took a deep breath, trying to think of a way to signal for help.

“Who are you?” she finally asked, hoping her voice didn’t betray how scared she was. “What are you doing here?”

“The answer is very simple: I need your help,” the man said, sitting down in the chair across from her desk. “I’m afraid the men I sent to find you the other night misinterpreted my instructions. They were only supposed to issue an invitation for you to meet with me. I regret that you were injured, and I want to assure you that the men responsible have been punished. I hope we can put that little incident behind us.”

“Even if that were possible,” she said, pleased with how calm she sounded. “You still have not told me who you are or what it is you want.”

The man sighed, “I don’t blame you for being hostile, Dr. Butler. In your position, I would feel the same way,” he said. “But let me assure you, I never meant for our relationship to be anything but friendly.”

“None of this feels very friendly to me,” she said, then leaned back and crossed her arms over her chest. “I’m not used to nearly being kidnapped, and I don’t appreciate you invading my office this way.”

“Maybe we should start over. I’m Harold Bowman, and I believe you’ve been researching my family, Dr. Butler,” the man said. “At first, you can imagine how angry I was to find out that a stranger was poking her nose into our business, but then I found out who you were, and well, it all began to make sense.”

“Well, I’m glad it makes sense to you, because I still don’t know what you’re doing here, Mr. Bowman,” she said. “I’m very busy, so maybe you could just get to the point.”

“Please call me Harold,” the man said, then smiled at her. “Since we’re going to be working very close together, I think we should dispense with the formalities.”

“I don’t remember agreeing to work with you,” she said, wondering how much longer Bonnie would wait before coming to her office.

“Yes, well, I’m afraid I got ahead of myself,” Harold said. “I understand that my niece Annabelle has been sick, that she’s been showing signs of the same disease my sister died from.”

It took her a second to absorb what he said, “You’re Natalie’s brother,” she finally said, unable to hide the fear from her voice this time.

“Please don’t look so scared, Dr. Butler,” Harold said, crossing his legs and making himself comfortable. “I’m not a monster, and I’m nothing like my father or the men who would have beaten her to death.”

She looked around the room at his men, “You’ll forgive me if I find that hard to believe,” she said. “You still haven’t told me what you want.”

“I want the same thing you want,” he said. “I want to find out what’s making Annabelle and the rest of the females in my clan get sick and die, and I think you may be the only one who can figure it out.”

“So, I was right,” she said, then wished she’d kept silent when she saw the look of satisfaction on his face. “I mean, what makes you think I would help you?”

“Oh, Dr. Butler, let’s not play games,” Harold said, shaking his head. “First, I know what kind of doctor you are. I’ve done my homework, and I know that you would never willingly turn your back on a patient that needed you. Second, it’s clear from watching you together that Annabelle is more than just a patient to you, which I believe will give you even more motivation to do as I ask.”

“And what is that?” she asked, as if she was getting tired of the discussion. “Nothing that you’ve said so far has changed my mind about you.”

“I don’t really care what you think of me,” Harold said with a shrug. “I’m more interested in finding a cure for the disease ravaging my clan. It’s our only chance of survival. I will provide you with anything you need, laboratory equipment, blood samples from everyone in the clan, support staff, you name it, I’ll get it for you.”

“That sounds like a doctor’s dream,” she said. “But I can’t help but think your offer isn’t as simple as that.”

Harold shrugged, “I’m doing the best I can,” he said, then got to his feet. “Shall we go?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m not going anywhere with you alone. I’m sorry, Harold, I just don’t trust you.”

“I was afraid you might feel that way, and as I said before, I don’t blame you,” Harold said. “So, I brought along a little insurance.”

CHAPTER 18



*** DEREK ***

Derek slipped his boots off and hung up his hat, looking forward to a quiet night with Annabelle and Salina, promising himself that for just a few hours they wouldn't let anything interfere. His life had changed so much in just a few weeks, sometimes it was hard to believe it was true, and he wanted to slow down just a little to enjoy it. Nothing had changed in the three days since Salina told him about what she'd found, but they were expecting the results from the DNA tests any day, and one way or another, they'd start getting some answers.

He was trying not to think about how they might get the other samples if that became necessary, but knew that he'd find a way if that's what needed to happen. As happy as he was to have Salina in his life, he wasn't ready to lose Annabelle and would risk anything to save her, even crossing into enemy territory if that's what it took. Taking a deep breath, he reminded himself that he wasn't thinking about all that tonight, and went into the kitchen to see what Pattie had left them for dinner.

The kitchen was deserted but there was a big pot on the stove with a note sitting next to it. He started across the room, but his cell phone rang in his pocket before he'd only gone a couple of steps. Digging it out, he saw that it was Bonnie and clicked on the call, heading for the pot again, wondering what might be hiding under the lid.

"Hey, what's up?" he asked. "I just walked in the door. Do you need me to pick the kids up again?"

There was a slight pause, “Oh no, I didn’t even think of the kids,” Bonnie said, then he could hear her talking to someone. “Derek, I can’t find Salina anywhere. She was late meeting me, so I went to her office, but she wasn’t there either. Jessie and I have searched everywhere, but she’s not here, and I don’t know what to do.”

He had to battle back first a wave of panic, then a surge of anger, “Go find someone in security and have them check the cameras,” he said. “I’m on the way.”

Before he could make it to the back door, his phone rang again, and for a second, he thought about ignoring it, but jerked it out of his pocket. “Hello,” he said. “This is Derek Ambrose.”

“Oh, Derek, thank goodness I got you. This is Mary Alice over at the day camp. I’ve been trying to call Salina, but she’s not answering her phone,” the woman said, slightly out of breath. “I don’t know how to tell you this, but we can’t find Annabelle. She went out to recess with the rest of the kids, but she didn’t come back inside. I’m really sorry. I already called the sheriff, and he’s on his way.”

Too stunned to move for a second, he felt his entire life collapsing around him, “Salina is missing too,” he said. “Tell the sheriff she disappeared from the hospital. I was on the way there, but I’m coming to you instead.”

“Oh, Derek, I’m so sorry,” Mary Alice said. “It’s going to be okay. We’ll find them. I’m going to call my dad. The clan needs to know what’s going on.”

“Thanks, Mary Alice,” he said. “I need all the help I can get.”

Knowing he had to keep a clear head, he put on his boots, grabbed his hat, and started for his truck as if the two people he loved most in the world hadn’t just been stolen from him. Before he could get the vehicle started, his phone rang again, and a new kind of fear erupted deep inside him, but when he looked at the screen, it was quickly replaced by relief when he saw Salina’s number across the top.

“Salina, thank God you called,” he said. “Please tell me you have Annabelle with you.”

“Annabelle is fine, she’s sitting right here beside me,” Salina said, but her voice sounded funny. “Derek, I need you to listen to me very carefully. There are some men on the way to get you, and I want you to go with them.”

“Salina, what are you talking about?” he asked. “Where are you?”

“There isn’t time for me to explain everything, but I’m with Harold Bowman,” she said. “I need you to cooperate with his men, Derek, don’t fight them. Just come along; he’s not trying to hurt any of us, he just wants my help.”

“Salina, that’s crazy, don’t believe a word he tells you,” he barked, fear racing up his spine and making his magic begin to stir. “He’s lying, don’t trust him.”

“Please, Derek, you have to trust me on this,” she said. “He’s only trying to help the shifters in his clan. Many of them are sick, just like Annabelle.”

“Salina, listen to me.” but the line was dead, and when he looked in his rearview mirror, he realized that his truck was blocked in by four large black SUVs.

Getting slowly out of the truck, he closed the door and then braced himself for a fight, but only one man got out. “Mr. Ambrose, we would very much appreciate it if you would come with us,” the man said. “We’ll take you to Dr. Butler and your little girl.”

“You must think I’m stupid,” he said. “I’m not getting in with you.”

“You’re more than welcome to take your truck. You can follow us if you like,” the man said. “We really mean you no harm. What happened the other night was a mistake. My boss would just like to talk to you. He’s been waiting to meet you for a long time.”

“And if I still refuse?” he asked, wondering how many men were hiding behind the tinted windows. “Will you force me to go?”

The man shook his head, “No, but we will be forced to keep you here so that you don’t try to interfere,” he said. “How that happens will be up to you.”

It only took him a few seconds to make the right decision, “Fine, I can see you’re not giving me much choice,” he said. “But I’m driving my own truck.”

Salina

Salina’s heart sank when they pulled through the big iron gates and onto a dirt road. The compound, as Harold liked to call his home, looked like a fortress, and once the gates closed behind them, she was sure escape would be impossible. She wanted to believe that Harold wouldn’t hurt them, but the man scared her with the intensity in his eyes, and she sensed that he would do anything to get what he wanted. If it had only been herself at risk, she might not have been so scared, but Annabelle was clinging to her side, her eyes wide with fear, and she knew it was her job to protect her.

Giving the little girl a squeeze, she looked out the window and put a big smile on her face, “Look Annabelle, Mr. Bowman has horses,” she said. “Maybe he has one you can ride; that would be fun. We are having an adventure, after all.”

Annabelle looked up at her, “An adventure?” she asked. “You mean like in the books we read?”

“Yes, exactly like that,” she said. “We’re going someplace new; we’re going to meet some new people and have new experiences. That sounds like an adventure to me.”

“Are all these scary men going to be there?” Annabelle whispered. “I don’t like them, Salina.”

“I know, sweetheart, but they’re just here to keep us safe,” she said. “Mr. Bowman doesn’t want anything bad to happen to us.”

“Did something bad happen to Uncle Derek?” she asked. “Is that why he’s not coming with us?”

“Oh, no, sweetheart, your Uncle Derek is just fine,” Harold said, smiling at Annabelle. “He’s just a little late to the party. Do you like to ride horses? I might have the perfect little mare

for you. I also have the perfect room picked out for you. It has a canopy bed with curtains.”

“Oh, I can’t wait to see it,” Annabelle said, a smile on her face. “This isn’t as scary as I thought. Can we go riding right away?”

Harold laughed, “We’ll see what we can do,” he said with a tender look in his eyes that surprised her. “Did you know that your mother liked to ride? In fact, she’s the one who taught me. You look a lot like she did when she was a little girl.”

“You knew my mommy?” Annabelle asked, her voice full of wonder. “I never got to know her, but I’ve seen her picture. She was very pretty.”

“Yes, she was,” Harold said, his voice laced with sadness. “She was also sweet, generous, and kind. She could have done so much with her life.....but that’s for another time.”

The car pulled up to the front door, and the men in the front seat got out to open their doors, “Come along, I’m sure you’re both tired. I’ll show you to your room and let you rest for a little while before dinner,” Harold said, leading them up the steps. “I want you to make yourself at home, you’re my guests, and I like to see that my guests are happy.”

She wanted to point out that they weren’t really guests, but instead, she put a smile on her face, “Thank you, Harold, that’s very kind of you,” she said. “But I would be happier if Derek was here with us.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” he said. “He’s on his way. Perhaps you’d rather wait for him to arrive instead of going up to your room.”

“Yes, that would be nice,” she said. “I’m afraid that I won’t be able to rest until I know that he’s safe.”

“I understand, being separated from your mate can be difficult,” Harold said, with a shake of his head. “I myself have not been so lucky in love. My wife passed away two years ago from the sickness that plagues us.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said, the depth of his sadness clear on his face. “That must be difficult.”

“I pray you never find out just how difficult,” he said, then seemed to shake it off. “You can wait for Derek in the front parlor, I’ll have someone bring in some drinks and snacks just in case you’re hungry.”

They followed him down a long hallway into a warm and comfortable room, “There’s a television and some games if you get bored waiting,” he said. “I have a few things to attend to, but I’ll be back when Derek arrives.”

When the door closed behind him, Salina let out a long sigh and looked around the room, wondering if she’d made a mistake coming without a fight. But Annabelle came running over to her, “Salina, can I watch television?” she asked. “I’ve never seen one that big.”

“Sure, sweetie, let’s see if we can figure out how to turn it on,” she said, taking her hand. “But I have to warn you, I’m not very good at that kind of stuff.”

Before they could get across the room, there was a knock on the door, and her heart leapt, making her let out a little scream. “What’s wrong?” Annabelle asked, looking up at her. “Are you scared?”

“No, sweetheart,” she said, smiling down at her. “I’m not scared, that knock just startled me.”

A second later, the door swung open, and Derek came striding into the room, his face full of anger, but when he saw them, it melted away. “Oh, thank God, you didn’t fight them,” she said, running over and throwing herself into his arms. “I was so worried.”

Derek pushed her away and looked down at her, “Do you want to explain what’s going on?” he asked. “I can’t believe you went with that man voluntarily. He could have killed both of you.”

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me, Derek Ambrose,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him so she wouldn’t cry. “He had Annabelle, I didn’t have much choice.”

CHAPTER 19



*** DEREK ***

Derek took one look at Salina's face and knew that he'd taken his anger and worry out on the wrong person, "Oh, Salina, I'm sorry," he said, pulling her into his arms. "I was just so worried. None of this is your fault, you just did what you had to, I know that."

She relaxed into his arms, "I wasn't going to go with him," she said, shaking her head. "I was going to find a way to get away from him, but he had Annabelle, and he was going to take her with or without me. I really didn't have any choice."

"I know, sweetheart, I would have done the same thing," he said, then spotted Annabelle across the room. "Hey, squirt, come give your uncle Derek a hug."

She ran over to him, and he scooped her up with one arm, not letting go of Salina, "There, that's better," he said. "Now I've got the two most important people in my life right here with me."

"Are you two going to kiss?" Annabelle asked. "Cause that's gross."

"Well, then, you'd better close your eyes," he said, then gave Salina a big, noisy kiss. "Is that gross enough?"

"Ewww....." Annabelle said, then started giggling. "Put me down, Uncle Derek, I want to go watch television."

Just then, the door opened, and a young woman came in carrying a tray with coffee, tea, and snacks. She set it down on the coffee table, then straightened up. "Do you need anything

else?” she asked. “Mr. Bowman wants to be sure that you’re happy.”

He opened his mouth to tell the woman exactly what would make him happy, but Salina put her hand on his arm, “That looks wonderful,” she said. “Thank you, I don’t think we’ll need anything else.”

When she was gone, he turned to Salina, “I’m like a volcano ready to blow,” he said, shaking his head. “Let’s get Annabelle something to snack on, and then you can tell me what’s going on.”

“Derek, I was right,” Salina said, after Annabelle was happily watching a movie. “The women in the clan are all dying from the same illness that killed Natalie. Harold wants my help to figure out what it is.”

“So, it’s Harold?” he asked, unable to help himself. “Do I need to remind you this guy is dangerous?”

“No, you don’t, but he’s not all bad,” she said, then pulled him over to the couch and made him sit down. “Derek, he’s Natalie’s brother, and the way he talks about her, well, I think he still misses her.”

It took a few seconds to digest that information, “I don’t care,” he said, shaking his head. “This wasn’t the right way to do this. He could have just come and talked to us.”

“After what happened the other night, would you have listened?” she asked. “I wouldn’t have.”

He sighed, “I don’t know why we should help him,” he said. “Natalie never said anything about having a brother. He’s probably just as bad as the rest of them.”

Salina let out a long sigh, “We could at least listen to what he has to say,” she said. “This may be just the break we need, Derek, and the only way we’ll figure out how to help Annabelle.”

“I know that you’re right,” he said, shrugging. “I just don’t trust this guy. How long does he expect us to stay here? It could take weeks for the tests you need, right?”

“I’m not sure what he’s expecting,” she said. “I don’t know how much he knows, but we’ll find out at dinner.”

Just then, the door opened again, and a different young woman came in, “Hi, I’m Bridget,” she said, smiling at them. “Mr. Bowman hired me to take care of Annabelle while you’re here. I was hoping to spend some time getting to know her, if that’s okay with you both.”

Derek looked suspicious, “And what makes you qualified to look after my niece?” he asked. “I don’t let just anyone take care of her.”

Bridget whipped a piece of paper out of her back pocket, “Mr. Bowman said you might say that,” she said. “Here’s my resume. I think you’ll see I’m more than qualified and I love kids, always have. I have six younger brothers and sisters.”

He scanned the resume, then handed it back, “Well, it looks like Annabelle has a new companion,” he said, smiling at Bridget. “She’s a very special little girl, take good care of her.”

Salina looked a little surprised, “She’s got a degree and a ton of experience,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I think we should pick our battles, and I would like to see what Harold has to say.”

“I think we’re going to get our chance,” she said a few seconds later when the door opened and Harold came in. “Here’s our host right now.”

“Derek, so good to see you. I’m Harold Bowman, Natalie’s brother,” the man said as he approached them. “Thank you for accepting my invitation to join us. Salina was very clear that she wanted you here.”

He got to his feet, “You can skip all that fancy talk,” he said. “We’re only here because you forced us, so let’s not pretend that we’re friends.”

“Oh, come now, we’re more than friends, we’re family,” Harold said. “I thought I would show you to your room so you can get changed for dinner. I’m afraid we’re a bit formal around here, but you’ll find appropriate attire and some

toiletries in your room, so I don't think it should be a problem."

"How thoughtful," he said, getting to his feet and offering Salina his hand. "Let's get this show on the road so we can go home. I have a ranch to run."

Salina

Salina gave her dress one more tug, trying to hide the alarming amount of skin showing, then gave up and opened the bathroom door. Derek was standing across the room, fussing with his tie, but when he heard the door, he turned to face her. "Holy moly, you look incredible," he said, dropping his hands to his sides, his eyes roaming over her body. "If I didn't think we'd be interrupted, I'd take that dress right back off you and show you just how incredible."

"I feel completely exposed," she said, tugging on the top of the dress again. "I don't think I've ever gone out in public with this much cleavage exposed in my entire life. I'm not going down there."

"All the important things are covered up," he said, grinning at her. "And this is for Annabelle. Just think about that when you go downstairs."

"That's not fair," she said. "Now I don't have any choice."

Derek leaned down and gave her a kiss, "You'll be the most beautiful woman in the room, Salina, you always are," he said. "Now help me with this tie. I can't seem to make it do the right thing."

After they went downstairs and were seated, Salina looked across the table at Derek, who was still pulling at his tie and shifting around nervously in his chair, "Just try to relax," she said. "I'm sure he'll be here soon."

"I'm getting tired of waiting," Derek said. "Making people wait is an old trick to show who has power, and I don't like those kinds of games."

"What kind of games?" Harold asked, walking into the room. "I love games of any kind, although I have to admit, I'm a terrible loser."

“I was talking about.....” Derek said, but Salina cut him off.

“Oh, nothing specific,” she said, “we were just making small talk while we were waiting.”

“Oh, yes, I’m terribly sorry about that, I had a business call that went much longer than I anticipated,” Harold said, taking his seat at the head of the table. “You look beautiful, my dear. I knew that dress would be just perfect for you when I saw it.”

“It’s not exactly my style, but it’s nice that you were thinking about me,” she said, ignoring the look on Derek’s face. “You have a beautiful house, Harold. You must be very proud of it.”

“It didn’t come easy, let me tell you,” he said, a pleased smile on his face. “But we’re not here to talk about my finances, and I’m sure you’re both hungry. I’ll ring for dinner, and then we can talk about why I’ve invited you here.”

Derek let out a grunt and opened his mouth, but she scowled at him, and he sat back in his chair, “Yes, we’re looking forward to hearing all about it,” he said. “I’m sure it will be a compelling story.”

Harold didn’t react to the mocking tone of Derek’s voice; instead, he picked up a bell and rang it, then sat back in his chair, “I know you think that I’m evil, that I’m no better than my father, but I can assure you, that’s about as far from the truth as you can get,” he finally said. “I loved my sister, worshiped her if you will; she was pretty, smart, and most of all, she was always there for me. Life in the clan was much different back then. Violence ruled our homes, no one was safe from the wrath of the men who ruled us, but what happened to my sister changed everything.”

Harlod paused when the swinging door opened and a line of servants brought in their dinner, and one by one served them, then disappeared without a word. “I’m proud to say that the reason my sister got away that night was because I arranged it,” he said, then smiled when he saw the looks on their faces. “You didn’t expect that, did you?”

“Natalie would never talk about what happened that night,” Derek said. “She was afraid it would get someone in trouble. She must have been talking about you.”

Harold’s eyes teared up, then he took a deep breath, “That’s just like her,” he finally said, then sighed. “I grew up watching the men around me beat the women they were supposed to protect. I watched my mother be belittled, screamed at, and treated worse than our dog. When I was small, I thought it was just how the world worked, but as I got older, I began to see how wrong it was, although it wasn’t until the night Natalie stood up to our father that I realized just how terrible it was.”

Salina could see what it was costing him to talk about his sister and looked over at Derek, who had relaxed, “What happened?” she finally prompted when the silence had gone on for too long. “What did you do?”

“I beat my sister, then arranged her escape,” Harold said, his voice strained. “I didn’t want to do it, but my father made me. He said it was time I learned what it meant to be a man. He gave me a strip of leather and made me use it on her. I can still remember what it felt like, the horrible feeling that I was hurting the one person I loved most in the world, and all because my father wanted to sell her off to the highest bidder.”

Harold was gripping the table in front of him so hard his knuckles had turned white, “I vowed that night to take my father down, to break him like he’d broken every woman in his life,” he said, his eyes blazing with anger. “And I did, I toppled his little kingdom, stripped him of his power, and watched him die the way he deserved, broken and alone. I’m not sorry I did it. I would do it again if I had the chance, so don’t expect to see any remorse, because I feel none.”

Silence fell over the room, lasting for several seconds, and she searched her mind for something to say, but Harold took a deep breath, “Now that we’ve got that out in the open, let’s enjoy the wonderful food,” he said. “My father was an evil man, and he’s not worth discussing any further.”

CHAPTER 20



*** DEREK ***

Derek picked up his fork and began pushing the food around his plate, his appetite long gone. He'd known that Natalie had been through something horrible, but had no idea how bad it had really been. Hearing Harold talk about it brought the memory of that night back to the surface, the fear in Natalie's eyes, the bruises on her body, her bloody face, and he knew the man sitting next to him was responsible for some of it. But he also heard the pain and remorse in his voice, felt his grief from across the distance that separated them, and against his better judgment, was drawn in.

"You helped Natalie escape?" he finally asked. "We always thought she did that on her own."

Harold set down his fork, "I got her guards drunk and unlocked the door; she did the rest herself," he said. "I was there that night with my father chasing her, and I knew that he would kill her if he caught her. It was such a relief when I saw you and your brother. I could tell right away from how your brother was looking at her that everything would be okay."

"You were there?" he asked. "I don't remember seeing you, but then again, I was scared half to death."

"That made two of us," Harold said, shaking his head. "My father was livid, and I knew someone was going to take a beating for Natalie escaping, and as it turned out, it was me. That only made me hate him more and made it that much easier to do what I did. I went back, you know, several times. I had to check on her, make sure that she was all right. I was even there the day she married your brother. It made all of it

worth it to see her so happy. I'm just sorry it turned out the way it did. She should be here with us."

"I can't argue with that," he said, studying his host closely and deciding that the man was being genuine. "But that still doesn't explain what we're doing here."

"No, I suppose it doesn't. I just wanted you to understand I'm not the monster you think I am," Harold said. "I've been trying to repair the clan, to shift our beliefs away from the darkness that has followed us for decades, but I have to tell you it hasn't been easy. This illness is standing in my way and killing my people. It has become my entire focus, but you can understand how difficult it is to find someone I can trust with our secrets."

"And you think you can trust me?" Salina asked. "What makes you think that?"

"Oh, come now, Dr. Butler, I already told you I do my homework," Harold said. "I know exactly the kind of person you are, the kind of doctor you are. You would never betray a patient's trust. Beyond that, since you're clearly involved with Derek, I can't imagine you would tell the world about us."

"No, you're right," she said. "But I haven't agreed to help you."

"You will, it's just a matter of time," Harold said, waving away her objection. "But I find that our talk has tired me out. I think I'd like to leave the rest of this discussion for tomorrow morning. I have something I'd like to show you. I believe it will help you make your decision. Breakfast will be served at seven sharp, and then we'll be walking the grounds, so please dress appropriately."

"And if we don't want to stay?" Derek asked. "Are we allowed to leave?"

"I'm not keeping you prisoner, Derek, we're family, remember?" Harold said. "If you'd like to go home, please feel free to go, but it seems like a waste of time to me. Your room is all ready for you, and I'm sure Annabelle is tucked into the nursery."

He looked over at Salina, who shrugged, “In that case, we’d be pleased to accept your hospitality,” he said. “But I hope you understand that there are people who need to know where we are.”

“Tell anyone you want, I’m not hiding what I’m trying to do here,” Harold said, getting to his feet. “I’ll bid you both goodnight. If there’s anything you need, please don’t hesitate to let one of the staff know.”

When he was gone, Derek looked over at Salina, “Well, I don’t know what to think,” he said, then got to his feet. “But I am exhausted, and I need to make some calls and let everyone know where we are.”

“We should go check on Annabelle,” Salina said. “I hope she’s not missing us. This is a big scary house.”

Annabelle was tucked into bed when they came into the nursery, “Uncle Derek, I was getting so sleepy, but I wanted to tell you good night,” she said, sitting up. “Bridget is almost as good a storyteller as you are.”

He sat down on the bed next to her, “I’m glad to hear that,” he said. “Have you been having fun?”

“We had dinner outside under a tree, and then we watched the sun go down,” Annabelle said. “Tomorrow morning, Bridget is going to take me riding if you say it’s okay. Please say it’s okay.”

“I think that sounds like a great idea,” he said, tucking her back into bed. “But if you’re going to go riding, you’d better get some sleep.”

“Goodnight, Uncle Derek,” Annabelle said, lying down and closing her eyes. “See, I’m already asleep.”

After a round of goodnight kisses and Bridget’s assurances she’d be right next door, they went back to their room, crawled into bed, and snuggled up together. “What are we going to do?” Salina asked, looking up at him. “Do you think we should help him?”

“I still want to see what he has to show us tomorrow, and I’d like to do a little investigating myself,” he said. “His story

sounds like the truth, but we have no way of knowing. He could be lying about everything. I wish Natalie would have talked about what happened to her more, the only thing she would ever say is that someone could be hurt if she told us.”

“So, she was trying to protect someone,” Salina said. “Do you think she knew Harold was the one who helped her?”

“I don’t know, but it seems like it,” he said, then sighed. “I can’t help but think that all of this doesn’t matter. If Harold holds the key to finding out what’s wrong with Annabelle, I don’t think we can say no. But it’s not really my decision. In the end, it’s going to be up to you, Salina. You’re the one who’s going to be doing all the work.”

“We’re a team, Derek,” she said. “We’re in this together; we’ll decide together what we want to do.”

Salina

Salina and Derek followed Harold through the house and into the kitchen, “I’m sorry about all the secrecy,” Harold said, smiling. “I just don’t want to spoil the surprise.”

“Don’t you think we’ve had enough surprises?” Derek asked. “Maybe you could just give us a clue.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” Harold said, clearly enjoying himself. “That would spoil all my fun.”

They went out the backdoor into the early morning sunlight, her hand in Derek’s, and she couldn’t help but marvel at the beauty around them as they stepped off the porch onto a path that led through the trees to the back of the property. She could tell that Derek was thinking the same thing, but neither spoke as they walked behind Harold, the trees suddenly casting everything around them into shadow. But when they stepped back out into the sunlight, she found herself pausing at the sight in front of them and looked over at Derek, who was just as surprised as she was.

Harold, sensing them holding back, turned and looked at them, “Nice, isn’t it,” he said, gesturing to the little compound of buildings. “Much better than other hospitals, don’t you think?”

“This is a hospital?” she asked, intrigued. “It doesn’t look like a hospital.”

“No, it doesn’t, and I’m rather proud of that,” Harold said. “Come let me show you. We’ll start with the doctor’s office and work our way back to the lab, which, if I do say so myself, is the crowning glory of what I’ve done here.”

They followed him to the first building they came to, painted white like the rest. It was full of big windows that let in lots of sunlight, and when they walked inside, Salina couldn’t help but sigh. Besides a comfortable waiting room, there were three exam rooms, each filled with all the best equipment, and she could just imagine seeing patients in the happy little building.

“Impressed?” Harold asked when they stepped back outside. “Wait until you see the cottage, as we like to call it.”

After leading them down the path a little further, he walked up to the door of what looked like a small house, but when they stepped inside, Salina understood instantly it was more than that. On the surface, the house looked like nothing more than someone’s home, but hiding among the furnishings was medical equipment, and when they stepped into the kitchen, a small pharmacy was on the wall.

This time when the door closed behind them, Harold was grinning, “This is the first time I’ve ever shown this to anyone outside of the clan,” he said. “I’m rather enjoying myself. Let’s keep going. It gets even better from here.”

“This is all very impressive,” Derek said, following behind Harold again. “But it’s just sitting here empty.”

“For that, we count ourselves lucky,” Harold said. “It’s not always like this. Most of the time we have patients, some of them dying. My wife had to suffer in a human hospital for weeks before she finally passed. It made a difficult death even worse, and I swore to myself that would never happen to anyone in my clan again.”

“You’re making it very difficult to dislike you,” Derek finally said, his voice choked with emotion. “Natalie was

shipped from one place to the next before she finally died. It was very frustrating, so I understand what you mean.”

“It wasn’t completely their fault, no one knew what was wrong with my wife, which brings us to the laboratory,” Harold said, opening the door with a flourish. “Please come inside, Dr. Butler. I think this building, above all the others, will interest you the most.”

The men let her go in first, but she only made it a few feet before she stopped, too shocked to move another step. Derek finally put his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her forward. Speechless, she walked around the room, trailing her fingers over the equipment lined up on the counters along walls, then turned back to face Harold, searching for the right thing to say.

“This is incredible,” she finally managed to say. “I must be dreaming. I’ve never seen some of this equipment out of a university setting, but it’s all here, everything I would need.”

“Your office is right through that door,” Harold said. “Of course, I didn’t know it would be your office when I built the lab, I just wanted to be prepared should the day come that I found someone like you. It was a long shot, but it paid off.”

Just then, a young man came through another door, dressed in scrubs and a lab coat, “Oh, Harold, I didn’t know you were coming by today,” he said, but when he saw them, his entire face lit up. “Oh, my God, you’re really here, you came. I can’t believe it. I’ve been following your work for a couple of years, and this is such an honor.”

“Dr. Butler, I’d like to introduce you to Dr. Franks,” Harold said, a big smile on his face. “He knows everything there is to know about these machines, and he’s here to be your assistant.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, feeling a little light-headed. “I think I need to sit down.”

CHAPTER 21



*** DEREK ***

Derek helped Salina into a chair, “Are you okay?” he asked. “Do you need some water?”

“I’ll get it,” Dr. Franks said. “I had the same reaction the first time I saw this.”

Salina downed half the glass of water, then took a deep breath, “I think I’m okay now,” she said. “This is all just a bit of a shock.”

“Sorry about that. I guess I should have warned you,” Harold said, not looking the least bit regretful. “But I did tell you that what I was going to show you today was going to make it impossible to tell me no.”

“He’s right,” Salina said. “This place is a researcher’s dream. I could do so much with all this equipment; tests that usually take weeks could be done in hours instead. I could figure out what’s wrong with Annabelle and the rest of the woman, Derek, everything I need is right here.”

“Is that a yes I’m hearing?” Harold asked, clearly pleased with himself. “I promise I’ll compensate you for your time, and I can be very generous when I want to; just ask Dr. Franks.”

“I don’t care about the money,” Salina said, then looked over at Harold. “Where did you get all the money to pay for all this? The equipment in that room alone is worth millions of dollars.”

“If you’re worried that I got all this through less than legal means, let me assure you, it’s all aboveboard,” Harold said. “You see, Dr. Butler, I have a talent for making money. The stock market has been very kind to me, and I’ve spent every dime I’ve made trying to bring this clan back to life. But I won’t be insulted if you’d like to check that out for yourself before you agree to come work with us.”

“We’ll do that,” Derek said. “Now, I think it’s time we got back home.”

“Oh, but the tour isn’t over,” Harold said. “There are a few people I’d like you to meet; I’ve arranged a luncheon to introduce you.”

He looked over at Salina, relieved to see that the color had come back into her cheeks, “I don’t know, Harold, this has already been a lot,” he said. “I think we understand what you want.”

“I’m okay now,” Salina said, getting to her feet and looking up at him. “We’ve come this far; maybe we should follow through.”

“If that’s what you want,” he said, then turned to Harold. “We’ll stay, but as soon as lunch is over, we’re going home. This has gone on long enough.”

Salina looked up at him, a concerned look on her face, “Do you think Derek and I could have a few minutes alone before we move on?” she said. “We won’t be long.”

“Of course, I’m sure you have a lot to talk about,” Harold said. “We’ll be right outside when you’re ready.”

As soon as they were gone, Salina pulled him over to the couch against the office’s back wall, “Okay, what’s going on?” she asked. “Harold is giving us everything we need to help Annabelle. Why are you so hostile to him?”

He sighed, “I can’t help but think there’s something more going on here,” he said. “It’s all just too perfect. I’ve spent years thinking Natalie’s family were monsters, but Harold isn’t anything like that. He’s got some rough edges, but deep down, he’s not that much different than I am.”

“Then why all the anger?” she asked again. “Derek, sometimes good things happen, and we just have to let them. There’s nothing wrong with that. Look at the two of us; if I hadn’t let myself get tricked by that jerk last year, I wouldn’t have even been here. I don’t see you turning your back on me because something good happened to you.”

“Well, when you put it that way, I guess it does seem kind of stupid,” he said, then shrugged, embarrassed to tell her the truth. “Okay, it might also be because I’m a little jealous. Harold can give you everything you want, and I’m just a rancher.”

“Now, you’re really being silly,” Salina said, smiling at him. “He can’t even begin to give me what you do, Derek. It’s you I want, and if you tell me that you don’t want me to do this, I won’t. We’re in this together, remember, I won’t do anything that will make you feel uncomfortable. There are other ways to find out what’s wrong with Annabelle.”

“Now I feel like a first-class jerk,” he said. “I’m being selfish, and you would have let me. I don’t deserve you, Salina.”

“Of course, you do,” she said, slipping into his lap. “And just for the record, you’re a lot more than just a rancher. Now you’re selling yourself short. I want to be with you, Derek, for the rest of our lives, and nothing is going to change that.”

He let out a long sigh, “Well, then we’d better get to lunch. I have a feeling you’re going to meet your future patients,” he said. “If I was Harold, that would be the next card I pulled.”

“I’m sure that you’re right,” she said, “but I think they can wait for a few more minutes.”

When they finally came outside, Harold and Dr. Franks were waiting patiently for them, “We’re ready for lunch,” she announced, her cheeks still pink from pleasure. “And then I think we have some serious talking to do.”

A big smile spread across Harold’s face, “Right this way, Dr. Butler,” he said. “There are some people who would like to meet you.”

He led them past the laboratory and down the path until they came to another complex of buildings, but this time it was clear they were all private homes. “The hospital compound was my big project,” Harold said. “But these homes were the first thing I did when the money started coming in. Most of the clan still owns land around here, but with all the troubles, it was better if we were all closer together. Someday, I hope we can reclaim those lands and go back to working them, but for now, we all get along just fine here together.”

He led them to a big building in the center of the houses, “We’ll be having lunch in the meeting house. It’s the only place big enough for all of us,” he said. “I hope you’re hungry, there’s going to be a mountain of food in there, and we don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings.”

By the time they started back for the main house, they’d been introduced to what was left of the clan and had been told so many stories about the deaths of the woman in the clan that the lunch he’d eaten was sitting heavily in his stomach. No one spoke as they followed the path back through the grounds, and Harold immediately excused himself, pleading exhaustion when they got back to the house.

“Let’s go upstairs and lay down for a while,” he said. “Annabelle is still out riding with Bridget, and I think we could use a little break.”

Salina nodded but didn’t say anything, her eyes haunted with what they’d just seen and heard, and let him lead her upstairs. As soon as the door to their room closed behind them, Salina threw herself into his arms and began to cry, clinging to him until she had no tears left, then looked up at him.

“We’re going to help them, aren’t we?” she asked. “I don’t think I could turn my back on them, even if you ask me to.”

“I would never ask you to do that,” he said, shaking his head and smiling down at her. “Of course, we’re going to help them. Harold made sure we couldn’t say no, and he’s got me so convinced I’m going to ask the clan for help.”

Salina

“Oh, Derek, I was thinking about asking Matt and Bonnie to help out, too,” she said, smiling up at him. “I guess great minds think alike.”

“Somehow, I don’t think my mind is anything compared to yours, but I’ll take the compliment,” he said. “Now the question is, do you know what I’m thinking right now?”

She saw desire blossoming in his eyes, and warmth slowly spread through her body, “Derek, you can’t be thinking what I think you are,” she said, her heart starting to pound. “We’re in someone else’s house, we can’t.....”

“Why not? he asked, grinning down at her. “Annabelle won’t be back for hours, and Harold looked like he needed a couple of hours to recover. I think this is the perfect time.”

“You are terrible,” she said, but didn’t stop him when he started to unbutton her shirt. “We really shouldn’t.....”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” he said. “This is exactly what we should be doing with a free afternoon. It won’t happen very often.”

His hands had already found their way to her breasts, and she knew the fight was already over when a huge wave of pleasure nearly took her under, but managed to pull away. “How can you think about sex after what we saw and heard today?” she asked. “It just seems wrong somehow.”

“Sweetheart, it’s because of everything we saw and heard today that I’m thinking about sex,” he said, smiling at the look on her face. “Don’t you see, life is too short not to take a little happiness when we can get it? Being with you is one of the best things in my life, and I’m not going to waste a single minute of our time together. Do you really think those people we talked to today would want you to deny yourself a little pleasure?”

“Well, no, I guess not,” she said. “I never thought about it that way.”

“That’s your problem,” Derek said, grinning at her. “You think too much.”

This time, when his hands found her breasts and his mouth captured hers, she gave into the passion that ignited instantly between them, letting the warmth of their connection sweep her away until the world around them faded. Derek lifted her into his arms and carried her over to the bed, then quickly stripped off her clothes, then his before pushing her down onto the bed. His hands were all over her body as he continued to kiss her, caressing all the most sensitive places until she was trembling in his arms, desperate for more, but unable to voice her needs.

When his hands slid between her legs, she lifted her hips to him, holding her breath as anticipation thundered through her, but he didn't touch her. Instead, he pushed her legs wider, then slipped between them. He dipped his head between her legs, and the first brush of his tongue across her swollen button sent a powerful wave of pleasure shooting through her. Then all she could do was hold on to Derek's shoulders, her nails digging into his skin, as he sent her soaring higher and higher, then tumbling over the edge into a realm of pure sensation.

Still floating on a cloud of pleasure, she wasn't ready when, with a growl that echoed off the room's walls, he grabbed her by the hips and flipped her over onto her stomach. Before she could catch her breath, he pulled her up onto her hands and knees, shoved her legs apart with his knees, and with his hands digging into her hips, drove himself into her. A cry of pleasure erupted from deep in her lungs, echoing the deep grunt of satisfaction from Derek as he buried himself even deeper inside her.

With the next thrust of his hips, a tight knot of pleasure began to form deep inside her and grew as Derek continued to fill her over and over again. Soon she began to feel the familiar warmth of his magic, its power feeding the pleasure until her body was trembling and bucking with the force of her climax, and she went flying again. This time she took Derek with her, his body straining deep inside her as hers clenched tightly around him, and he cried out her name, sending a wave of power flowing through her.

They stayed joined that way for several long minutes before Derek collapsed onto his side, taking her with him, but still buried deeply inside her. It was a while before either of them was able to breathe normally, and even longer before they felt the need to break the silence that had fallen over the room, but Salina finally shifted away from Derek. Groaning when their connection was broken, but all too aware of the sounds outside their door, she felt herself blushing.

“Don’t worry, you weren’t too loud,” Derek said, grinning at her. “I’m sure no one knows what we were doing in here.”

Her face got even hotter, “I hope not, that would be so embarrassing,” she said. “We should get dressed. We need to tell Harold that we’re going to help him, and then we need to make some plans. I don’t know how long this will take, Derek.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’m with you every step of the way,” he said. “Just tell me what you want me to do, and it’s done. That includes distracting you if you’re thinking too much.”

She gave him a little slap on the chest, “If you distract me too much, I won’t get anything done,” she said. “So, you’d better get it out of your system now.”

“Oh, was that an invitation?” he asked, flipping her onto her back. “Because I definitely accept.”

CHAPTER 22



*** DEREK ***

Derek stood next to Harold at the front gates of the compound, surprised to see how nervous he was, “Relax, it’s going to be great,” he said. “In case you missed it, Salina is a genius. This is going to work perfectly. Who doesn’t love a party?”

“We’ve been cut off from the rest of the world so long, I can’t help but be nervous,” Harold said, shrugging his shoulders. “Doing business with people hundreds of miles away over the computer is one thing, facing the people who have feared and hated our clan for generations is another. I’ve been dreaming about this day, but now that it’s here, I want to run away.”

Salina reached up and gave him a kiss on the cheek, and the look of surprise on Harold’s face made him laugh, “You’re a good man, Harold,” she said. “You may be a little rough around the edges, but deep inside, you have a heart of gold.”

“Hey, don’t you dare go around telling people that,” he said, a flush of satisfaction on his face. “I wouldn’t want that to get around.”

Only a second later, Matt pulled up to the gate, “We’re here,” he said, gesturing to the long line of vehicles behind him. “Tell us where you want us.”

“Hey, Matt, it’s good to see you. It looks like everyone came. I can’t tell you how glad I am,” Harold said, a look of relief on his face. “Everything is set up down by the big barn; just take the service road to the left, and you can’t miss it.”

After the last car disappeared down the road, they jumped into Harold's golf cart and followed the procession, surprised to find the clearing a hive of activity by the time they got there. Tents were being raised, food was being stacked on tables, games were slowly coming together, and in between, the medical professionals Matt had recruited were setting up their stations.

"It looks like they started without us," Salina said, jumping out. "We'd better get down there, Derek, before something goes wrong."

"Always the optimist, aren't you?" he said, jumping out and giving her a kiss. "We'll see you in a little while, Harold. Go get your people, and we'll get this party started."

They watched him drive off, a big smile on his face, then headed into the fray, Derek's heart filling with pride and gratitude as he watched his clan pitch in for a bunch of strangers. But he didn't have much time to reflect, as he was put immediately to work, and in no time, Harold was back with his clan. There were a few awkward moments as the two groups came together, but Harold jumped in and made an impassioned speech, easing the tension.

Before long, people were having fun, eating, drinking, and playing games, but under all the fun, they were there for a purpose, and small groups of Harold's clan could be seen disappearing into the tents marked with the big red cross. When Salina finally emerged from the biggest tent, Dr. Franks walking behind her carrying a big cooler, a cheer went up from the crowd, and he could feel the air change.

"Well, we did it. I never imagined it would be this easy," Harold said, walking up to him, a big smile on his face. "I want to thank you, Derek, this wouldn't have been possible without you, and it means the world to me. We got off to a rough start, but I'd like to think that we're friends now."

He slapped Harold on the back, "I thought I was going to have to kill you at one point," he said, shaking his head. "But you've proven me wrong, and I'd be honored to call you my friend."

Together they walked over to the laboratory, the happy sounds of the party behind them making them both smile and shake their heads. Inside, they found Dr. Franks and Salina carefully putting the samples into the refrigerator with Bonnie and Matt's help. When they were finished, everyone breathed a sigh of relief, and there were congratulations all around.

When Salina spotted Derek across the room, she rushed over to him, "Isn't this exciting, I wasn't sure it was going to work, but we got all our samples," she said, throwing herself into his arms. "We're going to start prepping them right away. Dr. Franks can't wait to get the equipment running; we should have our first results in a few hours."

"And then it's going to be days before you know anything," he said, looking down at her. "How about taking a break and eating something? I bet you haven't taken a break all day."

"Well, no, but this is too important," she said, trying to pull away. "I'll eat something later."

"Oh, no you don't, you'll come with me now and eat something," he said. "You need food and rest, and then I'll let you come back."

"Hey, who's the doctor here?" she asked, then grinned at him. "But you're right, I'm just so anxious to get started."

"I think Dr. Franks has everything well in hand, and I saw him taking a break earlier," he said, grinning at her. "Come on, there's a lot of good food out there. You don't want to miss out."

Salina

Salina picked up her coffee cup, then set it back on the desk with a frustrated thump, then looked over at Derek asleep on the couch and let out a long sigh. Looking up at the clock, she winced when she saw that it was two o'clock in the morning, but she wasn't ready to give up for the day, couldn't until she was completely sure about what she was seeing. Getting to her feet, she tiptoed over to the coffee pot and

poured herself another cup, then drank half of it standing there before refilling it.

She'd been at it for days, had spent hours pouring over the DNA results constantly being spit out of the whirring equipment, but hadn't found what she was really looking for. Looking back over at Derek, she let out another sigh, not sure how she was going to tell him, then went back to her desk to go over everything again, hoping that she'd missed something. But no matter how she looked at it, what they were looking for wasn't there. She found more evidence of the genetic anomaly in Harold's clan, more concrete proof that she was right, but that was all.

Picking up the hard copy of Annabelle's results, she studied it, then set it down on her desk, put her head down, and closed her eyes. A rustling from the couch made her pick up her head, and she realized that Derek was awake, his hair ruffled from sleep, his eyes still foggy.

"Somethings wrong," he said, getting up and walking over to her. "I can feel it."

"How do you do that?" she asked. "How do you know what I'm feeling?"

Derek shrugged, "I think it's the connection between us," he said. "You didn't answer my question."

"Annabelle doesn't have the markers," she said. "They're everywhere in Harold's clan, including Natalie, but Annabelle doesn't have them."

"Are you sure?" he asked, sinking down into the chair next to her desk. "I mean, we were so sure, it all fit."

"I know, that's what's so frustrating," she said. "I thought we'd have our answer, I thought this would tell us what we needed to know."

"Okay, well, at least we've eliminated something," Derek said. "Let's go to bed, Salina. It's the middle of the night; you have to be exhausted."

"I can't just go to bed," she said, getting to her feet and beginning to pace. "Annabelle is still sick, and we still have no

idea why. I've failed her, Derek. She could die, and I won't be able to stop it."

He got up and pulled her into his arms, "Salina, Annabelle hasn't been sick in almost two weeks," he said, looking down at her. "You've been so busy you haven't noticed, but she's thriving, sweetheart. I think whatever was wrong with her has run its course."

"But that doesn't make any sense," she said. "It couldn't have just gone away."

"Why not?" he asked. "People get sick, and then they get better. She does have shifter blood, and we are amazing at healing ourselves."

"Do you really think so?" she asked. "I mean, that would be wonderful."

"I think only time will tell," he said, smiling at her. "And I think it's time we got some sleep."

* * *

Salina put the last of her things into the suitcase, then closed the lid and latched it, "I'm almost sorry to leave, but I'll be glad to get back to the ranch," she said. "I hope Harold won't be lonely without us."

"I think he'll be fine," Derek said. "And Annabelle will come to visit. That will help."

Just then, Annabelle came running in the door, "Uncle Derek, look what Uncle Harold gave me," she said, holding out a framed picture. "It's a picture of him and Mommy when they were kids. I'm going to put it in my special place."

"That's very nice, sweetheart," Derek said, bending down to look at it. "You look a lot like your mommy."

"Everyone here says that," Annabelle said. "That means I'm going to grow up to be really pretty."

"But don't forget being pretty isn't the only important thing," she said, bending down to scoop the little girl into her

arms. “You have to be smart, too, and you’re very smart.”

“Are we going home now?” Annabelle asked, looking over at the suitcase. “I’m going to miss Uncle Harold.”

“You’ll miss him, but you can come visit all the time,” Derek said. “Now go tell Bridget goodbye and get your backpack. We need to get going.”

Harold was waiting at the door for them, “I can’t thank you enough for all you did,” he said. “I’m sorry you didn’t find what you were looking for, but Annabelle seems to be doing fine, and now we have some hope for the clan.”

“I’m glad we could help,” she said. “And I expect to see you at the ranch for dinner next week, you promised.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Harold said. “Eight o’clock sharp on Wednesday.”

Harold was waiting at the door for them, “I can’t thank you enough for all that you’ve done,” he said. “It’s a relief to know what we’re dealing with and that it’s possible for the women of the clan to have children that don’t carry the gene, Annabelle is proof of that.”

“We still have a long way to go, but knowing the cause of the problem will make it easier to treat it, and with some time, I think we should be able to completely eliminate it from the clan’s bloodline,” she said. “I’ll be here with you every step of the way, and Dr. Swensen should be here in a couple of days, he’s thrilled with the opportunity to dig deeper into this. I think you’ll find that he’s very open minded as well as a brilliant doctor, you couldn’t be in better hands.”

Harold wrapped her up in a big hug, “You’ve given us all a second chance and none of us will ever forget it,” he said, then let her go and knelt in front of Annabelle. “And you, young lady have given me a little piece of my sister back, I expect you to visit often.”

“And we’re expecting you for dinner Wednesday night,” Derek said. “Seven sharp, don’t be late.”

Harold smiled at them all, “I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” he said.

CHAPTER 23



*** DEREK ***

Derek pulled the truck up in front of the ranch, feeling like he'd been gone for months instead of just a few days, "It's good to be home," he said, looking over at Salina. "This is home, isn't it?"

"There's no place I'd rather be," she said. "But wherever you are would be home to me."

"Does that mean you're going to stay?" he asked, his heart pounding, a part of him afraid to hear the answer. "I know that might sound like a stupid question, but well....."

Salina slid across the seat, "I'm not going anywhere," she said, wrapping her arms around him. "This is home now, Derek, I have friends, I have a great job, and the lab of my dreams at my disposal. For the first time in my life, I feel like I'm right where I belong."

He let out the breath he'd been holding, "I love you, Salina," he said. "I love you more than I thought it was possible to love someone, and I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you."

"I love you too, Derek," she said, then stretched up and kissed him. "And if that was an invitation, I accept."

"Do you two really have to do this now?" Annabelle piped up from the backseat. "At least let me out of the truck."

They both looked in the backseat, "Sorry, Annabelle," she said, sliding away from Derek. "I suppose that can wait until we get inside."

Annabelle was still clutching the picture when they walked into the house, "I'm going to put this in my special place," she said. "Do you want to come, Salina?"

"Sure, I'd love to, sweetheart," she said, looking over at Derek. "Your Uncle Derek might want to come too."

Annabelle looked over at him, "Okay, I guess he can come too," she said and started for the stairs. "But you have to promise not to tell anyone about it."

"We promise," they said in unison, then laughed.

"Your secret is safe with us," she said, following Annabelle up a set of stairs she'd never noticed before. "Where are we going?"

"Up to the attic," Derek said, not looking very pleased. "Annabelle, you know you're not supposed to be up here."

"I know, Uncle Derek, but sometimes when I'm missing my mommy and daddy, I come up here. It makes me feel better," Annabelle said, climbing the steps carefully. "I'm always really careful, and I don't touch anything, I promise."

"We'll talk about it more later," he said. "Just promise me that you won't come up here again without asking."

"Okay, Uncle Derek," she said, climbing the last stair. "Follow me; it's over here in the corner."

She led them across the attic to an old armoire, its cracked and peeling white paint a stark contrast to the darkness of the attic, and he could understand why she had chosen it. Annabelle threw open the doors and crawled inside, making flecks of paint rain down on her head, but she didn't seem to notice.

"I'm going to put the picture right here next to Mommy's picture," she said, arranging them, making more paint fleck off. "I have some other stuff too. Do you want to see it?"

Behind him, Salina made a choking noise, "Oh, no, it can't be," she said, shaking her head. "That's just too simple, it's not possible, we would have checked, it's a standard test."

He turned back to Salina, “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” he asked. “Are you okay?”

She shook her head, “No, I’m not okay, and I don’t think Annabelle is either,” she said. “You need to get her out of there right now and into the shower. Get all that paint off of her now.”

“What?” he asked, confused. “It’s just paint, Salina, it can’t hurt her.”

“It can if it has lead in it,” she said. “Please, Derek, get her out of there and into the shower. I need to check her blood tests. I don’t remember seeing one for lead levels. We always run one in cases like Annabelle’s, it’s a silent killer.”

Trying not to panic, he went back over to Annabelle, “Hey sweetheart, I think it’s time for a shower. You’ve got paint all over you,” he said. “And for now, let’s take those pictures with you.”

Salina

Salina and Derek sat on either side of Annabelle’s hospital bed, both completely exhausted. Still, the little girl was completely unaware as she watched a movie on the television above their heads. Clutching her favorite stuffed toy, she laughed as the characters scampered across the screen, and both adults smiled with relief to hear her so happy.

Salina had stopped beating herself up for missing the obvious, but only after Derek had reminded her of all the good that had come out of it. She was still angry that Dr. Morgan had canceled the test without telling her, and considering confronting him about it, but that would have to wait. She was too exhausted to decide right then. She closed her eyes, her head swimming a bit. She was beginning to feel a bit queasy but shrugged it off, wondering when she last ate.

When the thought of food made her actively nauseous, she knew it had been too long, but when she tried to sit up, a wave of dizziness washed over her. “Salina, are you alright?” Derek asked, his face full of concern. “All the color just drained from your cheeks, and you look like you’re going to faint.”

“I don’t feel very well all of a sudden,” she said, closing her eyes again. “I think I waited too long to eat.”

“Do you want me to go get you something?” he asked, getting to his feet. “I can run down to the cafeteria really quick.”

“Maybe just some water,” she said, the thought of food making her feel like vomiting. “I’m sure that will help.”

Just then, there was a quiet tap on the door, and Bonnie poked her head inside, “Oh, good, you’re both here,” she said, a smile slowly spreading across her face. “I need to talk to you.”

“Salina isn’t feeling very well,” he said. “Do you think it can wait?”

“What’s wrong?” Bonnie asked, going over to Salina. “You do look a little pale.”

“It’s just a little dizziness and nausea, I’m sure I’ll be fine in a minute or two,” she said. “I should have eaten more today, but with everything going on, I just forgot.”

Bonnie went to the sink and filled a cup with water, “Here, drink this,” she said, handing it to her. “But I’ve got bad news for you. You probably aren’t going to feel better in a few minutes; it’s going to be more like nine months.”

She froze with the cup halfway to her mouth, then looked over at Bonnie, “I’m sorry, what did you just say?” she asked. “I don’t think I heard you right.”

Bonnie grinned at her, then at Derek, “You two are pregnant,” she said. “The lab always checks when they check lead levels, and it came back positive. Congratulations.”

She was so stunned she couldn’t speak for a few seconds, “Did they run it twice?” she asked. “We always have them run it twice.”

Bonnie nodded, “It was positive the second time, I was standing right here,” she said, a huge smile on her face. “I’m going to leave you two alone now, but I’ll just be right down the hall if you need me.”

When the door closed behind her, Derek pulled her to her feet, “Are you okay?” he asked, a smile on his face, his eyes filled with happiness. “You’re happy, aren’t you? I mean, I know we’re not married or anything, but I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Salina.”

She looked up at him, “Was that a proposal?” she asked, a sense of complete satisfaction slowly settling over her. “Because if it was, it sucked.”

Derek grinned, “I’m sorry, let me try again,” he said. “Dr. Butler, would you do the honor of marrying me and having our child?”

“Well, since the kid thing has already happened, I guess I don’t have much choice,” she said, grinning back at him. “I love you, Derek. This is the last thing I expected, but I’m so happy I feel like I’m going to explode.”

“I love you too, Salina,” he said. “And I’m going to spend the rest of my life showing you just how much.”

EPILOGUE



Noah put the lid back on the pot, opened the oven, took out the rolls and set them on the counter, then looked up at the clock, his annoyance with his son only growing. Connor knew what time he served dinner; they'd been eating at the same time every night for his entire life, but lately, he just couldn't seem to get himself back into the house on time. Remembering what it was like to be his son's age and all the mischief he'd gotten into, he shut off the stove and headed out the back door.

He had a pretty good idea of where to start looking and headed for the stream that created the border between his ranch and the neighbor's property, taking the well-worn path generations of his family had created. The sound of Conner's voice reached him first, and he slowed down, trying to hear what he was saying, but it was too muffled. Wondering who his son could be talking to, he crept through the trees, then jumped out from behind a tree.

"It's time for dinner," he shouted, making his son jump. "You're late."

A second later, he realized that his son hadn't been the only one who'd screamed, and a big splash confirmed it, "Oh, my God, I'm soaked," a female voice screeched from the stream. "You are such a huge jerk."

He turned to find a young woman making her way out of the water, her clothes completely soaked, her shirt almost transparent, and his body tingled at the sight of her full breasts. Tearing his eyes away, he ignored the woman and stomped

over to his son, who was staring at him with his mouth hanging open.

“Dad, what are you doing here?” Connor finally asked. “Am I late?”

“I wouldn’t be out here hunting you down if you weren’t,” he said. “Now get home right this instant, and I don’t want you coming down here again.”

“But Dad,” Connor started to protest, then saw his face. “Yes, sir.”

Connor started trudging toward the house, and he started to follow, “What? You’re not even going to apologize,” the young woman demanded. “You really are a jerk, and by the way, you should give that kid a break; he’s lonely, or maybe you’re too busy yelling at him to notice.”

He turned slowly back to the woman, ignoring the flare of desire that rose inside him when he looked over at her, “I don’t know who you are, but don’t tell me how to raise my son,” he said. “I’m sorry you fell in the creek, but maybe you should not have been here. This is private property.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at him, “Yeah, my dad’s,” she said. “I have just as much right to be here as you do, but I’m leaving since I’m soaked to the skin, thanks to you.”

She turned and stomped off, her well-rounded hips swaying as she walked, and another wave of desire washed over him, this one stronger than the last. “Great, just what I need,” he said, then turned and followed his son back to the house.

I hope you enjoyed the book! Want to read more of this series? [**CLICK HERE**](#) to get book 4 “[**Daddy Wolf’s Next Door Neighbour**](#)”.