



VALOR AND DOYLE BOOK SEVEN

*Chatsimonia*

MERRIMENT

NICKY JAMES

# Matrimonial Merriment

**Valor and Doyle Book Seven**



Nicky James



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Note from the Author

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## Note to Readers



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## Chapter 1

# Quaid

MONDAY, OCTOBER 2ND: TWO MONTHS AND TWENTY-ONE DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



A tiny, rolled note landed soundlessly on my desk, its unwelcome presence instantly grating. Why did this have to be a thing? I loathed the efforts made by the upper echelon of the department to inject cordiality into our working environment. It was unnecessary and patronizing. We had better things to do than play games.

Slips of paper delivered, Edwards strutted into his office with a devious smirk, the recycled margarine tub he'd been clutching now discarded into the waste basket beside my desk, having served its purpose.

Jordyn and I were the last to receive our *secret names*.

“He’s far too smug.” I sneered after our boss. “I hate it when the staff sergeants get together and devise department-wide *fun*

activities for their employees. And I say that sarcastically in case the sentiment didn't come through."

"Oh, it always comes through, Valor. And if it didn't, you wear your emotions on your face for all to see."

I turned my sneer toward my no-longer-in-training partner, Jordyn Frawley, who perfectly mimicked the expression I wore like a comfortable glove.

She laughed and rolled her eyes when I continued to stare with venom. "God, you're miserable. Why does this bother you so much? Who cares? Let's open them together." She toyed with the shiny red ribbon tied around her carefully rolled paper.

"It's stupid."

"Quit being a grinch."

Unable to unfurl my brows, I glared at the roll of paper and crimson ribbon on the ink blotter. It was a mini scroll in essence. No more than three inches long and tightly wound, it resembled a party-size straw like the ones they put in your drink at the bar. Those at least served a purpose. This *thing* risked impeding proper focus, and our jobs were serious. They *required* proper attention at all times.

"I hate this kind of stuff." I picked at the ribbon and squished the tube under a finger. "And for the love of god, it's October second. Who does Secret Santa in October? We haven't even had Halloween yet. I object to this on every level, and it doesn't make me a grinch."

“You object to everything on every level.”

“I object to that observation.”

Jordyn threw her hands up. “Case in point.”

“Come on. Admit it. This is preposterous. I refuse to be festive and merry *in October*.”

“I will only accept that as a legitimate defense if you agree to be festive and merry *in December*.”

“Shut up. You’re bugging me.”

“Grinch. The purpose of the activity is for us to have multiple opportunities for positive interactions with coworkers so we can get to know one another on a deeper level and be in the best possible position to select a final gift when the time comes. Didn’t you read the email?”

The wrinkle in my nose grew more pronounced. “Yes, I read the email.” I’d *skimmed* the email, then promptly trashed it because I had more important things to worry about than engaging in Secret Santa crap in October.

Like planning a wedding in under three months. I got sweaty and jittery every time another day passed and not enough things were ticked off the endless *To-Do* list.

Besides, I wasn’t the biggest fan of Christmas. I tolerated it but didn’t lose my head like some people. It was partly why agreeing to a wedding on December twenty-third had been so easy. If I had something other than the traditional holiday to occupy my mind, I wouldn’t have to think about the horrid festivities any more than was required.

And every year following, I would have somewhere better to focus my attention, something better to celebrate. An anniversary.

“Come on, Quaid. Quit snarling and open your scroll. I want to know who you got.”

I glowered at my partner. “I’m not telling you. It would be in direct violation of the rules. It’s called *Secret Santa*. *Secret*, as in don’t tell anyone who you got.”

“Wow. You were picked last for everything in high school, weren’t you?”

I didn’t dignify her comment with a response and untied the ribbon on my rolled paper.

Chuckling, Jordyn did the same.

According to the email we had all received from Inspector Lassaline a few days ago, the executive officers had decided to organize a department-wide Secret Santa event that would involve all units and subunits in the building. The rules had been slightly modified to suit their purpose, which was to encourage interdepartmental camaraderie and the development of new friendships. Like we were in freaking kindergarten. It wasn’t the first inane idea the big wigs had come up with, and I was sure it wouldn’t be the last. All the team-building propaganda they’d pushed lately was getting out of control. Okay, I could concede that it was a team-building event that had kick started mine and Aslan’s relationship, but I still wasn’t happy they existed. I still despised them to the very depths of my soul.

Jordyn got her mini scroll open first, and a smile spread across her face. I unfurled my paper and peeked at the name scrawled on the inside. *Tallus Domingo*. Great. Who the hell was Tallus Domingo? Yet another reason the department-wide Secret Santa idea was stupid. Most of us didn't know anyone outside our unit, and they had ensured everyone was assigned someone not within their core department.

“Case in point indeed,” I muttered, tossing the paper aside.

“Who'd you get?” Jordyn asked in complete disregard for the rules.

“That's a mighty fine question, but I have no idea.” Irritated, I pulled up the Metropolitan Police Department directory on my computer, scowling at the screen as I looked up Tallus Domingo in the personnel section.

“Someone you don't know, I take it?”

“This is why I hate these things. How am I supposed to come up with a gift for a person I don't know.”

“Shame, shame. You skimmed the email.”

“No, I didn't.”

“Yes, you did, or you would know that isn't the purpose of the game.”

“I didn't skim the email.”

“So you're being purposefully obtuse? Or is this you being belligerent and cranky as usual? Is Az not putting out? Would a good orgasm help? I can text him and see if he's busy.”

“Shut up, Jordyn.”

I had one hundred percent skimmed the email, and I hated it when she called me out on my bad temper. And no, sex would not fix this—although the mere thought of being shoved against the supply room door as Aslan brought me beyond my senses *was* enticing.

“And PS, I had sex this morning, so...” I stuck out my tongue.

She laughed, and I turned back to my computer.

Tallus Domingo worked as a records clerk on the first floor of the building. Good for Tallus. Wait? Was Kitty gone? Had she finally retired? I was always out of the loop. It made sense. The woman was ancient. I guess they had finally hired a new guy to replace her.

I studied Tallus Domingo’s staff photo, trying to recall if I’d seen him around lately. He was young, midtwenties at a guess—unless the photo wasn’t recent.

Tallus Domingo had a broad forehead, sharp cheekbones, chic, dark-framed glasses over hazel eyes, and stylishly messy auburn hair. The man used far too much product in my opinion. Call it a hunch, but I had a feeling he was the type of guy who bathed in aftershave or cologne, carrying a cloud of fumes in his wake.

*Gross.*

Probably an attention-seeker. He *looked* like an attention-seeker.

In his buttoned-up paisley shirt and lavender tie, Tallus had the air of a flashy college student. He reeked of academia. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn he'd studied literature or the arts while in school. He had a vibe. How he'd ended up in records, I had no idea. Kitty Lavender had owned and run the department for years, a grandmotherly woman who knew everyone by name.

Jordyn, nosy as usual, leaned across our joined desks, but before she could look at my computer screen and Tallus Domingo's profile, I planted a hand in the middle of her face and pushed her away, laughing. "No peeking. You're such a cheater."

"Am not." Without missing a beat, she snagged my discarded paper as she fell back into her seat.

"Jordyn! Don't you dare. As your superior officer, I order you not to—"

She unfolded the paper and read out loud. "Tallus Domingo." Her gaze turned inward for a second as she accessed her internal databank. "Do I know him? Wait, isn't he the new guy down in records?"

I didn't respond, still scowling. Then, quick as a viper, I leaned over our desks and stole Jordyn's discarded scroll, reading the name of the person she'd been assigned. "Lisa Jenkins." The name rang a bell. "Homicide?"

"You should know. You're over there enough."



Yes, Lisa Jenkins was one of Aslan's coworkers. Dammit. She would have been easier. I could have harassed Aslan to give me all the details I needed for the task of Secret Santa. Effortless, and it wouldn't have interfered with my free time.

"Trade me?" I tried and failed to look cute, jutting my lower lip a fraction.

Jordyn snorted. "Not a chance, pretty boy. Suck your lip back in your face." She threw my slip of paper back and snatched hers, stuffing it into a pocket. "Too bad you're not single. If Tallus Domingo is who I think he is, I'm pretty sure he's gay. And seriously good looking, and I say that as a tried and true lesbian."

"Really?" I pitched a face and glanced at the computer screen where Tallus's staff photo was still displayed. Turning the screen, I asked, "This guy?"

"Yep, that's him. Hundred percent gay, or bi, I suppose. I don't want to be judgy. He could swing both ways."

"You went from 'I'm pretty sure he's gay' to 'hundred percent' awfully fast. And he's not that good looking. I mean, he's okay, I guess."

"Quaid, good lord, just say he's hot. You're allowed."

"Not my type. Are you sure he's gay?"

I studied the man's picture. Aslan was of the opinion I had broken gaydar. He was probably right, but to be fair, I didn't like to judge people based on looks or manner of dress. Perhaps I would notice nuances in the flesh, but the still frame

image didn't scream *gay*. Not to me. I supposed what I'd considered academic or scholarly on Tallus could be interpreted differently, but...

"June and I were at Gasoline about a month or two ago. He was there with a guy. They seemed chummy."

"Well, good for him. And since I'm clearly not single or interested in a man barely out of his teens who looks a little too high on himself, can you please, please, *please* trade me names? I don't want to get to know a complete stranger from records who might be gay."

"Is gay."

"Please."

"No."

"What if he flirts with me?"

"Then show him your ring."

"Jordyn..." And it did not come out as a whine. "Why do you hate me?"

Jordyn didn't get a chance to respond. The alarm on my phone went off, startling us both.

"Shit, shit, shit." I silenced it. "How is it almost four o'clock already? If I don't move my ass, I'll be late for our appointment, and I have to run home first. Shit."

I bolted from the chair and tugged on my jacket as I located Aslan's number on my phone. Balancing the device between

my shoulder and ear, I riffled through my pockets in a frantic search for my keys.

Jordyn located them on her desk—she was the last person to drive—and tossed them so they hit me in the middle of my chest. I caught them, almost dropping my phone in the process, and mouthed *thanks*.

Aslan answered on the third ring, speaking before I could get a word out. “Hey, hot stuff. No, I didn’t forget, and yes, I’m on my way out the door right now. I should be there in fifteen or twenty minutes, traffic pending.”

“Where are you? At work?”

“No. Came home after court this morning.”

“Can you bring the binder?”

“What binder?”

I stalled and sneered at my phone. “Please tell me you’re joking. It has been attached to my hip morning, noon, and night for a week.”

Aslan chuckled. “Relax. I’ve got your precious wedding binder under my arm. I knew you’d want it.”

“Don’t ever mess with me like that. Do you have any idea how stressed I am?”

“Would this be a good time to remind you about the wedding planner fiasco?”

“No, it would not. We will never discuss that again.”

“And when I say wedding planner, I mean planners—*plural*—those lovely, innocent people who could have alleviated some of your stress had you not told them to go to hell.”

I growled under my breath and spoke through clenched teeth, emphasizing each word. “We are not discussing that debacle again. I can’t help it if people don’t listen.”

“Yes, Mr. Control Freak. It was all their fault.”

“Az, They were—”

“I don’t get why we have to view the venue. It’s already booked. It’s not like we’re changing our minds this late in the game. There was nowhere else available to suit us, so what’s the deal?”

Blood pressure rising, I waved goodbye to Jordyn and hustled to the elevator, switching my phone to the other ear. “We’re viewing it because we plan to have our wedding there. All I’ve seen are pictures online. That’s not good enough, Az. How can I determine the exact choreography of our ceremony without seeing what I have to work with?”

Aslan was quiet for a beat too long. “Az? Did I lose you?” I pulled my phone away from my ear, but the call was still connected.

“No, I’m here, but I feel like this is one of those instances where I’m going to say the wrong thing, so I’m opting to remain silent.”

“Good call.”

“Seriously though, you’re *choreographing* the ceremony? What does that even mean?”

I scrubbed a hand over my face as the elevator lurched and sent me plummeting to the first floor of the building. “You know what? To save our future marriage, I’m hanging up now. See you soon.”

Aslan’s chuckle was all I heard as I disconnected the call.

## Chapter 2

# Aslan



**S**trongwind Castle, once known as Château de Vent Fort, was an elegant mansion constructed in the 1860s. The variegated fieldstone facade with limestone trim enriched the beauty of the four-story mansion to something reminiscent of fairy tales. I had expected nothing less when Quaid had told me about it.

The castle was built on the hillside of a vast property spanning over three dozen acres. The shady terrace, oversized courtyard, and extravagant gardens incorporated limestone fountains, marble sculptures, long, winding paths, and a man-made canal sporting a waterfall and rocky outcroppings. The potential backdrops available for wedding photography were innumerable.

We had viewed several albums on their website, but as I drove up the expansive cobblestone driveway to Strongwind Castle, I immediately determined none of those images did the property justice.

I had arrived first and parked the Harley in what seemed to be a designated guest lot, half expecting a valet to hustle along at any moment to inform me I didn't belong and needed to move the bike.

Locking my helmet to the bars, I dug through a saddle bag for Quaid's precious wedding binder. It was surprisingly thick, and I had no clue what information he could have possibly collected in the two weeks since I'd proposed, but he'd barely slept and had been working nonstop, determined to put together his dream wedding in our limited timeframe. Every time I offered to help, he tensed and changed the subject. I got the feeling he didn't trust me not to screw things up.

Unfortunately, work had been insanely busy for both of us, and free time was scarce.

An engraved wooden sign indicated the direction to the main office, but I decided to wait for Quaid in the parking lot while taking in the vast estate and all it encompassed. Other signs marked the locations of Strongwind Stables, Mademoiselle Elise Courtyard, Misty Falls, and several named gardens, of which there was an abundance.

Trees surrounded the property, and the canopy of leaves overhead was a veritable abstract canvas of maroon, burnt sienna, and gold. A matching carpet stretched across the landscape. In the distance, gardeners were eliminating the new autumn blanket, exposing the manicured lawn underneath, grass yet to turn yellow and die with the season. The rich scent of autumn filled my nose.



The refreshing fall air was a relief after spending all morning in a stuffy courtroom, where I'd given testimony about a case Torin and I had closed almost a year ago. It was part of the job, but not one I preferred. Since we had solved the serial killer case in Cornwall the previous month, Torin and I had collected a growing pile of mundane cases. Some were brushed off our desks as quickly as they landed. Others lingered, headache-inducing and with no leads. We picked and poked and pattered with them daily.

As I waited for Quaid, two men exited a gated section of the property on the east side of the castle. Both men wore formal three-piece suits and ties. They could have been employees or part of an evening function since it was nearing dinner hour. Strongwind Castle hosted more than weddings. According to their website, they also accommodated corporate affairs and social events.

The gentlemen spared me a snobbish glance before dismissing me and continuing down a cobblestone path and out of sight. I could imagine how out-of-place I must seem. I'd changed after court but was woefully underdressed in faded jeans, a Marilyn Manson T-shirt, and a beat-up leather jacket. Only as an approaching vehicle sounded from farther down the drive did I consider how my tragically uptight and anal fiancé might feel about my presentation at a location fit for royalty.

Shielding my eyes against the setting sun, I glimpsed a blacked-out, unmarked department-issue Charger rounding the bend and coming toward me. I could make out Quaid's silhouette behind the tinted windshield but not the expression

on his face. I smiled regardless, knowing instinctively he wore a pinch in his brow and a wrinkle in his nose.

God, I loved that insufferable man. Planning this wedding may be the death of him—and me—but I'd give him anything his heart desired if it made him smile for one day. However, if that was ever going to happen, I needed to spend the next twelve weeks keeping him as calm as possible so he didn't lash out at people or make himself sick.

Stress was not his friend, and we'd already had three casualties in the form of wedding planners.

Quaid parked beside the bike and got out, face set almost precisely as I'd predicted. He had come from the office, so he wore dark trousers, a respectable pale blue button-up that accentuated the color of his eyes, a pinstriped tie, and shiny black loafers. His hair was as polished and perfect as when he'd left the house at six that morning. The only indication of time having passed was the faint accumulation of scruff on his jaw. Otherwise, he looked about as put-together as he always did first thing in the morning.

Hands perched on his hips, Quaid raked his gaze over my body from head to toe. "You look like a metalhead biker."

I smirked, tipping my head to the motorcycle and tapping my nose. "Good catch, Detective. I *am* a metalhead biker."

"No, I mean—"

I grabbed Quaid's hand and pulled him into my arms, shutting him up with a thorough kiss. The tension fled his

muscles, and he caught my waist as he melted against me, arguments fleeing. Only when I knew he'd swallowed his obstinance did I release him.

“I know what you mean,” I said against his mouth. “I’m sorry I’m not more handsomely dressed like you, but I was more concerned about arriving on time. Here.” I thrust his precious binder into his arms. “I remembered this. Am I forgiven?”

Quaid hugged the binder to his chest, and the corner of his lips curled a fraction, hinting at a smile. “I guess, but you *will* dress properly for our wedding.”

“Whatever your heart desires.”

“In a tux.”

“Like a prince.”

“Don’t be smug.”

“I would never.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Or sarcastic.”

I zipped my lips, then indicated his belt. “Are you going to wear your service weapon inside?”

Quaid shrugged. “It’s sufficiently intimidating. Might help me get what I want.”

“Lock it up, hot stuff. You’ve already fired one wedding planner and made the second and third cry before they both quit. I don’t want you to cause a scene. Plus, I work in homicide. I see what stress does to people.”

I earned an appropriate eye roll before he spun on his heels and marched to the back of the Charger, where he locked his weapon into a safe in the trunk.

“Happy?”

“Just looking out for the safety of society.” When he scowled, I laughed and offered a hand. “Shall we?”

Quaid accepted as he glanced around for the first time, eyes alight with awe and wonder. The partial smile I’d been granted earlier blossomed to life as he took in his surroundings. “Wow. This place is even better in person.”

*Suitable for a prince*, I wanted to say but didn’t. Goaded him once was enough. Quaid was both highly sentimental and stubbornly reserved. It was hard to know when I could tease him about his romantic fantasies of castles and magical weddings and when I couldn’t, so I let him enjoy the view on his own terms.

Once he’d looked his fill, we headed toward the main office, where we were to meet with a woman named Francesca for our tour.

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“Much of the outdoor spaces will likely be undesirable by the end of December. The cold is unappealing. The snow, however, if we’re lucky enough to have some by the twenty-third, could make for a gorgeous setting for some photographs. Do you have a photographer yet?” Francesca, in her high heels, knee-length skirt, and frilled blouse, jewelry in

abundance, shifted her attention between Quaid and me as though unsure who to address.

Quaid patted the binder. “I have a few lined up to interview.”

“It’s getting late in the game, don’t you think? Especially with the holiday.” Francesca had a death wish.

I tightened my hold on Quaid’s arm, sensing the gasket about to blow, and answered. “Not at all. We’ll have it all sorted out on time.”

Hopefully.

Quaid might have agreed to a winter wedding despite the limited preparation time, but it was only because I’d been so adamant about getting married right away. Time was tight, and hiring anyone to work December twenty-third was proving difficult.

Everything was pending, and nothing had been decided, but the last thing we needed was for Quaid to go off on someone else and to lose the only venue we’d been able to secure.

Our tour had begun in the Mademoiselle Elise Courtyard, where ivy-covered arches hung over stonework paths that wove between thriving garden beds. The October weather meant nothing was in bloom, and most sections had been prepared for a long winter slumber, but its luxuriousness was no less astounding if not slightly dulled by the encroaching season. It was obvious the gardens were well maintained year-round. Crisp autumn leaves rustled in the wind overhead, clinging precariously to branches trying to shake them off.

Groundworkers must have swept the fallen ones away recently since the paths were clear.

Despite our late-season wedding, Francesca gave us a moderated tour of the outdoor areas at Strongwind Castle. At the stables, she explained about horse-drawn carriage options, an attraction adored by most couples marrying in the spring or summer months.

“Still an option for winter. The carriage is pulled by two Clydesdales and can be hired for a scenic tour of the property or to bring your br—one or both of you to the main ceremony.”

I was sure Francesca was going to say *bride* but caught herself in time. Quaid had been particular when researching venues, ensuring they were accepting of the LGBTQ community. Most were nowadays unless you were my parents’ church. Francesca’s near slip was forgivable, especially when her cheeks wore the color of shame and she mumbled apologies.

She showed us where the regal carriage was stowed. Its elegance was reminiscent of the one taken by Cinderella. I watched Quaid for a reaction, and he pondered it a long time, a spark of desire lighting up his eyes as he gnawed his lower lip, but in the end, he offered no commentary.

We moved on.

Misty Falls, Strongwind Castle’s most boasted attraction, was breathtaking. A burbling, man-made creek weaved through a significant portion of the property, the trickling

waterway ending at a dainty pond where a gentle waterfall tumbled over a rocky outcropping, misting the air around it. The irregularly shaped pool and surrounding area had been artfully manicured with photography in mind. How many hundreds of newlyweds had stood on these rocks and had their pictures taken or said *I do*?

“Gorgeous,” I said, taking it all in.

“Again, all these options will be weather dependent, but I’d be remiss if I didn’t show them off. Under the right circumstances, some of the best winter wedding memories were captured here. Envision this...”

Francesca stretched her arms above her, encompassing the colorful canopy overhead. “Come winter, the branches are bare. Let’s say there’s been a recent snowfall, so they’re dusted white, shimmering against a pale blue sky. The water doesn’t typically freeze until late January, so the winter sun sparkles not only against the blanket of snow covering the ground but against the glassy stream and pool. Icicles hang from the rocks over here”—she gestured—“and your breath billows, frosting in the air. And with a waterfall in the background...” She grinned like a saleslady who knew she had you. “I’ll let you picture it. Charming, wouldn’t you say?”

Optimal, but what were the chances we’d get perfect weather the day we got married? December in our neck of the woods was typically sloppy and uninviting. Francesca knew how to sell it but was selling a fairy tale.

Quaid's features softened, and I could see him imagining it for all it was a fantasy that might never come true. He tilted his head to the sky and closed his eyes. "And if it was snowing..." he added wistfully.

Oh, my sweet Quaid. If only.

Francesca waved a hand in the air as though the very suggestion had made it happen. "Even more perfect. Something to think about. You two are the only event scheduled for that weekend, so the entire property is at your disposal. We'll assign you a few staff to help keep things organized. Shall we head inside?"

Quaid nodded but took an extra minute to absorb the landscape, a faraway look in his eyes. I read the yearning in his heart, the coveted desire to make icicles and snowflakes out of thin air. I felt the aching draw inside, wanting to somehow reshape the universe so his dream would come true, so he could have the photograph Francesca had painted so vividly.

If I could control the weather, I would deliver his fairy tale on a silver platter.

Francesca walked ahead, leaving us on our own for a few minutes, likely sensing Quaid needed time.

"Thoughts?" I asked, approaching and rubbing Quaid's arm.

A sorrow-filled sigh deflated him. "The likelihood of us being outdoors in December is slim. Besides, knowing our



weather, it will be slushy, muddy, and gross. But it's nice to view the property."

He shuffled the binder in his arms and opened it. "According to the pamphlet, this place has thirty-two available rooms, so we can book what's required for our out-of-town guests, and..." Quaid leafed through the plastic-covered pages one by one until he found what he was looking for and pointed. "Can we stay here too?"

"What do you mean? On our wedding night?"

"Yes. Look." He heaved the binder into my arms, indicating an image in the pamphlet. It displayed Strongwind Castle's King's Suite, and its elegance was indescribable. It was how I imagined the wealthy might have lived in the late 1800s. A lavish overabundance of extravagances, from a massive, oversized canopy bed to plush rugs and art-adorned walls. Gold and silver trimming, opulent sculptures, fanciful antiques—real or imitation, I couldn't tell—and treasures that worked to elevate the room's charm to that of royalty.

Quaid waited for my reply. "Quaid, I don't know about you, but I'm only getting married once. If you want to stay in a room at Castle de la Magnific"—I gestured with a flourish at the castle—"on our wedding night, then that's what we're doing."

His smile could only be described as breathtaking. "Your attempt at French is deplorable."

"Meh. If I get to *couche avec toi* in this here bed"—I tapped the photograph—"then I'll learn a few more sexy phrases for

you.”

“Don’t hurt yourself.” He kissed me full on the mouth, his grin stretched ear to ear, before following after our guide.

I hummed approval at the sight of his ass in his tight trousers. In the year we’d been together, it had never failed to turn me on. “Je veux destroyer your derrière ce soir, Quaid. Beaucoup de times.”

His shoulders bounced with his laughter, and he shook his head—my French *was* that horrendous—but his walk became more of a strut, and the response was worth the effort.

The interior of Strongwind Castle was like nothing I’d ever seen. It contained ballrooms and dining areas bigger than our house. Domed ceilings, exotic wood floors, gilded trim, elegantly carved balustrades surrounding exquisite indoor balconies, and eye-catching ornate furniture sang the castle’s praises. I’d never seen anything like it. Everywhere I looked was a new treasure to behold.

But the showstopper, the place that won my fiancé’s heart and brought a sheen of likely unwanted tears to his eyes, was the grandiose hallway. The foyer, as it was called. It was a practical stadium in its grandeur with a ceiling stretching two stories high, classically and architecturally stunning pilasters placed at intervals around the room, and an immense crystal chandelier bigger than my car earning center focus.

On either side of the room, majestic and sweeping staircases rounded down to the main level, mirroring one another, their carved banisters and balusters polished and gleaming under

the bright lights. The floor consisted of intricately designed inlaid wood, patterned masterfully, and down the center of the main hall, leading under the mezzanine, ran a thick ornamental rug—crimson and gold—ending at a raised alcove.

Like the rest of the castle, the room's elegance shone in every detail.

Quaid stood in the center of the vast open hallway under the chandelier where both staircases ended on either side. The long runner was a few feet in front of him. His loafers squeaked as he spun, neck craning to take it all in. One hand covered his mouth. The other clutched the binder.

To this point, Quaid hadn't said much. He'd quietly taken notes and muttered to himself, offering only scant commentary when necessary. His mind was busy, and his tongue had been actively tracing a path along his upper lip—something he did when he was deep in thought.

All that had stopped.

An inner light shone from his baby blue eyes. The transition was immediate, but Francesca, not seeing or understanding Quaid's signals, aimed to move on.

Catching her attention, I held up a hand, silently stopping her as I shook my head. No, this was important, and the last thing I wanted was to rush Quaid off too soon.

When a few beats passed, when Quaid had properly absorbed the space, he turned to me, breathless when he spoke. "Here. This is where it will happen."

Ignoring our guide, I moved toward him, glancing about and seeing the area through new eyes but knowing I could never envision it the same as my fiancé—him with his passion and dreams.

I took his hand and squeezed. “Talk me through it. What do you see?”

Quaid had filled the canvas inside his mind with the whole magical story of our union, and I wanted to be part of it.

He thrust the binder into my arms and backed up, peering to the top of the mezzanine. “There. We begin up there. Our guests, they’re down here.” He motioned to either side of the runner. “We can have the chairs on either side of the carpet, facing the alcove. That’s where we’ll be married. But first... hang on.”

He raced up one flight of stairs, his footfalls echoing in the cavernous room, and spoke from the top. “We each descend a staircase at the same time like this.” Quaid demonstrated, unrushed, one hand trailing the banister. “We meet at the bottom. Here.”

I moved beside him, cradling the binder in my opposite arm so Quaid could link us together.

“Then we walk arm in arm along the runner, like this, to the raised area in the alcove.”

We did, stopping once we’d climbed the three steps to its platform.

“Here. This is where we’ll be married.” Quaid peered back from where we’d come, and I knew with certainty he was picturing our guests. “And decorations. I can see it all in my head. I can’t describe it, but it will be wintry, and... magical... and—”

“Christmassy?”

“God no!” He pitched a face.

I chuckled. “Quaid, it’s a Christmas wedding. The runner is crimson. It’s perfect.”

“So? It doesn’t mean it has to be Christmassy.”

“It would be fitting.”

He scowled harder, so I held up my hands in defeat. “It was just a suggestion.”

“Gold and silver.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our wedding colors. They can be gold and silver.”

“Or red and green.”

He punched my shoulder good-naturedly and snatched the binder from my arms before turning to Francesca. “Can it be done? Here in the foyer?”

“Absolutely. This space is adequate enough to accommodate a small wedding. How many guests do you have confirmed?”

*Oh no. Here we go...*

Quaid paled and threaded fingers through his hair, an instant sweat dampening his forehead. “Oh... um...” He blew out a shaky breath. “We don’t... I haven’t...”

Unintentionally, Francesca had activated Quaid’s panic button.

I wrapped an arm around his shoulder and tugged him against my side, answering, “We don’t know yet. We haven’t sent our invitations.”

“We haven’t even *selected* our invitations.” Quaid pulled away and faced me, anxiety marking every inch of his face, straining his eyes. “God, what if no one comes? It’s so last minute, and everyone has plans for Christmas by now, don’t they? I need to get that done, like, yesterday. Why did I wait so long? It’s going to be a whole process getting the invitations printed, never mind labeled and sent out. I haven’t even decided which ones I want. Then it will take at least a week or two before they’re delivered, which means we won’t get replies until... God, it will be November. That’s insane. And...”

He clutched his chest, face paining as he turned half circles, seemingly unsure where to put himself. “I should have focused on invitations first. We’ve been engaged for two weeks. That’s fourteen days gone, and I knew time was short. Work has been crazy. Oh god, I’ve been so busy.”

Quaid pushed his hair back off his forehead and took the binder back, flipping through pages until he landed on the tab marked *invitations*. “Look. I’ve picked a few options, but we

need to sit down and agree on which we want, and we haven't come up with a proper theme yet. What if—”

I removed the binder from his hands, closed it, and kissed his temple.

“My chest hurts,” he squeaked.

“Breathe. You aren't breathing.” To Francesca, I said, “We don't have a huge guest list, so our numbers will be minimal either way. No more than fifty or sixty. Likely a lot less, considering the time of year. How about we look at the ballrooms to get a feel for the reception area?” I dragged a hyperventilating Quaid along with me. “Do you have menu options we can browse?”

“Food.” Quaid bent at the waist, clutching his knees. “Oh god. I think I'm going to be sick. I can't decide on dinner on a good day. You know what I'm like. How am I ever going to pick the appropriate menu plan for the wedding?”

“You're not. I will.”

Quaid snorted, but the noise was half maniacal. “No. That's not happening. We'll all die of congestive heart failure before the midnight buffet is set up.”

“At this rate, *you're* going to die of congestive heart failure before we get that far.” I urged him to stand upright. He was pale and trembling. “Now stop talking and focus on breathing while Francesca takes us to the spot where we'll dance, party, and have a kick-ass reception.”

“Songs. I haven’t thought of songs yet. Our first dance. I need to make a list, and—”

“Quaid.”

He blew out a ragged breath. “I really don’t feel well.”

Francesca, finally noting how badly Quaid was unraveling, offered a sympathetic smile. “Sweetheart, planning weddings can be quite stressful. I’ve seen it. Have you considered hiring a wedding planner? I can offer a few suggestions. It can significantly reduce the pressure of—”

I held up a hand, stopping her midsentence as Quaid’s face turned the same color as the carpet, and his eyes clouded with an incoming storm. “No wedding planners. We tried that. It didn’t work out. Can we move this along before he has an aneurysm?”

“Right this way.”



## Chapter 3

# Quaid

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 7TH: TWO MONTHS AND SIXTEEN DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“We could do a virtual invitation. Email people. It would be immediate, save us a huge headache printing real invitations, and the RSVPs would come in much faster.”

My fiancé wanted to die.

I glared from the coffee table, where dozens of invitation options had been spread out, to Aslan, who was cuddled up with his niece on an overstuffed chair, reading her a picture book. “An email? You want to *email* our wedding invitations?”

Aslan, clearly confused, shifted his gaze from me to his sister, who sat beside me, lips folded inside her mouth to contain her evident smile. “Is that not okay?”

“No,” Amelia and I both said at the same time.

“It’s our *wedding*, Az.”

“And we’re on a serious time crunch. It was just a suggestion. With so many other things to take care of, I figured it was a viable place to cut corners. I can see I was wrong.” He pulled his phone out, checking the time, holding it aloft so Kylee wouldn’t grab it. “PS, hot stuff, not to add insult to injury, but we have to leave in twenty minutes if we’re going to make it to the meeting on time.”

“Shit.” I tore a hand through my hair and bounced a knee. The first of several planned mandatory Secret Santa staff meetings was today, and it was the least of my concerns. I’d rather take the reprimand than leave before we’d made a decision about invitations. “I’m not going.”

Aslan huffed. “Um, yes, you are.”

“I don’t have time for ridiculous games. We work insane hours as it is, and the best we can do is take advantage of our weekends. It’s Saturday, and we have”—I glanced at the thick binder as sweat gathered in my arm pits—“so, *so* much to do.”

We needed help.

A wave of guilt hit me in the chest when I recalled how the last three people we’d hired to help us were no longer available because I was insufferable and impossible to get along with.

Amelia patted my leg, likely sensing my rising panic, and picked an invitation option from the table. “I like this one. It’s elegant and wintery.”

“It is.” A lump grew in my throat as my heart pounded.

Amelia let me hold it as I considered. Everything about it was gorgeous, but I couldn't seem to make a single decision.

The one she'd selected was embossed with silver snowflakes, the top half decoratively cut in the same shape. The font was a flowing cursive in silver foiling. “I like it, but... it feels... lacking. I don't know. Something isn't right.”

“I like the one with the splash of crimson in it.” Aslan held a chunky storybook while his niece turned the pages, babbling gibberish and pointing at the pictures.

“Which one?”

“Silver snowflakes, same idea as the one in your hand, but with crimson highlights. That one is lacking color. That's the issue. The silver is nice, but it doesn't stand out. Add red, and it becomes so much better.”

Amelia found the one Aslan was referring to in the pile.

Red. I took it and frowned.

“We're not having a Christmas-themed wedding,” I mumbled.

“It's not. But admit it. The red pops. The red ties it all together.”

“You could get it in a different color,” Amelia suggested. “It says other options are cobalt, emerald green, or violet.”

“Green is Christmassy too,” I said.

“I like the red.” Aslan kissed Kylee’s cheek. “What do you think, monster?”

His niece babbled, peering up at Aslan with a toothy grin.

“See? Kylee agrees.”

“Blue is wintery.” My nose wrinkled as I stared at the cobalt color swatch, not liking it.

“Red.” Aslan turned a page in the book and continued reading to Kylee.

I sighed.

The example invitation was done in crimson, and I loathed to admit it was the better option when compared to the plain silver. It too had snowflakes, but their middles were a glittery pop of color, and our names would be highlighted in the same crimson. I envisioned it in blue and instantly didn’t like it as much. Green? Same difference. But I’d been adamant about avoiding anything Christmassy. It was a hard sell.

“Blue?” I tried again.

“Quaid, you make a face every time you suggest it. Quit being so stubborn.”

“I’m not stubborn.”

Even Amelia couldn’t hide her smile.

“Red,” Aslan said again, firmer. “You wanted my opinion. I’m giving it.”

Why was he so adamant?

“What do you think?” I asked Amelia.

She eyed her brother, who smirked but didn't look up, then studied the invitation. "Not to take his side, but I like the red too."

I whined, wiped the sweat from my brow, and glanced at the other dozen options. Why was this so hard?

Before I could decide, Graham wandered into the living room with a paper folded in thirds. "Hello, Detective Valor?"

"Hey, bud."

"Remember what Mommy said? It's Uncle Quaid, not Detective Valor." Amelia reached out and rubbed a thumb over Graham's cheek. "You have marker on your face."

Graham mashed his lips together, forehead creasing as he dodged his mother's attention. His gaze was focused on the table. "But they aren't married yet, so Detective Valor is not my uncle."

"That's a technicality," Amelia explained. "He's practically your uncle, so it's what you should call him."

"What's a technicality?"

"It's okay," I interrupted. "You can call me whatever you'd like. What do you have there? Were you drawing?" I gestured to the folded paper.

"I made you an invitation for the wedding." He held it out, his gaze flicking over my face once before landing near my shoulder.

Graham rarely made eye contact with anyone, but I'd been privileged to be awarded his tentative gaze on a handful of occasions. It never lasted longer than a few seconds, but it was a huge honor. For whatever reason, Graham had taken to me from day one.

I accepted the paper and unfolded it. He'd drawn a picture of two men in tuxes holding hands. I assumed them to be Aslan and me. Surrounding us were chess pieces. I identified two rooks, a knight, a bishop, a king, and several pawns. A brick castle with crenelations occupied the top of the page. A checkerboard path wound among the game pieces. In the middle, Graham had carefully printed, *Come to our wedding. Two days before Christmas. Don't be late.* Not a single spelling error. He was academically leaps and bounds above most children his age.

I couldn't smother a grin. "This is incredible, Graham. And I love the chess theme." I waved the paper at Aslan. "See? This I can get on board with. Am I allowed to keep this invitation? It's special."

"Yes. You can put it on your fridge. That's where Mommy puts our pictures. Kylee's are scribbles. Mine are better."

"Be nice," Aslan said. "Your sister is a baby."

Graham didn't acknowledge Aslan. "Will you put it on your fridge, Detective Valor?"

"I most certainly will. It's a great idea."

"Are we going to have time to play chess today?"

“Not today, bud,” Aslan answered. “Uncle Quaid and I have a meeting at work.”

“On a weekend?”

I threw my hands up. “That’s what I said. It’s not even a real meeting. It’s a mandatory social gathering. Believe me, I’d rather play chess.”

Graham pressed his lips together, his gaze flitting to my ear, back to my shoulder, then to my face for the briefest of instances before returning to my shoulder. “We can play before you go. I usually beat you pretty fast.”

Aslan snorted.

I chuckled. “That you do. Unfortunately, I won’t have time. We have to decide on these invitations. Another day?”

Graham’s fingers fluttered at his side. “Okay.” He shuffled his feet, again flicking his gaze to my face for half a beat. “Am I going to be the ring guard at your wedding?”

“That’s right. Ring *bearer*.”

Graham ignored the correction. “And I have to wear a bow tie?”

“Yep.”

“And take care of the rings?”

“It’s an important responsibility.”

“I can do it. Is Kylee the flower girl?”

“She is.”



“Did you know she doesn’t listen very well?”

“That’s why we gave her the easy job.”

Graham mashed his lips together, fingers fluttering. “Okay. I’m going to make more invitations. Bye, Detective Valor.” He bounced off down the hall.

“Hey, what am I, chopped liver?” Aslan called after him.

“Bye, Uncle Aslan,” he called from across the house.

I stuck out my tongue at my fiancé. “He likes me better.”

“Listen here, hot stuff. We’re leaving in nine minutes. Make a decision about these invitations, or I’m sending out emails this afternoon.”

I growled under my breath. “Seriously, who calls a meeting on a Saturday? A mandatory meeting at that. A mandatory meeting that isn’t a meeting at all but a gathering of employees from different departments who don’t know each other, like each other, or give two shits about each other but who are being forced to—”

“Eight minutes.”

“Fine. I’m stopping. God, why is this so hard?” I picked up the two preferred options and glanced between them. All silver and white, or silver, white, and with a pop of red. I scowled at Aslan. “If I pick the one with crimson, you aren’t going to make this a thing, are you?”

“Of course I am. Red and green, baby, and all the Christmas goodness that goes with it. Boo-yah!”

“I hate you. Remind me why we’re getting married again?”

Aslan laughed.

Amelia touched my arm as I ground my teeth. “Ignore him. This one is gorgeous, and it doesn’t have to dictate your wedding theme. My brother is being an ass, as usual, and is purposefully pestering you to get a reaction.”

“It’s working. I don’t want a Christmas wedding.”

“We know. *He* knows,” she said pointedly, glaring at her brother.

“Gold and silver,” I reiterated.

Aslan loudly hummed *White Christmas* as he continued flipping pages in the storybook.

I sneered.

He ignored me, unfazed as always.

Kylee babbled, and Amelia laughed.

Eventually, I turned back to the invitations.

“Okay. Fine. The snowflakes with the crimson.” It was truly beautiful and the best option. “This afternoon, we need to—”

Amelia removed the cardstock from my hand and lifted her chin. “No. *You* are going to your meeting, and *I* will get these organized for you. Check it off your list. Consider it done. Write down the exact information you want printed on them, and I’ll make sure they get ordered this afternoon. Chris can watch the kids. Let me take this off your plate.”

“But—”

“No.”

“We can always—”

“No,” Amelia and Aslan said simultaneously.

“Okay. Fine. But when they come in—”

“We’ll worry about it then.” Amelia squeezed my leg. “I’ll buy plenty of stamps. Have a list of guests ready and addresses on hand, and we’ll get them out lickety-split the second they arrive.”

“If you can put a rush on them—”

“I will.”

Aslan let Kylee down, and she ran off to find her brother. Amelia saw us to the door. “Oh, you need to give Mom a call,” she said to Aslan. “She and Dad leave for Florida next weekend, but I guess they were talking to a friend at church and found someone willing to officiate your wedding.”

Aslan made a face as he pulled on his jacket. “I’m afraid to ask. Who?”

“Old man Barney.”

“Noooo. Are you for real?”

“Who’s old man Barney?” I asked, looking between the siblings.

“He’s gotta be a hundred years old. Amelia, they can’t be serious.”

“You’re depriving them of a church wedding and interrupting their usual Christmas celebration on practically no

notice.” She held up her hands to ward Aslan off. “Don’t shoot the messenger, but I suggest you talk to her about it.”

“I’m not depriving them of a church wedding. The Catholic church is doing that. That is not on me. I didn’t make those rules.”

“Who’s Barney?” I asked again.

“He’s an old family friend,” Amelia said. “He used to do our parents’ landscaping.”

“Yeah, like back in the seventies.” Aslan pinched the bridge of his nose.

Amelia laughed, shoving her brother. “I wasn’t alive in the seventies, and I remember him coming around the house when I was little. It was the nineties.”

“Same difference. And he was ancient back then. I didn’t know he was still alive.”

“Yep, and willing to officiate your wedding. He’s an ordained minister.”

“And he knows I’m marrying a man?”

“I assume so. Call Mom.”

“God help me.” Aslan kissed his sister’s cheek.

I accepted a tight hug when he finished. “I’ll text you once I’ve put in the order for those invitations and let you know a time frame,” Amelia said. “Don’t fret.”

“Thank you.”

“I’m available if you need help with anything else. Just ask.”

“I will.”

## Chapter 4

# Quaid



Aslan parked the Equinox in the employee parking behind headquarters. The drive had been quiet. I'd been staving off a swiftly growing headache all morning. I'd slept like crap for the past two weeks. Every time I closed my eyes, my brain spun with long lists of tasks I had yet to accomplish, and more times than not, I ended up at the kitchen table, pouring over details and stressing.

Pressing a heel to my breastbone where the muscles remained incessantly cramped, I exhaled and winced.

"You okay?" Aslan asked when he killed the engine.

"Headache. Indigestion. Cloudy brain. You name it."

"Stress."

"I'm fine. We have so much to do and not enough time to do it. Then we have this useless crap getting in our way, and... Wait." I shifted to face him. "You never told me who you got for Secret Santa."

“That’s because it’s a secret, and last I checked, you were a stickler for rules.”

“I’m over it. I’ve decided I no longer care. I got Tallus Domingo. Do you know him? I’d never even heard of him until—”

“Oh my god. No way. You got the cutie down in records? He’s a new hire.”

My brows winged up. “Excuse me? Cutie?” I held up my hand and pointed at the white gold band Aslan had put on my finger barely two weeks ago. “This is not a free pass to ogle other men... or women for that matter.”

Aslan chuckled. “Relax, he’s got nothing on you. Plus, he’s, like, twenty-one or something, and I wasn’t ogling him. A man can notice a nice-looking person and not ogle.”

I crossed my arms and scowled.

“It was a small ogle. Tiny. More of a double take when he walked by.” Aslan leaned over the console and kissed my frown. “You’re way cuter. Especially when you make *the face*. I’m the one who should be worried. Once he sets eyes on you, you’ll be out the door. I knew I’d lose you to a younger man someday.”

I huffed and rolled my eyes as he kissed me again.

Aslan broke the kiss and sat back a fraction. “I can help with wedding plans, you know. You don’t have to do everything on your own. Let me take some of the load off your shoulders.”

“Right. This coming from Mr. I’ll Email Invitations.”



“Come on, Quaid. You’re getting yourself really worked up. You’ll make yourself sick at this rate.”

“I’m fine. Amelia is helping, and you’re getting dragged along to offer your opinion even when I’m starting to think you’re being manipulative.”

“The crimson was the right choice.”

“It’s Christm—”

Another kiss, deeper than the two previous, shut me up. It was a balm to my stressed-out soul, and he knew it. I whimpered and drew him closer. The taste and scent of him all around me eased the pain in my chest and the pounding in my head.

I threaded my fingers through his hair, keeping him in place. Aslan was almost over the middle console and on my side of the car. He fumbled with my belt but was unable to get it undone—our positioning compromised his success—so he moved the hand over my crotch instead, massaging the growing swell and inviting a moan up my throat.

“I could alleviate your stress right here and now,” he said against my mouth. I tasted his smile.

Laughing, I pulled back and encouraged him to his side of the vehicle. “As incredible as that sounds and as much as I’d love it, the last thing we need is to get reprimanded for indecent exposure in the police headquarters parking lot.” I couldn’t emphasize it enough.

Aslan shrugged. “Meh, I’d have risked it.”

“Some days, I think you’re still eighteen.”

“Supply closet?”

“No.”

“We’ve done it before.”

“No.”

“Fine. Let’s get this over with.” Aslan reached for the door handle.

“Wait. I need a minute.” I adjusted my pants. “All I need is to show up to this thing with a raging hard-on.”

Aslan eyed my crotch, hunger burning in his eyes. “True. I might lose you to a semi-hot records clerk who I definitely did not ogle. Can’t have that.”

Once things had settled, we got out and headed for the back entrance of the building.

“So who’d you get?” I tried again.

“Nope. Not telling.”

“You suck.”

“I was going to, but you stopped me.”

“Rain check?”

He shoulder-bumped me, grinning. “We’ll see.”

The meeting that was not a meeting but more of a gathering was taking place in a media room often used for larger press conferences. We were among the last to arrive and stood in the doorway, observing the swarms of mingling personnel.

“What exactly is the point of this?” I mumbled, still unimpressed since it was taking up a good portion of my Saturday.

“Didn’t you read the email?”

“Yes. Why does everyone assume I didn’t?”

“Because you’re a liar.”

I managed not to roll my eyes. “Just tell me.”

Aslan chuckled. “Consider it a department social. The purpose being that we spend an hour each week between now and Christmas getting to know people outside our department and forming new friendships and bonds.”

That time, I did roll my eyes. “Sounds awful. I hate socializing.”

“And,” Aslan continued, “it was specifically arranged so our Secret Santa was someone from *outside* our usual department.”

“I knew that. See? I did read the email.”

“During these weekly gatherings, it’s up to us to mingle and learn about our selected person so we can best determine a gift for the exchange.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“You’re a grump.” Aslan nudged me into the room, inconspicuously smacking my ass as I went. “Try not to breathe fire on anyone. It’s my weekend off.”

“I don’t mingle well. I hate talking to people I don’t know.”

“Quaid, put on your detective hat. Your main goal is to learn as much about your person as you can without them knowing.” Aslan gestured with his chin. “And there’s Mr. Snazzy New Hire right there. Don’t flirt too much. I know he’s younger and hotter, but I’m the only person on the planet who can deal with this face.”

Aslan clasped my chin and pecked my mouth—which he knew annoyed me since I wasn’t a fan of publicly displaying our relationship at work. My scowl deepened.

“Yep. That’s the one.”

Mr. Snazzy New Hire, Tallus Domingo, was chatting with several people from various departments. Other than last names and positions, I didn’t know most of them. Was I supposed to just walk up and join in on their conversation? Yeah, that wasn’t happening. Maybe I could linger on the outskirts and eavesdrop.

“Where’s your person?” I asked Aslan, sticking close to his side as he weaved around the crowd.

“You can keep asking, but I’m not telling.” He zipped his lips and waved at Torin, who was with Allison near the far corner of the room.

Edwards, Summerfield, and several other superior officers from other departments were present, grouped together and chatting with Inspector Lassaline. They got a kick out of these things, and I couldn’t figure out why.

For the first twenty minutes, I trailed behind Aslan as he mingled and made small talk with several groups of people. He was naturally gifted in the art of friendly chitchat and quick with a joke. People gravitated to his outgoing personality. I needed to make a conscious effort not to make a face or look constipated. My reputation preceded me, and hardly anyone acknowledged my presence.

Unconsciously, I found myself using my detective skills as I tried to figure out who Aslan was schmoozing for information. Considering he talked to everyone, it was impossible to sort out.

At one point, I glanced around, seeking Ruiz or Jordyn, two of the few people I could socialize with without coming across as awkward. I didn't find Jordyn, but Ruiz was chatting with a few detectives from intelligence who I'd gotten to know a few months back when I'd contemplated a transfer.

Ruiz had it easy. He worked with everyone in the building, so in essence, he *knew* everyone. Although, he didn't look any more pleased to be here on a Saturday than I did. Ruiz's weekends were precious. If he wasn't scheduled to work, he tried to stay as far from this place as possible. He was a family man, and this was surely cutting into his time with his girls.

Aslan was deeply engaged in conversation, so I squeezed his arm and wandered off to rescue Ruiz. Aslan had told me to use my investigative skills, and it gave me an idea.

As I approached the department's head IT guy, he ended his conversation, moving away from the group and meeting me in

the middle of the room. “This sucks,” he grumbled. “And on a fucking Saturday. Can you believe this shit?”

“Finally, someone agrees with me. At least you’re in a better position to know people already.”

“Tell it to the big wigs. They still made me come.”

“Care to do a friend a favor?”

Ruiz, who’d been scanning the room, settled his attention on me, brow cocked. “What’s up?”

I grinned deviously. “Come on.”

It didn’t take much convincing to get Ruiz out of the room. He followed me to the elevators without asking a single question. I pulled out my phone and shot Aslan a text. Eventually, he would find me missing.

*Quaid: Escaped with Ruiz. We’re in his office. Come find me when you’re done.*

I tapped the basement button on the elevator keypad.

“Why are you bringing me to the dungeon? Is this work-related?”

“It’s as work-related as that stupid meeting. I think I’ve discovered a workaround and plan to take advantage.”

Ruiz huffed. “Fair enough.”

In Ruiz’s basement office, he switched on the overhead fluorescents and got comfortable in his swanky leather desk chair. I pulled up a less extravagant seat and motioned for him to turn on his computer.

“Seriously? It’s my weekend off.”

“But you’re doing a favor for a friend so I don’t have to participate in that mess.” I pointed to the ceiling, indicating a few floors above us and the meeting we’d abandoned.

Ruiz studied me for a long minute before turning on his main computer. “What am I doing?”

“You’re going to do a clandestine, off-the-records search into the person I got for Secret Santa so I don’t have to be social.”

Ruiz chuckled and shook his head.

“What?”

“It’s brilliant.”

“I have a few good ideas from time to time.”

“It’s gonna take a second to boot up. I shut the whole thing down for the weekend. How’s the wedding planning going?”

“It’s a nightmare. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That bad?”

“I don’t know what I was thinking when I agreed to plan a wedding in under three months.”

“That’s tight. Tia and I took a year and a half.”

“I think it’s giving me gray hair.”

Ruiz chuckled. “Wait until you have kids. Okay, we’re good to go.” Ruiz cracked his knuckles and faced his keyboard. “Who am I secretly investigating, Watson?”

“At least give me the credit of being Holmes.”

“I *am* giving you credit. Watson was the smarter of the two.”

“Watson was a drug-induced figment of Holmes’s imagination.”

“What? Since when?”

“It’s a theory. Look it up.”

“I’ve never heard that.”

“Have you read Sherlock Holmes?”

“Yes.”

“Then look it up. It’s an interesting theory.”

My phone chimed, and I drew it from my pocket, finding a response from Aslan.

*Aslan: Shame on you for skipping out. No flirting with Ruiz. If he liked you, he shoulda put a ring on it. I did. You’re mine.*

“Good grief. He thinks he’s Beyoncé now. At least he’s living in a more appropriate decade for once.”

“What’d he say?”

I passed my phone to Ruiz, who laughed, shaking his head. “Idiot.” Then he pointed at the message. “But he’s right. No flirting.”

“No worries. Those days are behind me. I’m engaged now.” I wiggled my ring finger, displaying the engagement band.

Ruiz handed my phone back. “I can’t handle these weird conversations we have.”



“Relax, sweetheart. I’ll keep you for backup. You never know.”

“Stooooop. God, why do you do that? Enough. Name, Valor.” He pointed at the computer. “You want my help or not?”

We were both laughing.

“Tallus Domingo. Apparently, he’s a new hire in records. Not sure what happened to Kitty. She probably retired. I think she was in her eighties. Long overdue. Anyhow, I was hoping you could... What’s wrong?”

At the mention of Tallus Domingo’s name, Ruiz turned to stone. His humored guise melted into a blank canvas I couldn’t read as he stared unblinking at his computer screen. But he didn’t type or pull up a search panel. He didn’t move.

“Costa?” It still felt weird calling Ruiz by his first name, but I’d promised to try.

“You said Tallus Domingo?”

“Yeah. Do you know him?”

*Oh shit.* Jordyn had said Tallus was gay—or bi. Ruiz, prior to about a year ago, had been less than kind to anyone who didn’t identify as straight. I’d always suspected his intolerance was a learned behavior rooted in his upbringing, but we’d never properly discussed it. In fact, we tended to avoid those unsavory days before we’d developed our friendship.

Ruiz had made a supreme effort to shed his old ways. He’d taken great strides in becoming a more well-rounded and

accepting individual. If he hadn't, we wouldn't be sitting in his office. He wouldn't be my best man.

But Ruiz had a past. Was Tallus Domingo part of it? Had Tallus been a target of Ruiz's bigotry?

But no, Tallus was a new hire. By the sound of it, he hadn't been working for the department for long. Did they know each other outside work? Their age gap suggested not. Ruiz was close to my age, and the new guy in records was a good decade younger. They wouldn't have gone to school together.

The stress I'd managed to let go of in the car resurfaced. It was different this time, but my chest tightened all the same, and I had to refrain from clutching it or squirming. Did Ruiz only tolerate me? Was he still a bigoted asshole with other people?

Ruiz punched a knuckle against the power button on his computer screen. The monitor went dark. He didn't face me and continued to stare into the middle distance.

"I feel like I've waded into hot water, and I'm not sure what to do." My voice was thin.

Ruiz didn't respond.

"You know him." It was no longer a question.

"Yes."

"Okay." I didn't want to, but I pushed forward. "Is this related to the fact that I learned Tallus Domingo is gay? If so, maybe I should leave."

“Quaid... don’t.”

“Were you an asshole to him?”

A pause, then, “Yes.”

I stood to go as Ruiz spun his chair to face me, grabbing my arm. “Don’t. Please. It wasn’t recently.”

I remained standing, unsure where to put myself. Ruiz released his hold, but the tortured look behind his eyes held me captive. I’d believed in our friendship, and it had taken a long, *long* time to get there. Had I misjudged?

“You better say something.”

Ruiz nodded. Whatever was troubling him, he seemed to be working it out in his head before voicing it. “Can you sit?”

Tentatively, I returned to the chair.

Ruiz wet his lips and scrubbed a hand over his jaw. He didn’t make eye contact. “Yes, I know him. And yes, I was not exactly a nice person to him, but I haven’t spoken to Tallus in close to ten years. I only learned last week they hired him. I’m shocked he would apply knowing I work here, but...”

“*How* do you know him?”

“He’s my cousin. Tallus Ruiz-Domingo. He dropped the Ruiz part after his dad... after my uncle disowned him.”

## Chapter 5

# Aslan

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 12TH: TWO MONTHS AND ELEVEN DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“**M**om, I can’t come right now. I’m at work, and we just got called to a scene. I’m not sure if—”

“Oh gosh. A murder? Don’t tell me. I don’t want details. You know that stuff makes me squirm. Your father insists on watching all those cop shows with the blood and the trauma...” She *tsked*. “There’s this one show. Oh, what’s it called. Hang on...”

“Mom, I don’t have time to—”

“Ronan,” she yelled, not listening to my protests. “Ronan, what’s that show you watch on Tuesday nights? The cop one with the murders.” My dad responded, but I couldn’t make out what he said. “No, not that one. The LADP something-or-other one. You know, with all the dead bodies and gore... It is

so gory. Don't tell me it isn't. I watch it with my own two eyes... It has the good-looking fella Loraine likes."

Another grumble in the background.

"No, Loraine from card night with the hair. You're thinking of Lorna. Lorna is Earl's ex-wife. Earl!" Another *tsk*. "The guy you bought the mower part from. The mower! Good grief, get your hearing checked... The show. LADP something-or-other. Is that it?"

"It's *LAPD*, Mom. Stands for Los Angeles Police Department."

She didn't hear me. She and Dad were spiraling into another tangent. All I could do was wait.

"Oh blast. Your father's got a mind on him like a sieve. It's old age, you know? That and his hearing's going. He won't admit it, but I think he should see Dr. Melvin. He's a sweet old man. Did you know—"

"Mom, I don't have all day."

"Right, right. Anyhow. What I was saying was, you know your mother doesn't like hearing about your work."

"Mom, I have never and would never give you details about my job. I promise. Why are we even discussing this? I called because Amelia said—"

"Oh, I've got it. Hang on, hang on."

Mom shouted at my father again, asking if it was the NCBS show—whatever acronym that was meant to be, I had no idea.

She mixed them all up. My dad bickered in the background, and Mom strung a new series of letters together.

I'd lost her again. This was hopeless.

I sighed.

Torin, the ass, snickered from the driver's seat as I pinched the bridge of my nose. I only wanted to plan a time to meet with my parents before they took off for their winter house in Florida. The week was getting away from me. It was already Thursday, and they were scheduled to leave on Saturday. Not that I wanted old man Barney to officiate our wedding—I really, *really* didn't—but I'd promised my sister I would talk to our parents and let them down easy.

"I need a backup plan," I whispered to Torin. "I can't go through with this."

"I could officiate your wedding. It's a quick online clickety-click to get your license or whatever you need." Torin pulled to the curb outside a house where yellow police tape and a half dozen officers kept a crowd of civilians at bay. Double homicide, we'd been told. I'd be lucky if I could meet up with my parents at all that evening.

Mom was still squawking at Dad, and I was about to hang up when she came back on the line. "*Ma dai!* He's going to make me crazy. Anyhow, love, come for dinner. Bring your boyfriend."

"Fiancé."

“I’m making ribollita. Your dad’s favorite. Maybe I’ll do some biscuits. You like them with herbs and cheese, don’t you?”

I loved my parents to death, but they were a lot to take. Loud, boisterous, argumentative—in the most loving way—and a little over-bearing and in your face—again, in a loving way—but it was suffocating.

Knowing what this meeting with my parents entailed, I pointed at Torin, “Don’t mess with me. I’d take you up on the offer in a heartbeat. Heck, I’ll even pay any fees it took for you to get certified.”

Torin chuckled as he scanned the multitudes of officers bustling about on the front lawn. “I was joking. Besides, lover boy would not approve. Ten bucks says this one’s messy.”

“I don’t care what Quaid says. I’ll find a way to convince him.”

“Hello? Are you there, sweetie?”

“Yeah, I’m here, Ma. Dinner sounds great. I love biscuits. What time are you thinking? It can’t be too early.”

“Let’s say six.”

“Seven?”

She *tsked*. “All right, but not a minute later. Your dad needs to take his pills with food, and seven is getting late.”

“Okay... How about six thirty? I’ll do my best to be on time.”



The city's head forensic pathologist, Dr. Elizabeth Thornlow, pulled up in front of Torin's Charger. She was a distinguished woman in her late fifties. Thornlow exited her vehicle, offered us a grim smile and wave, and headed toward the house.

We needed to get inside.

"Ma, I gotta run."

"You'll bring Quaid, won't you, sweetie? I'd love to see him before we head south again."

"I'll ask him. He might be busy."

"Nonsense. Busy is not an excuse to miss dinner. He needs to eat. That boy is far too skinny. Don't you feed him?"

I snorted. That was a loaded question.

I wasn't sure I could convince Quaid to step away from work and wedding planning long enough to eat dinner with my parents. Getting him to consume food on a good day was a chore. Stress had done a number on his appetite. Plus, Cellina and Ronan Doyle overwhelmed him.

Quaid had been moodier than usual since the weekend. When I'd asked what was wrong, he'd informed me in a biting tone that Ruiz was related to his Secret Santa guy, Tallus Domingo, and there was bad blood between them. It didn't explain his mood, but he'd refused to elaborate.

When I'd asked Ruiz what was going on, he'd told me to mind my own business.

“I’ll ask him, Ma. No promises. I gotta go. See you around six thirty.”

I disconnected and let my head fall back against the headrest. “Good freaking god, save me.”

“Your parents are extra.”

“Tell me about it. Shall we?”

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“Okay. Here’s the plan.” I killed the engine on the Equinox, studying the front windows of my parents’ house to be sure no one was stalking us. “When they offer to have old man Barney officiate our wedding, you tell them, ‘Thanks but no thanks. We’ve already found someone. It’s booked and paid for, and we can’t back out.’ Got it?”

“But it’s not, and we don’t. Az, I’ve called eight different people, and no one is willing or able to marry us on December twenty-third. My list of potential officiates is dwindling. This guy, whoever he is, may be our best option. Especially if he’s willing.”

I laughed almost manically. “No. No, no, no. He’s not. Trust me.”

“Couldn’t we at least meet with him? How bad can he be?”

“Quaid.” I shuffled around in my seat and took his hands. “Darling, sweetie, baby, love of my life—”

“Laying it on a little thick, aren’t you?”

“Please help me avoid this catastrophe. We don’t want The Ghost of Gardener Barney to marry us. He was a hundred years old in the seventies. He’s at least three hundred and ninety-seven now.”

“Your math is off.”

“And if you think my parents ramble and get in your face too much, this guy is worse.”

“You haven’t seen him since you were a kid. People change. Besides, if you want to keep things kosher between you and your parents, we should agree to meet with him. We can always tell them he wasn’t a good fit *after* they’ve gone south.”

I hitched a brow. “Okay, see, now you’re making sense. This is why I’m marrying you. It’s your brain. It’s so sexy.”

“So we’ll meet with him and give him a chance?”

“No. We’ll meet with him, then let my parents down gently. Over the phone. When they’re far, far away. Trust me. We don’t want Barney anywhere near our wedding.”

Quaid’s smile was strained. The wedding planning was taking its toll. I’d pulled him from his desk thirty minutes ago after Jordyn had reassured me she didn’t need him for the rest of the night, but he looked tired and rundown. The bags under his eyes stood out against his pale skin. When was the last time he’d slept a whole night or eaten a proper meal?

Using a thumb, I smoothed the pinched skin between his brows and cradled his jaw. “You’re smiling but still wearing a

fret face.”

“I’m okay.”

“No, you aren’t. Is it dinner with my parents?”

“No.”

“Work?”

“No. I’m fine. Truly.” He removed my hand from his face and squeezed it, trying and failing to fix the strained smile.

“It’s the wedding. You don’t look good, Quaid.”

He huffed. “Obviously the wedding is causing stress.”

“But that’s not what’s causing your current fret face. I know you, Quaid.”

He shrugged. “We should go inside.”

“Is it Ruiz?”

Quaid’s jaw tightened, and he broke eye contact. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I glanced at the house again, then back to my fiancé. “You get a free pass because we’re going to be late. But when we get home tonight, you *are* going to talk about it because I’m worried about you.”

“It’s nothing.” His features softened, and he leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to my mouth. “Let’s go inside. I’m hungry.”

And with *that* comment, he knew I would give up.

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“Oh, my boys, my sweet, sweet boys. Come inside. Let me take your coats. Ronan,” Mom yelled into the house. “The boys are here. Come and take their coats. Oh, look at you,” she said to Quaid, claspng his face and dragging him down for a kiss on the cheek. “Just look at you. I always said you were handsome. Amelia agrees with me. Such a beautiful boy. But, honey, you’re so pale. Are you sick?”

“I’m fine.”

Quaid’s cheeks pinked with the assault as Dad entered the front hallway. “I was just watching the news. Did you hear that curmudgeon is talking about running for president again?”

“What curmudgeon?” Mom asked.

“You know. The one with the weird face from whose-it-ville. I don’t know where he’s from.”

“Pennsylvania?”

“No.”

“Illinois?”

“I don’t think that’s it.”

“Connecticut?”

“Forget it. It’s not our country, and I said I didn’t know. I’m not gonna stand here and listen to you rhyme off fifty states. Why do you care anyway?”

“You brought it up.”

“No, I didn’t. It was on the news.”

“Never mind the news. It’s all hogwash. Look who’s here. It’s your son and his future husband. Oh, dolly,” she said to Quaid. “Let me help you with your coat.”

Mom practically undressed Quaid, twirling him and tugging his sleeves down his arms like he was six.

“Mom, I think Quaid can take off his own coat.”

“I’m just helping.”

“I think it was New Hampshire,” Dad said. “Hang on. They’re still talking about it. Let me go—”

“Get back here. Take these and hang them up.” Mom shoved our coats into Dad’s arms. “And no more news. We have company.”

Mom wasn’t done with her greeting or inspection. She’d hardly gotten started. When Quaid tried to hide behind me and let me take the brunt of her assault, Mom was having none of it.

“Don’t you get away from me. Come here and let me look at you properly.” Mom was short and round, but her personality made her larger than life, and no one told her no.

My father, whose genes I shared, stood in the background, shaking his head. They had a loving relationship, but there was never any doubt about who wore the pants.

First, Mom straightened Quaid’s tie and brushed invisible dirt from his shoulders before taking his hands in a loving hold. “Now, sweetie. How are you? Truthfully.”

“I’m well, Mrs. Doyle.”

“None of that. You call me Mom.”

“O-okay.” Except I wasn’t sure Quaid would be capable of such a demand.

“Amelia tells me you’re stressing yourself out with these wedding plans. I told Ronan you boys should have waited until spring. At least then we’d have been back from Florida and I could have helped. Didn’t I say that, Ronan?”

“Yeah, you said that.”

“You see? Maybe you should hire a wedding planner. It could help. Have you thought of that? Who plans a wedding in under three months? Honestly, sweetheart, what were you two thinking?”

“It was my idea for a winter wedding, Mom. Quaid just went along with it.”

“Oh, I’ll get to you. And that doesn’t shock me.” She wagged a finger. “You always were too gung-ho. Wasn’t he too gung-ho, Ronan?”

“Too gung-ho,” Dad parroted.

“I always said he had ants in his pants growing up. Never listened to instructions. Wouldn’t sit still. The teachers would call me and tell me he was too rambunctious. Mind of his own, and off it went at a million miles an hour. Who was that teacher who used to call us all the time? The French one. Mrs. Parker?”

“Picoult,” Dad said.

“That’s not her. It was Parker.”

“Parker’s not a French name.”

“Doesn’t have to be.”

“No. I think Parker is the lady who runs the diner by the beach down south. The one with the grandkids always hanging off her leg.”

“That’s Velma.”

“Yeah. Velma Parker.”

“Now why would I mix them up?”

“Because her husband speaks French.”

“Oh, that’s right. Robert. He’s a handsome devil,” she said to Quaid conspiratorially. “Although, I heard he had a heart attack. Too much weight around the middle. That’s what retirement does. Ask Ronan.”

I glanced at Quaid, who looked uncomfortable and unsure how to respond. With Mom, it was best to let her ramble. She ran out of steam eventually.

“Mom, maybe we could—”

“Hush. I’m talking. Anyhow. The teacher, whoever she was, used to call every week to make reports about my sweet lion. So when I say his impatience is eternal, I mean it. Been like that all his life. You should have put your foot down and convinced him to have a spring wedding. It would have been better.” Without pause, Mom examined Quaid and *tsked*.



“Sweetheart, you’re too skinny. Doesn’t anyone feed you? It’s the job, isn’t it? I don’t know how you kids do it. All those dead bodies.”

“Quaid works in MPU, Ma.”

Mom waved me off. “I don’t know what that is.”

“Missing persons,” Quaid explained.

“Oh my.” Mom clutched her chest. “That’s even worse. No wonder stress is doing you in. Now, get your handsome self into the dining room, and we’ll put dinner on the table. You’ll eat two helpings tonight and no arguing. I made biscuits too. They’re Aslan’s favorite. With butter because you can’t make them with margarine or they don’t taste the same. Isn’t that right, Ronan?”

“Butter’s better.”

“You see. Come on, love.” Quaid stole a quick glance in my direction, and I shrugged. What else could I do? When Mom dug her heels in, no one on earth could stop her.

Dad hung our jackets and offered me a hug. We were the same height and of similar build. The years had widened my dad’s midsection and thinned his hair, but he was still the same solid man I’d loved all my life.

“Sorry about your mother. You know how she is.”

“She’s going to smother him to death.”

“Can’t be helped. We survived it. He will too.”

We followed Mom and Quaid into the dining room.

The table was set for four, and Dad deposited me in a chair across from Quaid. The minute I sat, I found his foot under the table and rubbed his ankle with my big toe. My family dynamic was extreme compared to what Quaid had grown up with. He was used to silent nights of chess and mumbled conversations with his dad, not dynamic shouting matches and good-natured arguments you couldn't win.

“You okay?” I whispered when my parents vanished into the kitchen.

“Your mom is intense.”

I chuckled. “Welcome to the family.”

Dad came back carrying a pot of soup. Rich, savory smells filled the room and made my stomach grumble. Mom returned with an uncorked bottle of red wine.

“This is not for you,” she said, wagging a finger in my face. “You’ve got your sobriety to think about.”

“I’m good with water.”

“Your father said I shouldn’t serve wine, but you can’t have ribollita without wine. I mean, come on. It’s like going to Paris and not seeing the Eiffel Tower.”

“It’s not the same, and yes, you can,” Dad argued, setting the pot on the table before propping his hands on his hips. “You should support your son instead of waving alcohol in his face. You don’t know how hard this is for him. It’s hard, right?”

“I’m fine. Really.”

Dad threw his hands up. “See? He’s struggling.”

“I’m not. I’m much better.”

“You could start a slide. I’ve read about those.” Dad shook his head admonishingly.

“It’s called a slip, and I’m okay, Dad. Really.”

“It’s not how it’s done, Ronan,” Mom said, cutting in. “Certain meals require certain beverages. Ribollita requires wine. End of argument. Now pass me your wine glass.”

“How long’s it been now?” Dad asked.

“Two years in December.”

“And you’re going to those meetings still?”

“Every week.”

“Good stuff. I knew it would stick. Chris had his doubts, but not me.”

I bit my tongue and forced a smile. Quaid applied pressure to my foot in silent support. My brother-in-law and I had been slowly rebuilding our fractured relationship, but we were a long way from best friends.

“I’m serving the wine,” Mom announced to no one in particular. “But not to you,” she reiterated with a pointed glare. “You get water.”

Mom filled Quaid’s glass without asking and made her way around the table. Quaid might have protested if given a choice, but ultimately, a night with my parents required wine. Especially if you weren’t used to the craziness of my family.

After everyone's glass was filled and the food was out, my parents sat. We all held hands and said grace. Some traditions held strong. Mom was raised in a religious household. Hence, Amelia and I had been raised in much the same. Mom had welcomed her bisexual son and his fiancé with open arms, but she was still a church-going Catholic to her core, and if Mom said we prayed before meals, we prayed before meals.

“My God makes exceptions,” she'd informed me years ago when I'd brought home my first boyfriend, officially announcing I was bi. And heaven help anyone who tried to tell her differently—including Father Renolds from their church.

Dad had never batted an eye.

Amelia claimed she had always known.

“Now,” Mom said when the prayer was complete, “let's get some food in both of you and talk about Barnabus. Your sister mentioned him doing your service, didn't she?”

“She did.” I glanced at Quaid, who smirked and ducked his chin while stirring the steaming bowl of ribollita Mom had placed in front of him. “I didn't know Barney was still alive.”

“Oh, nonsense. Of course he is, and who better to marry you than a man you've known all your life. He's like a long-lost uncle.”

“More like a long-lost great-grandfather. How old is he now?”

“Oh, I don't know,” Mom said. “Does it matter?”

“Kind of.”

“Ninety-three.” Dad waved a hand at Quaid. “Can you pass the salt, son?”

Mom *pffed* as she passed around the plate of warm biscuits. “He’s not ninety-three. We celebrated his fiftieth birthday in 1990. Don’t you remember the party, sweetheart?” Mom asked me. “There was a slip and slide for the youngsters. And balloons.”

Didn’t every birthday party have balloons? But I did vaguely remember celebrating.

“That was his sixtieth birthday,” Dad said, adding a thick smear of butter to his biscuit. “Don’t you remember the signs? Harriett made them and stuck them on the lawn.”

“Oh, right, right! What did that one say? Something about ironing his wrinkles. Oh gosh. It was hilarious.”

Dad nodded. “See? He’s ninety-three, like I said.”

“Isn’t that a little old to be officiating weddings?” I asked.

“Not at all. He’s sharp as a whip,” Mom said, tapping her temple.

“He’s dull as a butter knife,” Dad said, dunking his biscuit in his soup.

“Ronan!”

“Can’t fault the man. He’s ninety-three. No one has any wits left at ninety-three. I’ll be dead by then, God willing.”

“Dad!” I said, mimicking my mother’s tone.

“We can definitely meet with him,” Quaid said, interrupting as he inspected a biscuit and made faces at the butter dish Mom had pushed in front of him.

“Does he realize he’ll be marrying two men?” I asked.

“Oh, I remember now.” Mom clapped her hands. “It said how your birthday suit needs regular ironing at sixty.” To me, she added, “I had to explain it to your sister at the time because she didn’t understand it. You understand, though, right? Wrinkled skin and ironing?”

“Yes. I get it. Mom, does he know we’re two men getting married? Maybe he won’t appreciate that.”

“Of course he knows. His granddaughter is a lesbian.”

“He has a granddaughter? I didn’t know he was married.”

“He isn’t. Never was. It was quite the scandal.”

“He’s almost blind,” Dad added, eating his soup. “And deaf.”

“You’re almost deaf,” Mom said under her breath.

“What was that?” Dad glanced around the table.

“I said use your napkin. You have soup on your chin. Honestly, Ronan, I can’t take you anywhere.”

Dad swiped his chin. “I’m at home for Christ’s sake. You *haven’t* taken me anywhere.”

“Watch your language. You remember Helen from church?” Mom asked.

“No.”

Mom went on to explain the Barnabus and Helen scandal of '84. I didn't bother listening. Mom got on tangents, and it was best to nod along until she was done.

Quaid's shoulders bounced as he tried and failed to stifle a laugh. I knocked his foot, and he peeked up over his dinner. "Still wanna meet with him?"

"More than ever."

"He's a wonderful man. I think it would be fabulous to include him in your wedding. He's practically family. Quaid, love, is there something wrong with your biscuit?" Mom asked.

Quaid jolted. "No, ma'am." He stuffed an overly large bite into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. "It's delicious."

Mom squeezed his hand before placing another on his plate. "Have two. Heaven knows you need them. And add some butter next time. You need the extra calories. You're too skinny. I should give you the recipe."

My poor neurotic fiancé would not escape eating tonight as much as he tried. I should invite my mother over to our place for dinner on occasion. Or at least use her as a threat to force Quaid to eat on those nights he felt exceptionally objectionable.

Quaid had devoured over half a bowl of soup, which was remarkable, especially lately. Albeit, the soup was full of vegetables and legumes, so it was right up his alley.

After dinner, Mom insisted on coffee in the living room. Dad wrapped an arm around Quaid's shoulder and guided him along, sharing stories about their winter home in Florida and all the activities they did for fun.

I helped Mom clear the table. When we were alone in the kitchen, Mom stopped me and shoved an envelope into my hands. "Here. This is from your father and me."

"What is it?"

"Consider it an early wedding present."

I turned the envelope over and raised a brow.

Mom patted my hand and lowered her voice. "It's money, sweetheart."

"Mom, we don't need—"

She shushed me. "Use it for your honeymoon or use it for the wedding. Either or. Your father and I don't care. We paid for your sister's wedding and wanted to do something nice for you too."

"Mom—"

"Nope. No arguing. We aren't sure how it works between two men when they get married. I mean, who pays for the wedding? Does anyone think of that? It's customary for the bride's father to pay. That's what Ronan did with Amelia. But our son is marrying another man, so—"

"It's the twenty-first century, Ma. Those customs are antiquated."



“Oh, *peshaw*. Don’t give me that nonsense. The thing is, when you have two grooms, your father and I weren’t sure where our responsibilities lie.”

“They don’t lie anywhere. Quaid and I can pay for our own wedding. In fact—”

“I know, I know. We aren’t stepping on toes. That’s why I said you could use it for a honeymoon. Take that sweet boy somewhere nice. He deserves it.” She leaned closer and whispered, “Can I suggest a beach? The man is very pale. He’s not sick, is he?”

I chuckled. “No. He’s fine. Just vampiric at times.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It was a joke. Never mind. Thank you for this.” I waved the envelope. “You didn’t have to.”

“We most certainly did.” She dragged me into a suffocating hug, engulfing me in her familiar perfume. When she released me, she held my face. “And now listen to me. You let Barnabus officiate your wedding. It’s the least you can do for the poor man.”

“We’ll meet with him.”

“Aslan Ronan Doyle, don’t you sidestep me on this. You do that man justice. He loves you like an uncle. Like a father.”

My mother was the queen of pet names. Sweetie, pumpkin, love, honey, you name it. So if she was full-naming me, I knew she was serious.

“We’ll see. I’m not making promises. If he’s as senile as Dad suggests—”

“Your father doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I saw Barney last week at church. We had a long chat, and he’s eager to be part of your wedding. He remembers you from way back in his gardening days. At the house on Forest Lane. You remember? He doesn’t do that anymore. Bad knees. He also had his hip replaced in oh-nine.”

Bad knees, new hip, deaf, blind, ninety-three. These were not positive qualities to put on a résumé. I quit arguing, and we collected the coffee paraphernalia and met Dad and Quaid in the living room.

## Chapter 6

# Quaid

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 13TH: TWO MONTHS AND TEN DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“**Y**ou need to call Barney and book a time for us to meet.”

Aslan filled two travel mugs with freshly brewed coffee as I tapped a shiny plastic-covered page in the wedding binder, waiting impatiently with my ringing phone pressed to my ear.

“For this weekend?” he asked.

“Ideally. Although, I don’t know how we’re going to fit it in. We have an interview with Lacey’s Photography on Saturday morning at—” The answering machine at the flower shop I’d called finally clicked on, so I paused to listen to the message, holding up a finger to Aslan. At the beep, I said, “Hi, this is Quaid Valor. *Again*. I called yesterday to make an appointment to arrange flowers for a wedding, and no one called me back. It’s important I get this arranged ASAP. I’m on a tight

schedule, and although I'd prefer to work with your business, I have other flower shop options on my list. I suggest you return my call, or I'll move on." I rhymed off my number—twice—and hung up, spinning on Aslan.

"You can't be nasty with everyone, or no one will agree to work with you."

I ignored him. Stress made me impatient, and people who didn't return my phone calls kicked up my blood pressure. "We meet with the photographer at eight Saturday morning and have the stupid mandatory meeting bullshit again in the afternoon. So if Barney can meet with us around three, that might work. Or even one evening next week. Did you call the DJs on the list I gave you?"

Aslan handed me a travel mug of coffee. "I did not. You gave me the list at ten o'clock last night after a long lecture about not wanting heavy metal or junkies or guys with dreadlocks behind the sound system."

"They should be respectable looking. And I hate metal. Is that too much to ask?"

"No." Aslan kissed my cheek. "And I'll take care of it the second I have a free minute. I have to go. Torin and I have two autopsies scheduled for this morning, and I can't be late."

I drank a large mouthful of coffee and leaned heavily against the counter. "What day is it?"

"Friday."

I whimpered and sucked down more coffee. Time was disappearing too fast. “We need to pick out the style of tuxes we want and go for fittings. There’s this place on—”

“Nuh-uh. Before we do that, you need to make up with Ruiz. He and Torin need to be there. Unless your fight was profound enough you fired him too.”

“I didn’t fire him. And we aren’t fighting. It was... nothing.”

I glanced at the travel mug hugged between my palms. Aslan had tried and failed to get the story out of me the previous night after we’d gotten home from his parents. I’d diverted his attention to sex. It worked like a charm every time.

“I’m going to talk to him this morning,” I said. “I’ll make a phone call this afternoon and schedule an appointment for tux fittings. I have a place in mind.”

“Don’t make it for this weekend. Torin and I are swamped with our double homicide. As it stands, I’m not sure we’ll make the meeting on Saturday. Summerfield gave us a free pass if we were too busy with the case.”

“What about our meeting with the photographer? I already booked it.”

“I can’t make promises, Quaid, and if you get called to a last-minute case, you can’t either. Things get dicey in this line of work. You know how it is.”

I did, and it was half the reason why this wedding had been so hard to plan on short notice. Free time in our field was sketchy at best. I pressed the heel of my palm to my chest.

Between my stomach sloshing about and the cramping under my sternum, I was a mess.

Aslan hitched a chin. “What’s up? Why are you doing that?”

“I don’t know. Heartburn. Probably the coffee.”

Frowning, he snagged the loaf of bread we kept on top of the microwave and plunked it on the counter beside me. “Eat something. You can’t live off strong coffee and no food.”

But my stomach was too upset to eat.

“I will,” I lied. I checked the time on my phone. At this rate, I would be late to my desk, and Jordyn would give me hell.

Aslan removed the travel mug from my hand, placed it on the counter beside the loaf of bread, and wrapped me in his arms. “You’re overdoing it.”

“I can’t help it. Time is vanishing, and a million things need to be done. I can’t sleep because all I can think about is the long list of things I haven’t gotten to yet. Then Jordyn and I get called on a case, and any free time I think I have goes bye-bye, and the next thing I know, three days have gone by, and I haven’t done anything. Did I tell you we got a lead on that old case where the guy reported his wife missing?”

“No, and never mind it right now. Breathe.”

I tried, but the heartburn made inhaling difficult. “I regret being an asshole to those wedding planners. I need help,” I mumbled against Aslan’s shoulder.

“You need breakfast and sleep.”

“Az, I’m serious.”

“I know. Let me take some of the burden.” He pulled back and kissed my forehead, brushing his knuckles along my clean-shaven cheek. “You can’t do this all on your own. I’ll call Barnabus today and see when he can meet with us, and *I’ll* arrange a time for us to go for tux fittings and all that jazz. If Torin and I can organize our interviews properly, I’ll join you at the photography place on Saturday morning.”

“It’s at—”

“Eight o’clock. I listened.”

Closing my eyes, I let the comfort of Aslan’s arms around me take some of the weight off my shoulders. The clean scent of his body wash and cologne surrounded me, and I had the sudden urge to crawl back into bed with him and forget everything.

When he released me, it was too soon. “I really have to go.”

“Okay, but hang on a sec.” I retrieved the binder and scanned a few pages until I found what I was looking for. I removed a pamphlet from the sleeve and handed it to him. “This is the place I was considering for the tuxes. It’s on Bloor Street. They have a solid reputation and hundreds of five-star reviews. Do not go to the men’s fashion store on Danforth. I’ve heard horror stories.”

Aslan studied the colored pamphlet. “Does next weekend work?”



“Or an evening this week.” Could we swing that? I had no idea. It always depended on work.

“It’s going to be hard for all four of us to get away for fittings,” Aslan said, reading my mind.

I massaged the spot between my eyes. “I know.”

Aslan removed my hand and kissed the spot I’d been rubbing. “Eat something and try not to worry so much. It will all come together.”

“Why did I have to be such an asshole to those wedding planners?”

“Because you’re you.”

I sneered, and Aslan chuckled, taking my hand and squeezing. “I’ll figure something out.”

“We need help.”

“I know, and I’ll take care of getting it.”

“Who? How?”

“Trust me.”

Aslan gently put the travel mug of coffee back in my hands. “Toast. Two pieces. Promise me.”

“I’ll eat.”

The look in his eyes said he doubted it.

“I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that. I’ll see you tonight.” One last lingering kiss, and he left me alone in the kitchen.

Once the front door clicked and I knew he was gone, I returned to the binder, eyed the loaf of bread, and submitted. Stomach issues or not, he was right. With two slices in the toaster, I contemplated the endless checklist of things we had yet to accomplish before December.

Arranging the dinner and midnight buffet. Organizing the bar. Ordering a cake. Selecting flowers—if that damn place would call me back, maybe that would have been done by now. Choosing a DJ who wasn't a headbanging junkie with a scraggly beard who smelled like patchouli. Picking out tuxes and going for fittings. Hiring a photographer—with luck, that task would be done Saturday morning. Choosing rings. And meeting with Barnabus, a man who might be ninety-three and senile. If the old man wasn't suitable, then we needed to find someone to officiate a wedding that happened to be two days before Christmas.

Great. Wonderful. Perfect.

By the time I finished my toast, it was seven thirty. I'd told Jordyn I'd be at my desk by eight, so I needed to get moving if I wanted to stop by Ruiz's office for a quick chat. Considering it was a twenty-minute drive to work—traffic notwithstanding—I was pushing it.

After learning who Tallus Domingo was to Ruiz and discovering their unpleasant past, I'd left. Ruiz hadn't stopped me. And to his credit, he hadn't tried to explain away his position. If anything, I could see the guilt he carried and knew without a doubt he was ashamed.

For the longest time, Ruiz had treated me poorly, but over the past year, he'd woken up and made great strides toward being a better person. In the process, for reasons I might never fully comprehend, we'd become friends. Good friends.

But was it crumbling already?

After mulling over the Tallus issue for a few days, I was ready to confront him. I wanted the whole story, and if Ruiz truly wanted to make amends for the past, then I had an idea of how he could make it happen. Plus, it would indirectly help me with my Secret Santa problem, which I still didn't have time for and hated on principle.

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The basement at headquarters, home to our resident IT expert, was dark and often dreary. An underground tomb tucked away from the chaos of the rest of the building. It had rightfully earned the nickname *the dungeon*, and its poor lone occupant worked tirelessly, surrounded by the scent of warm plastic and noisy cooling fans.

The department only granted Ruiz help if a case was significant enough to call for it, which he'd informed me was a rarity. For as harsh and abrupt as Ruiz could often be, he was hardworking and always willing to help a fellow comrade—sometimes to his detriment. The man had a wife and two young children he rarely saw. His time off was scarcer than mine, so I wasn't surprised to find him at his desk, neck-deep in paperwork, when I arrived a few minutes before eight.

I'd been wise enough to grab him a fresh cup of coffee, figuring his first would have long ago been consumed. The empty mug beside him supported my theory. Our love for decent coffee was about the only thing Ruiz and I had in common.

I remained in the doorway for a moment, watching him work. His back was turned, but I didn't for a second think he didn't know I was there. It had been six days since I'd walked out of his office, unsure how to feel about his confession and feeling oddly defensive about a guy I didn't know.

"Is it fresh?" Ruiz asked after a minute. He hadn't turned around, and his fingers clacked away at the keyboard.

"I brewed it myself a few minutes ago. Black like your rotten soul and extra strong. How'd you know I had coffee for you?"

Ruiz finished whatever he was doing and spun to face me. "Two reasons. One, I smelled it. Two, you always bring me coffee when you think we're not okay."

I frowned. "I didn't realize I was so transparent."

I passed Ruiz the mug and rolled the seat I always used from its place in the corner of the room before sitting.

Ruiz sipped the hot brew, eyes closed and with a look of ecstasy on his face. Once he set it aside, he regarded me suspiciously. "You're talking to me again?"

"I wasn't *not* talking to you. I needed to—"

"Process?"

“Think.”

The eye contact vanished, and Ruiz looked suddenly uncomfortable. His knee jiggled, and he fumbled with a pencil, spinning it on the table’s surface. “I won’t make excuses.”

“I appreciate that.”

“I’m not the same person anymore.”

“I know that too.”

It took a long moment of silence and what seemed like heavy contemplation on Ruiz’s part before he faced me. But even then, he didn’t seem to know what to say.

It was me who spoke. “I always assumed you grew up surrounded by... In a house with...” I scrambled, looking for an appropriate word, for some reason not wanting to insult his family even if it was warranted.

“Bigots?” Ruiz supplied.

“Yes. I guess.”

“I did. Profound bigots. Vocal bigots. My dad was the worst of them. His brother, my uncle John, Tallus’s father, wasn’t much better. The commentary, opinions, blatant racism, and homophobia that surrounded me every day of my life left an impression, and it’s taken me a long time to realize their views shouldn’t dictate my own. Too long.”

Ruiz shifted in his chair, making the leather creak. He focused on the pencil again but abandoned it immediately,

clenching and unclenching his fist before continuing. “I’m a freethinker. I can form my own beliefs, and I have. Honestly, Quaid, you’re the reason I did some heavy soul-searching a year ago and decided I didn’t like the person I was.” He frowned and shook his head. “And I don’t want my kids to grow up like me.”

“What happened with Tallus?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Tell me anyway.”

The sorrow behind Ruiz’s eyes told its own story. “He came out when he was fourteen or fifteen. I can’t remember. It was... explosive. He’s...” Ruiz scrubbed a hand over his mouth, and I knew he was searching for the right word—the politically correct word. I’d addressed his language excessively over the past year and could see his hesitation and desire to get it right. “Tallus has an outgoing, unapologetic personality. He’s a bit of a showman. Did theater in school. Very dramatic. Always showing off. Always looking for attention. At least that’s what he was like as a kid and preteen. We haven’t talked in close to ten years, so maybe he’s changed. Growing up, he was always... extroverted. Shamelessly flashy and exuberant.”

“Is the word you’re looking for flamboyant?”

“I was purposefully avoiding that word. Isn’t it an insult?”

“Not necessarily. I’ve heard it used in a way intended to cause offense, but overall, it’s fine.”

“Then maybe he was a little of that. He never cared what people thought of him and had no filter. Not sure any of the Ruiz clan did to be honest. We’re a bunch of loudmouths who talk too much. We speak our minds and don’t care who we harm.

“Tallus and I never really hung out. He’s over a decade younger than me, so we weren’t friends or anything, but I remember the talk around the house when I was in my early twenties. Tallus would have been a preteen. Dad used to tell Mom that Uncle John needed to rein that boy in and set him straight. He needed to...”

“Man him up?”

Ruiz nodded and glanced at the dark monitor of a stray computer on the desk beside him. He fiddled with the pencil again, rolling it under his fingers before abandoning it to take another sip of coffee.

“When Tallus came out, no one was surprised. I think they all feared he was gay long before that day. Uncle John called him every name in the book and showed him the door. My aunt Bernice walked out behind her son.” Ruiz shrugged and went quiet.

“That doesn’t explain your poor relationship with him.”

“I was responsible for my fair share of shaming and name-calling. I mimicked my dad and uncle. Said words I won’t repeat. Words I regret.”

We sat in silence again, and it stretched on for long enough I wondered when Jordyn might text, asking where I was. We had a full day planned, and if I didn't get upstairs soon, we'd be late for an interview with a man whose wife had been missing for eight months. I checked the time on my phone. Twenty past eight.

"I'm not that person anymore, Quaid."

"I know." But a ball of lead still sat in my belly, and this time, stress and food weren't responsible. I'd had it easy growing up. My dad had fully accepted me when I came out, but that didn't mean I hadn't encountered my fair share of homophobia. People were cruel, and even knowing Ruiz wasn't the same man, it stung.

"I've been learning. You've been teaching me."

"I know." I cleared my throat and stood. Anguish crossed Ruiz's face. It was enough to tell me my choosing to leave again hurt. But I was late, and I couldn't hang out anymore. "I have a lot going on today."

"Okay." His brows crinkled before he tentatively asked, "Are we good?"

"We will be." Ruiz didn't know how to make it better, but I did. "You're going to do me and yourself a favor."

"What's that?"

I tucked the chair I'd been sitting on back in the corner out of the way. "We have to attend these stupid mandatory *meetings*"—I added air quotes—"from now until Christmas so



we can get to know our Secret Santas. You're going to help me get to know mine."

"But I don't—"

"Tallus is your cousin. You just learned he got a job in the department, so you're going to make amends for the past. You're both adults now, and we're friends, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"My friendship should help your case because there isn't anyone in the department who doesn't know I'm gay. If new-hire Tallus doesn't know yet, he will soon enough. Especially when he sees us together and wonders who I am. He'll ask questions. You can drag me along for moral support while you reunite with your cousin and apologize for the past. Don't expect immediate forgiveness. It won't happen. It will take time. But if you make a tiny effort each week to talk to him—with me by your side—not only will you repair your relationship, but I'll get to know my Secret Santa."

Ruiz listened attentively. When I finished, he blew out his cheeks. "Okay. Deal. But he'll probably tell me to go to hell."

"And you deserve it."

"I do. What if he won't talk to me?"

"You'll figure it out. And you won't give up because I know you mean it when you say you're sorry. Tallus will take some convincing, but I think he'll see it too in time."

I turned to go but shifted back around at the last minute. "Oh, and Az is making appointments for us to pick out and get

fitted for tuxes, so I'll let you know when that is. It will be an evening this week or possibly next weekend. I don't know for sure. Everything's a mess."

"I'll be there."

## Chapter 7

# Quaid

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 14TH: TWO MONTHS AND NINE DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“Where’s your other half,” Ruiz asked when I met him outside the media room where our mandatory Saturday meetings took place. A low drone of voices carried into the hallway.

“He wormed his way out of it. He and Torin are working on a hot case. I’ve barely seen him since Friday morning.”

“Oh, right. The Fitzgeralds. Double homicide. I heard about that.”

“How do you keep track of everyone’s cases?”

Ruiz shrugged. “Nature of the job. I’m everyone’s bitch.”

“You were my bitch first.”

Ruiz snorted. “You wish. Didn’t you two have a meeting with the photographer this morning?”

I shuffled out of the way as two people squeezed past us in the hallway and entered the media room. “We did, but Az couldn’t make it.” I threaded fingers through my hair, then cringed, knowing I’d mucked up the effort I’d made that morning styling it. “It’s okay. I managed to book someone for the twenty-third, which was practically a miracle. Don’t ask what it cost me since I almost had to get down on my hands and knees and beg.”

“Was he cute?”

I deadpanned, and Ruiz smirked and wiggled his brows. “What? You’re the king of flirting.”

“Only with you, sweetheart. Besides, *she* was in her sixties and long past her prime. Even if I was straight, it would have been a hard no.” I frowned. “Although now that I think about it, she did touch my arm excessively until she found out I was marrying a man.”

“Ah, a missed opportunity. You could have cut your expenses in half with a little lash batting and lip licking.”

“Does that turn you on? I’ll keep it in mind for later.”

“And what would you do if I said yes?”

I rattled those unpleasant thoughts away and kicked Ruiz’s foot, admonishing him. “Don’t be gross. Anyhow, all her photographers were booked through to the new year, and the ones who weren’t were off that holiday weekend. I almost broke down and cried. No joke. This whole Christmastime wedding thing is going to be the death of me, and that

photography place was my last resort unless I wanted someone subpar behind the camera. Matilda, the touchy owner, took pity on me and agreed to photograph our wedding personally. She had a very nice portfolio. She did photography for decades before opening her shop and turning toward the administrative duties.” I sighed. “One thing ticked off the list. I’m so grateful she didn’t show me the door.”

“She agreed because, gay or not, you’re cute.”

I batted my lashes and licked my lips salaciously. “What was that, sweetheart?”

“Nothing. Oh my god. Shut up.”

“Doth my ears deceive me? I never thought I’d get to say this, but stop flirting, Costa. I’m off the market.”

“You’re such a shit.” Ruiz chuckled, but his underlying discomfort was evident. He cut his attention to the media room. Maybe the comment was his way of proving he was comfortable around me and not the same person who’d bullied and tormented his cousin years ago. Or maybe he was relaxing into our friendship and less inhibited about playing along and injecting his own playfully flirty banter from time to time, which had always been my go-to.

Either way, I smiled to myself. We’d come a long way.

Following his gaze, I peeked inside the room, scanning for Tallus Domingo and finding him socializing with a few of the administration staff, people I vaguely knew. He wore formfitting black trousers, a mustard-colored shirt, and a loud

patterned tie. His auburn hair was impeccably styled off his forehead, and whenever he smiled, his eyes shimmered mischievously behind his dark-framed glasses. Okay, I could admit he was kind of good looking.

After hearing Ruiz describe what Tallus was like as a child, I could see some of those attributes in his stance and mannerisms. I wouldn't have called him flamboyant, but Tallus—from a distance at least—was expressive in how he talked and held himself. He oozed confidence. This was a man who didn't hide behind walls or false fronts. He was who he was, and screw anyone who had a problem with it.

For as much as I loathed the idea of this Secret Santa business, I was curious about Tallus now that I knew he was related to Ruiz.

“How old is he?” I didn't need to specify. I got the sense Ruiz was watching Tallus too.

“Um... ten years younger than me, so twenty-six, I guess.”

“Really. He looks younger. I pegged him at twenty-two or twenty-three.”

“Nope.”

“Wait. Are you thirty-six?”

“Yes. Why?”

“Me too.”

“Oooh, samesies. Gimme skin.” He held up a hand for a high five, but the mocking tone of his voice made me scowl in

response instead.

“You’re a jerk.”

He laughed, unaffected by my sneer. “We’re only the same age for another month. You’ve got half a year on me.”

“Really? How do you know when my birthday is?”

Ruiz shrugged. “I’m a computer guy who specializes in digging deep into people’s backgrounds.”

“That’s invasive. When’s your birthday?”

“May fourteenth.”

“Oh. I missed it.”

“No big deal.” Ruiz spared me a quick glance before returning his attention to the room.

“Feel free to miss mine,” I said. “I don’t feel much like celebrating getting older. It’s more and more depressing as the years pass. I can’t believe I’m creeping up on forty.”

“Tell me about it. My mother was convinced I wouldn’t see the end of my teens, but here I am.”

We remained at the door, watching Tallus as he made his way around the room, chatting amicably with everyone. I hated judging a person from a distance, but Tallus seemed friendly enough. When Doug from cybercrimes bumped into a lady from homicide and she spilled a bit of her coffee on her blouse, Tallus was the first one there with tissues to help clean it up.



There was a distinct lack of gene-sharing between him and Ruiz. Tallus was rangy and fine-boned, resplendent in a way that gave him character and attracted the eye. He walked with his shoulders back and his head high. Ruiz was tall and sturdy, virile to his core. He stalked when he crossed a room and was more intimidating in presentation.

Ruiz's Hispanic heritage showed in his warmer skin tone, black hair, and deep brown eyes. Tallus was fair-skinned. Any tell-tale markers of his roots were absent. I suspected his mother was Caucasian and he took after her.

"I'm kind of nervous," Ruiz mumbled, breaking me from my musing. He'd been no doubt examining Tallus with his own critical eye, remembering the past.

"Don't be."

"What if we cause a scene?"

"You're both grownups. Don't."

"I wish it was that easy. Tallus never had much of a brain-to-mouth filter."

"Sounds like a family trait and the reason why you're in this situation."

"I deserved that."

We remained in the hallway, observing from the sidelines. Ruiz seemed to be waiting for me to make the first move. It was busier in the media room than the previous week, and people seemed more relaxed and willing to socialize. Last

Saturday, there had been a divide, units sticking with units and far more reluctance when it came to mingling.

“Who’d you get for Secret Santa?” I asked, delaying.

Ruiz huffed. “I can’t tell you.”

“Why not? I told you who I got.”

“And look at the mess it caused.”

I pierced Ruiz with a snarly look, but he was grinning good-naturedly.

“Tell me,” I pressed.

“No, and aren’t you the one who’s hell-bent on always following the rules?”

“Why does everyone insist on reminding me of that? This is different. Tell me.”

“No.”

I huffed. “Az won’t tell me either.”

“See?” Tipping his head toward the room, Ruiz asked, “Should we go in?”

“I suppose. Hanging out here isn’t getting us anywhere.” I studied the chaos beyond the entrance. “Do not abandon me. I hate these things. I’ll try not to cling to your arm, but if you leave me alone, I’ll be pissed.”

“All right.” Ruiz moved to go inside, but I snagged his shirt and held him back.

“And please do all the talking because I’m awkward and never know what to say.”

“You’re not awkward.”

“Believe me, I am.”

Ruiz moved again, and I drew him back, pressing close to his side and whispering, “And don’t go directly to Tallus because I don’t want him to suspect anything.”

Ruiz stared at me. “You’re getting handsy, Valor, and you just promised not to cling.”

I released his shirt and stepped back. “Sorry.”

Ruiz peered into the room and seemed to be conjuring his strength. Considering what I was asking him to do, I was sure he wasn’t exactly gung-ho about approaching his cousin either.

“We’ll make a circuit,” Ruiz suggested. “Starting over there.” He pointed.

“Perfect.”

Neither of us moved.

“Oh,” I pulled Ruiz away from the door. “The tux fitting is for next Sunday morning at ten. Does that work for you?”

“I’ll make it work.”

“Az and I are going Wednesday night—work pending—to pick out what style we want. God knows we can’t agree on anything. I don’t know what I’m looking for, but... I’ll know when I see it. Anyhow, Sunday is for you and Torin. Just

measurements. It shouldn't take up too much of your day, and \_\_\_”

“Whatever you need me for, Quaid.” Ruiz clasped a hand on my shoulder and aimed me toward the media room. “Now let's quit delaying before I lose my nerve.”

In we went.

We spent an inordinate amount of time mingling. Like Aslan, Ruiz was skilled at conversing with just about anyone. It didn't hurt that he was familiar with most people in the department. I let him talk and kept my eye on his cousin, analyzing Tallus's body language and catching snippets of his conversations when the buzz of voices around us ebbed.

Tallus was either supremely proficient in feigning ignorance or didn't recognize his cousin after a ten-year absence. He gave no sign he saw or identified Ruiz, even when we stood a few feet away, engaged with detectives from various units. Tallus went on laughing and chatting like usual.

Then, it was time.

Ruiz bumped my arm and caught my eye, subtly tipping his head toward Tallus and his group, warning me he was about to venture into enemy territory. I knew I couldn't remain the silent observer in the background anymore. Ruiz would need assistance, and part of the reason I'd suggested this encounter in the first place was so I could learn more about my Secret Santa.

It turned out Tallus did recognize Ruiz, and the people he was with must have sensed a change in the air because the second we joined their circle, the conversation died off. Tallus didn't flinch or show any signs of apprehension. He made eye contact with his cousin, a crooked smile turning the side of his mouth, but his gaze was challenging. Tallus was a grown man, and I immediately saw he had no intention of backing down and letting his childhood bully walk all over him.

A small part of me respected that.

It was Ruiz who broke the ice. "Hey, Tallus. It's been a long time."

"Wow. You remember my name."

The other people present, no doubt feeling the tension, decided to continue making rounds and left us alone. Tallus watched them go before facing his cousin once again. "Is there something you need? The purpose of this inane activity is to *get to know each other*, and I feel like we know each other well enough already, don't you?"

"That was a long time ago."

Tallus shrugged dismissively. "Sure, but it's all still very clear to me. A person doesn't forget those kinds of things. If you'll excuse me."

Tallus turned to leave, but Ruiz bounded forward. "Wait. Tallus. Let me... Can I just... Please."

His cousin stopped. His smile was gone, and the good-natured countenance he'd displayed vanished. Petulance, a

natural defense to an age-old hurt, took its place. “What, Costa? I have no intention of standing here and being mocked, ridiculed, or whatever you think you’re doing. I’ve learned the power of walking away and not letting other people hurt me.”

“I wasn’t... That’s not... I want you to meet someone.” Ruiz snagged my arm and drew me beside him. His grip was biting, and he didn’t let go, almost as if he needed to hang on for support.

“I thought we agreed on no clinging,” I said from the side of my mouth in a hushed tone.

“Shut up.” He still didn’t let go. To Tallus, Ruiz said, “Um... this is my friend—my *good* friend—”

“We’re practically besties, and I agree, this whole event is inane. Good word for it. I object to it on principle.”

Ruiz tightened his grip, and I shut my mouth.

“This is my friend Quaid. He’s an MPU detective...” Ruiz shuffled his feet, then added, “He’s gay.”

I heaved a heavy sigh and stole a sideways glance at Ruiz. “And you were doing so well too. We’ve talked about this.”

“I know. Under the circumstances, it seemed relevant,” he mumbled out the side of his mouth like I had a few minutes ago. To Tallus, Ruiz said, “I’m not trying to set you up. That’s not what I was... Quaid’s getting married. To a guy.” Ruiz seemed to consider a moment. “I guess that’s a given, considering I told you he was gay. Anyhow, I’m his best man. Because we’re good friends. Besties.”

I snorted, and Ruiz squeezed my arm too tight again. “You’re hopeless.”

Ruiz sighed.

Since he was going in circles, crashing and burning in an attempt to find the right words to fix an age-old problem, I figured it was time to step in and save him before he made it worse.

I shook Ruiz off and held a hand to Tallus as I found a smile. “Quaid Valor. MPU. Forgive him. He’s barely civil in public. Spends too much time in the dungeon, away from people. When we let him out, the fresh air goes to his head and he rambles. Nice to meet you. I hear you’re Costa’s cousin.”

Tallus took a minute to study my hand, then Ruiz, before accepting the offer and shaking. He kept his chin high. “Tallus Domingo. You have strange taste in friends.”

“Oh, I know. Pickings are slim when you’re me. You take what you can get.” I glanced at Ruiz, sizing him up and down. “He’s not so bad. Maybe at first, but we’ve formed a truce.” I returned my focus to Tallus. “I hear you’re a new hire down in records.”

“I am.” Tallus crossed his arms, shifting his body to cut Ruiz out of the conversation. “I was working a dead-end admin job at the hospital, but when the posting for a records clerk came up, I thought it might be a good change of pace. No salary increase, but a change of atmosphere can make all the difference. Plus”—Tallus smirked with a mischievous grin I’d

seen a few times—“I love having access to all those cold cases. It makes for interesting reading on slow days.”

“Sure.”

“Fresh eyes can’t hurt, am I right?”

“Definitely.”

“Can I ask you something?” I was right. Tallus liked his cologne, but it wasn’t as assaulting as I’d assumed after seeing his photograph on the department website. Regardless, it drew attention. He smelled nice, and I instantly wondered if Aslan had ever stood close enough to notice.

“Um... go for it.”

“Who determines when a case gets filed? Is that your decision? Your sergeant’s?”

“A combination. It depends on several factors. Do we have fresh leads? Are they going anywhere? How cramped is our time? I don’t like giving up. I usually have to be told to pack it in, and it drives me crazy to abandon a case.”

“I could see that. Man, that would suck. Does it happen a lot?”

“More than I’d like.”

“I’ve read through a ton of cases, and I get these ideas, you know? Sometimes, I wonder if they’ve been explored.”

“Probably have, but let me know if you ever discover something interesting.” It sounded like Tallus was an armchair



detective in the making. I'd seen them before. His curiosity, intrigue, and questions were typical.

“I will.”

I floundered for more to say. I wasn't talented in the art of conversation with strangers on a good day unless I had a case to focus my attention or was interviewing suspects. At present, my mind was gathering details on Tallus, but not in the way it should. Instead, it was tallying up his finer features and positive qualities and twisting them in my mistrusting brain, taking me in directions they shouldn't.

“Is Kitty gone?” Ruiz asked, moving in beside me again and interrupting my spiraling thoughts. He stood closer than he might usually stand, but I recognized he was trying to push his way back into the conversation since he'd been excluded.

Tallus glanced at his cousin and back to me. I didn't think he would answer, so I added, “She was due to retire at the turn of the century. I'm kind of shocked she took this long to step down.”

“Oh, Kitty Kat didn't step down, and she'd be offended if she thought people were spreading that rumor. She reduced her hours. That's why they hired me.” Tallus lowered his voice conspiratorially. “I think she's lonely. She comes in three days a week for a few hours in the afternoons, but she mostly does word searches and reads those gossip magazines.” Tallus smirked. “I don't mind. Her stories give me life. Plus, she's familiar with every case that's ever crossed a detective's desk, and I mean every one of them. She doesn't even have to look

them up. She was supposed to come today. I was going to pick her up, but she has the sniffles and didn't want to spread it around."

Kitty Lavender had been with the department since the fifties. My few encounters with her had been nothing short of entertaining. Tallus was right. She was a wealth of information and had a memory like an elephant.

Tallus glanced around the room. "Anyhow, I should keep making rounds. I told Kitty I'd stop by with soup later. Nice to meet you... Quaid, was it?" He offered his hand.

"Yes." We shook. "Nice to meet you too."

Tallus barely spared Ruiz a glance as he wandered off. The minute he was gone, Ruiz blurted, "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Because I panicked and outted you to my cousin."

"I'm already out, and I don't care. But you could have gone about it differently."

"I was thinking if he knew I was friends with someone who is gay, then maybe he would see I wasn't the same asshole who taunted him as a kid."

"It's a good theory, but—"

"I know. Poor execution. I'm sorry."

"It's fine. I think it went well."

"Really?"

“Yes. And the best part is,” I smirked, “you and I have a standing date every Saturday until Christmas. We’ll come to these meetings together and mingle arm in arm. I may even insist you bring me coffee if the mood’s right. The more Tallus sees you with me, the better it looks for you. And we’ll chat with him again.”

“Arm in arm? Coffee if the mood’s right? What is this?”

I chuckled and shrugged. “For the record, it was you clinging to me just now.”

“I know. I’m ashamed. Do we have to call it a date?”

“Absolutely, if for no other reason than it makes you uncomfortable.”

“And coffee?”

“It’s a given.”

“Why do I put up with you?”

“Because we’re practically besties.”

“Fuck my life. Wanna get out of here and grab coffee?”

“Please. Lead the way, *date*.”

“Don’t do that.”

I smirked, and Ruiz laughed.

We ducked out and went for coffee.

## Chapter 8

# Aslan

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 17TH: TWO MONTHS AND SIX DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



Tuesday evening, after a long day of chasing leads and interviewing people, I picked Quaid up at his desk so we could head out. He and Jordyn had been working a new angle on a case they had thought long dead. It meant extended hours at the office, more stress, and even less sleep for my already overexerted fiancé.

Quaid was on the phone when I got to MPU. Jordyn offered me a tight smile and glanced at her partner, who was giving someone the what-for on the other end of the line. His tact and professionalism had gone out the window. The thin threads of control holding his patience together had snapped. Whoever he was talking to was getting an earful of snark.

I moved in behind him and rested my hands on his shoulders. Quaid glanced up, first with a sneer, then with a

forgiving smile. He held up a finger, asking me to hang on.

“Take your time,” I mouthed.

Our meeting with Barnabus Rooney was for seven, but I was sure the elderly man wouldn't care if we were a few minutes late.

“Do you have any idea what your delay does to this case?” Quaid snapped. “Well, I don't care about protocol... Get your supervisor then... Oh, I'll wait.”

Jordyn smothered a smile as she made herself busy with paperwork.

“Relax, hot stuff,” I whispered by his ear.

“I can't relax. These people are fucking mor—Hi, yes, Detective Valor, MPU...”

When Quaid dropped the f-bomb, you knew he was serious.

While my frazzled fiancé argued with the poor soul on the phone, I massaged the tension from his shoulders, pressing into the unyielding muscles coiled tight beneath the skin. It took a solid three or four minutes before he relaxed enough to allow for the massage. When he did, his tone of voice changed, softening a degree.

I kept it up the entire time he was on the phone, hoping he'd feel less murderous when he was done. At one point, he dropped his chin to his chest and muttered a few affirmative grunts to the person on the line.

When he ended the call, he tossed the phone aside and groaned, tipping his head back and grinning lazily up at me. “Your hands are magic. I want them all over me. *Need* them all over me.”

“Gross. Save it, Valor.” Jordyn’s sneer won a solid silver medal on the sneer-scale, but it would never surpass the master’s.

Quaid sneered back—proving my point—then closed his eyes and let me continue to work.

“You are so tense.”

“I know. The lab said we would have those results no earlier than Friday. I couldn’t sway them to do it faster,” he mumbled to Jordyn. “I tried. They said Friday was generous. Generous, my ass.”

“I told you threatening them wouldn’t work,” Jordyn said. “I still say we put the asshole in an interview room and apply pressure. We can always insinuate we know more than we do. He’s going to crack. We have him cornered.”

“Is this the husband whose wife has been missing for months?” I asked.

“Yes.” Quaid melted further at my touch, groaning softly when I hit a particularly knotted area. “We’re convinced he killed her. We just have to prove it. We don’t have a body, but we have a good feeling and potential evidence. They found her car with blood inside. Two types. We assume one is hers, but if the other comes back positive with his DNA, we have grounds

for a warrant. If we can get a warrant to search his house, we might find a body or a lead telling us where he put her.”

“Then I should expect another case to land on my desk in the days to come? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Possibly,” Jordyn said. “But if we can prove what we believe, it will be solved, and the husband will be arrested.”

“True.”

“Unless it’s not his blood,” Jordyn added.

“It is,” Quaid snapped. “It has to be.”

So long as there was no body, the case remained with missing persons, but there were plenty of times when our territories crisscrossed. Murder wasn’t a foregone conclusion with this missing wife, and since the husband had reported her gone, it remained an MPU case until proven otherwise.

I bent and kissed Quaid’s temple. “As much as I’d like to keep doing this for you, we have to get out of here.”

“I know.”

But he didn’t move, and his eyes remained closed. My heart ached. What he needed was sleep, not more running around.

Jordyn no longer looked amused at her snarly partner. Concern filled her face, and she eyed me. The look said everything she couldn’t while Quaid was in earshot. My fiancé was notorious for wearing himself out on a good day. Lately, he hadn’t found time to recover and was dragging.



I'd told him the other day I would get someone to help with our wedding plans, and I hadn't followed through because I'd been stretched thin with my own cases, but this couldn't go on. It had been my idea to get married ASAP, so Quaid had done his best to make it happen, but he'd also taken the lion's share of the planning—mostly because he had trouble letting go of control—but I needed to put my foot down for the good of his health.

I kissed his temple again. “Come on, hot stuff. Up and at 'em.”

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Barnabus Rooney, my parents' old gardener and the man who'd been at my house all the time when I was a kid, lived in a retirement village in Vaughan, a suburb of Toronto located in York. It was a quaint community with well-tended grounds boasting outdoor gardens, winding paths, and several scenic-viewing benches. I wondered if Barney gardened in his old age or if he was long past able.

I parked in the visitor lot, and Quaid and I got out, studying the rows of joined complexes for a few minutes. The single-story design was townhouse-like in appearance. Each unit had a patch of grass and a cobblestone path leading to their front doors. Most windows were lit. Some were dark but flickered with dull blue light, evidence of TVs in use beyond. An autumn chill had moved in with night fall. It meant no one had their windows open, so it was quiet, the rustling of dying leaves in the trees singing in the background.

“We are under no obligation to use him for our wedding,” I reminded Quaid. “If he isn’t to your liking, then we say no. We’re simply placating my mother. I’ll call her tomorrow and let her down gently. Then we’ll be done with it.”

“I know.”

Quaid didn’t have to reiterate how our options were running out. His tone of voice said it all. I had a feeling it was the only reason he’d agreed to meet Barney. Unfortunately, the elderly man who had once been like an uncle to me was long past his expiration date and would never be fit to officiate our wedding. I knew it, and Quaid knew it.

But we were here, and we would chat with the man for a bit and head home. At least we could say we tried.

We followed the path to unit eighteen, where Barney was said to live. His personal garden space wasn’t overgrown with weeds. In fact, the remaining plants had been prepared for winter slumber. Maybe the old man did occasionally get out to dig in the dirt.

I knocked on the heavy wooden door, took Quaid’s hand, and offered him a reassuring squeeze. Tiny grooves marked his forehead. He wore dark shadows under his eyes. It pulled at my heart and made me want to reverse course and forget this nonsense. “After this, we’re heading home, and I’m putting you to bed.”

He didn’t respond, but I saw the unspoken argument on the tip of his tongue. Hell no. I’d get him in bed one way or another. He was not spending half the night at his laptop again.

I didn't care how important his case or our wedding were. He needed sleep. Eight uninterrupted hours at minimum. It was likely his victim was dead, and there was nothing he could do to change it.

"I'm serious."

"I know."

I narrowed my eyes, waiting for the argument that never came.

He offered a tired smile and shoulder-bumped me. "More massages?"

"Definitely, and if you're good, it might have a happy ending."

Quaid hummed approval. "Those are the best kind."

The door opened a minute later, revealing a hunched man in an oversized knitted cardigan. I barely recognized him as the gardener who had practically lived at my house growing up. Barnabus Rooney wore thick-lensed glasses over filmy eyes. Perched on the end of a bulbous nose, they threatened to fall off. He wore bulky hearing aids in both ears, but somehow, tufts of springy white hair stuck out from around the devices. His dangling earlobes seemed overly large on his shrunken frame. He was the definition of wizened.

Old age had turned Barnabus Rooney into a shriveled and squinty-eyed man. His skin was two sizes too large, and it pulled unattractively away from his skeletal frame. A steady tremble radiated through him, likely from the effort of

standing or walking to the door. He looked every one of his ninety-three years, and it saddened me. It was funny how your mind retained an image of a person, and despite the passing years, that person, if not seen regularly, never aged.

How on earth did my mother think this wilted man, who could no longer stand erect, capable of officiating our wedding?

“Are you the vacuum people?” He shouted like someone hard of hearing and mumbled with the effect of absent teeth. The way his lips folded over his gums, I thought that was likely the case. “Where’s your truck?” The elderly man glanced at the parking lot, squinting and frowning. “You aren’t here to scam me, are ya?” He shook a finger in my face. “I won’t be scammed. Show me your ID. Right now. Let’s see it.”

“Hey, Barney. It’s me. Aslan.”

“Who? Speak up.”

“Aslan,” I said louder. “Don’t you recognize me? Aslan Doyle. Cellina’s boy.” I was no older than eighteen or nineteen the last we’d seen each other, so I was more than likely a distant memory if not forgotten altogether.

Barnabus pushed his glasses up his nose and studied me intently, face screwed up in contemplation. The tufts of thinning white hair on his head bounced and bobbed in the evening breeze. His wild nose hairs danced with each inhale and exhale.

Then his face lit up. “Ohhhh. Oh my goodness. Oh yes, yes. I see it now.” He poked me in the chest. “Good gracious, you got yourself all grown up. Look at you. How old are you now?”

“Too old.”

“What’s that? I don’t hear so well. You gotta shout at me.”

“I said I’m too old.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah. I understand that. Got me a bad case of old age myself. It’s a bugger, ain’t it?” He chuckled.

“Definitely.”

Barnabus sucked his gums and nodded before looking toward the parking lot again, shaking his head. His arms vibrated in his cardigan, a steady tremble that never left him. “Here I thought you were the vacuum people. I called them this afternoon, but no one’s come yet. I’m gonna have to clean up the damn mess myself. Got Bran Flakes all over the floor this morning, and the nurse ain’t been by all day. I tell ya, if I get down there on the floor, I might not get up again.”

His toothless mumbling made him hard to understand, but he carried on. “So you’re Cellina’s boy. Yeah, I remember you. Rambunctious thing you were. Always stomped through the flower beds. Had to shout at ya a time or ten.”

Barnabus studied me with confusion like he was picturing the past and couldn’t quite comprehend how or why I’d come to be on his doorstep. Then he glanced at Quaid and frowned. “Who’re you?”

I took Quaid's arm. "This is my fiancé."

"Huh?"

"My fiancé. We came to talk about you possibly marrying us, remember? I called on the weekend."

More gum sucking. The blank stare of incomprehension concerned me, but I waited. Then, without warning or explanation, Barnabus turned and shuffled away, leaving the door open. I glanced at Quaid, who looked at me with a smirk.

"Are we supposed to follow him?" he asked.

"No idea."

A clatter arose from deep in the house, and muttering and crashing followed. We decided to enter and found Barnabus in a tight hallway around the corner, holding a broom and kicking a dustpan toward what seemed to be the kitchen at the back of the house. He'd left the closet door open, and other detritus had spilled from within, preventing me from closing it properly or getting by.

We squeezed around the obstruction and found the elderly man in the kitchen, peering down at spilled cereal. The sink was full of dishes, the counters were littered with crumbs, and a container of milk was busy spoiling beside a microwave. Stacks of newspapers filled a round table, used tissues piled up beside them.

Quaid jumped into action before I finished taking it all in. "Can I help you with that, Mr. Rooney?" He relieved Barnabus of the broom and collected the dustpan from the floor.

“I don’t have a vacuum. That’s why I called the front desk. They said they’d send a vacuum man, but he hasn’t shown up yet, so I gotta do it myself, I guess.”

“I can get this tidied in no time.” And Quaid spent fifteen seconds sweeping the mess and depositing the Bran Flakes into a garbage pail.

“Are you the vacuum man?” Barnabus asked Quaid, peering from behind his thick-framed glasses.

“Nope. I’m Aslan’s fiancé. Quaid.”

“Huh?”

“Quaid. Aslan’s fiancé.”

Barnabus stared at him for a long minute. I wasn’t sure he’d heard Quaid’s soft-spoken response, then the elderly man shifted his attention to the floor where the mess had been. “I used to be able to do that too, but my knees aren’t so good anymore. They get all locked up.”

“My dad has bad knees too. I understand.”

“Got me a new hip, but it’s not that hip.” Barnabus chuckled at his own joke, and Quaid’s face lit up with humor.

Quaid returned the broom and dustpan to the hall closet, and I listened as he shuffled stuff around until he managed to close the door again with a *snick*. When he returned to the kitchen, he eyed the sink full of dishes and the table full of detritus, then looked at me.

*Oh, your poor head.* “Might as well. I know it hurts your brain.”

I earned a playful sneer. Without asking permission, Quaid unbuttoned his shirt cuffs, pushed his sleeves up his forearms, and filled the sink with water. He found dish soap and a sponge in a lower cupboard and got to work.

I smiled, shaking my head. Quaid might be a lot of things, but he had a heart of gold. I hated how he shielded the softer, more emotionally driven side of himself from the world. At least I got to see it.

Barnabus shuffled to the counter and watched Quaid as he scrubbed plates and coffee mugs, rinsed them, and placed them in the drying rack.

“The nurse usually does that. They come in the morning. Can’t remember if she came today. Are you a nurse? I ain’t seen you around before. You aren’t dressed like a nurse.”

“No, sir. I’m Aslan’s fiancé. I just thought I’d help. I don’t mind. Do you drink tea, Mr. Rooney?”

“No. I don’t have to pee.”

“Tea,” Quaid said louder. “Do you enjoy tea?”

“Oh. Yeah, I like tea. Tea, tea, it makes me pee.” Barnabus bopped in a hunched-over shuffle as he sang. Then he laughed at his own ditty.

Quaid’s smile was stretched to its max. His detective brain had spied the kettle and boxes of teabags on the counter, so of course he made the connection.



“Would you like me to make some?” he asked.

Barnabus told him yes, and Quaid instructed him to have a seat at the table. I joined the elderly man, and Quaid made quick work of stacking the piles of newspapers and getting rid of the used tissues before wiping up the remaining crumbs.

Barnabus sat but continued to eye Quaid as he worked. “Your mother told me you were getting married.”

“I am. At Christmas.”

“*Before* Christmas,” Quaid corrected. “It’s *not* a Christmas wedding.”

“And you’re marrying a man, isn’t that right?” Barnabus asked.

“That I am.” I wasn’t sure my parents’ old gardener had put it together that Quaid was the man I was marrying. “That man right there.”

Barnabus peered confusedly at Quaid. “Oh. Him? Good choice. That’s okay with me. My granddaughter likes girls. My son said it’s normal, and I need to accept it. I don’t give a rat’s patootie who she likes. I’m too old to care anymore. And let me tell ya, if you want to snog this gentleman who’s washing my dishes, I say snog away. You have my blessing.”

“Thanks. I might just do that later.”

Quaid’s shoulders bounced with silent laughter as he wiped the dirty counters.

“Mom said you’re an ordained minister. When did that happen?”

“The landlord isn’t sinister. Goddamn rumors. Pearl doesn’t like him much, but she doesn’t like anyone.”

“Minister,” I said louder. “Mom said you’re an ordained minister.”

“Oh. Son of a gun. I thought you said sinister. Can’t hear too well. Gotta shout at me. I got these here things in my ears, but they don’t always work.”

I had a hunch they weren’t turned on, but I wasn’t about to ask.

“So you’re a minister?”

“Yep, yep. That I am.”

“When did that happen?”

“Now when was it?” Barnabus removed his glasses and set them on the table before rubbing his rheumy eyes. “Might have been going on twenty years now. Eighty-seven? Eighty-eight? I can’t remember. About the time my son was born.”

“Twenty-years ago was 2003.”

“No, I don’t think so. It was definitely in the eighties. Mulroney was Prime Minister. He was a bugger, wasn’t he? Didn’t like him much. Not sure who’s in charge now.”

“Justin Trudeau.”

“Who’d you say?”

“Justin Trudeau.”

“He’s a young fella, right?”

“Young enough.”

“Yeah. I don’t know him.”

Finished with the dishes, Quaid filled the kettle and turned it on before leaning on the counter and facing us. Humor shone in his baby blues. It was good to see the stress leave him for a time. “Is your license still good, Mr. Rooney?” he shouted.

“Oh, I don’t drive anymore. Can’t see a damn thing. Where the hell’d I put my glasses.” He shuffled on his chair, inspecting the floor.

I pushed them forward. “They’re right here.”

Quaid snagged them and cleaned the lenses on his shirt before ensuring Barnabus had a secure hold and got them on straight. “There you go. Better?”

“Ohhh, look at you. You’re a handsome devil. Do I know you? Are you a nurse? Where’s your scrubs?”

“Not a nurse. I’m Aslan’s fiancé.” Quaid gestured to drive his point home, but by then, I figured it was useless.

“Oh, right, right. Gosh darn brain ain’t what it used to be. You’re the one Cellina told me about. You want to get married.”

“Yes. Can you marry us?”

Barnabus heaved a heavy sigh and sucked his gum. “Yeah, yeah, I can do that.” Perking up, he said, “I’m an ordained

minister. Haven't done a wedding in a month of Sundays, but I remember how. When's the big day, son?"

I eyed Quaid, curious how he would approach this. We didn't want to lead the guy on, but I got the sense Barnabus wouldn't remember the conversation ten minutes after we left, so it didn't matter.

The water had finished boiling, so Quaid filled three ceramic mugs, making tea. "The wedding is December twenty-third. Two days before Christmas. We would understand if you're busy with family affairs or—"

"Oh, I don't much care for Christmas. Too much fuss."

"I agree!" Quaid set a partially filled mug of tea in front of Barnabus. "It's an overrated holiday, isn't it?"

"Uh-huh." The elderly man shook a finger at Quaid. "I like you. You're a good lad."

"I like you too, Mr. Rooney. Careful you don't burn yourself. It's hot."

The perpetual confusion remained as Barnabus examined the offering. "I don't much like sugar. You didn't put sugar in this, did you? Makes my diabetes all wonky."

"No, sir."

"Good. Don't want to raise my blood sugar."

Quaid gave me a pointed look as if to say *I told you so* before he moved to fetch the other mugs of tea. He joined us at the table. We shared a silent conversation while Barnabus

brought his mug to his lips with shaky control. I understood now why Quaid had had the forethought not to fill it to the top.

At this point, I was convinced we would need to keep hunting for an officiate for our wedding. There was no way Barnabus could handle such a task. My mother had lost her marbles.

But then, much to my confusion, Quaid chatted away about the ceremony, telling Barnabus all he envisioned for our special day. He painted a picture of Strongwind and all its extravagance, explaining about the foyer and double staircases. And the withered old man beside him listened attentively.

“There’s a raised dais type of area in the alcove, so after we go down the two staircases, we’ll follow the carpet to the end. That’s where we’d meet you.”

“Uh-huh. Is it high up? I don’t do stairs. I’ve got bad knees. They wear out, you know. Knees. Had my hip replaced in... Golly, I don’t remember. It’s fine now, but stairs give me hell.”

“Someone can help you with the stairs. There are only three, so it’s not too bad.”

“What was that?”

“Three steps. We’ll have someone help you.”

“Oh... That’s so kind of you. You’re a nice boy.”

“And we don’t need a long event. Something short and to the point. We aren’t bringing religion into it, so no Bible readings necessary.”

“My mother might not like that,” I interjected.

“We’ll talk about it.”

Barnabus listened with squinty-eyed wonder as Quaid went on and on. Every now and then, he slurped his tea and smacked his gums. Quaid explained how we were writing our own vows.

I almost choked on my tea. “We’re what now? Why didn’t I know this?”

Quaid pierced me with a glare. “Relax. You have just over two months. I’m sure you can handle it.” To Barnabus, he said, “And Aslan’s nephew is the ring bearer. So he’ll bring the rings to us when the time is right.”

“Wonderful. I love a good wedding.”

I wasn’t sure how much Barnabus absorbed, especially considering the man’s hearing was compromised, but Quaid didn’t seem to notice or care. He talked about Strongwind Castle, described the invitations we’d ordered, and showed Barnabus his engagement ring, enthralled him with the story of my botched proposal. Whenever the elderly man asked him to repeat himself, he did.

When Barnabus dribbled tea on himself, Quaid jumped up and helped him dry it.

“I’m so clumsy.”

“It’s okay. Nothing that won’t clean up.”

The two chatted for almost an hour while I marveled at how relaxed Quaid had become in Barnabus's presence. Wedding ceremonies turned to indulgent conversations about Barnabus's granddaughter, Megan—the old man was only too keen to talk about her—and sharing quibbles about the overhyped holiday. Before long, they were on a tangent about sugar, high blood pressure, and cholesterol.

Barnabus nodded, his jowls jiggling. I couldn't help but smile. They were two peas in a pod.

“Do I have to wear my teeth?” Barnabus asked at one point.

Quaid smirked. “It might help people understand you better.”

Barnabus sucked his gums and considered. “All right, but I don't much care for them.”

“You can take them out for the reception,” Quaid assured him. “If you wanted to stay for the meal, you're welcome.”

“Well, how the hell am I gonna eat if I take out my damn teeth?”

Quaid chuckled. “Or you can keep them in.”

Barnabus stabbed a trembling finger on the table. “You need to write this on my calendar so I don't forget. My memory isn't so good anymore. I'll get Megan to dry clean my good suit and shine up my fancy shoes.”

“That's fantastic. Where's your calendar, Mr. Rooney?”

“It's right there on the fridge. Can't miss it.”

Quaid found a pen in a drawer and wrote it down. I watched him, baffled he was entertaining the man with all this nonsense.

“I added my phone number too, in case you have questions.”

“What’s that?”

“My phone number,” Quaid raised his voice and took out his phone, waving it around to get his point across.

“Oh, I can’t talk on those there phones. Can’t hear so good anymore, and they’re all fiddly, farty, and complicated. I have the kind that makes everything louder. It’s in the other room. Wanna see it?”

“Not necessary. You can use it or have your granddaughter call me if necessary.”

“Megan’s a lovely girl. She’s a lesbian.”

“I heard.”

“Do you know her?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Oh. She’s younger than you. A lovely thing.”

Quaid helped Barnabus up from the chair when it was time to go, and the old man followed us to the door with shuffling steps. I hadn’t participated in the conversation for most of the evening, but my parents’ old gardener and family friend turned to me before we left and patted my chest. “It was good to see you, Alex.”

“It’s Aslan.”



“I know. You should bring your fiancée around sometime. I’d love to meet her. Your mother tells me you’re getting married.”

I glanced at Quaid, who smothered a smirk and touched Barney’s shoulder. “He’s marrying me, Mr. Rooney.”

Flinty gray eyes flicked between us, then it dawned on him. “Oh. Oh my gracious. That’s right. Gosh darn it. I’m all mixed up. So it’s your wedding I’m helping with,” he said, stabbing my chest again with a bony finger.

“Yes, it is.”

“Well, I’ll be. Isn’t that just wonderful?” The old man gave my arm a squeeze. “You kids get home, and I’ll see you on Tuesday.”

I didn’t ask him to clarify what he meant. We exchanged goodbyes and left. At the car, I turned to Quaid, who glowed. “Please tell me you aren’t seriously considering having him officiate our wedding.”

“Why not? I like him. Isn’t he great?”

“Quaid, the man’s almost deaf and halfway to senile. Plus, without his teeth, I could barely understand him.”

“I understood him fine. And he said he’d wear his teeth for the ceremony.” Quaid stole my keys and hip-checked me away from the driver’s side door so he could get in.

“Are you doing this because you’re afraid we won’t find someone else?”

“No.”

“Are you doing this to appease my parents?”

“No. I really like him. He’s... grandfatherly. If he makes a mistake, people will understand.”

“Quaid, he probably won’t remember to show up.”

“He will. I added it to his calendar.” And with that, Quaid got in the car and started it up.

He was serious. Mr. Everything Has To Be Perfect was allowing ninety-three-year-old Barnabus Rooney to officiate our wedding. I felt I was missing something, and the joke was on me.

I got in the car and was met by a wistful smile. Eyes half-lidded, Quaid leaned in and pecked a lingering kiss on my mouth. It was the most relaxed he’d looked in weeks.

“Are you sure about this?” I asked when he pulled away.

“Yes.” Quaid peered at the door to Barnabus’s unit. “I can’t explain it. We connected. Now, unless you have other plans, I say we go home and snog.” Quaid wiggled his brows and backed out of the parking spot.

## Chapter 9

# Aslan

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 18TH: TWO MONTHS AND FIVE DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“**E**verything is ordinary. I don’t want *ordinary*. I want... different. Unique. Something... I don’t know. Not this.” Quaid waved a dismissive hand while his face did a thing I couldn’t quite describe. It was halfway between a frowny sneer and a petulant sulk. He’d become insufferable.

Pièrre, the distinguished owner of Hommes Chic, who’d been showing us options for tuxes over the past two hours, was losing his composure. The plastered-on smile he’d worn all evening cracked and crumbled with Quaid’s latest rejection. We’d gone through dozens of options, and nothing was to my complicated fiancé’s satisfaction. The suits were all too black, too straight, too dull, too flashy, or too... *ordinary*—his newest complaint. He was worse than an overtired and hungry toddler. If he threw himself on the ground and had a tantrum, at this point, I wouldn’t even flinch.

I was ready to skip the wedding, use my parents' generous monetary gift, and drag Quaid to a tropical island, leaving his stress behind. We could spend a week getting sunburned and having lazy sex on a white sandy beach under palm trees with the salty ocean breeze blowing over our skin.

Pièrre, with a failing mask of understanding, returned yet another vetoed tux to the rack. "Perhaps monsieur can explain to me what he's looking for. We have many styles, but I'll be honest, I've no clue what direction to take."

"You don't want black?" I asked. It was traditional, but Quaid seemed to have veered away from tradition in this case.

With one arm wrapped around his body and the other propped on top, he gnawed a thumbnail and scanned the store. Eventually, he faced me. "Black is dull. Black is a funeral color. It's... dreary. Plus, we won't stand out if we're both in black tuxes. Every man who comes to the wedding will be wearing a black or gray suit. We'll blend with the crowd. It's boring, Az. Maybe not for Torin and Costa or for regular people, but I want something... different."

"Define different. This poor man has no idea what you want."

"I don't know. If I knew, I would tell him."

Pièrre waited patiently, his lips pressed a fraction tighter, his smile bordering on fake.

"What about white tuxes?" I suggested.

"It's cliché."

“It’s a wedding.”

“I’m not a sheep. I’m not following a formula because custom dictates weddings are black and white.”

“Ivory?”

“Same difference.”

Quaid’s mood was plummeting. At that point, he was being disagreeable for the sake of it. I had a hunch I could whisper a clue into Pièrre’s ear and come up with precisely what Quaid wanted and needed for our wedding, but the suggestion came with risks.

Quaid was... sensitive.

“Your colors are gold and silver?” Pièrre asked.

“Yes,” Quaid said.

“Let me see. I may have an idea.”

The poor man would fail again, but I didn’t stop him.

Pièrre went into another room, and I approached Quaid, uncoiling his tightly wound arms and encouraging him to leave his thumbnail alone before he decimated it. I drew his head against my shoulder. He moved reluctantly at first, then the air left him like a deflating balloon, and he sagged. Rubbing his back, I pressed my nose to his temple and inhaled his scent as I closed my eyes.

“You’re super cranky today.”

“My stomach hurts.”

“You haven’t eaten much.”

“Because my stomach hurts.”

I sighed.

“I don’t mean to be miserable. It’s just... everything is wrong. I don’t know what I want, and that guy is getting frustrated with me, and if I don’t stop being an asshole, he’s going to tell me to go to hell like everyone else, and we’ll have to go to that deplorable place on Danforth, and I don’t want to go there, Az. They have bad reviews.”

I chuckled and pressed him harder against my chest, kissing his ear. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then, if whatever he’s getting right now isn’t right, I’m going to make a suggestion. Don’t bite my head off.”

Quaid pulled from my arms, a deep frown in place. “What kind of suggestion?”

“I know you, Quaid. Maybe I can’t read your mind, but I have an idea of what you’re looking for in terms of a wedding.”

“How can you know when I don’t have a clue?”

“You do have a clue. You’re just afraid to give it a voice. Let me help.”

Quaid’s frown turned into a sneer, one laced with worry.

Pièrre returned before I could reassure him. When Quaid turned around and saw the silky white tuxedo with a flowery

gold appliqué up both sides and around the cuffs, he flinched in horror, the worry shifting to instant disgust.

“Oh god no. No. That’s so tacky.”

Pièrre huffed, his fake smile no longer convincing. Before the man could snap or walk away, I stopped him. “Hang on. I think I have an idea.”

The lines in Pièrre’s face smoothed. He had already tagged me as the more reasonable groom. The sensible one. Every time Quaid made a face or had a negative comment, Pièrre and I shared a commiserative look. But, where Pièrre found Quaid’s temperament annoying, I was endeared by how important every aspect of the wedding was to him. How adamant he was about making the day perfect.

Which was why I was going to open my mouth, make a suggestion, and risk sleeping on the couch—which had never actually happened in all the time we’d been together, but there was a first for everything.

“Pièrre, my man, I think what we’re looking for is something a little more... majestic. Something you might see in a fairy tale. Think Disney. We need tuxes suitable for princes. We’re getting married in a castle for god’s sake. Got anything like that?”

I didn’t have to look at my fiancé to know his sneer was set to maximum. I felt it burn the side of my face. Of all the times Quaid had tried to make my head explode with *the face* alone, I figured this was the time he might succeed.



“Also,” I leaned in, whispering my last suggestion since Quaid hearing it would mean my imminent death, and I didn’t think Pi re deserved to have blood on his carpet. “It’s a Christmas wedding, so give it a splash of holiday cheer if you can.” I nudged the stiff businessman and winked.

Pi re lit up for the first time in an hour. “Ah, yes. I think I have the perfect ensemble. Give me a moment. It’s tucked away in the back.”

“And if you have any accessories that might help sell it, bring them along.”

“Yes, monsieur.”

The minute Pi re was gone, Quaid slugged me on the shoulder. *Hard.*

“Ouch.” I laughed and rubbed the afflicted area.

“I am *not* looking for a fairy tale wedding. Disney? Really?”

Grinning at my furious fianc , I leaned in and whispered, “Newsflash, hot stuff. I think you are, and you just can’t admit it.”

“You’re wrong.”

“It’s rare, but I suppose it’s possible. If you don’t like what he brings, we’ll go back to browsing all the black tuxes you despise.”

“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You’re sleeping on the couch tonight.”

I snorted. “Like that’s ever happened.”

He sneered.

I smiled, unaffected as always.

That did it. Quaid broke. A tiny twitch at the corner of his mouth gave him away. “I still hate you,” he mumbled.

“Uh-huh. Then stop smiling.”

“I’m not smiling.”

“Are so.”

“Shut up.”

I laughed, and he resumed pacing, gnawing his thumb.

A few minutes passed before Pi re poked his head around the corner. “I’ve arranged for the ensemble to be viewed in here, accessorized as suggested. Come. I hope you will be pleased.”

Before Quaid could storm off, I snagged his arm and drew him in for a kiss against his will. “Don’t bite the man’s head off if you hate it.”

“I already hate it.”

“God help me. I’m taking you home tonight, and I will fuck this negative attitude right out of you.”

He tried hard not to smile when he said, “No, you aren’t. You’re sleeping on the couch.”

Quaid made to move, but I snagged his chin and kept him in place. “Listen, grump. You liked this place. You chose this

place. You boasted about it. You said they had an amazing reputation and you wanted to do business with them. Remember that before you get us kicked out.”

I kissed him square on the mouth, and he let me.

When I pulled away, his sneer had turned into a sulk. “I’ll be nice, but it doesn’t mean I’m going to praise something I don’t like.”

“I don’t expect you to.”

I let him go and followed him into the next room.

We hadn’t gone three steps when Quaid stopped dead in his tracks. I almost bumped into him. Pièrre had hung the tux on a freestanding rack with a few accessories positioned for full effect, exactly as I’d suggested.

And it was, in a word, stunning.

The air in the room stilled as Pièrre and I waited for Quaid’s reaction.

When Quaid didn’t immediately spew negativity, I cautiously moved around him. My fiancé seemed to be in a state of shock. He held a hand over his mouth, eyes glistening as he took it in.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I announced cautiously, “we might have a winner.”

Pièrre and I shared a look, and he beamed with pride when I gave him a subtle thumbs-up.

“What do you think?” I nudged Quaid’s elbow.

He moved his hand from his mouth long enough to say, “It’s not a Christmas wedding, you bastard.”

I smirked. No, maybe not, but he hadn’t outright rejected the tuxedo Pièrre had brought forth despite it being a soft sage green. And by the expression on Quaid’s face, color notwithstanding, he was utterly in love with it.

The jacket was a regal tailcoat design that fit the Strongwind Castle atmosphere. The lapels were peaked—a darker emerald green velvet—and the buttons along both sides were accented with the same material. Pièrre had displayed the tux with a hidden button white dress shirt. Instead of a traditional tie, he’d fitted a bolo-style tie around the collar. The center was a large jasper quartz with gold trim. The cord was braided gold and hung just below the emerald green waistcoat. Attached to the left lapel was a decorative pin of finely crafted gold flowers. The trousers were the matching soft sage color of the tailcoat. The whole outfit looked like it belonged to a nineteenth-century prince.

Pièrre had hit it out of the ballpark.

Quaid hadn’t moved. His eyes shimmered as he took it in. I wrapped an arm around him and nuzzled his ear. “Am I still sleeping on the couch?”

“It’s green.”

“Yes, but it’s perfect, and you know it.”

He didn’t argue and shifted his attention to Pièrre, who stood taller now that Quaid was no longer yelling at him. “Can I try

it on?”

“Of course, monsieur. It would be my pleasure.”

What he meant was *it's about fucking time*.

We'd been in and out of the changeroom all night, trying on endless options despite Quaid's outright objection to most styles. Hommes Chic had three regally decorated rooms for customers to don their various wares. It wasn't like venturing to a clothing store at the mall where you got a tiny cubicle and a barely long enough curtain to hide your behind.

The rooms at Hommes Chic were set up with velvet upholstered settees and freestanding, elegantly framed mirrors, poised at every angle so you could view yourself in 3D. Fresh flowers perfumed the air. Gentle, classical music played from a hidden speaker system, and a crystal pitcher with lemon ice water and glasses waited on a sideboard in case you needed to rehydrate. As I was quickly discovering, choosing the perfect tuxedo was exhausting.

Pi re gathered all the pieces for the tuxedo and brought them into the room we'd been using, hanging them carefully on a rack. “I'll find you proper footwear to match,” he announced before gliding off to another part of the store.

Quaid hadn't lost his stunned expression or taken his eyes off the outfit. I gave the small of his back a rub. “I'll let you dress. Come out and surprise me when you're done.”

All he could do was nod, gaze still riveted on the formalwear.

Pièrre delivered shoes, and we left Quaid on his own to dress. Back in the main part of the store, Pièrre said, “Your fiancé is a tough one.”

His accent was mild. I pegged Pièrre as being in his midthirties. He was prim and proper, elegant and graceful when he moved around the store. Like most classy men’s fashion boutiques, Hommes Chic had a snobbish feel, and Pièrre fit right in. He oozed arrogance, but deep down, he seemed like a decent guy.

“Quaid has an image of the whole ceremony in his head, but he’s too self-conscious to share it out loud. He’s been dreaming of this day since he was a kid.”

“Do you think he will be satisfied this time?”

“I think we’re on the right track.”

“He does not like the green.”

“He’ll get over it. It’s a Christmas wedding. Once he accepts that, we’ll be soaring.”

“Can I show you something?”

I followed Pièrre toward the counter near the back of the room. He shuffled catalogs and pamphlets aside so he could access the computer. His long fingers danced over the keys. When he found what he was looking for, he adjusted the screen to show me.

“The tux he is trying on is also available in crimson, and it can be accented with the same golden accessories as the sage. See?”

“Holy fuck.” My lips parted as I stared at the model on the screen and the variation of the tuxedo Quaid was in the process of trying on. “Pardon my language.”

“I’ve heard worse from your fiancé today.”

I chuckled.

“All I’m saying is, if he agrees to the style, and if you’re looking for a Christmas theme, I can envision one of you wearing the crimson and one of you wearing the sage. What do you think?”

It was perfect. It was elegant and majestic. It was classy and stylish. It was fit for a prince who had decided to get married in a castle. *And* it was appropriately festive.

“Az?”

I turned when Quaid’s choked-up voice called my name. I didn’t know what I was expecting, but the air left my lungs when I saw him.

“Holy fuck,” I said again, only that time in a whisper. “Oh my god.”

I’d never seen anyone more beautiful in my entire life. Quaid hated being called beautiful, but that was exactly what he was in that moment. With unshed tears glistening on the surface of his eyes and a hopeful, almost shy stance, Quaid waited as I took him in.

“You look...” A lump in my throat stole my ability to finish the sentence. I swallowed and tried again. “You look incredible. Oh my god, Quaid.” I was terrified to ask because I

couldn't imagine turning this option down, but I added, "What do you think?"

He glanced down at himself, smoothed a hand over the velvety lapel, and turned a lazy pirouette. The tails spun with him, lifting a few inches from his body before settling as he faced me again.

He beamed, and the smile on his face was utterly breathtaking. "I love it."

"Even though it's green?"

He shrugged. "I feel like..." He eyed Pierre, then returned his attention to me. "Please don't make fun of me, but I feel like a prince."

"You look like a prince."

He extended a hand, and I took it, holding it aloft as I admired every inch of him, spinning him again like we were dancing. My vision blurred, and I swiped the growing pools under my eyes before the tears snuck out.

I couldn't take my eyes off him. I didn't want to blink or look away. I wanted to imprint this image in my brain and see it whenever I closed my eyes. But the truly winning accessory was not the tie or the lapel pin. It was the smile on Quaid's face.

"Don't hate me," I said. "But you're beautiful."

His cheeks took on a hint of color.



“Come see this.” I guided him to the counter and showed him the crimson color option on Pi re’s computer screen. “What if I wore this one, and you wore the one you have on? We can still use gold as an accent color.”

Quaid studied the screen for a long time, lips parted as he silently contemplated. I saw the struggle behind his baby blues. “But...” Worry drew out the creases beside his eyes and pulled at his mouth. “It’s not a Christmas wedding.” His voice was barely audible.

I brushed my knuckles down the velvety right lapel. “But, Quaid, it kind of is, and think of how regal we will look in these tuxes as we descend the grand staircases at Strongwind Castle.”

His throat bobbed. He looked down at himself again, his fingers delicately exploring the fabric-covered buttons before trailing down the gold cord of the bolo tie.

“Beautiful,” I whispered in his ear. “And mine.”

A wisp of a smile touched his lips, and he glanced at the crimson variation one more time before turning to me. “Okay. You win. It’s a Christmas wedding. Red and green. But Torin and Costa will have black tuxes with crimson and sage highlights. Torin to match you, and Costa to match me.”

“With gold accents?”

“Of course.”

I took his face between my palms and kissed him deeply. I wanted to do a hell of a lot more since he looked good enough

to eat, but we had an audience. I reined in my libido and behaved. Pi re had tactfully stepped aside to give us a moment, but he wasn't far, and I was sure he wouldn't be happy if I pressed Quaid against the counter and started rutting—it had crossed my mind more than once since he'd stepped out of the changeroom.

“I have some ideas for your groomsmen that would complement this style,” Pi re said. “Come this way.”

I offered Quaid a wink and guided him with a hand pressed to his lower back. Pi re now had a vision that matched Quaid's, and when he showed us a black tailcoat paired with a crimson and gold paisley vest and tie underneath, Quaid couldn't have agreed faster.

He traced his fingers over the delicate patterning on the inner vest, remarking how it matched perfectly.

“I can order it in an emerald green as well,” Pi re said. “Your two groomsmen would complement you without coming close to outshining you.”

With that settled, the store ten minutes from closing, and Quaid breathing easier than he had for days, it was time for him to change.

He turned to walk away, and I grabbed a handful of his ass, whispering, “Need help undressing?” I'd barely been able to take my eyes off him long enough to admire the tuxes for Torin and Ruiz, and my thoughts had spiraled into the gutter.

Quaid elbowed me away with a smirk, but I was hardly deterred.

Whether Pierre read the implication in my tone or not, he gestured toward an office space on the other side of the store. “I’ll need fifteen or twenty minutes to write up the order and get things organized. Take your time.” With that, he spun on his fancy dress shoes and sashayed away.

I snagged Quaid’s hand and dragged him at top speed toward the changeroom. The minute we were inside and the door was closed, Quaid snapped, “No way. Whatever your thinking, get it out of your—”

I slapped a hand over his mouth and backed him up against the nearest wall. “I’m thinking you talk too much. Now you’d better take the tux off and put it somewhere safe because in sixty seconds, I’m going to be in your ass one way or another.”

Wide baby blue eyes stared back at me. I saw Quaid’s budding protest, but he must have realized voicing it was a waste of time.

“Are we clear?”

He couldn’t talk with his mouth covered, so he nodded. Lust surfaced, eclipsing Quaid’s insatiable urge to argue about the sheer irresponsibility of my suggestion.

“You look so fucking hot in that suit. I want to devour you. Now take it off before I tear it from your body. I’m sure the price tag for buying it is a little outside our budget.”

Removing my hand from his mouth, I stepped back. For a second, Quaid didn't move. His chest rose and fell, his wild eyes took me in, then his gaze flickered to the door and back.

“Better hurry. Don't want Pi re to wonder why it's taking so long.”

“Az, we can't,” he hissed.

“Oh, but we are, and you're down to thirty seconds, hot stuff, so move that perky ass.”

The indecision on Quaid's face was priceless. It lasted another fifteen seconds before he lurched into action, undressing at record speed. He hung the suit as fast as possible. The whole time, his gaze flicked to mine, double, triple, and quadruple checking I was serious.

I was dead serious.

The minute he was in his underwear and the expensive tux was tucked away, I grabbed his arm, yanking him toward me. He wore only silky black boxer briefs, but they did nothing to hide his arousal.

As vehemently against the idea of public sexual encounters as he was, the suggestion turned Quaid on.

I spun him to face the wall and moved in behind. Still fully dressed, I pressed my overheated body against him until his back was flush with my front.

“Az, this is so wrong,” he hissed over his shoulder. “We're going to get caught.”

“We won’t. Besides, I’m pretty sure Pi re isn’t stupid.”

“We’re police officers. We should be setting an example, and —”

I clamped a hand over his mouth again. “Enough. You think too much.”

He reached up to tug at my palm, and I chuckled. “No fucking way. I’m keeping your mouth covered. You’re noisy when I get you going. Hands on the wall.”

Quaid glanced back to see if I was serious. “Hands. On. The. Wall.”

He pressed his palms against the wall. Quaid’s pupils were blown, and when I slid my free hand down the back of his briefs, dragging a finger over his crease, he arched his spine and tipped his head back on a muffled gasp.

“Yeah. Look at you. Bullshit you don’t want this. You’re practically begging for it.”

He tried to speak, but his words were too muffled to understand.

“Do you want to be fucked, hot stuff?”

Quaid whimpered and whined, but then he nodded despite his obvious inner conflict.

Time was a factor. Pi re might or might not know what was happening back here—we couldn’t be the first people to take advantage of a private changeroom for some fun—but I was

sure he didn't want to spend half the night waiting to close up shop.

I shoved Quaid's underwear down, and they puddled around his ankles. Using my free hand, I unbuckled my belt and jeans and pushed them low enough to access the goods. I was well on my way to fully hard, and with Quaid's perky ass on display, I would be there in seconds.

I dragged my erection over his crack, reveling at the warmth of his skin and the soft peach fuzz of hair, blond enough to be almost invisible. Quaid pinched his eyes closed, his puffing, labored breaths warming and dampening my palm.

“Spread your legs more.”

He obliged.

I tugged his bottom half away from the wall to put him at a better angle. With his hands planted, his back arched, and his ass jutted out, he was a sight to behold. I spat a few times in my palm, coating myself with as much saliva as I could conjure in a few short seconds, then I dragged my length over his crease again, burying it between his ass cheeks a fraction deeper until I lined up with his hole.

“You okay like this?”

He couldn't have nodded faster, and his whimpers told me to hurry up.

With no prep or proper lube, I resisted the urge to impale him. Adding more spit, I took my time, entering him slowly, ensuring he was comfortable. Although he might not admit it,

Quaid was a bit of an ass slut and loved a hard fucking with little prep. He coveted the sting and yearned for the intense pressure that accompanied initial penetration.

As I pressed inside, his teeth cut into the fleshy part of my palm. He growled and pinched his eyes shut. It wasn't a cue to stop, that much I knew.

When I was all the way in, I moved my free hand to his abdomen, holding his lower half flush against me, still ensuring his mouth was covered. I nuzzled his bare shoulder, inhaling his essence.

“You feel so fucking good,” I said against his skin.

He whined and squirmed, making a noise that sounded like “Move already.”

“I'm getting there. Don't rush me. You'll get your fucking.”

He growled and pivoted his head to face me. *The sneer* was present, and it said, “Paybacks are a bitch.”

I chuckled and drew out an inch before slamming home again hard enough to jar him against the wall.

Quaid groaned. His eyes fluttered closed as his chin tipped forward, dangling between his raised arms. He clawed at the wall like he was scrabbling for purchase. So I did it again, drawing out farther, then punching home with force.

Quaid grunted and more mumbled words reached my ears as his lips moved against my palm. “More. Harder.”

“You can be such a slut sometimes.”

Another growl. “Harder,” he tried to say.

“You better be sure.”

He snapped his flaming gaze over his shoulder. “Harder,” he said behind my palm.

It was game over. I ratcheted up the pace. This wasn’t a slow lazy fuck on a Sunday morning. I wanted to make him come, and I wanted to make him come so hard his knees gave out.

Every thrust rocked him into the wall. Quaid planted his cheek against the cool surface and took it happily, grunting and breathing heavily behind my palm. At some point, he reached a hand around, grasping and digging his nails into my ass in an effort to encourage me to go deeper or faster—I wasn’t sure which. I obliged him on both as best I could.

A steady stream of groans and moans built against my palm. He was a dam ready to burst at any moment, and it was a good thing I was covering his mouth, or he’d be putting on a show for half the block. Quaid got delirious during sex, and all inhibitions went out the window.

I pumped into him, adjusting my angle, looking for the sweet spot that would make him lose control. “Come on, Quaid. I’m really fucking close. Meet me there. Can you do that?”

Somewhere in his blissed-out state, he heard and comprehended because he nodded. One of his hands moved to stroke himself. For a second, he opened his eyes and met my gaze. Those baby blue eyes, eyes that had once upon a time



looked at me with arctic fury and hatred, now turned my heart inside out. They called to me. They made me surrender.

I slowed for a second and tugged him more upright, angling his head and removing my hand only so I could kiss him. His face was damp with perspiration from having breathed heavily against my palm. I tasted salt and thick, undeniable lust.

His tongue slashed out, shoving and dueling with mine. Giving and taking. Asking and answering. When I came up for air, I slapped a hand over his mouth again, and his eyes shone with humor.

“You’re noisy.”

He shrugged and pressed his ass against me, silently informing me I should shut up and get to it.

Heat grew in my low belly. It spread to my groin, tingling and expanding. I picked up the pace until Quaid was gone again, lost in sensation. His hand flew over his cock with increased speed, and the building orgasm quivered through his body.

I could read his every expression and knew when he was tiptoeing the line of no return. He squirmed, arched his back, and angled himself until I hit the exact right spot. A squeaky noise left him, and a moment later, he cried out behind my palm. His voice was hoarse and muffled but more audible than I expected. Poor Pièrre was getting a show anyway.

Body stiff and with Quaid’s ass clamping around me in a vise grip with his orgasm, I reached my peak only a few

staggering steps later.

From there, my senses left me. It was a few solid minutes before I became aware again. Quaid was in my arms, face stuck to the wall, hands dangling at his sides. He would have likely collapsed if I had not been clinging to his middle with one arm. The two of us were sweaty and trembling. At some point, my pants had fallen from my hips and pooled around my ankles.

Quaid moved his head, dislodging my hand from his mouth. It was then I recognized the pain in my palm. “Did you bite me again?”

I examined the area and found deep grooves left behind from his teeth. “That’s going to leave a mark. It’s already bruising.”

“Sorry.” Quaid’s voice was little more than a rasp, and with his cheek still smashed to the wall, his hair in disarray, and his baby blues shining with a sex haze, he looked absolutely gorgeous.

I nuzzled his damp skin as I eased out. “God, that was good.”

“I made a mess on the wall and floor.”

I chuckled. “We’ll clean it up.”

“He’s going to know.”

“Only because you shouted.”

Quaid groaned, and his cheeks pinked with embarrassment. “Not sure I can stand without support.”

I moved my hand to his ass, gently prodding his hole, dipping a finger inside where I'd left my mark. "Are you okay?"

"You didn't hurt me. You worry too much."

Maybe, but I also had a tendency to get carried away. I kissed his shoulder again. "Come on, hot stuff. Let's clean up and get home. I'm not done with you."

## Chapter 10

# Quaid

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 21ST: TWO MONTHS AND TWO DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“Costa told me who he got. Why can’t you tell me?”

Aslan grabbed the door since I was carrying two paper cups of takeout coffee and he only had one. “You’re such a liar. He did no such thing.”

I scowled. “He could have. You don’t know.”

“I do know because I talk to him.”

“Are you two conspiring?”

“No.”

“Sounds like it.”

“You’re paranoid.”

“I am not. Why won’t you tell me?”

We took the back stairs to the oversized media room where our now familiar Saturday gathering of the Secret Santas occurred. It was all getting rather irritating. We were primarily a group of detectives with far better things to do with our time than to indulge in childish games. Our superior officers didn't think so. *Team spirit is essential for creating a positive working environment.* We'd received another email with exactly that headline. I'd skimmed it and trashed it.

They were lucky any of us detectives showed up at all. Torin and Aslan were still neck-deep in their double homicide, but the urgency had simmered, so they had been told their attendance was required.

Jordyn and I were juggling pop-up cases left and right while still focusing heavily on our missing wife. That particular one was going nowhere fast and was close to retirement, as much as I didn't want to admit it, so we had no excuses. We were still waiting on forensics. My stern demands had been ignored, and the lab's promises of swift results were all lies. I should have known we wouldn't get answers promptly.

After making a mandatory appearance at this bullshit circus of a nonevent, Jordyn and I had a Monday press conference to prepare for. We were meeting up at our desks no later than two o'clock. No rest for the wicked.

Since choosing our tuxes a few days ago, Aslan and I hadn't gotten anything more done with regard to wedding plans. Time was running out.

“I take it you’re meeting up with Ruiz and abandoning me to my fate?” Aslan asked as he tugged the door open on the third floor, letting me pass.

“How else am I going to get to know my Secret Santa?”

“Socialize like the rest of us?”

I snorted. “Do you know me at all? I don’t socialize. Besides, Costa owes me.”

“Fair enough.” Then Aslan raised his voice. “There’s the bastard now.”

Ruiz waited outside the media room, leaning against the wall and doing something on his phone. He glanced up at Aslan’s shout.

We joined him, and Aslan pecked my cheek. “Can’t believe you’re choosing this tattooed freak over me. I’m way hotter.”

“If you tell me who your Secret Santa is, I’ll ditch him.”

Aslan pinched my chin between his fingers and gave my head a shake. “No. Stop. Asking.” Another kiss, and he pulled away. “I’ll see you at home later.”

“Is Torin giving you a ride?”

“Yeah.”

Then he grabbed my ass, making me stiffen, and pointed a finger at Ruiz. “This ass is mine. Hands off.”

Ruiz, being a jerk, shoved his shirt sleeves higher on his arms, exposing more of his tattoos, and said mockingly, “But I’m way hotter.”

To me, Aslan said, “He’s got an overinflated ego.”

“Pot meet kettle.”

Aslan and Ruiz knocked fists, laughing, and Aslan headed into the media room, but before he vanished into the crowd, he made the *I’m watching you* sign at Ruiz.

Ruiz shook his head. “He’s such an idiot.”

“He’s ensuring you know your place, sweetheart.”

“Don’t start.”

Grinning, I handed him one of the takeout cups. “Here. Black like your miserable soul.”

Ruiz hummed as he cracked the lid and inhaled the steam that belched from inside. “You’re incredible.”

“Admit it. You love me a little.”

“Don’t push your luck. I tolerate you.”

“Are you prepared?”

“For what? Getting ignored by my cousin again? Sure. Can’t wait.”

“Same as last week. We make our rounds until we get to him, then we linger. You show him your best self and how changed you are while I learn something about him so I can fulfill my obligation to this stupid game.”

“On that note.” Ruiz tipped his head to the door. “Shall we?”

It was a diminished crowd this week. People were making more and more excuses not to come. I was glad to see Tallus



present. But he wasn't alone. Kitty Lavender, the elderly woman who had worked in records since before I was born, hung off his arm, looking proud as punch.

Kitty was a squat, plump woman with bowed legs who waddled when she walked. Her tightly permed white curls stuck to her head, and her makeup was overdone, trying and failing to cover the overabundance of wrinkles on her face. She wore a floral muumuu that hung to her shins, and her beige stockings pooled around her ankles where her swollen feet had been crammed into orthopedic shoes.

Clinging to Tallus's arm, she looked like the cat who got the cream. Beaming, she showed off yellowing teeth as she shuffled along beside him like she was his date to the prom. Tallus indulged her, patting her wrinkled hand as he spoke by her ear and guided her about the room.

When the man of the hour caught my eye, he waved, wearing the same mischievous smile I'd seen the previous week, and steered Kitty toward me. Only a second too late did Tallus realize I was with his cousin again. He hesitated, his self-assured grin fading. But the motion had been set, and after a brief, indecisive pause, he continued.

Ruiz was busy chatting with a female detective from narcotics when I nudged him in the ribs and whispered, "Heads up. We have company."

He followed my gaze and sighed before saying goodbye to the detective.

"Best behavior," I said when he came up beside me.

“Yes, Mom.”

“Remember your goal. I will unfriend you so fast your head will spin.”

Ruiz snorted as he wrapped an arm around my shoulder and gave me a shake. “No, you won’t, *sweetheart*. We’re besties forever, remember. But it’s cute when you try to be assertive.”

“Shut up... and stop flirting.” I shoved him off, sneering as Tallus and Kitty drew closer. “You owe me,” I hissed.

“I know.”

Ruiz laughed, but proving he wasn’t messing around and was willing to make an effort at redemption, he jumped in the second his cousin was within range. “Hey, Tal, my man. Good to see you again.”

I sighed. Why were cocky men so hard to work with? Better question. Why did I somehow attract them into my inner circle?

Tallus gave Ruiz a disproving once over. “I don’t think you’ve earned the privilege of short-forming my name or calling me *my man*”—he mocked Ruiz’s tone—“do you?”

“It’s better than what I used to call you,” Ruiz mumbled.

I elbowed my so-called bestie in the gut hard enough he wheezed and almost lost hold of his coffee. “Tallus it is.” The words came out winded.

Smirking with all the haughtiness and self-satisfaction of a man who’d bested another, Tallus turned his attention to me.

“Detective Quaid Valor from MPU. We meet again. You know my precious Kitty Kat I presume.”

Kitty Lavender tittered and snuggled closer to Tallus. “Isn’t he darling?”

“Hi, Kitty. How are you?” I didn’t know her well. When a case got retired to records, there was slim hope of ever getting it back. For a short stint not long ago, I’d focused on solving a few cold cases, but even then, I hadn’t ventured to the clerk’s office frequently.

“I’m splendid,” Kitty said. “Hooked me the best man in the department.” Another girlish titter snuck out as she smiled up at Tallus, who was a good head and a half taller than her. “Isn’t he handsome?”

“I’m the one who lucked out,” Tallus responded. “I can’t believe no one’s scooped you up already.”

“Oh you.” Kitty waved dismissively like the notion was unfathomable. To me, she said, “We’re going for tea and cookies at Rosie’s when we’re done here. Do you know Rosie’s?”

“I can’t say I do.”

“Quaid doesn’t eat sugar, so if it’s a bakery, it’s probably on his no-no list,” Ruiz said.

I leered. “Do you want another elbow to the gut?”

Ruiz smartly crossed an arm over his stomach for protection, holding his coffee away from his body in case I decided to go for the kill. “I’m good.”

I continued to glower and glare, doing all I could to communicate that Ruiz should feel free to jump in and start working on some long-overdue damage control.

He got the hint. “So, um, Tallus... How’s Aunt Bernice doing?”

“My mother’s fine. Living her best life in the company of a much more tolerable man. How’s John?”

*John?* It took a second for me to recall who this person was in Ruiz’s life. John was Ruiz’s uncle. Hence, Tallus’s unaccepting father.

“I wouldn’t know. I don’t talk to him anymore. I barely talk to my own father. We... had a difference of opinions and went our separate ways. I have two little girls now.” Ruiz reached for his phone in the back pocket of his jeans. “Wanna see?”

“Not particularly,” Tallus muttered as Kitty exclaimed, “I’d love to see. Oh, children are just so precious.”

I could understand Tallus’s discomfort and refusal. Getting chummy with his old bully of a cousin couldn’t feel good, but Ruiz, a proud father, was oblivious to Tallus’s discontent. He searched through the gallery on his phone until he located what he wanted and handed the device to Kitty.

“That’s Maddy, or Madeline. She’s seven going on twelve.” He swiped once. “And that’s my youngest, Anna. She’s a rambunctious five. Utterly fearless.” Another swipe. “This is them both together. First day of school in September. They asked for the matching outfits.” Ruiz chuckled. “Anna

wouldn't stop making that face. I swear, that girl gives me gray hair."

I stared at Ruiz's mop of dark brown hair, cut and styled in likely the same way he'd worn it in high school. Not a single gray strand to be seen. He was such a liar.

"I pull them out," he said under his breath.

I smothered a smile, turning back to our company.

Kitty beamed as she swiped through the photographs, offering praise and commentary fit for a grandmother. Tallus barely spared them a glance, squirming uncomfortably like he was looking for an escape.

I watched Ruiz, who watched Tallus, and immediately registered the disappointment he couldn't hide. It wasn't the icebreaker he was hoping for.

"Aren't they gorgeous?" Kitty asked Tallus, showing him the screen.

"Sure."

I nudged Ruiz gently that time, encouraging him to say something. "Look, Tal. Tallus. I'm sorry. I've made a lot of mistakes in my life, and I'm trying to rectify them. Quaid's helped me see things differently. I'm not that person anymore."

"You will *always* be that person to me."

"What person?" Kitty asked Tallus, still mooning over the pictures of Ruiz's kids.

Tallus wet his lips, hesitated, then said, “Five-letter word for a person who is obstinately attached to a prejudiced belief and is antagonistic toward people who identify with a particular group they disagree with.” A pause. “First letter is a *B*.”

“Oh, I love crossword puzzles. Tallus and I do them together all the time.” Kitty mulled over the clue for a moment, repeating it to herself before her face fell. “Oh.” She glanced at Tallus, then at Ruiz.

“Bigot,” Ruiz answered for her, taking his phone back from the elderly woman and walking away.

The air stood still, and for a few beats, the buzz of other people’s conversations rang too loud in my ears. I caught a whiff of floral perfume and wondered if it belonged to Kitty or someone else.

Tallus, although not appearing ashamed per se, didn’t look happy with himself either. I understood his position. A year ago, it was me giving Ruiz flack. It was me snarling like a threatened dog with its back up. Until one day I realized the department IT guy wasn’t throwing insults anymore. He was awkwardly trying to make peace even when he didn’t quite know how.

But Tallus only remembered the bully, and those old hurts scarred a person for life.

I squared my shoulders and glanced after Ruiz before facing his cousin. “Look, I’m not making excuses for Costa, but I want to say this. He’s made mistakes, but he’s also made a profound effort to make up for them. I know that doesn’t erase

the past or the hurt feelings or repair the damage, and I'm not telling you to forgive and forget. What you feel is valid and justified. He was an asshole, and he knows it."

I searched for the right words, trying to remember how I felt when it was me under attack and the confusion that came when he showed up at my house one day, willing to risk his job to help with a case that had gone sideways. "Costa and I weren't friends a year ago. His behavior was grating, and I could hardly tolerate him. If I had to call him to consult on a case, it was awful. But something changed. I don't know why it happened, but one day, he recognized me as a human being. As his equal. He went out on a limb for me. From that day forward, he's done all he can to make amends. I wouldn't have asked him to be my best man at my wedding if I thought he hadn't changed. He knows you probably won't forgive him, but believe me when I tell you, he *is* sorry."

I shrugged, unsure what else to say. "Just... something to think about. Maybe we shouldn't punish the people who want to right their wrongs. We should hope more people see the light."

Tallus didn't respond for a long time, but he seemed to be absorbing my words. Kitty rubbed his arm, and he patted her hand in response.

"So..." Tallus blew out a breath and glanced around the room. "Who's the future hubby? I'm not gonna lie. I asked around about you after..." He made an absent gesture. "Well, you know."

“After Costa blurted out I was gay last week?”

The mischievous grin made its appearance again. “Yeah. I hear it’s some guy in homicide. I don’t know everyone yet. Is he here?”

“Yeah. Somewhere.” I scanned the room and found Aslan and Torin in the far corner, avoiding the crowd. Whatever they were discussing looked serious. Probably their case. Aslan caught me staring and grinned, offering a wave and tapping his chest over his heart.

I waved back and pointed him out to Tallus. “Aslan Doyle.”

Tallus sized him up before turning back and doing the same to me. The smirk persisted. “Lucky guy.” He winked. Aslan might think I was oblivious to other men checking me out, but I wasn’t. Tallus backed up a few steps. “Well, we should go. Kitty Kat and I have a date with cookies and tea at Rosie’s.”

“We should do a crossword puzzle,” Kitty said.

“We’ll grab one from downstairs before we head out.” To me, Tallus said, “It was good to see you again, Quaid.” He glanced over my shoulder and back. “Let Costa know I need time. He’s got a lot of years of damage to make up for. It won’t happen overnight.”

“I’ll tell him.”

Tallus glanced over my shoulder again. “I think he’s waiting for you.”

I followed Tallus’s line of sight and found Ruiz hovering near the doorway, focused on his phone screen, likely



reviewing the photographs of his girls.

*“I don’t want my kids to grow up like me,”* he’d said.

They wouldn’t. Ruiz was a good person. I knew that in my heart.

“Take care, Quaid.”

“You too.”

Ruiz’s cousin headed off with Kitty Lavender in tow. They swayed along side by side, doing a two-step shuffle toward a back exit. It was endearing and odd. I hoped Tallus would do some soul-searching and see I was right. I didn’t get the sense he was a bad guy. Wounded, yes, but not bad.

Uncaring about the mandatory gathering or mingling with colleagues, I went to find Ruiz. He was about to tuck his phone away when I took it from his hand. “You’ve never shown me these.”

“I haven’t?”

“No. Holy crap, Anna’s your spitting image.” The younger girl had the same rich brown hair and warmer complexion as her father. The shape of her eyes, nose, and cheekbones was all her daddy. The other girl was blonde and fair-skinned like her mother.

Ruiz smiled, and it was genuine and proud. “Anna’s a daddy’s girl too. She’s shy with other people, but I don’t think it will last. She has too much personality to keep it all bottled up. I’m not looking forward to her teen years. If she’s anything like me, I’m in trouble.”

“You were wild, weren’t you?”

“A bit of a nonconformer.”

“Shocking. How come I’ve never met your girls?” I asked, handing back his phone.

“I don’t know.” Ruiz stared longingly at the photograph on the screen before shutting the device off and tucking it away. “I guess I never figured you’d want to. People who don’t have kids don’t usually want to be around other peoples’ kids.”

“That’s not always true. I want kids someday... and yes, gay couples can have kids.”

“I know.”

Ruiz scanned the room, but I didn’t get the sense he was seeing any of it. He was lost in his head, his hurt feelings more exposed than he probably would have liked.

“Tallus said to give him time. There are a lot of hurt feelings.”

Ruiz nodded. “That’s fair, I guess.”

“It took us time.”

“I know.”

“We got there.”

Ruiz playfully punched my arm. “Yeah. We did.” Then, more seriously, “Do you still hold a grudge against me?”

“No.”

My immediate answer seemed to help. Ruiz relaxed, and a hesitant smile touched his mouth. “You’re a pretty decent guy.”

“Stop flirting.”

We both laughed, and when he slugged me again, it jostled me back a step. “Ow, you brute.”

“I’m getting outta here. I promised my girls I’d watch *Frozen* this afternoon for the three billionth time. It’s not a movie I ever wanted to know by heart, but such is life.”

“You love it.”

He chuckled. “Are you sticking around?”

“Nah. I’m meeting Jordyn upstairs in a bit. We have a press conference Monday morning and have to do some prep.”

“All right. See you around.”

Ruiz headed out, and I scanned the room for Aslan and Torin, figuring I’d hang out with them for a bit before taking off.

## Chapter 11

# Aslan

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 24<sup>TH</sup>: ONE MONTH AND THIRTY DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



Quaid sat at the kitchen table, phone pressed to his ear, barking at the poor soul on the other end of the line, surrounded by his laptop, the open wedding binder, two case files, a mountain of brochures, four wedding magazines—certain pages tagged and saved—umpteens pens and highlighters in various colors, a calendar—marked to within an inch of its life—and the unopened mail I’d brought in on my way home from work earlier, while I cleaned the kitchen.

It was becoming a familiar scene in our house.

Quaid was the king of multitasking, and although he looked overwhelmingly busy, he still had half an eye on me lest I decide to take a shortcut in the cleanup process by not rinsing the dirty dishes before loading them into the dishwasher. It was a rare day when I could convince him to let me tidy the

supper dishes, but I also wasn't naive enough to believe he wouldn't go over the entire kitchen again when I wasn't looking. The man had a touch of OCD and was super anal about how things were done.

The night's feast had been homemade stuffed pepper soup—Quaid-altered so it was acceptable to his stringent tastes. I'd convinced him to eat a full bowl, a feat I was proud of.

The doorbell rang as I wiped the counters, and Quaid frowned, mouthing, "Who's that?"

It was encroaching on eight on a Tuesday evening, so the question was valid. I'd secretly planned a wedding intervention and doubted he'd be pleased.

"Reinforcements." I rolled a finger. "Wrap up your call."

"Reinforcements? What the hell does that mean? I can't just... Yeah, hi, I'm still here... I realize the twenty-third is two days before Christmas, but... No, what I'm saying is... You aren't listening." He rolled his eyes and pinched fingers to the bridge of his nose. "I'm not shouting..."

I left him to his call and headed for the door. Whoever he was talking to was ten seconds from hanging up anyhow. They wouldn't be the first. Quaid's tolerance for people was nonexistent, and in turn, most people were at the point of contacting the authorities to file harassment charges because he wouldn't let up. Smart people simply hung up on him.

It was why I'd made the authoritative decision to call in the cavalry—for the good of his health and the survival of our

wedding. If my plan failed, I might put him in a holding cell myself just to see if it chilled him out. We had less than two months before the big day, and at the rate he was going, Quaid would put himself—or someone else—in an early grave.

I opened the door and found Torin and Ruiz standing on the stoop in a wash of yellow light. The night was dark and dreary. A late October rain pummeled the earth. With the accompanying wind, no leaves would be left on the trees come morning.

Ruiz and Torin were getting soaked, so I waved them inside. Before I could open my mouth, Quaid's raised voice traveled from the kitchen. "Then put your goddamn manager on the line and let me talk to someone who knows what the fuck's going on!"

I grinned at my two companions. "Perfect timing. I hope you both wore a cup because this will be like riding a bucking bronco. Here's the deal. Ruiz, you get in there, hogtie him, and drag his ass into the living room. Watch out for flailing limbs and sharp fingernails. Once he's out of the kitchen, Torin steals the wedding binder, but be mindful, it could be booby-trapped. He never lets it out of his sight."

I placed a hand on each of their shoulders. "Proceed with extreme caution, gentlemen. He's rabid, and he *does* bite." I displayed my palm with its fading bruise in the clear shape of Quaid's teeth. It had been almost a week since our changeroom encounter, and the nasty thing still wasn't gone.

Torin snorted, eyes widening as he grabbed my hand. “Holy shit, dude. What the fuck? He bit you? For real? What did you do?”

Ruiz shed his wet jacket with a masterful look of disgust. “Don’t feel sorry for him. Remember when we went to get sized for our tuxes over the weekend and I told you I didn’t want to use the far changeroom?”

Torin flipped his attention from my palm to Ruiz. “Yeah.”

Ruiz pointed at my hand.

Torin studied the injury. “I don’t get it.”

“The hand was used in place of a gag.”

Torin jerked his attention to Ruiz. “Wait. *I* used that changeroom. Are you saying...” To me, “What the fuck, dude? In public?”

“He told you?” I asked Ruiz.

“He tells me everything. In extreme detail. Even when I beg him not to. I think he likes torturing me.” Ruiz shuddered when I laughed. “Where can I hang this?”

I took his and Torin’s wet coats, hanging them in the hall closet.

Still looking grossed out, Torin said, “I used that changeroom. I touched things in that changeroom. You fucked him in there?”

I grinned wider as I buffed my knuckles on my shirt.



Torin glanced at my hand. “And the bruise is... Dude, a replacement gag?”

“Had to shut him up somehow. He’s vocal when I get him going. Especially if I get rough.”

“Come on,” Ruiz whined. “Please stop talking. Some of us don’t want to hear this.”

Quaid appeared in the front hallway, looking both frazzled and irritated. Upon seeing Ruiz and Torin, the look shifted to confusion. “What are you guys doing here?”

“I told you. Reinforcements.” I wrapped an arm around him and moved him toward the living room. “Now go sit on the couch.”

Quaid frowned and dug his feet in, looking among the three of us. “Explain. I’m not in the mood for games. I just got off the phone with—”

I kissed him to shut him up, then patted his cheek. “We have a wedding to plan, and our two willing and wonderfully tolerant best men are here to help.”

“Willing is an exaggeration,” Torin said. “He bribed us with a free bar.”

Quaid pulled from my hold and propped his hands on his hips. “We are not having a free bar. We talked about this.”

“I know. Relax. Torin and Ruiz are the only ones because I encouraged them to come here and put up with you for a few hours.”

Quaid cocked a brow at my word choice.

“Believe me, sweet love of my life and future husband, they will need a free bar by the end of December. Everyone else can pay. Now go sit down. We have a lot to cover.”

Quaid still didn't move, arms crossed and defenses up. “Is this an intervention?”

“Yes.”

Ruiz huffed a laugh and shuffled past him, aiming for the living room.

Torin followed but stopped in front of Quaid, pointing a finger in his face. “I'll help, but if you bite me...” He left the threat open-ended.

Quaid snapped his teeth at Torin's finger, and my best friend jerked it back in time before he lost it. Quaid growled, and Torin laughed before following after Ruiz.

Once we were alone, Quaid narrowed his eyes. “You told him.”

“You told Ruiz first.”

“Yeah, but that's different.”

“How?”

“Making Costa squirm gives me life, and he's super weirded out by”—he made air quotes—“*gay sex*. You should see the faces he makes. I'm desensitizing him.”

“And how's that going?”

He waffled his hand from side to side. “Rome wasn’t built in a day.”

I wrapped an arm around Quaid’s waist and pulled him against me, brushing my nose along his. “I need you to shed your funk and open your mind.”

“Say what you really mean. You want me to relinquish control of all these wedding plans and let other people help.”

“Yes.”

Quaid opened his mouth to protest, so I kissed him, backing him against the door and pinning him there. When I broke the kiss, he playfully sneered. “You can’t spend the whole evening shutting me up with a kiss whenever I want to protest.”

“I can certainly try. You need this, Quaid. Admit it. Stop being difficult.”

“I’m not—”

“You are.”

He deflated. “Okay. Fine. *I* will delegate jobs, but things have to be done *my* way.”

“You need extensive therapy.”

It was a joke, but it hit a little too close to home. We’d never discussed it, but there were times when I thought Quaid could use some outside help with all he’d been through in his life.

“Or maybe you need a long vacation,” I said instead, shifting the seriousness away from his mental health.

“It will be nice to get away when this is done.”

“Anywhere you want to go. I’m serious. Think about it.” We hadn’t talked about our honeymoon, but thanks to my parents’ generous wedding gift, we had the means to go wherever Quaid’s heart desired.

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“Welcome to the first meeting of the Valor and Doyle Shindig Planning Committee.” I tapped a marker against the giant easel paper taped to the wall. I’d stolen it from a conference room at work.

“We’re not calling it that,” Quaid said from his spot on an overstuffed chair. Oscar had curled up on his lap the moment he’d sat down, and the two of them looked far too cozy. At least the cat had taken Quaid’s temper down a notch.

Torin and Ruiz shared the couch, Torin with his feet kicked up on the coffee table leafing through Quaid’s precious wedding binder—much to my fiancé’s horror—and Ruiz sitting forward with his elbows on his knees, twirling a pen, a yellow legal pad in front of him.

I pointed the marker at Quaid. “I hear your objection, but it is overruled because I already wrote it down, and we don’t have enough paper to start again.”

Torin smacked Ruiz. “That’s one.”

Nodding and grinning, Ruiz made a notch in the top corner of his legal pad.

“One what?” Quaid asked before I could.

“Nothing,” Torin said. “So how are we doing this?”

“Simple. We list everything that needs to be done, assign duties, set deadlines, and call it a day. Bingo bango, we have ourselves a wedding.”

Quaid snorted and rolled his eyes. “Just like that?”

“Just like that. You’ve made this far more complicated than it has to be.”

“Oh, have I?”

“Two,” Torin said. “Man, this is going to go down like a sinking ship.”

Ruiz made another notch.

“What are you two assholes doing?” I asked.

“Nothing.” Torin tried and failed to look innocent.

“What is he doing?” I asked Ruiz.

Ruiz shrugged. “We have a bet going to see how many idiotic comments you make before Valor’s head explodes.”

I spun on Torin and pointed with the marker. “This was your bright idea, wasn’t it?”

“What can I say? I make my fun where I can. I’ve got ten bucks saying you put your foot in your mouth six times before this one loses his head.” He gestured to Quaid, who was sneering.

“If it helps my reputation any,” Ruiz said, pressing a hand to his chest. “I said it would take at least ten. Quaid’s tolerance for dumbassery is much higher than most people think.”

“Well, he does put up with you almost every day, so it must be,” Torin said.

“Do you hear this?” Quaid asked Oscar. “The Valor and Doyle Shindig Planning Committee is off to a great start. I’m glad I stopped working to take part. These, my furry friend, are the men responsible for helping me plan a wedding. We’re doomed.”

“All right. All right. Enough with the games. Let’s get this show on the road.” I turned to the easel paper, ready to write. “Torin, you have the binder. What’s our top priority?”

“Um...” Torin turned a few pages, flicking back and forth, frowning. “There’s a lot of shit in here. How do I know what’s been done?”

Quaid gave an exasperated sigh and shooed Oscar off his lap, the cat vocally expressing his objection at being dismissed, and made a grab for the binder, but Torin hugged it to his chest.

“Give it to me,” Quaid said.

Torin eyed me. “I was told not to do that under any circumstance.”

“Torin,” Quaid said through gritted teeth. “Give. Me. My binder.”

“I can’t. Az said—”

Quaid launched at him, and Torin panicked, throwing the binder at Quaid, saying, “Jesus, take it, you freak,” before

retreating as fast as he could on the couch, where he collided with Ruiz, who shoved him back where he belonged.

I threw my hands up. “Torin! What did I say?”

“Dude, I don’t want him to bite me.”

“He’s not a fucking animal.”

“Are you sure?” Torin gestured to my bruised hand.

The fact Quaid was gnashing his teeth and practically growling at my best friend was not helping my argument.

I chuckled. “Correction. He has animalistic tendencies. Particularly in bed when I’m giving him a good fucking.”

“Az!” Quaid snapped, giving me a death glare.

“What? It’s true. You bit me.” I displayed my palm.

Quaid fumed and looked ten seconds from coming at me next.

“Three.” Torin and Ruiz said at the same time.

Quaid narrowed his eyes and glared at all three of us. If he could have made our heads explode with mind power alone, he’d have done it. When he’d gotten his point across, he settled back into the cushy chair and laid the binder on his lap.

“Now if we can all act like grownups”—Quaid fished a page from a front pouch on the binder—“I have a list of things that still need to be done before the wedding. If you all insist on helping—which I didn’t ask for, by the way—then let’s get this over with.”

“Feel better?” I smirked.

Quaid glared.

“Okay.” I clapped my hands. “Now that that’s settled, I say once we have a list, we divide into two teams and make a game of getting it done as fast as possible.”

“You want to make a game out of our wedding?”

“Four,” Torin said, nudging Ruiz. “See how his temple’s pulsing? He’s gonna blow. One more doozy, and...” Torin made an explosion sound and performed the actions with his hands.

“At this rate, it’s going to be you who sets him off, not him,” Ruiz said, angling his head in my direction.

“Man, they aren’t even married yet and the honeymoon’s over.”

Ruiz patted Torin’s legs. “Careful. If he launches at you again, I might not be able to save you in time.”

To me, Quaid said, “How exactly is this helping to reduce my stress? Honestly, tell me. I’m deeply curious.”

“It sounded good in my head.”

“I’m not sure it will be an arguable defense in court. For the record, if you don’t control your partner and best friend, he will be the first to die.”

“You hear that,” I said to Torin. “Behave. Joking aside, he’s right. Let’s get to work and prioritize what needs to be done. Hit me, hot stuff.”



Lips pinched in a tight line, Quaid referenced the sheet of paper in his hand. “Music. Now why is music still on the list, you ask? Because someone still hasn’t called DJs, even though I asked him to do it three weeks ago and have reminded him no less than fifteen times since.”

Yeah, that was true, and I felt the sting of his words as I wrote it down. To prove I’d been listening all those times, I added *no headbanging junkies with scraggly beards who smell like patchouli* in brackets. “Next?”

Torin snickered at the side note. “Nice one.”

“Cake,” Quaid said.

I wrote it down and waved a hand for him to keep going.

“Decorations.”

The marker squeaked as I jotted it all in list format.

“Can I make a comment?” Quaid asked.

“You have the floor.”

“I’ve *begrudgingly* allowed our wedding colors to be red and green and gold, but under no circumstances is anyone to get it into their heads that this is a Christmas wedding. It’s not. Understand?”

We all looked at him. No one said a thing. Quaid was still in denial, but no one had the balls to point it out.

“Sure, my sweet, oblivious man. No Christmas wedding.”

“I’m serious.”

“As am I.” I nodded at the list.

Quaid sighed and cleared his throat. “Flowers, and believe me, I’ve been working on that particular detail for weeks. I have a list of all the florists in the city. Hang on.” He rummaged through the binder and extracted a paper from a plastic sleeve before handing it to me.

“Are the ones you’ve crossed out unavailable on the twenty-third?”

“Um... something like that.” Quaid’s cheeks took on color.

I bit the inside of my lip to stop the smile. The truth was Quaid had managed to piss off several of these people, and they would no longer work with him.

“What else?”

“The bar needs to be organized, and you aren’t doing that.”

“Doesn’t the venue provide a stocked bar and bartender?” Ruiz asked. “Most do.”

“Usually,” Quaid said, “but not on December twenty-third. They have limited available staff that weekend. I knew those stipulations when I booked the place.”

“Okay. Bar,” I said, writing it down. “Next?”

“I want someone to film the ceremony, but so far, I’ve had no luck finding a wedding videographer. For such a bustling city, there aren’t many options.”

I added it to the list and scanned what we had so far. Something was missing. “What else?”

“Rings, but that’s for us to do. They can’t help with that.”

I made a side note for rings. “We should do that soon in case they need to be sized.”

“Do you have a photographer?” Torin asked.

“We do. That’s one thing I’ve got covered.”

“What about a travel agent to help plan your honeymoon.”

Ruiz looked between us.

“We haven’t decided where we’re going yet.” What I didn’t say was how a travel agent was much like a wedding planner, and we hadn’t had good luck with them, so I figured we’d be planning our vacation on our own.

Ruiz glanced at Quaid. “Dress rehearsal and dinner?”

“Bachelor party?” Torin added. “We’re getting strippers, right?”

“We aren’t having a bachelor party,” Quaid mumbled.

“Why the hell not? It’s the perfect excuse to be allowed to watch strippers. Allison can’t tell me no. It’s practically required.”

“I said no. Besides, if we did have a bachelor party—which we’re not—and I agreed to strippers—which I’m definitely not—Aslan’s bisexuality aside, they would be male, not female, and that point would be nonnegotiable.”

Torin deflated. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Oh, I did,” Ruiz said under his breath. “Many, many times. It gave me nightmares. What about the menu?” he asked Quaid.

*That* was what I was missing.

Quaid pressed his lips together and dashed a quick glance in my direction. “*I’m* taking care of the menu.” His tone brooked no argument.

“Dude,” Torin said with a warning in his tone. “We talked about this.”

I snorted. “Relax.” To Quaid, I said, “Nice try, you sexy thing, but that ain’t happening. You and food are mortal enemies, and with respect to all people in the food industry, I am officially disallowing you from going anywhere near that task.” I added *menu* to the list.

“You’re *disallowing* me?”

“Yes.”

Quaid sneered.

“Won’t work.”

He sneered harder.

I grabbed myself and groaned. “Oh, baby, take it down a notch. You don’t wanna make me hard in front of Ruiz. He’ll get jealous.”

*The face* broke, and Quaid snorted a laugh against his better judgment, but it turned into a wince as he readjusted himself in the chair like he was uncomfortable. “You’re such a shit.”

Ruiz, shaking his head, cursed under his breath, but he was chuckling too.

“Ruiz is right,” Quaid said, voice strained, wincing. “Add dress rehearsal to the list. We also need to organize a dinner or late lunch for everyone.”

I jotted it down. “Is that all?”

Quaid checked the paper in his hand, face contorted as he massaged the heel of his palm against his sternum. “I think so.”

“Are you all right?” Ruiz asked.

“I’m fine.” He waved a hand for me to carry on.

I studied him for a moment. He was not fine. He was in evident pain. Again. It was starting to be concerning. “Quaid?”

Before I could address his obvious lie, he got up and excused himself, heading for the stairs to the second floor. “I need a minute.”

## Chapter 12

# Aslan



“I’ll be back.”

I dropped the marker I’d been using on the coffee table and followed after Quaid. I found him in the bathroom, pouring two-extra strength TUMS into his palm before tossing them into his mouth and crunching them to dust.

He’d been eating them like candy lately, sneaking them whenever he thought I wasn’t looking. If it wasn’t TUMS, it was something for his stomach. None of it seemed to work.

“Heartburn again?”

“Probably the soup. Too acidic. Tomatoes, peppers, spices. I should know better.”

Dinner might have contributed, but I thought most of Quaid’s recent issues were stress related. He’d spent over half an hour on the phone, carefully controlling his rage while the vein near his temple pulsed and throbbed. He’d gotten a call from the forensic lab earlier that day, informing him the results

of the sample he and Jordyn had sent didn't yield the answers they were hoping for. Plus, I'd surprised him with a wedding intervention, forcing him to relinquish control.

Braced on the bathroom counter, he leaned forward, hanging his head. His breathing was shallow. "I'll be fine. Give me a minute."

"Maybe you should see a doctor. You've been going through TUMS and the stomach stuff like crazy, and they don't seem to help."

"They help."

"You know how I joke about stress giving you an ulcer? Maybe it's actually given you an ulcer. They can treat you properly."

"It's not an ulcer, and it's not stress. It's the soup."

"You're a mule sometimes."

He didn't respond.

I rubbed his back and waited while the TUMS did their job and his breathing became less strained. After a few minutes, Quaid stood upright, shook two more tablets into his palm, and ate them. "Okay. Good as new. Let's go."

"You are so stubborn." I tugged him into my arms, and he didn't fight.

Quaid rested his head on my shoulder. I studied his reflection in the mirror. He had always been pale, but the shadows under his eyes made him seem all the more washed out. I stroked my



fingers through his sun-bleached blond hair and wished, not for the first time, that I could convince him to stop trying to carry the world on his shoulders.

“I’m trying to help,” I whispered by his ear.

“I know. I appreciate it. I do. I just want the day to be perfect.”

“It will be. I’m marrying you. How can it be anything but?”

I watched the man in the mirror. A content smile pulled at his mouth. “You’re such a charmer. I love you.” He squeezed me tighter.

“I love you too.”

We stayed locked in an embrace for a few more minutes until someone—Torin—whistled from downstairs. “Hello? If you two are getting busy up there, we’re leaving.”

“I hate him,” Quaid mumbled.

“No, you don’t.”

“He makes me crazy.”

“News flash, hot stuff. You make all three of us equally crazy.”

He chuckled and let me release him. “Fair enough.”

“Come on.” I offered him my hand, and he took it, letting me guide him back downstairs.

We rejoined Torin and Ruiz in the living room, and Quaid collapsed into the overstuffed chair again, his exhaustion glowing. I didn’t miss the subtle signs he still wasn’t feeling

well. I logged them into my brain, intent on addressing them again later.

“Is this everything?” I asked, gesturing to the list we’d made.

Quaid made a cursory scan and nodded. “I think so. There are smaller things, but that’s the bulk of it.”

“So now we team up and divide tasks.”

“Team up? We’re really doing that?”

“Yep. You’re with Ruiz. I’m with Torin.”

“Did we draw straws, and I missed it?” Ruiz asked. “Why do I get Quaid?”

“Because you lucked out. Plus, you two are besties.”

Ruiz arched a brow. “Does this job come with bodily insurance?”

“Don’t worry. For your safety and all those involved, Torin and I are taking charge of the menu and the cake.” I wrote our names beside those two tasks.

Quaid had long ago accepted he would be outvoted for those duties, but his silence was unusual. I expected a comment or a sneer, but I got neither. He sat in the chair and let the conversation happen around him. His fight was circling the drain.

I studied the list. “You two can take flowers and...”

“Music,” Ruiz said, interrupting. “I have some ideas for that, and I know people.”

I put Quaid and Ruiz's names beside those jobs. "That leaves the bar—"

"We'll take that too," Ruiz said before Quaid could interject.

"Amelia said she would take charge of decorating, so I'll mark her name here. That leaves planning the rehearsal dinner." I glanced at Torin. "You solid on that with me?"

"Sure."

"It's a big job," Quaid said, voice lacking enthusiasm.

"We can do it."

"Who's your flower girl?" Ruiz asked. "Do you have one?"

"My niece."

"How old is she?"

"She'll be twenty-two months when we get married."

"Does she have a dress? Tia kept the girls' baptism outfits. They're like miniature wedding dresses. White and frilly with ribbon ties around the middle. Cost a fucking fortune when we bought them. Maddy was two when she was baptized. It might fit. You're welcome to use it. Someone ought to. It's sitting in a closet gathering dust."

"I'll talk to my sister. We left it up to her to find Ky and Graham outfits, but she might appreciate borrowing something."

"Let me know."

"Can we please revisit the bachelor party?" Torin whined.

I glanced at Quaid, but he wasn't paying attention. With his head tipped back and his eyes closed, he seemed to have checked out of the conversation.

"I don't know," I said to Torin. "Those things are usually rowdy drunken parties, and... I can't do that, nor do I want to be the only sober person in the room while everyone gets shit-faced around me. And not to burst your bubble, but I'm siding with Quaid on strippers."

Torin sighed. "Can't say I didn't try. For the record, when you're my best man, I *do* want a party with strippers. Female strippers with a good set of Pamela Andersons on them. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, Torin, we all know what you're saying. How about you focus on proposing first."

"Oh, it's all planned out, and I ain't gonna do it on the bathroom floor of a hotel room either."

Ruiz smirked and ducked his head.

Quaid, returning to the conversation, found a sneer.

I pointed at my fiancé but spoke to my best friend. "When he kills you, I'm not gonna try to stop him because you deserve it."

Torin threw his hands up. "God, you speak the truth, and everyone has an attitude."

We spent another hour setting deadlines for tasks and planning to reconvene in a month to see how things were going. By the time we were finished, it was after ten, and

Quaid had fallen asleep in the armchair. Oscar had redeposited himself on his lap.

By silent agreement, we called it a night. I showed the guys out, but Ruiz lingered momentarily, peering back toward the living room. “Is he okay?”

“Honestly? No. He’s stressed to the max over this wedding, he’s not sleeping, and something happened with a case he’s working that pissed him off. It’s why I asked you guys for help. He’s going to put himself in the hospital at this rate.”

Ruiz, unaccustomed or uncomfortable with showing concern for Quaid, nodded but said nothing. He hesitated like he wanted to leave, but he also needed reassurance.

“I’ll take care of him.”

Seemingly satisfied, Ruiz slapped my shoulder. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

Then he left.

I returned to the living room and kneeled beside the armchair, petting Oscar and revving his engine while watching Quaid sleep. For once, the tension in his face was gone, the worry lines had smoothed out, and the strain in his body had relaxed. A chunk of hair fell over his forehead. I brushed it aside and skated my knuckles along his cheek. It rasped with the day’s stubble. I was hard-pressed to wake him, but he needed to go to bed, or he’d wind up stiff.

He stirred when I patted his thigh. His eyes opened a crack like his eyelids were too heavy to go any further.

“We should get you to bed. It’s getting late.”

He glanced around. “Where’s everyone?”

“They went home.”

I helped him to his feet. Oscar jumped down and weaved between our legs, meowing, purring, and demanding attention.

“Bedtime, you little beast. No more food. Upstairs. Daddy and Azzy are coming.”

Quaid made a pitstop in the bathroom while I turned down the bed and undressed, kicking my clothes off to the side of the room before thinking better of it and picking them up, adding them to the laundry basket instead.

“He can be taught,” Quaid said, returning to the room with a tired smirk. He wore underwear and tossed his own clothes on top of mine in the hamper.

“I do make an effort sometimes.”

“Sometimes.”

I chuckled. “Get in. I’ll join you in a minute.”

I made a round of the house, ensuring it was shut down, then brushed my teeth and emptied my bladder. By the time I made it back to the bedroom, Quaid was out cold, curled on his side in the fetal position. I climbed in behind him and made him the little spoon, wrapping him in a tight hold.

He hummed and wiggled back against me until our bodies were flush. I kissed his bare shoulder, inhaled his natural

scent, and found his hand, weaving our fingers together and pressing them to his abdomen.

He winced at the pressure, and his muscles tightened under my palm.

I kissed his neck to his ear, peering at him in the dark, concerned. “How’re you feeling?”

“I’m fine.” He rocked his ass against me, grinding against my flaccid cock and making it perk up.

“Is it your stomach?”

He hummed, not agreeing or disagreeing. “I know a cure for all my ailments.” He pressed against me again.

“I bet you do. And it’s tempting, believe me, but no. You need sleep.”

He whined, rocking his ass against me again.

“Quaid,” I warned.

He lowered our linked hands, directing me to explore beneath his underwear. I entertained the idea of rolling him to his stomach and burying myself in his ass, but after seeing him disintegrate so thoroughly this evening, I knew what he needed more was not a good orgasm but a good night’s rest.

I removed my hand from his underwear and tipped his face around to kiss him properly. “Sleep, and I’ll take care of you properly in the morning before work. I promise.”

He sighed but gave up the fight. He knew he wouldn’t win. Getting comfortable, Quaid let me hold him. I was drifting off

when he whimpered and adjusted himself.

“What’s wrong?”

“Heartburn again. Let me up. I need more TUMS.”

Heartburn again. And his stomach was clearly paining him.  
What else wasn’t he telling me?

“Fuck this shit. Get dressed. We’re going to the hospital.”

“Az—”

“I’m not arguing with you. Something is wrong, and I’m done ignoring it. Let’s go.”



## Chapter 13

# Quaid

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25TH: ONE MONTH AND TWENTY-NINE DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



Nobody liked hospitals. Nobody especially liked them in the middle of the night when they would rather be at home and in bed because they had a million and one things to do and not enough hours in the day to complete them.

Aslan dragged me into the emergency room just after eleven o'clock, and we'd been there for hours. The waiting room was full when we arrived, but no amount of protesting or whining had encouraged him to take me home.

When my name was called at quarter to one, my hopes for a quick evaluation and immediate discharge were squashed. Since my symptoms were indicative of a number of things and the on-call doctor was nothing if not thorough, the nurses had pricked and poked and prodded and rolled me into various testing rooms to get a good look at everything that made me

tick, ensuring nothing was seriously amiss and to hopefully discover the cause for my ailments.

When they'd taken me for an EKG, I'd broken into a cold sweat, memories of that chilling night Dad had had his stroke coming back in technicolor flashes. In all my adulthood, it had been the single most terrifying night of my life. Numb with the memories, I had barely been able to answer the hundred and one questions the nurse had thrown at me while undergoing their bodily assault.

From there, I'd been taken for an ultrasound, and the nightmare continued.

Then, when they had done all they had planned to do, they abandoned me in an unremarkable area of the emergency department, the only privacy I was afforded being a dull gray curtain. It was noisy beyond. The hustle and bustle of an emergency room was infinite. Although the nurse had told me I could rest, sleep was out of reach. It took every effort not to panic, hyperventilate, or assume the worst.

Aslan, who had been allowed to accompany me through it all, crawled onto the narrow hospital bed beside me. It was long past three in the morning. Shamelessly, I lay in his arms, allowing him to drag his fingers through my hair and comfort my nerves—something I might have protested about on a normal day since we were in public and professionals in the community. That night, I didn't care. It was warmer in his arms. The hospital gown they had insisted I wear didn't cover much, and I was chilly.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

“I can’t sleep here.”

“Try.”

His heart beat under my ear, and I concentrated on its steady, lively rhythm. It soothed and stabilized my worries. At least I wasn’t alone. Fear had her claws in me. Was this the snag that would disrupt the wedding I’d been dreaming of all my life? I knew it was too good to be true. All my painstaking attempts to eat right and exercise were for naught. What if they found something seriously wrong with me? How would I tell Dad?

“Can we discuss something?” Aslan asked, breaking into my troubled thoughts.

I remained quiet but burrowed my face deeper into his neck, waiting for him to go on.

Aslan ran his knuckles over my cheek before returning to his methodical scalp massage. “Don’t shut me down the second I open my mouth. Hear me out, okay?”

“Okay.” A new spike of adrenaline entered my bloodstream.

“I think you should see someone.”

I paused to process those words. “What do you mean?” I knew.

Aslan hesitated. “I think... This is just my observation, but you carry a lot of... hurt inside, and I’m not sure you’ve properly dealt with some of the... difficult stuff you’ve gone through in your life. Like your mom leaving. Your sister

getting kidnapped. Your dad's stroke." More hesitation.  
"Jack."

"I don't want to talk about Jack."

"He's part of it, Quaid. Like it or not, that man did serious damage up here." He tapped my temple. "All of it has affected you on levels you may not see."

"I know. I'm handling it."

"You're not." His voice was barely a whisper. "God help me, Quaid. I love you too much to watch it slowly eat you alive and not say anything. Maybe you *handle it* on a normal day, but all it takes is the slightest tip of the scale, be it a tough case at work or a wedding to plan, and it all becomes too much. You don't eat, you can't sleep, and you get frantic the second you feel your control slipping."

I wasn't sure what to say. He wasn't telling me anything that wasn't true. I knew. I saw. But the shame of having it so exposed made my cheeks warm and my insides turn to liquid. Tears burned my eyes, but I blinked them away. I was so tired.

"I'm scared, Quaid. I'm scared that you'll make yourself physically ill because of it. That you already have."

"So you want me to see a shrink."

"I don't think they like to be called shrinks."

"Don't get politically correct on me now. That's my thing, and I'm at the hospital in the middle of the night with no clue if there is something seriously wrong with me or not, so cut me some slack."

He held me tighter. Was I trembling? Maybe, hopefully, he would attribute it to the cold room and my lack of clothing.

“Yes, Quaid, I want you to consider going to therapy.”

I dug my fingers into his shirt, clinging, turning my face so my nose brushed the soft material at his collar. He smelled like comfort and home. “Okay.”

Aslan lifted his head a fraction to look at my face. “Okay? Just like that? You aren’t going to kick and scream and fight me on this?”

“No. I’m not stupid. I’ve done enough self-evaluation to know I’m a wreck. But not now. After the wedding. Things are too crazy right now.”

“All the more reason to start.”

“Az, after the wedding.”

“Promise me?”

I nodded, closing my eyes and inhaling his essence, desperately scrambling for an ounce of control so I wouldn’t fall apart.

He kissed my temple. “Thank you.”

“Do you think I’m a headcase?”

“No.”

“I am, though.”

“You aren’t. Anyone who has gone through what you have would be the same. There’s no shame in admitting you need help.”

But there was. To me there was.

I stayed in Aslan's arms. Sleep stalked the outskirts of the room but never quite moved in. I considered his words, the implication of talking to a therapist and unloading my woes, and I knew, deep down, this had been a long time coming. Even Dad had said on more than one occasion, in jest, that he should have gotten me help a long time ago. He and Aslan both thought I struggled with OCD tendencies and was overly neurotic about rules and schedules. I could openly admit I had a bad relationship with food that stemmed from Dad's stroke.

It was close to four before the doctor came to see me. She was a short woman with a boyish face and a choppy dark haircut that framed her face box-style. Based on her appearance, I didn't think she was long out of med school, but she carried a professionalism I appreciated.

"Mr. Valor," she said, flipping through a clipboard.

I sat up, Aslan doing the same, rubbing my lower back as we waited. The action kept me from panicking, but jittering energy popped and buzzed under my skin nonetheless.

The doctor smiled. "I'd like to book you in for an upper GI endoscopy to rule out an ulcer, but otherwise, you're in tip-top shape. Bloodwork is excellent, ultrasound showed no abnormalities, EKG was good, and X-rays are clear. You are a prime example of fit as a fiddle."

"So why is he getting so much chest pain and stomach upset?" Aslan asked.

“Honestly? Stress. People don’t always realize that stress can manifest in such physical ways. But stress causes us not to eat or sleep properly, and your body needs both those things in proper proportion to function. Not eating appropriately can increase stomach acids, which will induce acid reflux, cause cramping, irritable bowels, headaches, you name it. Ongoing stress accumulates until our body fights back and eventually shuts down on us in order to repair itself. It screams at us to listen. Stress can manifest into real problems. Like ulcers, which I’m confident you don’t have, but I’d like to test for nonetheless to be sure.”

She scribbled something on a pad and tore it off, handing me a slip of paper. “This will help with acid indigestion, which I believe is the cause of most of your symptoms. In the meantime, your best course of action is maintaining your stress level. Meditation. Relaxation. Time off work. Three meals a day and eight hours at night are advisable. We don’t do ourselves any favors when we get overworked and overdone. I can give you something to help you relax at night. It might encourage better sleep habits. But I don’t want this to become a long-term thing. Sleep aids can be addictive, and far too many people use them as a crutch.”

“No thank you.”

“Yes,” Aslan said. “A few won’t hurt. Get you back on track.”

“Az—” But it was useless. The doctor scribbled on her prescription pad, handing me a new sheet.



“Questions?” she asked.

I stared at the prescription papers. “Stress? Are you sure?”

“Yes, sir. You’re otherwise in perfect health.”

A knot tightened in my belly. Stress. Of all things. Aslan was right. I was a mess. I had just spent hours in the hospital because of stress. Because I couldn’t manage my life anymore, and it was manifesting into physical symptoms. I really did need help.

“No questions,” I said, defeated.

“I’ll put in a request for an endoscopy, and someone will contact you with an appointment time later this week.”

“Thank you.”

She left us alone, and I could only stare at the papers in my hand. Aslan continued to rub my lower back. “Are you okay?”

“How can I reduce my stress when I have a wedding to plan?”

“You’re going to give up the motherload of duties and let Torin, Ruiz, and me handle it.”

I huffed a wet laugh. “Are you serious? You three?”

It was doomed. My dream wedding would turn to ash in a matter of days.

Aslan kissed my cheek. “We might surprise you. Give us a chance.”

“I can’t sit back and do nothing, Az.”

“You can help, but you are taking a *massive* step back. Do you hear me?”

I nodded, fighting a new influx of tears. God, I was tired. Everything was crashing and burning, and I had lost control.

“Come on. Let’s stop at a twenty-four-hour pharmacy and get you home to bed. I’ll text Jordyn and—”

“I can’t miss work. We have that case, and—”

“Unless you have an emergency, you are going in late tomorrow. That case is almost cold, and you know it.”

I had no fight left. Agreeing, I dressed and allowed Aslan to take me home. After I’d taken half a sleeping pill—against my better judgment—we crawled into bed together. The minute Aslan’s arms were safely and securely around me, I fell asleep.

## Chapter 14

# Aslan

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 1ST: ONE MONTH AND TWENTY-TWO DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“I’m in heaven.” Torin spun, mouth gaping as he took in every aspect of the ritzy bakery and its endless displays of goodies. He inhaled, closing his eyes. “Fuck me. Do you smell that? That’s what paradise smells like. We lucked out, man. Lover boy’s food hang-ups have brought us to the Promised Land. Look at this place. I want to eat everything.”

Torin was right. It smelled incredible, like warm pies, brown sugar, icing, and melted chocolate. The delectables on display were mouthwatering. My stomach growled, and I’d eaten dinner less than an hour ago, so I wasn’t hungry.

Confectionery Couture was one of the classier joints Quaid had on a list of potential bakeries. Everywhere we turned, cakes, pastries, and tarts were elegantly presented to entice the customer’s eye. Unlike regular bakeries, where you could buy

a muffin and coffee and fly off to work, Confectionery Couture mostly catered events and took orders for important functions. They were high-end. Top-notch. They weren't for the small folk with a couple bucks in their pocket and a thirst for a latte.

I also had the feeling they might be outside our budget, but where Quaid and his dream wedding were concerned, I didn't care. We would figure it out. Since his emergency room visit the other day, he had been subdued. He didn't have faith that Torin, Ruiz, and I could pull off wedding planning without him, but I intended to prove him wrong.

When I'd called Confectionery Couture earlier in the week to ask a few questions, they had been more than agreeable about having a wedding cake made for the twenty-third of December. Plus, they had a whole team who delivered the cake where it needed to be and set everything up. Considering some of the cakes on display in the main room stood over five feet tall, it was an understandable service.

Today's goal was to pick what type of cake we wanted—flavor and design. Like Torin had said, it sounded like the best job on the planet.

Torin smacked my arm and lowered his voice. "Dude, not to be a mood-killer, but this place looks super expensive."

"Don't care. I'll just have to move my retirement date to late 2065 since I'll be in debt to my eyeballs until then."

Torin snorted. "Maybe they'll give you a hot young partner when I leave."

“Sometimes I think Quaid’s right about you.”

“What does that mean? What’d I say?”

I didn’t get time to respond.

A dignified, middle-aged Black man came from the back and peered up from a clipboard he’d been reading. He wore a trim black suit, a pristine white shirt underneath, and a narrow black tie. His wristwatch, reading glasses, and haircut looked expensive.

“Valor and Doyle wedding, correct?”

“Yep, that’s me. Aslan Doyle.” I offered a hand to shake, and the man obliged but not without examining the appendage first like I might have dirt under my nails.

His grip was delicate, his hands soft and uncalloused, and I loosened my hold in response since I tended to apply excessive force in a handshake. It came with the job. Asserting dominance was par for the course.

I motioned to Torin. “This is my partner, Torin.”

“A pleasure. I’m Rodney Chime, one of the owners.”

Torin shook Rodney’s hand. “For the record, I’m not the other groom. By *partner*, he means we work together. We’re homicide detectives. I’m the best man.”

Rodney pinched his lips tight together. “Homicide. Lovely.”

It was clear Rodney did not think it was lovely at all. He checked his clipboard. “I have you down for a December twenty-third wedding, is that correct?”

“It is. When I called, they said it was doable.”

“It’s sufficient.”

*Sufficient?*

“And you’re here for a tasting session.”

Torin rubbed his hands together. “Yes, we are, and I brought my appetite. How many flavors are we talking about? Ten? Twenty?”

I elbowed my partner to shut him up.

Rodney wrinkled his nose as he gave Torin an up and down, then made a mark on the clipboard. To me, he said, “Will Mr. Valor be joining us this evening?”

Torin and I both chuckled.

“No, and believe me, that’s a good thing. I’m saving you from high blood pressure and a monster migraine. We’ll make all the decisions for him.”

“And he’ll hate us for it,” Torin added.

Rodney wasn’t sure what to make of those statements. He studied us for a long time—two considerably underdressed men compared to him—jeans, t-shirts, and shitkickers—and motioned for us to follow him into a different section of the bakery.

“I’ve set up a tasting room. We have various flavors of cakes to choose from. After you’ve selected one, we can look at designs. I encourage you to share your thoughts or ideas, and I will help you make the best selection possible.”

“It’s freaking cake. How hard can it be?”

Torin earned another sideways look.

We passed through a doorway, and I stopped dead in my tracks. “Whoa.”

“Dude,” Torin breathed.

A long table at the far side of the room had been set with dozens of miniature squares of cake on tiny serving plates. Each plate had a glass dome covering, protecting the dessert from the air and preserving its freshness. The squares covered the entire spectrum of the rainbow, from white, ivory, and cream, to blues, reds, greens, and yellows, ending with a rich chocolate brown that was so dark it was almost black.

Torin nudged my side. “We get to taste all those cakes?”

“Yep.”

“All of them?”

“Yes.”

“I’m... Shit. This is... I’m speechless. For real. I’ve never been happier to be your best friend and partner. Like, dude, seriously, I don’t know how to process this much emotion.”

“Thank Quaid for being a miserable food critic.”

“I could kiss him.”

I chuckled. “I dare you to try.”

Rodney cleared his throat, chin lifted. When he spoke, his tone offered a generous helping of disdain. “Please take a seat, and we can begin.”



It sounded more like, *Sit the fuck down so we can get this over with and you can leave my bakery.*

Another table was set up in the middle of the room. Two seats had been placed facing the display table. Torin and I sat. I felt like one of those judges on a cooking show and was not sad.

Silver dessert forks had been wrapped in cloth napkins. They waited beside two empty crystal wine glasses. Torin unwound his fork and tucked the napkin into the top of his shirt like a bib. He looked like a man about to engage in an all-you-can-eat hot dog challenge, not a guy at a swanky bakery ready to taste test tiny pieces of cake. But hell if I didn't copy him.

Torin rubbed his hands together. "Fuckin' A. This is the best job on the planet. Cake tester. I'm in the wrong profession. We seriously lucked out."

I would have admonished Torin for his potty mouth—Mr. Rodney Straight-Tie didn't seem impressed—but I agreed with the sentiment. This was by far the *best* job on the list. No wonder Quaid had put it off for so long. If he had been in charge of choosing the cake, he would have walked through the door, scowled at the options, picked something at random without tasting it, and asked them to eliminate all sugars and oils during the baking process while offering a ten-point presentation about diabetes and its effect on long-term health.

Rodney, barely able to cover his contempt for the two of us, filled the crystal wine glasses with ice water, explaining we

might want to indulge in tiny sips between pieces to cleanse our palate.

He acted like eating cake was a formal affair and not something people had been doing since they celebrated their first birthdays.

Once we were settled, Rodney collected the first covered plate and removed its glass dome. Two delicate cubes of cream-colored dessert took center stage. One for each of us.

“Vanilla,” Rodney said as he placed it between us.

Torin and I took up our forks, shared a grin, and began.

We tried everything over the next hour like half-starved pigs in a stall. The options included vanilla, lemon, angel food, caramel, almond, pistachio, blueberry, red velvet, ginger, banana, café mocha, raspberry, and six kinds of chocolate. Some flavors had been combined or swirled together with others, like raspberry cream or chocolate caramel. Others had nuts or funfetti on the inside. Each square was iced with a complimentary flavor of whipped delight, and we all but licked our plates clean—much to Rodney’s disgust. We must have devoured twenty or more pieces of cake between us. I was riding a sugar high I hadn’t experienced since my teens.

After we’d gone over every option—slowing down near the end because even though the pieces were dainty and we were ravenous men, they added up—we discussed our feelings.

“Mocha is out,” I said, pointing to the decorative tag on the light brown piece with a single bite remaining on the plate.

“I’m not sure everyone likes coffee, so injecting it into cake, although divine, might not be a popular choice.”

“Quaid likes coffee,” Torin countered.

“In what universe do you see Quaid eating the cake?”

“Point taken. Can I be honest? The pistachio was just weird. I don’t know how I feel about green cake, and the little nut pieces got stuck in my teeth.”

“We should eliminate nuts altogether. Allergies.”

“Never thought of that.” Torin moved those two aside, squishing a few crumbs from the mocha cake under a wet finger and licking them off.

Rodney, with a look of disgust, swiftly removed the empty plate, setting it out of Torin’s reach before he could do it again.

“The buttercream was nice.” We had eaten the whole slice, so we couldn’t revisit it. Despite my stuffed belly, I stared longingly at the vacant spot where it had once been. “And the color wasn’t offensive.”

“True, but... Can I offer an opinion?”

“Always. That’s why I brought you.”

“Okay. This is your wedding, so it’s your choice, but the red velvet was phenomenal, *and* it’s red. Perfectly festive for your Christmas wedding.”

“You mean my *non*-Christmas wedding. If you use the *C* word in conjunction with the *W* word around Quaid, he gets fiery.”

“Valor is completely delusional, you know that, right? It’s a Christmas wedding.”

“Yes, I know that, but we play his game and pretend to follow his rules.” This might be one more instance of me breaking those hard and fast rules as I once again injected a good dose of Christmas into our wedding.

For all he was adamant about keeping the holiday and our wedding separate, I couldn’t help wanting to combine them.

The red velvet cake had been reduced to crumbs, but we both stared at it, reminiscing. Torin had a point, and it was one of the top five flavors.

“Hey, Rodney, my man. If I said I needed a non-Christmas Christmassy cake, would you know what I meant?”

“No.”

“Like Christmassy but not in your face about it,” Torin tried.

Rodney sighed. “Perhaps you could describe it.”

“I’m thinking red velvet”—I pointed at where the cake had once sat—“with white icing but a decorative wedding theme in red and gold on the outside. Something that hedges on Christmas but is more wintery in appearance. Does that make sense?”

Rodney’s expression said it didn’t. It also said he wished he was anywhere else.

I tried again. “You see, my fiancé is a bit... ornery.”

“Think Oscar the Grouch.” Torin pushed his eyebrows together, overexaggerating a frown. “Like this.”

I gave Torin a dirty look and smacked his arm.

“What? It’s true. I’m helping get your point across.”

“Do you want to wait in the car?”

“Okay, fine. Think Grumpy Bear from the *Care Bears*.”

I continued glaring at my so-called best friend.

“Eeyore?” he offered.

Ignoring him, I turned to Rodney. “Quaid doesn’t hate Christmas per se, but he’s not a huge fan of the holiday. He’s a bit of a grinch.”

“A grinch!” Torin slapped the table. “That’s perfect. Why didn’t I think of that.”

“Shut up. He doesn’t want Christmas to overshadow his wedding, and since the wedding is happening two days before Christmas, it’s hard for that not to happen. You see my predicament? What I need is a cake fit for nineteenth-century royalty. One that screams, ‘Prince Charming is getting married today.’ It needs to be regal and elegant. It needs to take his breath away with its beauty and sophistication. I’m talking about bringing a fairy tale to life. Quaid is very sentimental—and that stays in this room.” I pierced Torin and Rodney with a warning glare. “I want the cake’s design to be so extravagant it distracts him from the fact that it will also ooze Christmas all over the place. Can you do that?”

Before Rodney could answer, I held up a finger. “And, not to pressure you, but you should understand that if you fail in this mission, he *will* kill me. I *will* die. My death will be on your hands. Do you want that?”

Rodney studied me for a long minute, nose wrinkled, eye twitching. I half expected him to throw us out on the street when he spun on his heels and marched out of the room without looking back.

We both stared after him. He didn’t return.

I collapsed back in my seat. “I may have fucked up.”

Torin shrugged. “I caught the gist of what you meant.” He pointed at the few remaining crumbs of cake. “Think our friend Rodney would mind if I cleaned those up? I hate to see it go to waste.”

“Go for it. I’m paying for this taste test. Lick the plate for all I care.”

Torin did exactly that. Shamelessly. No wonder Rodney was sickened by the pair of us. We were more animal than human.

Torin was polishing off the last of the cake when Rodney returned. He carried a binder similar to the one Quaid had been lugging around for a month. Before he set it down, he observed the stack of shiny plates beside Torin and barely refrained from rolling his eyes.

Rodney showed me the page he’d found. “How about this?”

The world stopped spinning. I inhaled but forgot to exhale as I dragged the binder closer. “Holy shit.”

Torin leaned against my side to look.

“Dude,” he breathed. “That’s... that’s perfect.”

It was a tiered cake, three elegant levels high, with a smooth layer of white frosting emblazoned with tiny snowflake-like stars up the sides in a sweeping design. Dripping along the edge of each layer was an icicle border. It gave the cake a wintry look. Green holly leaves and crimson frosted berries surrounded snow-dusted pine cones. A few clusters decorated the base. More were spread out on the other levels. At its peak was a winter scene that gave just the right hint of Christmas—more frosted berries and clusters of pine needles and pine cones—while the presence of a stone castle brought Quaid’s fairy tale to life. Two delicately carved grooms in tails danced out front, the motion implied in the artistry.

“Apart from the topper, it’s all edible,” Rodney explained.

“No shit,” Torin said. “For real? Even the pine cones?”

“We hire only the finest confectionery artists. Does this express the mood you were looking for?”

“I think so. Wow. I... I don’t want to make the wrong decision. What do you think?” I asked Torin.

If I got this wrong, Quaid would never let me live it down. It was purely about aesthetics. At the end of the day, like I’d told Torin, Quaid wouldn’t *eat* the cake. He was going to look at it. It had to fit the fantasy he’d been building since childhood.

“I think it works. Man, it’s like Christmas and winter had a baby and it came out looking like a wedding.”

“Sometimes I wonder what Allison sees in you.”

“She loves me.”

“Good thing. And you can do this in red velvet cake?” I asked Rodney.

“Absolutely.”

That would look cool when it was served. White icing, brilliant red center. Plus, the holly leaves gave it a hint of emerald green, so it technically matched our tuxes. It felt perfect.

“What about a gold accent. There’s no gold here. Is there any way to add it in somehow? Or silver, maybe?” If I completely disregarded Quaid’s preferred color choices, it might hurt his feelings. He might think I’d rebelled on purpose.

“I’m sure my designers can work it in. I’ll make a note in that regard.”

I stared at the image for a few more minutes. Snowflakes like the invitations. Holly and frosted berries hinting at Christmas. Red and green. And the dancing grooms outside a castle on the top. “Let’s do it. This one.”



## Chapter 15

# Quaid

MONDAY, NOVEMBER 6TH: ONE MONTH AND SEVENTEEN DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



I knocked and let myself in out of the frigid rain. Winter had set her sights on Toronto, and it was cold enough the precipitation had a slushy consistency that threatened to turn to snow overnight. For once, I didn't complain. If it could please snow for December twenty-third, I wouldn't ask for anything again.

"Hello? Dad? Are you home?"

I knew he was, but it was polite to give him a heads-up when invading his privacy, especially after recent comments had reminded me that although my old man was well into his sixties, it didn't mean he was dead. The last thing I needed was to be traumatized because I walked in on something I didn't want to see.

"Den," Dad shouted over the blare of the TV.

Canned laughter from a sitcom filled the air as I kicked off my shoes and shed my coat. Cocking an ear, I listened, trying to determine what he was watching—it wasn't always pleasant. Some of those old sitcoms left much to be desired. Characters' banter leaked into the hallway, and it sounded an awful lot like Hawkeye having a go at Hot Lips. *M\*A\*S\*H*. It was better than some of the shows he watched.

After delivering the bags of groceries I'd brought to the kitchen, I followed the voices on the TV to the den, where I found my dad in his recliner, feet kicked up, cane leaned against the armrest, a plate with the crusty remains of what could have been breakfast abandoned on the side table. He spared me a glance, grunted a hello, and waved at the gaudy gold-colored wool couch that had been around since the dawn of time.

Dad still lived in the house where I grew up. It was as dated as him. He'd never taken a notion to update furniture or remodel. *Why fix it if it ain't broke*, he always said. The walls contained too many memories, some good but many I wished to forget—like the day my sister disappeared, the fights between my parents, and the day my mom left without saying goodbye to her already traumatized six-year-old son.

I dug my sock-covered toes into the shag carpet and ejected those thoughts from my mind. They served no purpose anymore except to make me miserable and heartsick. That and I'd been doing my best to make a conscious effort to reduce my stress. Agonizing over the past wasn't going to help. I'd promised to seek therapy, but that wouldn't be until after the

wedding. I could stew in those miserable memories all I wanted then.

Dad continued to watch his show. Hawkeye had been joined by B.J., and Hot Lips got sick of their idiocy and left the tent, rolling her eyes like no one else could, probably to hunt down Charles. Wasn't she having a fling with him at one point? I couldn't remember if it had lasted.

When the show went to a commercial, Dad shifted in his recliner, the leather creaking. "What are you doing here? You got nothing better to do on a Monday night than visit your old man?"

"Az got called to a case at five, so he won't be home until late tonight, if at all, and since I've been forbidden to work on the wedding, I thought I'd visit. I can make dinner if you're hungry. Maybe you can beat me at chess once or twice. I don't know. Am I interrupting your evening?"

"Knock it off. You know you're always welcome. How's the stomach?"

"I'm fine. The medication seems to be helping. They booked me an appointment for the end of the month, so I'll know more then. Hungry?" I asked, diverting the conversation from my health concerns.

"I could eat. Not sure you'll find anything to cook. All I've got are those microwave meals you hate."

I bit the inside of my cheek to avoid commenting on *why* I didn't like them—because they were overprocessed and full of

sodium for starters—and went with, “I brought groceries.”

“Of course you did. What am I suffering through tonight?”

“Homemade chili.”

Dad lifted a brow. “I’m intrigued. Keep talking.”

I smirked. “I know your aversion to eating healthy, but I also know you like chili. I’m nothing if not adaptable.”

Dad huffed a laugh. “Ain’t that a load of shit.”

What I didn’t say was that if I stayed home, I would likely resort to a bowl of cereal, and Aslan insisted Raisin Bran wasn’t a meal. Company helped me worry less about everything that was going on, and there was no better company than my dad.

“Are you at least making it with ground beef?” he asked.

“Much to my dismay, yes. It’s extra lean, so I’m allowing it. I would have made it with ground turkey or chicken, but I figured you’d toss the leftovers into the garbage the second I wasn’t looking, and I’d prefer you eat a home-cooked meal over that microwavable crap. You could at least buy the Lean Cuisine.”

“Too small.”

“The Hungry Man ones are so much worse.”

“When you pay my bills, you can have an opinion.”

The show was back on, and I lost Dad to more Hawkeye and B.J. banter. I’d seen more episodes of *M\*A\*S\*H* than I could

handle, so I got up and aimed for the kitchen. “I’ll start on dinner.”

Much to my surprise, Dad shut off the TV and followed, using his cane and hobbling along unsteadily with enough grunts and groans to make me want to bring up the unwinnable battle of knee surgery. Under no circumstance did Dad want to submit and take the specialist’s advice.

I saved my breath.

Dad didn’t help with meal preparation—he had never been much of a cook—but he kept me company, sitting heavily on a chair at the table and setting up the antique chess set that used to belong to my grandfather. We had played many games on the scuffed board, and I had yet to win a single one. I truly believed the day I defeated my father at chess was the day he never played with me again. Did I consider this while we battled it out? Yes, every time. Did I lose on purpose? Never.

“How’s work?” Dad asked as he polished a hand-carved knight on his shirt before placing it on the correct spot on the checkered board.

“It’s okay.” I peeled the outer layer from an onion and cut it in half, laying it flat to dice it. “Did you ever have a case you were close to solving, but one piece of the puzzle was missing, and you couldn’t quite figure out what that piece was or where to find it, but you knew if you just looked in the right spot everything would be clear, so you don’t want to give up, but your boss is insisting it’s time to retire it?”

Dad huffed. “More times than I can count. It’s the nature of the job, kiddo, and it sucks. What’s the case?”

“Thirty-four-year-old woman. Her husband reported her missing over eight months ago. At the time, we chased a dozen leads and hit dead ends left and right. It went nowhere and ended up buried among all the other cases on our desks. Even then, I had a gut feeling the husband was somehow involved.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time an abductor filed the report.”

“I know. He’s suspicious as hell. He’s good at playing the whole distraught, agonized husband card, but there’s something smug in his demeanor. Jordyn agrees. He sets off alarm bells, but we haven’t been able to prove anything. Well, the case was getting cold. Months with no leads. Edwards was ready to have us file it, then a couple of weeks ago, the wife’s car turned up forty miles away in a gas station restaurant parking lot off the highway. A busy enough place that the owner couldn’t tell us how long it had been there. The only reason anyone grew suspicious was because another driver backed into the car by accident. They couldn’t find the owner, so they called the police. When the responding officers looked up the plates, it dinged for our missing woman.

“Our people were called in. Traces of blood were found on the interior. Two types. I thought, ‘Yes, finally, we’re going to get this sucker.’ One turned out to be hers, unsurprising, and the other is unknown. It’s not a match for the husband. Logically, the owner of the blood is likely who took her, but

it's another dead end. All our leads have run dry. Edwards wants us to pack it in, but I'm still hung up on the husband."

"Not much you can do about that."

"I know, but it's frustrating. There is something about him I don't like. Filing the case as unsolved pisses me off. I hate doing it. The wife is probably dead, and her husband got away with murder. The family will never get their closure. It's not fair."

Dad remained silent. He'd seen it all in his day and didn't have to tell me life wasn't fair. He knew the disappointment that came with never solving a case. Hell, he'd been ordered to set aside the most horrific case of his career—my sister's. Moaning about my frustrations wasn't going to solve anything, but it did make me feel better. Dad understood like Aslan couldn't. Jordyn was only beginning to realize how important closure was to moving on and the bruise it left behind if you didn't get it.

I continued to work in silence, seasoning the chili with the right combination of spices—cumin, coriander, chili powder, and a few dried chili flakes to add bite—hopefully, it wouldn't aggravate my symptoms. Dad liked heat, and the chili was for him.

Once everything was simmering in the pot, I wiped my hands on a tea towel and leaned against the counter. Dad had the chess set ready to go. He waved me over.

"Might as well start while it cooks."



I sat and played.

“How’s the wedding plans going?” Dad asked after making his opening move.

The question prodded another sore spot. Dad knew about my trip to the emergency room and Aslan’s subsequent instructions that I should take it easy. But there was something I wanted to address. “Aunt Andrea didn’t RSVP. Neither did Scott or Conan.”

I’d sent invitations to my only aunt and two cousins out of obligation. Unlike Aslan, I didn’t have a lot of family. None, to be precise. My dad’s estranged sister and her kids were it, but we hadn’t spoken to them in decades, so it wasn’t a shock to hear radio silence. I wasn’t sure how to tell Aslan the only family I had attending the wedding was my dad, but the more time passed, the more it seemed true.

“You only sent those invitations a couple of weeks ago,” Dad said, marching a pawn forward one square.

“But RSVPs are collected through email to make things faster. We’ve heard from almost everyone.” I focused on the board and my next move despite feeling the heat of Dad’s gaze on the top of my head. I didn’t want him to know I was hurt, but I was. It wasn’t Dad’s fault. It wasn’t anyone’s fault.

“I don’t know what to tell you, kiddo. Andrea and I went our separate ways when your mom left. She didn’t...” He paused for a long time, but I knew what he was struggling to say and didn’t push. “She blamed me for Juni. Then she blamed me for Shari leaving. You don’t know this, but your aunt fought me in

court. She wanted custody of you. She thought I was unfit to raise you myself and used your sister's abduction against me."

I jerked my attention to Dad. "She what?"

Dad shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

"Why didn't you tell me? Dad, I never would have invited her."

"She's still your aunt. Scott and Conan are still your cousins. I thought if there was a chance for you to reunite with some family, you deserved it." Dad drummed his fingers on the table. "I don't blame her for what she did. People were angry back then. Emotions were high."

"You were a good dad."

It was his turn to avoid eye contact. He pondered the game, but I was sure he didn't see it. "I was a mess back then, but I did my best."

Abraham Valor had juggled work, grief, guilt, and raising a six-year-old boy by himself after losing his daughter and enduring the sudden departure of his wife. For many years, I struggled with the aftermath of my sister's abduction—Aslan would say I still struggled with it, and maybe he was right—but knowing my aunt had tried to break up my family even more hurt. Dad wasn't perfect, and sure, he'd made plenty of mistakes, but he wasn't to blame.

"I'm glad she didn't respond. Saves me the trouble of uninviting her."

Dad sighed, and I got up to stir the chili.

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*WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 8<sup>TH</sup>: ONE MONTH AND FIFTEEN DAYS BEFORE  
THE WEDDING...*

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“I’m going to take a walk and deliver this myself.” I waved a fat file folder at my partner, who barely glanced up from the tablet where she was filling in missing information from an interview we’d conducted that afternoon.

We’d spent the previous day in a chaotic race to find a twelve-year-old girl who’d gone missing on her way home from school. She had been recovered in less than four hours, but the paperwork involved took as much time to complete or more.

“The digital stuff is filed already.” Jordyn typed something, frowning at the screen.

I waved the folder again, but she didn’t bother looking. “This isn’t digital. It needs to go downstairs.”

My partner pointed at a basket across the room, her gaze never leaving the tablet. “Then put it in outgoing. Someone will take it down later.”

“I know. I want to deliver it myself. Do you need me to stand over your shoulder right now? I can get super annoying if that’s what you want.”

“Go.” She waved me off, still scrutinizing the interview notes. Jordyn got grumbly when she was focused on a task. I couldn’t blame her. I was the same.

As I headed to the elevator, she snapped out of her daze. “Oh, wait. Quaid.”

I spun, walking backward toward the elevator.

“Are we heading to the gym tonight?”

Retrieving my phone from a back pocket, I checked the time. It was shy of five. “We can. But this will be our last sparring session until after the wedding.”

Jordyn smirked. “Afraid I’ll mess up your pretty face?”

“Yes, and the last thing I need is a black eye for my wedding pictures.”

She made the motion of wiping tears. “Poor baby. You could work harder on not getting your ass kicked.”

I sneered—playfully—and stuck out my tongue—because Jordyn liked to reduce me to petty, childish comebacks.

She cackled like the witch she was and turned back to her tablet. “Six thirty, Valor. Be there with your Pampers on.”

I sighed and hit the down button on the elevator, aiming for the first floor.

The Metropolitan Toronto Police Records Department was located down a stuffy corridor at the rear of our prolific downtown headquarters building. The windowless sanctuary consisted of drab whitewash walls, a dull tiled floor, and a

long melamine counter that acted as the reception desk. Beyond the counter was a vast crypt of a room where retired or solved cases went to die.

With the advancement of the digital era, there was much less to physically file, but the antiquated practice of handwritten reports and taking statements in long form wasn't yet obsolete—and likely wouldn't be for a long time. The department dragged its feet when it came to upgrades, and many senior officers—myself included—were stuck in their old ways.

When I entered the clerk's office, a chime announced my arrival. No one was at the front desk, and the door to the crypt stood open. The ghosts of unsolved cases past whispered from within. *Solve me. Solve me.* It was as though they knew how hard it was for me to give up and were luring me toward corruption, begging me to break the rules and go against my sergeant's orders.

Rows and rows of steel shelves lined with banker box coffins filled the room beyond. A dim light emphasized the layers of dust gathered on their surfaces.

A familiar male voice called from within the depths of the crypt, "Be with you in a second," and I snapped out of my overly dramatic revery back to the present.

An overhead fluorescent light flickered, drawing my attention. I glanced up, noting which one was causing the assault and remembering when I'd had a bulb go over my desk upstairs. The flickering had gone on for days before they'd sent someone to change it, and it had been headache-inducing.

“Hello there.” Kitty Lavender appeared from a side office, drawing my attention. She exited while in the process of struggling to put on a long coat. “Detective Valor. How are you?”

Kitty had one arm in place but was chasing the other around and around, unable to catch it. The dangling coat sleeve danced persistently out of reach as she spun circles, moving toward the counter. The flapping empty appendage knocked over a cup of pens in the process, and Kitty was fast on the road to collision with a wastepaper basket when I lurched into action.

I set the file down and scrambled for a way to get around the counter in time to save her from imminent danger. “Kitty! Kitty, stop. Hang on. Let me—”

Tallus Domingo exited the Dark Crypts of Files Past just in time, did a double take at finding me on the other side of the counter, but sprang into action to save Kitty before she pirouetted herself into the hospital. “Whoa there, my lady. Who said it was time for dancing?”

He caught her in his arms, spun her once in a waltzing one-two step, did a proper spin, then made sure she landed on her feet in front of him. It was ridiculously dramatic, but Kitty smiled ear to ear, a flush rising in her cheeks. “Oh my,” she kept saying. “Oh my.”

Crisis averted, Tallus set her to rights, helping her don her coat, zip it up, and tie the sash around her waist before fitting her purse over her arm. Lastly, he helped her put on a plastic

rain hat. “It’s pouring again, Kitty Kat. Don’t want to mess up these beautiful curls you had done last week.”

Kitty tittered as Tallus tied it under her chin, tucking a wayward lock underneath when it tried to escape.

“There. Good as new,” he announced, staring her up and down. “And just in time. I think Laurie is here to get you.”

“Oh... I should hurry.”

“Don’t rush. Take your time. It’s wet outside, and I don’t want you slipping on the sidewalk. You’ll put yourself in the hospital, and then who would help me solve the crossword puzzles?”

Tallus guided Kitty through a gate in the counter, one I hadn’t seen, and to the main door where I’d come in.

“Bye now,” Kitty said, waving to me. “Tallus will take care of you. I’m off to dinner with Laurie. She’s my daughter.”

I smiled and wished her a good night.

Once Kitty was gone, Tallus turned, but the flickering fluorescent drew his attention. “Dammit. Another one.”

“Just a heads-up. It’s a pain in the ass to get someone in to change those freaking things.”

“Tell me about it. I had to do the last one on my own.” Abandoning his examination of the light fixture, Tallus met my gaze. “Have you ever accidentally shoved your junk in a guy’s face before you even asked for his name? I mean, literally, dick in the face. I wish I was joking. He was kind of

hot too. I mean, behind the death glare and under the hard-worn exterior.”

I blinked at the random segue. “Um... I’m sorry, what?”

Tallus huffed a small laugh. He seemed to be reminiscing on a memory I wasn’t privy to. “Never mind.” A mischievous smirk filled his face as he balanced his hands on his hips. “Long story. To what do I owe the pleasure, Detective?”

“Um...” I patted the file I’d placed on the counter. “This case is in the late stages of decomposition, and against my better judgment, I’ve been ordered to put it to rest. Thought I’d deliver the remains myself.”

Tallus eyed the folder and went around to the other side of the counter, using the hidden door. He wore a lavender shirt that day, a navy and purple swirled tie, and black pants. No glasses, but his hair was styled in the same artfully messy way that seemed intentional.

Across from me, Tallus spun the folder to face him and opened it. After a minute of focused skimming, his good humor faded, and a tiny pinch appeared between his brows.

He closed the file, thoughtfully gnawing his lower lip as he glanced at the strobing overhead light again. Refocusing on me, he said, “Dead in the water?”

“Yep.”

“Order to close it up?”

“Only reason I’m here.”



He glanced at the folder again. “It’s tragic when these things go unsolved.”

“Tell me about it.” My wall of the missing above my desk was littered with so many faces it kept me up at night. “We do our best.”

“Someone out there has answers.”

“Yeah, and my money is on the husband, but I can’t prove it.”

An awkward silence ensued. Tallus studied me, and when it got too uncomfortable, I diverted my attention to the wall clock, intent on making excuses. “So—”

“You weren’t at the mandatory gathering on Saturday. Your sidekick was lost without you.”

It took a second to comprehend. Then it clicked. “Oh, right. No, I wasn’t there. I had stuff going on for a case. But I heard Costa tried to connect with you, and you wouldn’t have it.”

Tallus huffed. “Did my cousin cry on your shoulder about it?”

“No. I had to pull the truth out of him. He’s too proud to cry on my shoulder. Why did you blow him off?”

Tallus shrugged, again staring at the brown folder. “Life’s too short. I don’t like colluding with the enemy.”

“Costa’s not the enemy. Not anymore.”

“So you keep saying, but he makes my skin itch.”

“You said you would try.”

“I did, then I went home and remembered all those years when he called me a cocksucking little faggot and decided maybe I wasn’t ready.”

It was my turn to look down at the abandoned folder. Tallus’s hand was splayed over its surface, his fingers long and spread out, and his nails were neatly manicured. My stomach soured at the thought of what he’d gone through. In his position, I might not want to forgive and forget either. I understood Tallus’s pain and those feelings of betrayal, but I also knew Ruiz.

It was messy, and maybe I shouldn’t get involved. It reeked of one more thing that would keep me up at night, and that was the last thing I needed.

“You’re right.” I backed away from the counter. “It’s not my fight. I shouldn’t stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, but I hope you change your mind someday. Take care, Tallus.”

I was halfway through the door when Tallus called out, “Quaid. Hang on.”

I held the door propped with a foot and waited, both pissed and feeling oddly sympathetic toward Ruiz’s younger cousin. It was a strange concoction of emotions I wasn’t sure how to handle. I understood where he was coming from, but I also wouldn’t stop fighting for Ruiz. A part of me took pride in his transformation.

“Completely unrelated, but...” Tallus tapped a finger on the folder I’d left behind. “You said you thought the husband

knew more than he was letting on. You looked into him, right?”

What was this about?

I returned to the room, letting the heavy door slam closed behind me. “Yes. Of course we did. Extensively. Why?”

“And you didn’t find anything suspicious?”

I frowned, studying the records clerk behind the counter. Tallus had a certain air about him I couldn’t put my finger on. Even when all he did was stand there, he filled the room with his presence.

“No, nothing suspicious. Again, why?”

Tallus considered for a long time, then waved it off nonchalantly. “No reason. Just curious. I like studying these old cases. That’s all.”

That wasn’t all. I was missing something.

“Do you know this guy?” I pointed at the folder. Magnus Aurelian, the husband of our missing wife, was a good two decades older than Tallus, so it didn’t seem possible.

“No. No, not at all. I just...” His smirk was a little too animated. “I read too many detective novels. Ignore me. Husbands make wonderful subjects. You see, if I was working this case, I would get my computer genius sidekick to dig deep into his background and see if there’s any buried dirt. There’s always dirt. Everyone has skeletons in their closet.”

I had already pegged Tallus as being a bit of an armchair detective when I first met him, but this was... more. It was like he knew something about this case and wasn't divulging it. I hated Edwards for making me give it up. More than anything, I wanted to walk over to the file folder, snatch it back, and take it upstairs with me. The unsettled feeling I'd been carrying around for months resurfaced. If I had missed something crucial, *I* wanted to be the one to discover it, not leave it in the hands of a new-hire records clerk so he could play Sherlock Holmes.

"Make sure it gets filed." I tipped my head toward the crypts.

"Oh, I will. That's my job."

We stared at each other a moment longer before I decided to leave.

I was halfway down the hall, car keys in hand as I contemplated my practice session with Jordyn when a thought occurred to me. Backtracking, I poked my head in the door to the records department and caught Tallus unaware, case file open as he read my notes, a phone pressed to his ear.

The younger man startled and surreptitiously tucked his phone into the front pocket of his trousers as he closed the file with a look of guilt. I didn't pay attention to his poor attempt at hiding what he'd been doing.

"By the way," I said, despite Tallus's obvious discomfort. "The computer genius I would consult is your cousin, and Costa's been up one side of that guy and down the other." I

indicated the file. “If there was something to be found, he would have found it, and he didn’t.”

Tallus didn’t have anything to say about that.

## Chapter 16

# Aslan

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 18TH: ONE MONTH AND FIVE DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“**Y**ou booked a private room at the restaurant?”

“Yes, Quaid.” I flipped stations, not taking my eyes off the TV while Quaid paced, binder in hand, checking and rechecking to ensure we hadn’t forgotten something crucial. Every day since he’d been relieved of wedding duties, he’d demanded updates so he knew we were taking care of things. I wasn’t sure if this was better or worse than having him participate.

“For how many people?”

“Twelve. Amelia isn’t bringing the kids to dinner. Chris’s parents are taking them.”

“But they’ll be at the rehearsal, right? They have to be.”

“Yes, Quaid. They are the ring bearer and flower girl. They will be there.”

“And you called Barnabus?”

“No, I went to his house and exhausted myself, making him understand he had to be there for the rehearsal. I even offered to pick him up. He said his granddaughter, Megan, will bring him.”

“You put it on his calendar?”

“Yes, Quaid. Are you sure about him?” I asked, turning my attention from the TV.

“Yes.” The answer was definitive. Quaid would not be swayed when it came to the elderly man. “And you called the venue to be sure we could use the space for an hour for the dress rehearsal?”

“Yes, Quaid. You act like Torin and I are incompetent.”

He deadpanned.

I chuckled, shaking my head. “We get an hour and a half for the dress rehearsal. Thursday the twenty-first from five until six thirty. The restaurant is booked for seven. I also ensured we had the right number of rooms booked for the guests staying on the wedding night.”

“You got us the King’s Suite?”

“Yes, Quaid.”

“Stop ‘yes, Quaiding’ me.”

“Stop with the incessant questions.”



“No. If you won’t let me help, then you get to suffer like this instead. Did you confirm if the smaller ballroom at Strongwind is big enough for all our guests for the reception?”

“Yes, Quaid. It’s plenty big enough, and I booked it.” I settled on a mindless sitcom, not that I had any hope of watching it with Quaid wearing a strip out of the carpet in front of the TV and worriedly checking his list like he was Santa Claus on the night before Christmas.

*Operation Reduce Quaid’s Stress* was not happening.

My nettlesome fiancé, who was fast wearing me out, stopped in front of the TV, blocking my view. He peered over the top of the binder and pursed his lips.

“What?”

He hesitated.

“For the love of god, Quaid. What?”

“About the food. Are you sure—”

“It’s all ordered. Again, Torin and I miraculously figured it all out without your help.” I waved for him to move out of the way. “You make a better door than a window.”

He remained in place. “And?”

“And what?”

“The food.”

I sighed, sinking lower on the couch and pinching the bridge of my nose. “The selections include beef Wellington, roasted chicken, and fresh Atlantic salmon because I know it’s your

favorite. We don't have any vegetarians coming, so I opted out of the vegetarian selection. All dishes come with potatoes or rice and a choice of vegetables. Rolls will be provided on all the tables—”

“Whole wheat?”

“And white. Red and white wine will be distributed to all tables as well, along with pitchers of ice water. The kids will be provided juice with dinner—apple juice, orange juice, or Sunny D at my request.”

Quaid opened his mouth, and I stopped him with a look. “You aren't allowed an opinion on my Sunny D. Some of us can't have wine with dinner and will take their pleasures where they can get them.”

Quaid pressed his lips together, but I saw the smile he was trying to smother. He refocused on the binder instead, but the smirk pulled tight at his cheeks, and he almost lost control.

“You're a pain in my ass,” I said playfully. “Now move over so I can see the TV.”

He shuffled aside a foot, still with a barely contained grin tugging at his mouth.

“Stop it.”

“What?”

“I like Sunny D, and so does Graham. There is nothing wrong with it.”

“I didn’t say anything about your childish obsession with that neon atrocity they call juice.”

“Good thing. Your self-restraint knows no bounds.”

“It really doesn’t.”

“For the record, because I know it’s your next question, the midnight buffet will consist of a selection of finger foods, all of which you will loathe and sneer at. In my defense, we were advised to pick carb heavier options to help soak up the abundance of alcohol most people will be drinking.”

Quaid wrinkled his nose. “You could have added *one* fruit tray, you know, for your future husband who you love.”

I chuckled. “Relax. I’m kidding. There’s a fruit tray *and* a veggie tray. Do I get extra points for that?”

“We’ll discuss it when I’m done. What about the cake? That was one of your jobs too. Is it organized?”

He really had no faith that Torin and I could accomplish anything on our own.

“Yes, Quaid. The cake will be delivered at ten on the morning of the wedding. It will be served after the meal by us, following the traditional cake-cutting ceremony.”

“And you didn’t get a picture of this mysterious wedding cake to show me what it will look like?”

It was my turn to smirk. “No, I did not.” I patted the couch. “How about you put the binder away and join me for some brainless television.”

“Can I know what flavor it is?”

“No. You aren’t going to eat it anyway, so what does it matter?”

“I might.”

I laughed. “Since when do you eat cake?”

“Since it’s my wedding, and maybe I want pictures of us feeding each other cake.”

I considered telling him, but since it was red velvet, it had the potential to dissolve into a long, drawn-out discussion about why we weren’t having a Christmas wedding, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Az?” he whined.

“No. It’s a surprise.” Again, I patted the couch. “Come snuggle with me and watch TV.”

“It’s less than five weeks until the wedding. I have to be sure you haven’t missed anything.”

“Quaid, it’s nine thirty on a Saturday night. We finally have a night off together. Please abandon this nonsense and cuddle with me.”

“Nonsense? Our wedding plans are nonsense?”

“Put the binder away, and I’ll play with your winky.” I wiggled my brows deviously.

With an unrestrained laugh, Quaid snapped the binder closed. “Well, since you put it that way. How can I possibly

resist? The last guy who offered to play with my winky was Poindexter Vandermeer, and we were both five.”

“Did you let him?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Quaid didn’t put the binder away. He hugged it to his chest, and I could see the gears still spinning inside his head.

“Quaid.” I inserted a touch of warning into my tone as I patted the couch for a third time.

“I was just wondering if we should—”

“Good grief. I’m going to physically restrain you to this couch soon.”

“No, listen. What if—”

I launched at him, and Quaid’s eyes blew wide as he scrambled back a step. I was too fast and locked him in a one-armed hold, plucking the binder from his tight grip and tossing it on the armchair. Then I heaved him off the floor as he cried out and hurled his heavy ass onto the couch before landing on top of him.

He *oofed* and struggled to free himself, but I kept him pinned as I attacked his neck with my teeth, nipping, biting, and driving him out of his mind. He was ticklish, so the assault worked in my favor.

Quaid playfully punched my sides, kicking, thrashing, laughing, and battling to get free, but he wasn’t putting much

effort behind it, and he eventually submitted when I dug my fingers into his sides and tickled him for real.

He squawked and cried out, “Mercy, mercy. Oh god... stop. Please stop.”

I stopped attacking and peered down at my future husband. With mussed, sun-kissed blond hair, flushed cheeks, a beautiful smile spread across his face, and contentment shining out his baby blues, he was enough to take my breath away.

“You’re mean,” he said.

“You love it.”

I kissed him full on the mouth, settling against him, and he took my face between his hands and kissed me back. My body lit up, thrumming with pleasure at his taste and the rasp of his tongue with mine. I could never get enough. Quaid was intoxicating.

After a long time, I broke free and sighed contentedly, resting our foreheads together. “Are you done making me crazy?”

“For now. Might I remind you, you signed up for a lifetime of crazy with me.”

“Oh, I know.” I kissed him again, his lips smiling against mine. “I’ll tell you what. If you insist on being involved in wedding plans, despite the doctor’s orders, then I know the perfect task, and we can do it while horizontal and snuggled together.”

“Can we do it while you play with my winky?” He arched his back, grinding us together.

I snorted. “No. But it can be your reward for cooperation.”

“This feels like a disturbing sort of kindergarten gold-star event.”

“Are you with me?”

“Yes. What’s the task?”

I stretched for the remote and clicked off the TV, then rolled to the side, wedging myself against the back of the couch and weaving our legs together. It was a tight fit, but we made it work.

The look in Quaid’s eyes spoke of love and contentment. It was at times like this when his troubled mind offered him a few minutes of respite from the constant swirl of anxiety he lived with on a daily basis. I wished I could make it last forever, but I didn’t think there would ever be a day when Quaid wasn’t a bit high-strung. Hopefully, he would follow through with therapy after the wedding.

“Where do you want to go on our honeymoon?” I asked, stroking his arm.

“Oh.” Quaid squirmed closer, sneaking a hand under my T-shirt and resting his cool fingers over my ribs. I took his other hand and warmed it by pressing it against my chest.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I haven’t given it much thought. Between the wedding and work, I haven’t even gone there yet.”

“Maybe it’s time we figured it out.”

“Do you have any ideas?”

“Some, but are you telling me you don’t have a dream honeymoon destination to go with your dream wedding?”

His eyes shifted to the side as he thought. “No... I guess I never got that far.”

“Well, my parents have pretty much funded the entire thing, so maybe we should think about it. The sky is the limit. Where do you want to go, hot stuff?”

Quaid was quiet for a long time, his focus far away as he traced patterns on my chest. Considering Quaid’s food quirks, I knew whatever he chose wouldn’t be driven by a desire to experience exotic foods.

“I don’t get the sense you’re a beach destination kind of person, like Mexico, the Dominican Republic, or Hawaii.”

“Not really. With my pale skin, lounging on a beach is a recipe for disaster. I don’t want melanoma. Did you know—”

“Stop. Forget it. No beach. What about a cultural destination? Somewhere with history. Italy? Scotland? Ireland? Germany? Spain? Portugal? Holland? Stop me when I hit on something you like.”

Quaid shyly smiled, and his tongue poked out, tracing the contour of his upper lip.

I bumped our noses together. “I can see you thinking of something in that smart brain of yours. What is it?”



“It’s cliché.”

“So? Who cares? What?”

“You’ll make fun of me.”

“Probably, but you should be used to that by now.”

He chuckled and pinched the sensitive skin under my arm.

“Ouch. You shit. I’ll tickle you again until you tell me.”

“Don’t you dare.”

I caught his wrist so he couldn’t pinch me again and held it between us as I brushed our noses together. “Tell me, Quaid. Where do you dream of having our honeymoon? Cliché or not.”

He wouldn’t look me in the eye. “Well... Paris is the city of love.”

And how had I not guessed that? It was exactly a Quaid type of destination. The perfect conclusion to his fairy tale wedding. It seemed so obvious.

“Ah, oui, oui, mon cheri. I’ll need to brush up on my French. It’s a little rusty.”

“It’s a little nonexistent.”

I laughed. “Be fair. I have a few good sentences in my repertoire.”

“Like asking someone if they want to sleep with you?”

“Again, to be fair, what else does one need when traveling in the city of love?”

“You’re such a pig.” Quaid slid his hand to my lower back, inching my shirt up as he wormed closer. We were breathing the same air, the inches between us shrinking.

“So Paris?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? Come on, Quaid. Is that where you want to go?”

“Yes. Is it silly?”

“Not at all. We’ll make it happen. Some night this week, when we aren’t working or running around like chickens with our heads cut off, we’ll meet with a travel agent and organize it.”

“Are you going to be able to get time off work?”

It was a justifiable question since I’d burned through all my vacation time earlier in the year.

“I think Summerfield is going to work something out for me. I talked to her about taking time off for the wedding, and she seemed agreeable.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll look up agents tomorrow.”

“No, tomorrow we’re going to pick out rings. It’s the one task I’m allowed to be part of. You can’t deprive me of that. We have an appointment at noon, and it can’t be rescheduled. We need them ordered and sized in time for the wedding.”

“Oh, right. Are you still sure you want to marry me?”

“Yes.” Quaid’s bashful smile was my favorite, and it didn’t come out often.

“Even with all my flaws?”

He rolled his eyes. “Hello, I have the gold medal for flaws. Did you miss the part where I put myself in the hospital because of stress? If you can handle me, I can put up with you.”

“Aw, such loving words have never been spoken.”

He laughed, and we were kissing again. Hands roamed, and things heated a few more degrees. But I wasn’t done talking. Not yet.

“One more thing,” I said into the kiss.

Quaid hummed, eyes still closed, absorbing the connection.

“After we’re married...” The words I wanted to voice wouldn’t form, and a silence opened where they belonged.

Quaid, sensing the seriousness in my tone, opened his eyes. “After we’re married,” he prompted. “I already promised I’d go to therapy.”

“I know. Not that. Have you... Have you thought about our future *beyond* marriage?”

I knew he had, a hundred times over, but we’d never officially talked about it. We’d brushed up against the subject here and there, expressing desires at nonserious moments, but fear of reality had kept us from facing it head-on.

I didn't have to ask if Quaid knew what I meant. The understanding was there in his eyes. "You mean..."

"I want to have kids with you, Quaid. Logically, we should probably wait and settle into married life first, but I'm forty-three. It's starting to feel like life is getting away from me, and I don't want to miss out on being a dad. So I thought, if we're going to do it, it should be sooner rather than later. We haven't ever talked about it. We would need to consider what direction to take."

Lips parted, Quaid's gaze skipped over my face with wonder, awe, or fear, I couldn't tell. A glassy sheen turned his baby blues into shimmering lakes, but I didn't draw attention to it. If the conversation made him emotional, then it also had the potential to make him run and hide. He was still working on how to comfortably express his feelings without shame.

I released his hand and brushed my knuckles over his unshaven cheek. I loved Weekend Quaid. He was less put-together than Weekday Quaid. "Did I break you?"

"You know I've always wanted kids."

"Did you ever think it would be your reality?"

"Honestly? No. But I'd also given up on the idea I would ever get married."

"Until you met me, right?"

He laughed. "Well... even then, I wasn't sure. I mean, I was dating the office playboy. Can you blame me?"

I clutched his chin and gave it a shake. "You. Are. A shit."

“What? Tell me I’m wrong.”

I kissed him instead. When we separated, I whispered, “Do you want to make a family with me, Quaid?”

“Desperately.” The words came out choked, and he blinked a few times when the lakes swelled. “You’d be an amazing dad. I’ve always wanted to tell you that. The way you are with Kylee and Graham... Any child would be lucky to have you as their parent.”

“Don’t discredit yourself. You’d be an amazing dad too.”

“I’ll probably struggle like I do with everything. I’ll worry about getting it wrong.”

“You never struggled a day with Oscar. You’re an amazing dad to him.”

“He’s a cat. It’s not the same.”

“No, but this will be your child. You will be the most incredible dad on the planet because of how badly you want it. Have you considered how you want to make it happen?”

Quaid’s brows drew together. “No. Not really. But I think...”

He didn’t continue, so I gave him a nudge. “You think?”

“I think I’d prefer finding a surrogate. I’d prefer one of us... contribute to the creation of a baby. There’s nothing wrong with adoption, but...”

“Okay.”

He huffed. “Okay? Just like that?”

“Okay. Just like that. Once the wedding is officially behind us, we’ll start looking into the process.”

“It will be a huge undertaking.”

“Yep.”

“And it’s expensive.”

“It will be worth it, Quaid.”

For a long time, we lay together, hands and legs entwined, hearts reaching out for one another. No words were shared. They might have spoiled the fragility of the moment. It was a time for reflection—on the past from which we’d come and the future we had yet to meet.

In a few short weeks, we would join our lives and continue life’s journey together. Where it took us was only limited by our imagination.

Staring into my fiancé’s beautiful face, I noted the tiny lines that tugged at the sides of his eyes when he smiled. Lines that spoke of experience and wisdom. Lines he might one day pass on to our children. I noted the hint of silver dusting his stubble. It barely showed in his blond hair if it was there at all. In a little more than a week, Quaid turned thirty-seven. We might have had a late start to our relationship, but I planned to live a long time, and I would savor every second of that life with Quaid by my side.

I wanted to bring a smile to his face every day. I wanted to see him cradle a baby in his arms and cry desperate tears of happiness he couldn’t contain. I wanted to feel his warmth

around me each night. Every morning, I wanted to race around each other as we fumbled half asleep to get ready for work because we spent too long fooling around in bed the night before. I wanted to endure Quaid's research when he sought the best daycare for our baby, when he insisted there would be no weekend trips to McDonald's, when he went head-to-head with a teacher, standing up for the rights of our child.

I wanted to celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, and more. I wanted to treasure this man who had somehow weaved his way into my life until we were old and gray.

"What are you thinking?" Quaid asked, breaking into my musing.

"About how lucky I am." I brushed the hair off his forehead and pressed my lips to his warm skin underneath, inhaling and closing my eyes.

Savoring.

"I'm so in love with you."

## Chapter 17



# Quaid

MONDAY, DECEMBER 4TH: NINETEEN DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“I already talked to Az about it, and he gave it the seal of approval. Don’t get your shirt in a knot. Scratch it off the list, and don’t worry about it anymore.” Ruiz never once took his eyes off his computer.

“I’m sorry, call me skeptical, but I don’t trust you and Aslan colluding over music. Your tastes leave much to be desired. I would feel much better if you told me what you planned.”

The asshole smirked, fingers flying over the keyboard. Ruiz was the king of multitasking. He had three devices on the go and somehow managed to carry on a conversation at the same time. “Maybe it’s *your* music that leaves a bad taste in people’s mouths. Are you going to Torin’s Friday night?”

“We were invited. Don’t change the subject. Who did you hire? What’s their reputation? Have they done weddings

before? Did you ask for references? Did you read their reviews?”

“Yes, Quaid, they’ve done plenty of weddings. I didn’t need to ask for reviews because I know them personally.”

“Are they respectable? I said no hippies.”

“Yes, Quaid, they’re respectable.”

“Don’t you start ‘yes, Quaiding’ me too. It’s Aslan’s new favorite thing, and I swear he does it to annoy me.”

Ruiz chuckled. “Yes, Quaid.”

I sneered at the back of Ruiz’s head, but he didn’t turn around to see it, so it didn’t satisfy me. As it stood, I was in the dark about the wedding cake, the music, the decorations, the florist—which was supposed to be my job, but Aslan had taken it back after my trip to the hospital, and he was being shady about what he’d ordered—and the Secret Santa—another matter altogether, but it was still pissing me off.

I pulled up a chair and collapsed. Ruiz glanced over his shoulder. “Are you hanging out?”

“Am I bothering you?”

“Nope. Thought you had somewhere to be at five.”

I checked the time on my phone. It was ten to. “Technically, I can be fifteen minutes late. I imagine it will take that long for him to get through the meeting.”

It had been one year since Aslan had been put on probation. One year since the department found out about his drunken

accident that had been covered up by another officer—without Aslan’s consent. Today, the restrictions placed on him a year ago would be lifted. He would be able to drive a department vehicle without being subjected to a breathalyzer every time he got behind the wheel. He would no longer need to report his attendance at AA meetings to Summerfield. It was a huge deal, and the relief that came with it was monumental.

I wanted to be there when he got out of his meeting.

Since Ruiz wasn’t any more inclined to share about certain aspects of the wedding than Aslan, I switched gears to another nagging topic. “Did you get your Secret Santa present yet?”

“Yep.”

“Who do you have?”

Ruiz chuckled. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“I would, actually. Tell me.”

“No.”

“Please.”

“No.”

“If you don’t tell me, I’ll make you dance with me at the wedding.”

That made Ruiz choke on his spit, and he leaned forward, coughing, wheezing, and laughing simultaneously. “That ain’t happening, Valor.”

“You’re still afraid of me.”

“No, I’m not, but dancing with a dude is weird, and it’s not happening.”

“It’s not that weird.”

He still wasn’t looking at me, but under the dense scruff on his face, I was pretty certain his cheeks were flaming red. It was good to know I still had the power to make Ruiz squirm.

“Do you know who Aslan got?”

“For Secret Santa? Yes.”

“He told you?”

“Nah, I figured it out.”

“How?”

He tapped a pencil against his temple. “I’m smart.”

“You’re annoying.”

“You’re whiny.”

“No, I’m not.”

“You’re pouting.”

“Maybe. I’m frustrated. Everyone’s treating me like I’m incapable. Plus, you won’t tell me who you hired to do music. You won’t tell me who your Secret Santa is. And above all, you won’t dance with me at my wedding. Some friend you are.”

“Good grief.” Ruiz, unable to hide his smile, shook his head. “How does Az put up with you?”

“I don’t know. It’s a mystery.”

“Did you get Tallus’s present?” Ruiz asked.

“No. I have no idea what to get him.”

The past few Saturdays, Ruiz had dug his heels in, insisting if Tallus didn’t want to accept his apology, he wasn’t putting himself out there anymore. Ruiz’s feelings were hurt, but his fragile masculinity prevented him from saying so. Hence, I hadn’t managed to learn anything more about Tallus. Mingling on my own was awkward, and the new records clerk was always in the presence of large groups of people. He seemed far more sociable and comfortable in his own skin, an aspect of his personality I envied.

Ruiz clicked around with the mouse, typed for another minute, then shoved back from the desk, swinging around in his fancy leather office chair to face me. “T-minus how many days now?”

“Nineteen.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Anxious. I’m afraid we’ll forget something. I’m afraid Az doesn’t have a handle on all that needs to be done.”

“Did you get your honeymoon sorted?”

“Mostly. We met with a travel agent. I wasn’t allowed to do the talking lest I *scare* her.” I sighed. “We leave on the twenty-sixth.”

“New Year’s celebration in Paris. Nice. That will be exciting.”

I'd imagined it a dozen times. Between Aslan not being able to drink and my aversion to fireworks, we had a different type of special evening planned to ring in the new year. But Ruiz was right. New Year's in Paris would be unforgettable.

I checked the time on my phone. "I better run."

"Friday night."

"Yeah, I know. I'll be there."

Torin had officially popped the question to Allison the previous weekend. They had gone away to a secluded cabin to celebrate their one-year anniversary and had come back engaged. On Friday evening, they were having a get-together with friends to celebrate their next step in life.

"I'll catch you later," I said to Ruiz as I headed out.

"Don't worry about the music, Quaid. I promise it will be perfect."

I studied Ruiz for a long moment, but in the end, I trusted him. The secrecy was annoying, but he wouldn't steer me wrong.

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Aslan was still in his meeting when I arrived. It was taking place in the same boardroom where he'd been disciplined a year ago. So far as I knew, the meeting was with Sergeant Summerfield and Inspector Lassaline.

I found a seat nearby and waited, taking the few extra minutes to ponder what I might buy Tallus for a Secret Santa

present. Time was up. We'd been attending mandatory department meetings for weeks, getting to know the people we didn't ordinarily work with on a given day. Had it accomplished anything? I wasn't so sure.

Before I settled on an idea, the boardroom door opened, and Aslan exited. I stood, and his face broke into a smile when he saw me. "Hey, hot stuff."

"So? How'd it go?"

He waved a stack of papers between us. "This mess of technical jargon officially terminates my probationary period. I'm free to drive again without humiliating tests whenever I get behind the wheel, but..."

Aslan shrugged, playing it off like it was no big deal, but it was a *huge* deal. That particular aspect of his probation had hit hard, and Aslan had refused to drive a department vehicle for an entire year rather than subject himself to the shame of having his partner administer a breathalyzer.

"But?"

"But I still need to keep Summerfield up to date with my attendance at AA meetings, which is fine. Since I've self-identified as an alcoholic, they are required to keep tabs on me for the rest of my career." A tiny flash of hurt flitted across his face, but he got control of himself and hid the emotions behind his usual sunny persona. Aslan's alcoholism would always stain his life—or that was how he saw it. No matter how hard he tried, he would carry those darker days wherever he went.

“I’m happy for you. This is a big deal.”

“Thanks. I’m happy for me too. Mostly.” He tugged his phone out and checked the time. “I have to call Tony and let him know how it went.”

Tony, Aslan’s sponsor, was also his rock. During all his ups and downs—the Columbus incident, his probation, the stress of the job—Tony was there. They talked daily. They attended meetings together. And they worked his twelve steps vigorously.

“Call him from the car. Marney from the jewelry store left me a message this afternoon. Our rings are ready to be picked up. If we hustle, we can get there before they close.”

“That was fast.”

“She said it wouldn’t take long.”

Twenty-five minutes later, when Marney placed the newly sized rings on the counter and encouraged us to try them on to be sure they fit, I was overtaken with emotions. The chaos of the past couple of months had given the wedding a surreal, clouded effect. I was too busy to stop and let it sink in.

In less than a month, Aslan and I would be married.

It hit me all at once, and my chest tightened. Aslan had his ring on, hand extended, displaying it while I stood motionless, taking in the moment.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Put yours on.”

When I didn’t move, he picked it up and waved for my hand.



“No. You can’t put it on me until the wedding. It’s bad luck.” I had no idea if that was true, but I took the ring from his hand, laying it on the silky pillow where it had been displayed. I had to remove the engagement band before I could try on the wedding band. It saddened me that I couldn’t wear both, but I’d bought a treasure box to keep it safely inside. The wedding band, simple polished gold with intricately carved edging, easily slipped onto my finger. A perfect fit. It matched Aslan’s, and we held our hands side by side to admire them.

Aslan slipped his off first, turning it until the light caught on the engraving we’d had the jeweler put on the inside. It was our wedding date and initials. I checked mine and admired the swirling cursive, ensuring it was exactly as we’d asked.

“These look great,” Aslan told Marney. To me, he said, “I’m glad we got the wooden box for Graham.”

“Me too.”

We had shopped around for a tiny wooden box with clasps on all four sides. The lid consisted of an interlocking heart design made from various shades of wood. Inside, a velvet cushion and silky ties kept the bands firmly in place. Entrusting a six-year-old to keep our rings safe gave me heart palpitations, and ensuring they had a secure mode of transportation helped.

Aslan had assured me many times that Graham took his responsibility seriously, and under no circumstances would he do us wrong. I knew that about Graham. The kid was as OCD

as me most days, if not more, but my destructive mind needed assurance.

## Chapter 18

# Aslan

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 8TH: FIFTEEN DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



I pulled to the curb outside Torin's house and killed the engine. It was after eight on a Friday night, and every window was lit up behind the drawn curtains. Torin lived in a single-story bungalow outside of Mississauga. Earlier that week, a brand new For Sale sign had been hammered into the front lawn. After he and Allison had officially announced their engagement, they had also decided it was time to unite under one roof. They had bed-bounced for the past year, but now Torin planned to move in with his fiancée as soon as possible.

Quaid scanned the dreary night beyond the windshield. It was dark. Dense cloud cover blocked the moon. The streetlights on either side of the road cast pools of shimmering light on the wet pavement. It had been raining off and on for a few days, but as the temperature dropped below freezing that evening, the mist turned into delicate snowflakes. They danced

in the beams of light, swirling as they made their way to the ground and promptly melted.

The trees were bare, branches shivering in the wind. Winter was around the corner, howling, warning of its imminent arrival despite the calendar insisting we had thirteen days before it was official.

Quaid glanced hopefully at the sky, and even though he ordinarily loathed the cold and snow, I knew he secretly wished for a white wedding, if for no other reason than to recreate the fairy tale scene Francesca had painted at the waterfall of Strongwind Castle several weeks ago.

We tied the knot in two weeks, and the weather didn't look promising.

“There's a lot of people here,” Quaid observed.

He was right. The street was lined with parked cars on both sides.

“I'm not sure who he invited. Maybe Allison has a lot of friends.”

Quaid frowned. His tongue danced along his upper lip. Then he shifted to face me. “Are you positive this is an engagement party?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Because Costa has asked me no less than ten times this week if I was sure I was coming.”

“So?”

“That doesn’t seem odd to you? He and Torin aren’t exactly friends.”

“I guess.”

Quaid was right. The two men were only somewhat friendlier because they had agreed to be the best men at our wedding.

“Could this be Torin’s sneaky way of throwing us a bachelor party?” Quaid asked.

My brows rose as I scanned the street full of cars. “That motherfucking bastard. I don’t know. You think?”

“It’s more plausible than it being an engagement party. Think about it. They *just* got engaged *last weekend*. The party was already planned on Monday morning when they came to work. That’s when we were told about it. Doesn’t that seem fast to you?”

“It does, but Torin can be a bit spontaneous.”

Quaid dug his phone from a coat pocket. He held up a finger as he connected a call, putting it on speaker as it rang.

Ruiz answered on the third ring, a cacophony of muffled voices blending in the background. Music thumped. Laughter. “Are you here? Why are you calling me?”

“Hey, handsome,” Quaid said with a devious grin. “I have a question for you.”

“Don’t call me that.”

I smirked at the growl in Ruiz's tone. His indignation was so glaringly fake.

Quaid stared at me across the console, an abundance of love and humor in his eyes. Fucking with Ruiz was quite possibly one of his most favorite things in the world, and I loved that Ruiz played along.

"Are you listening?" Quaid asked.

"Yes. Hang on." Ruiz covered the receiver and spoke to someone else, his words too muffled to make out. Then, the line cleared again. "Are you outside?"

"I am. With Az."

"Why? Get in here."

A curtain over the front window shifted, and the shadow of a person peered out into the gloomy night.

I flashed my headlights.

"What are you doing?" Ruiz asked.

"We were just thinking how unusual it is that Torin and Allison got engaged *last weekend* and somehow had time to plan an extravagant engagement party, handing out invitations on Monday morning, less than twenty-four hours after they got back from their cabin getaway."

The background noise swelled and fell away again. Laughter continued, chatting voices, music. Ruiz breathed down the phone line, but he didn't speak.

“Costa?” Quaid said when the silence went on too long. “If this is a surprise bachelor party, you *will* be dancing with me at my wedding. To a slow song. And you will *not* worm your way out of it.”

I did all I could to contain a burst of laughter when Ruiz cursed on the other end of the line.

“Motherfucker. That piece of shit. I told him it would be me who would pay the price. I told him. Goddammit.” Ruiz lowered his voice to a rasping hiss. “This was not my idea, Quaid. Do not blame me. That’s not fair.”

“You facilitated it.”

“I fought for you.”

“You didn’t fight hard enough. You let it happen.”

“Goddammit, Quaid. He was relentless. Have you met Torin?”

Ruiz was right. When Torin set his mind to something, there was no stopping him. Poor guy got sucked in, and now he was going to pay the ultimate price.

“Better make sure to spit-polish your dancing shoes, sweetheart.”

“Please don’t do this to me.”

Quaid took far too much pride in making Ruiz uncomfortable, so I cut in. “One more question.”

“What?” Ruiz snapped.

“Did he hire strippers?”



“No. I swear to god. I put my foot down. He wanted to get both male and female strippers to make everyone happy, but I said no, absolutely not. I said it was your wedding, Quaid, and you wouldn’t want that. See? I stuck my neck out for you. He wanted naked women at your bachelor party, and I went to war for you. And if you had any idea how much I love naked women, you’d know what kind of a struggle it was to tell him to forget it.”

“Sweetheart,” Quaid said, his tone rich and syrupy, “who do you think you’re fooling? You did not sacrifice female strippers for me. You fought that battle because the idea of *male* strippers in the mix makes you want to crawl out of your skin.”

“That’s not true. I...” Ruiz growled under his breath. “I’m not going to win this, am I?”

“Nope.” Quaid popped the *P*.

“You’re going to make me dance with you, aren’t you?”

“Absolutely.”

“Doyle. Do you hear this? Aren’t you jealous?”

I snorted. “Of you? Yeah, right. You’re not exactly a threat. Actually, I’m going to ensure the whole thing gets filmed, and then I’ll play it for everyone at work. It will show your supportive side. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Motherfucker. Just get in here. We have a full house, and Torin is pacing, wondering where the hell you are.”

He hung up, and Quaid burst out laughing, a full belly eruption that made the corners of his eyes leak, leaving him short of breath and wheezing. “It’s too much fun.”

“You are so mean to him.”

“It gives me life.” He kept laughing, head tilted back, delicate creases crinkling his eyes. It was so good to see, especially after all the stress he’d been under. Since our hospital visit, the medication the doctor had given him was working wonders. He was sleeping better and having less stomach and chest pains. The test for an ulcer had come back clear, so the diagnosis was nothing more than stress-induced indigestion and acid reflux, which was now being managed.

“Ruiz has come a long way thanks to you.”

Quaid calmed, swiping tears away, and said, “Do you think I’ll be able to convince him to dance? I won’t force it. I’m not that mean.”

“Are you kidding? He’ll do it. And he’s only kicking up a fuss because it’s expected of him.”

“He’s kind of a dick like that.”

I leaned over the console and snagged Quaid by the back of the neck, bringing him in for a lingering kiss. “But I get the first dance.”

“Obviously.”

“And I’m bringing you home, in case you had fantasies about some tattooed nerdy IT guy flipping sides.”

Quaid snorted. “As if.”

I kissed him again, crawling half over the console to do it. Quaid’s hand slipped around to my ass, heaving me the rest of the way until we were crushed together on one side of the vehicle.

I broke from his mouth, and we both laughed.

“Tight fit,” he said, snaking a hand up my T-shirt, fingers tracing along my lower back.

“I could make it work.”

“Tempting, but we would end up with an audience, and you know my stance on public sex.”

“We already christened the changeroom at Homme Chic and the supply room in no man’s land.”

“Well, we’re not christening the Equinox too.”

“One of these days...”

Quaid drew me in for another kiss, and the burning heat of his seeking tongue almost undid me.

“Hey,” he said, breaking free from my mouth, “about the first dance. Do we have a song?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like, a song. You know?”

“I don’t.”

“We need a first dance song.”

“I’m sure the DJ’s got us covered.”

“So you don’t have an opinion?”

“No. Should I?”

“Never mind.”

I felt like I was missing something, but his question reminded me of a conversation I’d had with my sister. “Speaking of dances at the wedding, Amelia wanted me to ask you something.”

“What’s that?” His fingers dipped down the back of my pants, not far but enough to graze the top of my ass crack.

“Traditionally, the groom’s parents get a dance, right?”

Like ice water thrown on a bonfire, the flames smoldered in Quaid’s eyes and went out. His smile dimmed, and he removed his hand from my pants, shoving me back to my side of the vehicle.

“True.” I heard the bitter edge in his tone. I was treading into dangerous waters. Some traditional wedding stuff wasn’t meant to be, and this had been crossed off his list from the start. It unearthed old hurts from his childhood.

“Do you think your dad might want to have Amelia as a partner for that dance? You know, since...” How did I end that sentence? Since your mom is dead? Since your mom abandoned you and probably wouldn’t have come to your wedding even if she was alive? Since it’s just your dad and no other relatives coming?

Amelia’s offer was kind, but I’d been struggling to find a good time to bring it up.

Quaid stared out the windshield, lost in his head. A sad smile hung on his lips when he faced me. “I think Dad would like that very much.”

“Good. I’ll let her know.”

Quaid peered at the brightly lit house. “I guess we’re having a bachelor party.”

I grinned. “It won’t be so bad.”

“Says Mr. Social Butterfly.”

“You’ll be fine, and before you take a notion on playing it straight tonight—”

Quaid snorted. “I assure you I never play it straight.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

He smirked and reached for my hand. “What were you going to say?”

“Knowing Torin, there will be an abundance of alcohol—”

“He’s not very supportive.”

“And you’re fine to drink and don’t need to worry about me having an issue. I’ll DD.”

Again, Quaid’s smile fell. “That’s not fair.”

I brought his hand to my mouth and kissed his knuckles. “It is what it is, and I want you to have fun. Annoy the fuck out of Ruiz and give my partner shit all you want, but for one night, try to forget about the wedding and the stress at work and have a good time.”

“Did you know about this?”

“No.”

“You swear?”

“I swear.”

He sighed. “All right. Let’s go, but don’t abandon me.”

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Upon entering Torin’s house, we were greeted by a crowd of at least a dozen people. It looked like my idiot partner had invited several male detectives from both our departments, a handful of mutual friends, and a few family members from my side—including a close cousin and my brother-in-law, Chris.

A cheer went up when we walked through the front door. People clinked glasses and raised beer bottles, shouting congratulations and warm greetings. Quaid clung to my side. He wasn’t a huge fan of large gatherings, least of all something that focused on him as the man of honor.

Torin, who had been busy chatting with Chris, raised his glass and shouted. “Fucking finally. The future grooms have arrived. Let the festivities begin.”

Another whooping cheer rose.

I pointed at my far too smug partner and gave him a mock scowl, raising my voice. “You are a lying piece of shit.”

Torin and several other people laughed.

“Come on,” Torin whined. “You can’t get hitched and not have a bachelor party.” To Quaid, he said, “And relax, lover boy, no strippers. I promise. But I ensured everyone here understood *you* were the reason it wasn’t happening.”

Quaid sneered—mostly for effect—as everyone smirked and laughed at Torin’s comment.

I turned to my fiancé as he removed his coat and muttered death threats under his breath.

“Please don’t kill him. He means well.”

“He’s an idiot.”

“I never said he wasn’t. In fact, I agree.”

The idiot made his way toward us and greeted me with a backslapping bro hug. “Are you pissed?” Torin asked when he pulled away.

“Nah. But you’re still a dick. This was supposed to be an engagement party.”

“*Pff*. As if. Allison needs way more time to make that happen.”

Torin offered a hand to Quaid. When Quaid took it, intent on shaking, Torin pulled him in for a backslapping hug as well, whispering loud enough I heard. “Relax, lover boy. I behaved. It’s all low-key. We’re having a barbecue, some card games later on, and no naked dancers, male or female.”

Quaid, uncomfortable with Torin’s bro hug, pulled back and arched a concerned brow. “A barbecue?”

“Dude,” Torin pointed, “your face is doing a thing.”

Quaid frowned. “It is not.”

“Is so. And yes, a barbecue, but don’t worry, your other boyfriend made me buy chicken and veggies, informing me if I subjected you to beef or steak, it could mean my balls.”

Quaid tilted his head. “I’m sorry. My *other* boyfriend?”

“The tattooed freak with a chip on his shoulder.”

I smothered a chuckle. Torin was lucky Quaid didn’t deck him. But instead, Quaid smiled almost smugly. “Ahh, yes. Him. He’s curiously protective of me. I suppose you’re forgiven.”

Torin smirked. “See? I ain’t so bad. I listen when it’s important. You might even decide to like me one day, Valor. I think, deep, deep down, you don’t really hate me like you claim.”

“Very, very, *very* deep down. I somewhat tolerate you.”

“Meh.” Torin shrugged. “Good enough for me. Do you want a drink? I’ve got beer and a whole shit load of the hard stuff. Not for him. He can have pop, water, or that kiddy juice he likes.” Torin thumbed at me.

I felt the hesitation in Quaid and bumped his arm.

“Sure,” he said reluctantly.

Before Torin could ask what he wanted, Ruiz showed up and passed a beer bottle to Quaid. I wasn’t sure if Quaid was fond



of beer, but he accepted it with a smile. “Thank you, *my other boyfriend.*”

Ruiz’s grin turned into a deep frown. “Excuse me?”

Quaid sipped the beer, playing the innocent card as he rocked on his heels and shrugged.

Torin and I snorted.

Ruiz studied us all and growled under his breath, “I hate all of you.” Zeroing in on Torin, he added, “You most of all.”

Someone called Torin from the kitchen. My smug partner punched Ruiz’s shoulder. “You’re such a lug. You and Valor have a cutesy bromance, and you know it. Might as well accept it.”

Torin dodged a slap that would have beamed him across the head as he ducked away, laughing.

To me, Ruiz said, “Your partner is an idiot.”

“That seems to be the consensus.”

To Quaid, he said, “We do *not* have a bromance.”

Quaid dramatically sighed. “Okay, darlin’. Whatever you say.”

“Fuck’s sake,” Ruiz muttered under his breath before taking a deep drink from his beer bottle.

I scanned the main living room, where most people had gathered. Classic rock played from a speaker system loud enough people had to raise their voices to be heard.

A burly man talking to my brother-in-law near the TV caught my eye. “Shit. Tony’s here.” I nudged Quaid. “I’m going to go say hi.”

I half expected Quaid to follow, but he stayed back. Ruiz was likely the only person in the room outside me he felt comfortable with. And Ruiz, despite the constant pokes and jabs at his fragile heterosexuality, enjoyed Quaid’s company too. They were an odd pair.

I weaved through the crowd to say hi to my sponsor, greeting people along the way; Isaac Piggot, a fellow homicide detective I’d known for years; Erik Travolta, an MPU detective and Allison Bright’s partner; Miles Horne, another MPU detective, a man with a propensity to sing operatically in the morning according to Quaid—I didn’t know him well, but he was apparently a decent guy; Stone Kibbler, a personal trainer and mutual buddy who Torin and I had worked with off and on at the gym; and many more familiar faces.

I smacked Tony on the back as I moved in beside him. “Hey, stranger. What the hell are you doing here? Thought you didn’t do parties anymore.”

Tony was a heavysset guy in his late fifties, but decades of smoking cigarettes and a youth of severe alcohol and drug abuse had left its mark. He might have had twenty-plus years of sobriety under his belt, but Tony wore the scars of addiction on the surface. His graying hair was bristly and unkempt. It hung to his shoulders when he didn’t tie it back. A rat’s nest

beard grew wild on his face and hung almost to midchest. His skin was weathered and pockmarked.

“My man.” Tony grabbed me in a crushing bear hug, squeezing me until it was hard to breathe. The scent of stale cigarettes and faint body odor enveloped me. We slapped backs and hung on an extra second. Tony had saved my life. Without him by my side, cheering me on every day, I might never have found the strength to stay sober.

“How could I say no to a bachelor shindig?” Tony asked, pulling back. “Your buddy told me there’d be free burgers and all the Diet Coke I could handle.” Tony patted his wide belly with a grin. “Think he’s trying to tell me something?”

I chuckled. “You know, this is Torin we’re talking about, so I couldn’t tell you. But I think you’re handsome as ever just the way you are.”

Tony roared with laughter, slapping my shoulder. It turned into a raspy smoker’s cough before it died off. “You’re so full of shit, Doyle. I’m about as handsome as a monkey’s hind end. But if drinking Diet Coke will fix the ugly, maybe I’ll try it.”

More laughter ensued.

My brother-in-law hung back as Tony and I spoke, but he didn’t leave. I gave him a nod. “Hey, Chris. I see you met my sponsor.”

“I did. Nice guy.”

“Bah.” Tony waved him off. “I’m a crusty old bastard.”

“A crusty old bastard who’s kept me on my feet these past two years.” I squeezed Tony’s shoulder.

“You did that yourself.”

At no time before that night had I shared with Chris that I attended AA or had a sponsor, but I was sure my sister had brought it up. Amelia had been advocating for my sobriety for almost two years, and although it had taken time, Chris was finally letting the past go. I couldn’t blame him for holding a grudge. He was protective of his family, and I’d been a real asshole. Part of recovery included making amends with the people I’d hurt, and Chris was one of them. It had been slow going, but we were getting there.

“I’m glad you both could make it,” I said. “Quaid and I were kept in the dark, so it’s a bit of a surprise.”

“So I heard.” Chris subtly abandoned the beer he’d been nursing on a nearby table, moving to block it with his body. I could hear Amelia preaching in his ear about showing support and not waving alcohol in my face.

“I heard Quaid was pretty adamant about not having a bachelor party,” Chris said. “Torin said no less than ten times tonight that Quaid would probably kill him.”

I chuckled. “Quaid’s socially introverted, and my partner is exactly the opposite. They don’t always see eye to eye. I think Quaid was more concerned about what Torin might subject him to.”

“Strippers?”

“Strippers.”

Chris smirked as he glanced across the room. “He seems to be doing okay.”

I peered over my shoulder and found Quaid chatting with Erik Travolta. Erik was as stolid and reserved as Quaid most days. I had always wondered why they weren’t better friends. Erik was older by a dozen years or so, but they shared a similar personality.

“I was telling your brother-in-law about that problem I was having with my truck,” Tony said, his voice like gravel. “Said he might know what’s wrong.”

“Chris is a military field mechanic. If anyone can help you out, it’ll be him.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“I told Tony to get my address and number from you and I’d sort him out.”

“Definitely.”

At that moment, Torin appeared in the doorway from the kitchen, shouting to get everyone’s attention. “Food is off the grill. Come get it while it’s hot. I don’t want any leftovers, so feast away to your heart’s content.”

Tony, Chris, and I moved with the crowd toward the kitchen. Glancing back, I wasn’t surprised to see Quaid and Erik still in a quiet corner, chatting and ignoring the call to eat.

With the help of a mutual friend, Torin had barbecued burgers, sausages, hot dogs, chicken, veggie skewers, potatoes, and corn on the cob. Allison had prepared umpteen different salads for the occasion too, and they were all laid out on the counter.

Chris clapped my shoulder as I stacked two thick beef patties on a bun and topped it with lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, pickles, onions, and all the sauces. “There’s pop and bottles of water in the fridge. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Sure. Coke is good.”

To my plate, I added a sausage and bun, dressed with fried onions and mustard, potato salad, macaroni salad, green salad, and coleslaw. I only stopped when I ran out of room.

Chris returned from the fridge and tried to hand me a Coke. His plate was full too, and I noticed he’d grabbed himself a pop instead of a new beer. The cans were stacked one on top of the other.

“Can you hold it for a second?” I set my plate in a safe place on the counter. “If I don’t get Quaid food, he will do his best to avoid the kitchen at all costs.”

Chris smirked. “I hear he’s a bit of a food connoisseur.”

I snorted. “Connoisseur? Not quite. Quaid is one step away from having an eating disorder. And he would sneer at me for saying that, but it’s true. He’s extremely picky and can’t see past sodium, fat, and cholesterol content when he eats. It’s almost debilitating.”

Chris looked concerned. “I didn’t know it was that bad.”

“Some days are worse than others. At the moment, I have a handle on it.”

I was used to Quaid’s food quirks and had seen progress in my obnoxiously finicky fiancé’s eating habits over the past few weeks. He kicked up a fuss, but he gave in and ate with less need for excessive encouragement—after he got all his bitching out. The hospital scare had been effective. Hopefully, therapy would help him get over this hump.

Taking a clean paper plate, I topped it with two veggie skewers—filled with zucchini, mushrooms, peppers, and onions—a juicy piece of grilled chicken—coated with a thick layer of barbecue sauce, which was sure to make him cringe, but whatever—and a heap of green salad. I puzzled over the macaroni and potato salads, debating which was the lesser of the two evils. Quaid needed a carb. They both had a cream base and would make his eye twitch. Eenie meenie... Potato. I made sure I didn’t add too much, knowing the more I put on his plate, the less inclined he would be to try it. I’d learned a few tricks this past year.

Cautiously, I balanced my plate in one hand and Quaid’s in the other. There was a serious weight imbalance, and I laughed to myself. I glanced at Chris, who had his own plate and our drinks in hand.

“That’s it?” he asked.

“If Quaid eats half of this, I’ll consider it a good day.”

Chris followed me as I sought Quaid, finding him exactly where I left him, chatting with Erik near the window. He caught sight of my approach, noted what I carried, and his nose wrinkled of its own volition.

I chuckled. “Stop sneering. I come bearing gifts.”

Quaid took the plate, examined it, then studied the mountain on mine. “You’re disgusting. There’s enough food on your plate for three people. And seriously, Az, two patties on your burger? That’s just doubling your cholesterol and fat intake.”

Erik did his best to contain a smirk.

“Yes, two patties. It’s a double-decker. And I’m going to eat every bite.” I tapped the side of Quaid’s paper plate with my plastic fork. “As are you. So get going.”

Chris handed me my Coke and nodded a greeting to Quaid and Erik.

“Hi, Chris,” Quaid said, barely sparing him a glance since he was too busy picking his meal apart.

Erik bowed out, saying he was going to get something to eat. “We’ll chat later,” he said, brushing a hand over Quaid’s shoulder as he left.

“What kind of dressing is on the salad?” Quaid asked, poking a tomato with his fork and holding it up to scrutinize it.

“I don’t know. It’s a vinaigrette or something.”

“Or something?” He sniffed it.



“I didn’t read the bottle. I know you don’t like the creamy stuff”—I cleared my throat—“on your food at least, so I chose the other one.”

Quaid’s interest moved from the tomato on his fork to me, and he narrowed his eyes.

I smirked and wiggled my brows. “What?”

“Pig,” Quaid mouthed.

I winked. “I didn’t say anything that wasn’t true.”

Oblivious to the innuendo—or purposefully ignoring it—Chris worked his way through his macaroni salad.

Quaid returned to thoroughly examining his plate. “Is this bacon in the potato salad?”

“Probably.”

“I don’t like bacon.”

“Yes, you do. It offends you, but deep down, you like it.”

Another sneer, but I was right. If I fried bacon at home, he snuck the odd piece off my plate.

“Why is my chicken drowning in barbecue sauce?”

“Because without it, it would be a dry hunk of sadness, and this is a happy affair, so we can’t have that. Here, wanna try this instead?” I held my overly dressed sausage on a bun to his mouth. It was shiny with grease.

Flinching back, Quaid pressed his lips together. The fiery pits of hell burned from his eyes, but a twitch in his lips hinted at a suppressed smile. “You’re disgusting.”

I chuckled, took an enormous bite of the sausage, and spoke with my mouth full, “Eat your food, Quaid. I’m not playing games.”

“Pig,” he muttered again with no heat.

In the end, Quaid picked up one of the veggie skewers and pulled a grilled mushroom off the end with his teeth. It was likely the least offensive thing on his plate, but once he started, he ate everything I’d served him, including the potato salad with bacon.

*Score one for the Azinator!*

## Chapter 19

# Quaid



The bachelor party went long into the night. At one point, Torin pulled out a few card tables and arranged them around the living room for a poker tournament. The recap of a hockey game played on TSN, muted so a person needed to read the captions across the bottom of the screen if they wanted to know what was being said—I couldn't care less. The music was louder than was comfortable, and someone had changed it from my preferred classic rock to nineties grunge. The next step would be Aslan's vile metal bands. Then it would be time to go home.

I wasn't a poker player, so I'd opted out, happy to watch others play as I drifted around the room, chatting with a handful of people I knew from work. Aslan was having a blast. He was a huge fan of friendly competition and had joined Ruiz, Torin, and Chris at a square table where a rambunctious poker game was taking place.

Their conversation had a tendency to dissolve into crude banter and tasteless jokes. By their sixth or seventh hand, any attempt to play seriously had gone out the window. If they weren't stuffing their faces with potato chips, they were throwing them at each other. It baffled me how grown men tended to regress to their preteen years when they got together. When I caught Ruiz using the phrase "that's what she said" more than once, I groaned and wondered at my choice of friends.

Torin must have robbed a piggy bank or told everyone to bring loose change since the groups were using nickels and dimes instead of poker chips. More than a few coins had been flicked with a snap across the table, beaming fellow players in the head and causing an uproar of laughter and play fighting.

I'd always felt uncomfortable in these types of crowds. It reminded me too much of high school and the cliques I'd never been invited to join. Jocks being jocks, and me, the nerdy outcast, hovering on the perimeter of the room, unsure how to fit in, knowing if I tried, I would do it wrong.

But this wasn't high school, and if I wanted to be part of their ridiculous fun, I would be welcome—teased, no doubt, but welcome.

Aslan and Chris nursed sweating bottles of water while Ruiz and Torin were sucking back beers at a fantastic rate. Both grew louder and more obnoxious the more they consumed. I'd had a few drinks throughout the evening, but my fourth beer had become more of a prop. I'd barely finished half of it

before it had gone warm. Instead of abandoning it on a side table or in the kitchen, I kept it in hand, fearing if I put it down, someone might bring me a fresh one, and I didn't want to drink more.

It bothered me more than it did Aslan.

Tony and Erik had left early, so I had no one I felt especially comfortable socializing with. Instead, I feigned interest in the hockey game recap until Aslan's cousin, who I didn't know, asked if I'd seen the wicked play in the third period. I muttered I hadn't and drifted elsewhere lest my limited hockey knowledge be questioned.

A long table had been pushed against the wall. I walked its length. On it was a display of fancy liquors, gift baskets full of gimmicky items, and envelopes containing gift cards—to baseball games at the Rogers Center, dinners at fancy steak restaurants, or rounds of golf at a nearby country club I'd only heard talked about but never visited. Torin had set up a silent auction, and people had spent all night outrageously upping the bids to win prizes worth a fraction of the swollen sums they promised to pay.

Torin might be an idiot who drove me up the wall most days, but deep down, he had a heart of gold. *All funds from the silent auction are to help pay for your wedding*, he'd said. *That's why you have a bachelor party, Valor*. He'd flicked my ear after his explanation and walked away.

Eventually, I moved in behind Aslan and wrapped my arms around his neck, bending enough to rest my chin on his

shoulder and watch their game. He clasped my hands and pressed them against his chest as he tipped his head to the side and kissed my cheek.

“Hey, hot stuff. How are you doing?”

“I’m all right. How’s the game?”

“A joke. This one has a poker face like you wouldn’t believe.” He pointed at Chris, who had a mountainous pile of coins in front of him and a military-trained impassive countenance. “And these two idiots are too drunk to be of any concern.” He gestured at Torin and Ruiz. The former wore a giddy grin as he rearranged the cards he’d been dealt like a kid readying to play go fish. Even I could tell he was pleased with his hand. Ruiz peeked over the top of his cards with a wily sparkle in his dark eyes.

I angled my beer bottle toward Ruiz. “That one’s trouble. Keep an eye on him.”

“Don’t I know it.”

Ruiz narrowed his eyes. “No cheating, Doyle,” he said. “Valor’s not allowed to help.”

“I’m not helping. Chill. Here. Finish this for me. I don’t want it.” I offered him my beer.

I didn’t expect Ruiz to take it, but after a millisecond of contemplation, he shrugged and snapped it from my hand. One swig, and he pitched a face. “Oh my god. It’s piss warm. The fuck?”

I smirked. “Sorry.”

Aslan chuckled, his shoulders bouncing under me. “I thought you’d be more concerned about catching Quaid’s cooties.”

“Hey.” I fake bit Aslan’s neck, snarling. “I don’t have cooties.”

“Mmhmm.” He tipped his head to let me further assault his neck, which I did.

I nipped playfully for another second as Ruiz finished dealing the next round. My warm beer got abandoned with the growing pile of empties.

When Aslan collected his cards and fanned them out, I studied them. A pair of Jacks—heart and diamond—an eight of clubs, a three of diamonds, and a ten of spades. Nothing spectacular.

“Thoughts? Opinions?” he asked, waving them in my face.

“No. I’m better at chess.”

Aslan chuckled. “Are you sure about that? Graham may not agree.”

I bit him again—harder—making him squawk. After a round of betting, Aslan tossed the eight, three, and ten at Ruiz, picking up his new cards when they were delivered, ones that weren’t any better. He sighed and muttered under his breath. Meanwhile, Torin was practically bouncing in his seat.

I whispered in Aslan’s ear. “I suggest you fold.”

Ruiz snapped his fingers and pointed at me. “Stop helping.”

I made a motion of zipping my lips.



The game progressed, and I remained hanging around Aslan's neck, watching.

"Why don't you pull up a chair?" Aslan asked after the hand ended.

"I'm good. Do you need me to move? Am I distracting?"

"No. I like wearing you like a scarf." He rubbed my arm and stole another sideways kiss. "You could sit on my lap."

I snorted. "No, but thank you." I didn't trust his wandering hands not to do things they shouldn't under the table where people couldn't see. Aslan was in a mood, and when he was like this, he got devilish and unpredictable.

The men played, and I lingered, dragging my fingers through Aslan's hair, massaging his scalp, nuzzling his cheek, and planting the odd kiss on his temple or jaw. I must have been distracting since Torin had to keep reminding Aslan to play when it was his turn.

"Valor!" Torin shouted after the third time he'd had to kick Aslan to get his attention. "Quit sexing him up. We're trying to play a game here, and you're turning him stupid."

"Maybe sexing him up is my goal and I want him to stop playing and take me home to bed. It's late," I whispered in Aslan's ear. "And I'd love to get you naked and do nasty things to you."

Aslan hummed and tipped his head back, peering at me upside down. "I'm one hundred percent on board with that plan. One more round?"

“Okay.” We shared an upside-down Spider-Man kiss, and Torin and Ruiz interjected their opinions.

I let Aslan play his other round uninterrupted. When he shoved all his coins to the middle of the table and called with only a pair of sixes, ace high, I figured he was throwing in the towel so we could split. Sex was a huge incentive for Aslan, and it rarely failed to get him moving. I had no shame.

His plan backfired, though, and instead of losing, he took Ruiz out of the game and ended up with a mess of coins in front of him equal to Chris’s stack.

“Ah, fuck it,” Ruiz said, shoving away from the table. “I’m done with you assholes anyhow.” He collected his and Torin’s accumulated empties and headed to the kitchen to dispose of them.

Torin didn’t have many coins left, so I figured another hand or two would wipe him out. Then Aslan would sacrifice his pile of winnings to Chris. So one more hand had turned to two or three. That was fine. He could have his fun.

I followed Ruiz into the kitchen and found him busy fitting the empties into the case by the garage door. “Are you sticking around?” I asked, leaning against the counter.

“Nah, I should probably call it a night. I told Tia I’d be home by midnight, and it’s almost one.”

“Oops. Will you be in shit?”

“It’s fine. But she won’t let me sleep in, nor will she feel sorry for me. I’m on kid duty in the morning, so I’m going to

regret the eight or ten beers I drank come six a.m.”

I couldn't help but smile at his upcoming misery.

“Wipe that smirk off your face. Your day will come.”

It would, and possibly sooner than I expected. I was still reeling after Aslan had brought up having kids the other day. It had always been a background thought, but neither of us had voiced it before now. It seemed fast, but time was getting away from us. Aslan was already in his forties, and I was only a stone's throw away. I wanted to have stamina when chasing after a toddler.

“Do you need a ride home?” I asked when Ruiz slumped against the counter opposite me. “Az is DD. He won't mind.”

“Nah. I'm out of the way. I'll call an Uber. No big deal.” He yawned and gave his head a shake like he was trying to wake himself up. “Did you have an okay night? It wasn't too much?”

“It was nice, actually. Low-key like Torin promised.”

“Good. I tried to keep him in line.”

“You mean you stood up for me.”

“Don't make it a thing.”

I chuckled. “Never.” A pause ensued before I added, “I appreciate it. You looking out for me.”

Ruiz glanced around, feigning interest in Torin's kitchen decor. He didn't do well with sentimentality. “Are you ready

for tomorrow afternoon?” he asked, changing the subject as I anticipated he might.

“I guess. Az and I aren’t hanging around long. We have a final fitting for our tuxes at two, so we’re just making an appearance. Exchanging gifts and getting the hell out.”

The following day was Saturday and our official Secret Santa gift exchange. Our superior officers had booked a restaurant downtown, and our final gathering was also doubling as our staff Christmas party. I wasn’t exactly keen on being there, so the tux fitting had been a welcome excuse to bail early.

I’d puzzled over the gift for many days and eventually found something I thought might be suitable for Ruiz’s cousin, who I barely knew and wasn’t sure I liked—albeit maybe I wasn’t being fair. Tallus’s relationship with Ruiz wasn’t my problem. I hoped they could work things out one day because I firmly believe Ruiz deserved a second chance.

“Did you get your present bought?” I asked.

“I did. It was easy.”

“And you still aren’t telling me who you got?”

Ruiz smirked. “Actually... I have a proposition for you.”

“You’re propositioning me? *Tsk tsk*. I should warn you. I’m engaged.” I wagged my ring finger, showing off the white gold band.

“Ha, ha.” Ruiz deadpanned. “I’m serious. I’ve been thinking. What if we switched?”

“Switched?”

“Traded people.”

“Um... the gift exchange is tomorrow. Isn't it kind of late for that? I already bought something for Tallus, and I don't even know who you have.”

“I have Jordyn. She was a piece of cake. I knew all about her thanks to you. I got her two courtside tickets to a Raptors game and VIP passes for a meet and greet afterward. A couple of weeks back, I overheard her telling someone she and the girlfriend are huge fans.”

“Basketball fans? Really? I didn't know that. Wait. Did you say VIP tickets? That would cost a fortune.”

“Tia has connections at work, so she hooked me up. Didn't cost too much. A smidgen outside our limit but not excessively. Anyhow, you could surprise Jordyn with two amazing tickets to a game, and I could maybe... give Tallus whatever you got him. It would give me an excuse to talk to him again, and unless he's a real dick, he can't exactly brush me off when I'm giving him a present. At least not immediately.”

I stared at Ruiz, whose arms were crossed tightly over his chest, practically hugging himself. When he caught me staring, he dropped eye contact. His discomfort was in the red zone. The gesture might not get him anywhere with Tallus if Tallus couldn't let go of the hurts from his past, but it was something. Ruiz was thinking outside the box, trying to regain his footing

with a family member he'd wronged. He didn't know how to go about it, so he was scrambling. The effort was admirable.

"Okay," I said, trying not to let pity leak into my tone. "We can do that. It's a great idea, and maybe it will help. But... I hate to take credit for VIP passes to a Raptors game."

"It's nothing. Are you sure?" He looked hopeful.

"Yeah. Absolutely."

"Might do nothing more than irritate him, but I have to try, right?"

"It's a good plan."

"So what did I get him?"

"Theater tickets to a weekend compilation of Agatha Christie plays. It's a Friday, Saturday night, and Sunday matinee event. There's a trendy theater on the west end putting them on. Three different shows. The tickets came with a pass to a whodunnit evening event after the Friday night performance." I waved a hand. "I don't know what you call it. Like a murder mystery cocktail thing. Maybe it's dumb, but Tallus strikes me as the theater type—and not because he's gay. I just get a vibe. I've also pegged him as being a bit of an armchair detective, so I figured, why not? Maybe it's dumb. You don't have to trade if you think it's a shit present."

"It's not. It sounds like something he'd like. He did drama in high school. Acted in a few plays. Made his dad crazy. Do you want to meet outside the restaurant tomorrow to switch gifts?"

"Sure. I'll text you."

“Cool.”

“On that note...” I smirked. “And since you’re being forthcoming and I’m doing you a huge favor, any chance you wanna tell me who Az got?”

“Not on your life.”

“Oh, come on, Costa, pleeease.” I dragged it out on a long whine.

“Begging will get you nowhere.”

“You suck.” I kicked out a foot, intending to nail him in the shin.

He dodged me with ease. “Sorry to disappoint, *sweetcheeks*, but I draw the line at flirting. Sucking is not in my repertoire of activities I enjoy.”

I gasped and pressed a hand to my chest. “Costa Ruiz. Did you just admit to flirting with me? Did you just call me sweetcheeks? Holy crap, I think I came in my pants.”

Ruiz groaned and scrubbed his face. “God help me. Why are you like this?” But he was laughing behind his hands, and when he peeked up, and we made eye contact, it set us both off.

Aslan and Torin came into the kitchen a short time later. Aslan scooted up beside me and dragged me into his arms. “Ready to split?”

“Probably should. Ruiz is flirting with me and calling me cutesy names that are making my heart flutter. I can hardly

contain myself.”

“Is he now? Can’t have that.” Aslan captured my mouth in a kiss, and it was hot, heavy, and... claiming. He pressed me against the counter, wedged a thigh between my legs, and applied pressure to my interested groin.

I grunted and tried to get away, but he wasn’t having it.

“Az?” I tried to say.

Aslan growled deeper and shut me up by shoving his tongue halfway down my throat. I had the feeling he was ten seconds from laying me out on the counter and devouring me like Thanksgiving dinner.

“All right, all right. Enough,” Torin yelled. “Jesus. Go home. Both of ya. This is my kitchen for fuck’s sake, and we don’t need a show.”

Chuckling, Aslan pulled back. My skin tingled and burned. Humor and a healthy dose of hunger lingered in his eyes as he stared at my mouth. “I’m not done with you.”

“Good,” I breathed.

But any longer and I’d have been embarrassingly hard and unable to hide it. As it was, he’d conjured a decent semi that was making me uncomfortable. We needed to go home.

Aslan, proud of what he’d accomplished with a single kiss, strutted toward the door to the kitchen but stopped in front of Ruiz, patting his cheek. “I know you think you’re a bad boy with your snappy attitude and your ink, but you aren’t man enough for him.”



Ruiz chuckled. “On this, we can agree. He’s all yours.”

“Damn right.”

There was no animosity between them, only good humor. They bumped shoulders, and Ruiz followed Aslan to the front door, the pair of them laughing.

We collected our coats. Aslan double-checked if Ruiz wanted a ride, and we all wandered out on the front stoop. The air was refreshingly cool after being stuck inside a stuffy, overly warm house all night. The rain had officially turned to snow, falling in thick flakes, dusting the grass, gathering on cars, but melting when it hit the pavement.

I tipped my face to the sky and watched it dance and swirl against the night. It was mesmerizing, and a small part of me hoped and prayed we’d have a white wedding.

## Chapter 20

# Quaid

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 9TH: FOURTEEN DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



**W**e got out of the car into a blustery winter-like day. Minimal snow had fallen overnight, but the temperature had plummeted, so traces remained, swept along the sides of buildings and dusting the curbs, blown there by the gusty wind that came out of the north.

I'd dug my wool coat from the closet before leaving the house and regretted not finding my gloves too. It was freezing.

"Where's your gift?" I asked, bouncing on my toes and hunching my shoulders near my ears to stay warm.

Aslan was emptyhanded, leather jacket undone like he was impervious to the weather.

"I've got it."

"Where?"

He flipped open the side of his leather jacket, displaying the inside pocket where the top of an envelope peeked out.

I sprang into action, making a grab for it, but Aslan caught my arm at the last minute and maneuvered me in a skillful sweep until my wrist was halfway up my back and I was pressed against the Equinox. His breath ghosted my ear. “Nice try, hot stuff. You’re slick, but you’re not that slick.”

“Your caginess is annoying.”

“Your impertinence is astounding.”

“You can’t even spell impertinence.”

He laughed, crushed me harder against the vehicle, and growled, “Watch yourself, Valor. I know how to bring you to your knees.”

Aslan kissed my ear and released me. Facing him, sneering ineffectively—mostly because it came with a side smile—I popped the collar on my jacket and tucked my chin. “Just tell me, and I’ll stop being so irritating.”

“If only it were that easy.”

*The face* wasn’t working. Nothing was working. I gave up. In less than an hour, I’d know. Scanning the parking lot, I dug my phone from a pocket and checked the time. “Ruiz should be here any minute.”

“He knows I’m freezing my ass off waiting for him, right?”

“You could do up your jacket.”

Aslan knocked my foot as I typed a quick text with numb fingers to Ruiz, asking if he'd be long.

When I'd explained our plan to Aslan, he'd gotten caught up on the VIP Raptors tickets. Aslan was only passively interested in sports and rarely watched a game—be it hockey, baseball, basketball, or other—but he wasn't naive enough to not understand the significance of such a gift.

I didn't get a response to my message and was about to suggest we wait inside—the howling wind bit aggressively at my ears—when Ruiz pulled in and found parking a few spaces down from Aslan's Equinox.

He joined us, sharing a mixed handshake bro hug with Aslan—a macho exchange that always made me roll my eyes—and offered me a tip of the head. My poor, emotionally crippled Ruiz still avoided physical contact with me at all costs. Aslan claimed it was because he was still navigating the proper way to have a gay bestie without giving me the wrong idea. His analysis made me shake my head because it sounded sadly accurate.

Ruiz and I exchanged envelopes—gone were the days of presents that weren't gift cards—and both peeked inside to check the contents. “You're sure this is okay?” he asked.

“Absolutely. Are you?”

“Can't hurt, right?”

“Are we good?” Aslan asked, glancing between us. “I'm freezing my nuts off. If you two wanna chitchat, we can do it

inside.”

“We’re good.”

The three of us headed toward the front of the restaurant. The department had reserved a party room for the event, and a freckle-faced waitress with oily skin and wary eyes who couldn’t have been more than nineteen showed us the way. It was busy. Several long tables had been arranged side by side, and dozens of people filled the chairs, chatting, already with midafternoon drinks lined up.

The staff sergeants were all gathered in one spot, and the seats surrounding them were still available. No one wanted to crowd in beside the bosses.

Aslan took my hand and guided me toward Torin and Allison on the far lefthand side of the room. They had saved us a couple of seats, and Torin was waving us over. I snagged Ruiz’s jacket and dragged him after us. We could wedge in an extra chair if we had to, but I wasn’t abandoning him. Not that he wasn’t far more social than me and would be fine on his own.

Aslan sat beside Torin, and I let Ruiz have the other seat while I found a stool in the corner and dragged it over, wedging myself between the two. We had a quarter of an hour before Aslan and I had to take off, so we didn’t plan on ordering food.

“How was six a.m. kid duty?” I asked Ruiz when he ordered himself an ice water instead of a beer like half the other people in attendance.

“Painful. I managed to convince them to lie with me on the couch and watch *Frozen* while I snoozed.”

“How did that work for you?”

“Not well. They kept slapping my face and yanking my nose, telling me to ‘Sing, Daddy, sing.’ I hate *Frozen*. I hate Disney. I hate every cartoon known to mankind.”

“But you sang.”

“I sang every fucking word. In falsetto.”

I chuckled, jabbing him with an elbow. “You’re a squishy marshmallow inside.”

“Shut up, Valor.”

For all Ruiz acted rough and tough, he was an amazing dad. He would turn the world inside out for his kids. And because I didn’t have a death wish, I refrained from pointing out the pale pink nail polish I’d noticed on three of his fingers. Either he’d forgotten about it or missed it when he took off the rest.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Inspector Monica Lassaline stood and called for order.

The hubbub died.

“Good afternoon, everyone. Boy, it’s good to see so many of you all in the same room, happy and chatting and sharing drinks. Thank you for coming, and thank you for indulging us in this new attempt at bonding our units. I think it’s been a great success. I know some of you thought a department-wide Secret Santa was frustrating or unnecessary, but I disagree. We

spend a lot of time working alongside one another, but rarely do we find the time to properly get to know the man or woman in the office next door. I hope the mandatory Saturday gatherings encouraged new friendships and gave you a greater understanding of your fellow comrades.”

Lassaline smiled and glanced around, meeting the gazes of several people and taking in the gathered groups. “But I’m sure you don’t want to listen to me yammer on. So, without further ado, let’s get to the gift distribution. Then we can order food and enjoy the afternoon. The department will pick up the tab, but you are responsible for your alcoholic beverages.” She glanced down at the man seated beside her. “Edwards, do you want to take over?”

Hank Edwards, staff sergeant for MPU and my boss, stood and cleared his throat. “I think everyone wants to get to the fun first before we fill our faces. We considered a few ways to do this but ultimately decided a bit of chaos was preferable to structure. Plus, with so many of us, we were afraid we might be here all day if we did this one gift at a time. So, on that note, the room is expansive enough we’d like to encourage you to get up, stretch your legs, and mingle. Deliver your gifts, chat with new friends, and in twenty or so minutes, we’ll return to our seats and worry about food.” He waved a hand, encouraging us to commence.

Allison had a gift bag with tissue paper bursting from the top, but Torin clung to an envelope like the rest of us. We stood, glancing around at the ensuing chaos as people moved about and sought their Secret Santas.



As I turned to Aslan to ask him where he wanted to begin, he presented his envelope, decorated with hand-drawn hearts in red pen. The words *To my gorgeous future husband* were scrawled on the front.

“Surprise.” His smile cut grooves into his unshaven cheeks.

I narrowed my eyes, smirking as I snapped the envelope from his hand. Then I smacked him with it. “You did not get my name.”

Aslan beamed. “No, but I have my ways. A little perseverance, a steady inquisition, a compelling bribe, and voilà.” He flicked the envelope. “Merry Christmas, handsome.”

“That’s cheating.”

“Did you and Ruiz not just exchange Secret Santa gifts in the parking lot ten minutes ago?”

“That’s different.”

“Open it, Quaid. What I did was necessary.”

Smirking, I tore through the sealed envelope and uncovered a day pass to a spa and a gift card for two private yoga lessons.”

I hitched a brow. “I feel like you’re trying to tell me something.”

“I am. Now listen for once.” He caught my chin and gave it a shake. “You are going to learn how to *slow down*.”

“But yoga? I’m not exactly flexible.”

Aslan wet his lips, scanned the room, then lowered his voice. “I disagree. I had you bent in half with your knees by your ears last night, and you were not complaining about being uncomfortable.”

My cheeks flamed, and I darted my gaze around the room as well. No one was paying us any mind. “That’s different,” I hissed.

“Not really. Besides, the lady said you don’t have to be flexible for yoga. It’s about tuning into and listening to your body. It’s a type of meditation, and god knows, Quaid, it might help reduce some stress. What did the doctor say?”

“I know, I know.”

He kissed me before I could sum up a protest, but I didn’t have one. We’d had this discussion many times, and he was right. I needed to take better care of myself. The chest pains and subsequent hospital visit were enough to scare me into behaving. Stress might kill me long before cholesterol did, and it was time to stop ignoring it.

“Thank you,” I said when he let me go.

“You’re going. You will not tuck those into a drawer and forget about them.”

“I’ll go.”

“Good.” Another kiss, and he stroked my cheek. “Because I love you too much to see stress destroy you.”

At that moment, Hanini Aolani from cybercrimes came up behind Aslan. He was a middle-aged detective, tall but stocky

with brown skin and smiling dark eyes. The man was good-natured and friendly. He was better known around the department as Vanessa's husband. Vanessa worked at Casey's Café down the road from the station. She had made friends with about every single detective in every single unit, and we loved her.

"Hey, Doyle," Hanini said, slapping Aslan on the shoulder. "Am I interrupting?"

"Not at all." Aslan released me and spun to shake hands with Hanini.

"Merry Christmas." The cybercrimes detective handed Aslan a gift bag. "I'm not ashamed to admit the wife had a hand in helping me pick it out. She says to say hi."

I left Aslan and Hanini on their own to seek out Jordyn and deliver my gift, but when I turned, I found Ruiz planted against the wall, alone and waiting for me.

"What are you doing?"

"Witnessing the show. Again. Do you two ever stop?"

"We're tame in public."

"Are you sure? That's tame?"

I smirked. "How come you're not mingling?"

Ruiz repeatedly tapped the envelope I'd given him on his thigh. It seemed to be a nervous twitch. He radiated with it. "I need a wingman. I don't think I can do this on my own. He's less likely to brush me off if you're there."

I scanned the room and noticed Tallus with a few men closer to his age from administration. They had gathered on the opposite side of our table and were talking jovially to one another. Tallus was vibrant and expressive as usual. His laughter rang musically above the buzz of conversations, and the mischievous smile he wore like a glove was present. I could see how Ruiz might find him unapproachable. Tallus was a powerhouse, overflowing with confidence, and I got the sense he wouldn't shy away from speaking his mind in front of his friends. It left Ruiz open to possible ridicule or insult, and as much as Tallus might think Ruiz deserved a public reprimand, he didn't.

“Come on.” Uncaring I was crossing lines and possibly making Ruiz uncomfortable, I linked my arm with his and dragged him along to the other side of the table.

Surprisingly, he did not protest and shove me away.

We wedged our way into their private circle and waited for a lull in the conversation.

Tallus immediately noticed his cousin, and his joy dampened, the mischievous smirk dimmed, and any contribution he was making in the discussion ended.

Ruiz didn't need coaxing and thrust the envelope I'd given him in Tallus's direction. “Merry Christmas.”

Only because our arms were linked did I notice how badly Ruiz trembled. It was probably the only reason he hadn't forced me off. The poor guy was a bigger wreck than I

realized, and I was possibly the only reason he was still on his feet. Making amends with Tallus was important to him.

Tallus stared at the envelope for a long time before accepting the gift. He maneuvered away from his crowd of friends, and we followed.

After a long moment of pondering, he asked, “Is this why you’ve been angling to clear the air? Because I was your Secret Santa?”

Ouch. Neither of us had thought of that possibility. But, of course, Tallus had. He’d been searching for a reason why Ruiz was suddenly interested in making amends, and lo and behold, he’d found one. He hadn’t asked with animosity. It was simply a question.

“No,” Ruiz said, jumping in. “Not at all. I... Tallus, it’s not... I’m trying to...” Ruiz sighed. To me, he said, “I can’t do this. Forget it.” He attempted to unlink his arm from mine so he could walk away, but I didn’t let him go.

“You were my Secret Santa, Tallus,” I said. “Costa offered to introduce me because I’m not the social type. He told me what happened between you ten years ago and said he wanted to clear the air and ensure you knew he wasn’t that person anymore. When you consistently gave him the cold shoulder, he was afraid you wouldn’t ever give him a chance to make amends, so he asked me to switch names.”

I gestured at the envelope clutched in Tallus’s hand. “I think he did well.”

Tallus glanced at the envelope, turned it over, then opened it. After he spent a minute reviewing its contents, Ruiz spoke. “I remember you liked drama in school. In ninth grade, before everything turned to shit, you were in a play. I can’t remember the name of it.”

Tallus gave him an exasperated look. “*Cinderella*.”

“Right. Fucking Disney.” He chuckled to himself. “Always fucking Disney. Anyhow, you, um... you played the fairy godmother.”

“No. I played the Fabulous FG. The play was a parody of *Cinderella*, so the roles were gender mixed. All the evil stepsisters and the godmother were played by men. It was the perfect role to hide behind. I figured my dad wouldn’t see through it. I was wrong. I gave the role of the Fabulous FG all the pizzazz it deserved.” He smiled at the memory.

Ruiz didn’t squirm. He stood his ground and looked his cousin in the eye. “I didn’t appreciate theater much in my twenties,” he said. “My wife has really opened my eyes to it. We go to all the shows now. I’m sorry I missed your performance, and I know it was a pivotal moment that... that...”

“Launched me out of the closet?”

Ruiz tightened his hold on my arm. “Yeah. Do you still act?”

Tallus huffed, but a touch of nostalgia shone in his eyes. “No. Life’s been too busy.” He stared at the Agatha Christie tickets. “These are really amazing actually.”

Ruiz pointed. “There’s a murder mystery cocktail thing on opening night too. Thought it might be fun.”

“And there’s two tickets,” I added. “So you can bring a date.”

“Are you seeing someone?” Ruiz asked.

A beat passed before Tallus lifted his head and met Ruiz’s eyes. “No, but I’m sure I can find someone to go. Thank you.”

“Maybe get to know them first before you shove your junk in their face,” I said.

Tallus laughed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll take that into consideration.”

“It’s good advice.”

Ruiz, clearly confused, glanced between us.

Tallus studied his cousin a long time before offering his hand. “Merry Christmas, Costa.”

Ruiz shook. “Merry Christmas.” He backed up a step like he was going to retreat but then thought better of it. “Um... I’m locked in the dungeon most days at work, but if you ever want to shoot out and grab coffee, let me know.”

Tallus nodded. Again, he glanced at me as though looking for reassurance. “I’ll think about it,” he said to Ruiz.

Alone again, Ruiz subtly dislodged from my arm, but he did it without comment, so I considered it to be progress. He stuffed his hands into his pockets and glanced about the room. “Could have been worse.”

“You’re putting yourself out there. That’s what counts.”

“Thanks for holding me up. Um... should I ask about the junk in your face thing?”

I smirked. “I couldn’t explain it if I wanted to.”

“Okay then.”

“I need to find Jordyn. Want to join me? I really shouldn’t be the one taking credit for your gift.”

“I just took credit for yours.”

Fair enough. I scanned the room, locating my partner. She was accepting a new drink from the waitress. I made my way toward her, and when she saw me, cocktail straw in her mouth, cheeks hollow, she waved.

I thrust the envelope between us. “Merry Christmas.”

She frowned, glanced at the gift, then at me. “What is this?”

“Your gift.”

“But you got Tallus Domingo. I saw your paper. I listened to you whine about it for over a month.”

I shrugged and stole a line from Aslan. “A little perseverance, a steady inquisition, a compelling bribe, and voilà, now I have you.”

She shook her head and tore the envelope from my hand. “You’re such a liar.” She pointed the envelope at Ruiz. “This one wanted his cousin’s name and asked you to switch.”

Busted. I glanced at Ruiz, but he was smirking.



“You’re not too shabby of a detective, Frawley. Props.” He offered a fist to bump.

She met him halfway. “Thanks.”

Jordyn opened the envelope. When she saw what was inside, her eyes widened. “Holy fucking shit. Are you serious right now?” She looked up, head swiveling between Ruiz and me.

Ruiz pointed in my direction, giving me full credit I didn’t deserve.

I shrugged. “I hear you and June are Raptors fans.”

“Quaid, these must have cost a fortune.”

“Nah, Ruiz’s wife hooked me up. She knows someone and got me a good deal.”

“You are amazing.” Jordyn thrust her drink into Ruiz’s hand and then launched herself at me, squeezing me in an unexpected bear hug. Neither of us was big on gratuitous displays of emotion, nor were we handsy, so we’d never connected like this before. The shock made me freeze up, arms pinned to my side, unsure how to react.

But Jordyn kept right on hugging me. “Thank you,” she said by my ear. “Thank you so much.”

Eventually, I found my senses and hugged her back. “You’re welcome.”

When she pulled away, her smile lit up the room. She was practically bouncing. “I have to call June. Oh my god, this is amazing.” She took back her drink and got her phone out,

searching for her girlfriend's number as she raced out of the room.

I turned to Ruiz, who looked pleased as punch. "You did well."

"We both did."

## Chapter 21

# Aslan

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 21ST: TWO DAYS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



The digital clock glowed ten past nine when I woke Thursday morning. It was two days before the wedding. Quaid and I were both officially off work starting today and didn't have to grace the headquarters building again until January, a few days after we got home from our honeymoon.

It was a relief, a perfect day to sleep in, hang out in bed curled around one another, and indulge in several sweaty rounds of lazy morning sex. But was my fiancé beside me when I woke? No, he was not. Of course he wasn't. Our dress rehearsal was scheduled for that evening, and I would bet the house, the cat, the cars, and my career, he was downstairs, pacing a strip off the floor and going over every detail for the hundredth time, despite my having hid his precious binder a few days ago and earning the sneer to end all sneers. He didn't

trust I had a handle on things, and despite agreeing to let go of wedding duties, he still managed to drive me up the wall.

I closed my eyes, envisioning the most recent sneer, reliving the beautiful event that had started with *the face* and ended with Quaid thoroughly debauched, unable to remember his name or why he was mad. I grinned. My cantankerous future husband just didn't get it. The sneer was my undoing. It would never upset me.

Groggy with sleep, I hung off the end of the mattress and peered upside down into the dark recess of the underside of the bed. Nothing, not even a dust bunny. "You little shit. Fucking figures."

The binder was gone—not that I'd hid it well, considering Quaid's neurotic need to constantly clean house. It was worse when he was stressed, and lately, our house sparkled. I should have known he would find it.

Oscar, curled up fast asleep on Quaid's pillow, didn't stir when I got up. Yawning and stretching, I aimed for the dresser and dug around until I found a clean pair of underwear. The cat shifted, stretching long on the bed, so I gave him a scratch between the ears.

"Why didn't you stop him?"

Oscar buried his nose in a paw without so much as a meow and fell instantly back to sleep.

"Is that so? Fine. I'll take care of him."

I wandered downstairs, following the rich scent of coffee wafting from the kitchen.

In the doorway, I quietly observed my fiancé as he poured over the pages and pages of wedding plans and notes, watched as he scribbled new lists on a yellow legal pad—for what, I had no idea—and guzzled coffee like it was the nectar of the gods and it alone would fuel his insatiable sense of urgency.

A quick glance at the coffee pot told me he'd had at least four cups—there was barely enough left for me to be bothered. He would aggravate his acid reflux and give himself heartburn at this rate.

He wore pajama pants and a plain white tee, his hair sleep-mussed and sticking up at odd angles, and his jaw was thick with stubble. I assumed he had literally rolled out of bed, brewed coffee, and deposited himself at the breakfast nook to go over all the details I'd been keeping from him.

Sometimes, I was convinced my begging and pleading for him to slow down didn't penetrate his thick skull. There was stubborn, and there was Quaid, a man hell-bent on transcending the mere definition of the word.

I contemplated what to do and how to approach the situation.

“Fuck it. I warned you.”

My muttered comment drew Quaid's attention. Wide, pale blue eyes darted toward me, a deer-in-the-headlights expression, as I marched across the kitchen with purpose.

“Busted.”

“Az!” Quaid scrambled, slamming the wedding binder and doing all he could to make it look like he’d been absorbed in his coffee and nothing more. The effort was cute if not ineffective. “I was just... It’s not how it looks.”

“Oh, you blew it, hot stuff. We had a deal, and now you will pay.”

“But I wasn’t...”

I snagged the binder, and he made a grab for it before thinking better and lowering his hand. “Please don’t hurt it.”

Chuckling, I tossed it onto the closest counter with more force than necessary. It landed, slid, and collided against the backsplash. No damage done.

Quaid cringed, but I had a finger in his face before he could utter a single word. “You blew it, Valor.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nope. Too late for that.”

“But I—”

He didn’t have time for further commentary before I swung him to face me, snagged his wrist, crouched, planted my feet, and heaved him off the chair and over my shoulder in a fireman’s hold.

The noise he made was a mixture of a yelp and a squeal. “Holy shit. Az! What are you doing? How are you lifting me? Oh my god. Put me down.”

Quaid wasn't a big guy, but he wasn't light either. His lean and lithe frame was solid, and he had decent height. It all added up. My legs quivered as I spun and aimed for the kitchen door.

"How are you doing this?" he asked again, voice shrill and panicked.

"Twenty years of sporadic weight training, a shit load of determination, and waking up to an empty bed with a hard-on and no one to help me take care of it. Now stop fucking squirming, or I'll drop you."

"Az!" He thumped a hand against my back, half laughing and half terror-stricken. "Seriously, oh my god, put me down. You can't carry me like this."

"I *am* carrying you like this because you're a stubborn motherfucker who doesn't listen to a word I say. Even the doctor told you to stop. Did you listen? Nooooo."

"I'll listen. I'm sorry."

"Too late."

He squirmed, and I slapped his ass hard enough he yelped and stilled. "Do you want to land on your head?"

"No."

"Then hold still. You're not exactly light. I don't want to drop you."

"Then put me down. Oh my god, if you throw your back out before the wedding, I'm going to be so pissed at—"



We crashed into the wall, both *oofing* as I rounded the corner into the living room. For a second, I thought we were both going down, but I got my feet planted and kept going, fighting the strain. I really was going to put my back out at this rate, but I wasn't quitting. No fucking way.

I aimed for the stairs to the second floor.

“Az! Holy shit. No. Please don't. Stop. You are not climbing the stairs with me like this. You'll kill us both.”

He had a point. Grunting and repositioning him on my shoulder, I spun, scanned, and aimed for the couch. My quads were trembling by the time I reached it. I didn't have much oomph left and used the last of my strength to launch Quaid lengthwise.

Quaid's fear dissolved the second he was on his back, and he burst out laughing. The sound was so open, free, and uninhibited my heart swelled. He could be such a shit sometimes, but he also had a raw beauty inside him, and it took my breath away when I caught a glimpse of it.

But that essence wasn't going to save him. Not today.

Out of breath and with beads of sweat blistering my forehead, I crawled overtop of the man I planned to spend the rest of my life with and took his chin in a firm grip, angling his face so he couldn't look away. Baby blue orbs full of love and glistening with humor locked onto me.

“Hi,” he said with so much innocence I almost laughed.

“Don’t you ‘hi’ me. You’re in trouble. If you so much as *touch* that binder again, I’m shredding it.”

“No, you aren’t.”

“Try me.”

He stuck out his tongue, and I snorted.

I couldn’t even pretend to be anything but amused. “You’re going to be the death of me, Valor.”

“You love me.”

“Even when you’re insufferable.”

Loosening my grip, I ran my thumb along his stubbled jaw, absorbing his perfect smile, messy blond hair, and the tiny creases beside his eyes. I loved him so much it hurt.

“This is the first day of the rest of our lives, and you are *not* spending it in a state of anxiety. Got it?”

“Okay.”

“We do a run-through of the wedding tonight, we make it official on Saturday, then we’re off to Paris on Monday. Everything is planned. Nothing more needs to be done, and I’d really, *really* like for you to relax and enjoy it. Can you do that?”

He nodded, and for once, I believed him.

I brushed the hair off his forehead. “Are you anxious?”

He huffed. “Of course I am. I don’t know how not to be.”

“Fair enough. Are you excited?”

“Are you kidding? This is the most anticipated event of my life.” He clung to my waist, his fingers cool against my warmer skin. “I hardly know where to put myself.”

“We don’t have to be anywhere until late this afternoon. How about we spend the first day of our holiday right here like this?” I rolled my hips, grinding against him. My skin buzzed with the bit of friction, and lust bloomed in Quaid’s baby blues.

“Know any good ways to reduce stress?” he asked.

“One or two.”

“You still have some morning wood happening.”

I chuckled. “Sure. Let’s call it that. Any suggestions what I might do with it?”

“Yes. Feed me your cock. Punish my throat.”

I groaned, my eyes fluttering closed at the implication. There was something incredibly sexy about Quaid when he talked dirty. Outside the bedroom, his language was usually rigid and chaste. It took a lot for him to bring out the big boy words, but when he did, when I got to witness his filthier side, it was all I could do to contain myself.

I ground against him, encouraging things to liven up. It didn’t take much. I’d awoken with a craving, and Quaid’s body responded beautifully.

He worked his thumbs into the elastic of my briefs and tugged them down my thighs. Wrapping a hand around me, he stroked, bringing me from half to fully hard in no time. Quaid

watched me attentively. I thrust into his hand, enjoying the tight hold, but Quaid was determined to have more.

He encouraged me higher. “Come here. Let me taste you.”

I maneuvered my way up the couch, bracing on the armrest of the sofa as I nudged his chin with my stiff cock. He raked his nails over my thighs, and I shivered. Quaid stared, wet his lips, and nibbled his bottom lip as though contemplating where to start.

“Open your mouth, goddammit.”

He peered up from under dark blond lashes, mischief brewing, pupils inflamed. He flicked his tongue over my head, along the seam, toying with my slit, and I shuddered.

“Fuck... Open your mouth, Quaid. You want me to punish your throat or not?”

He nodded.

Without further ado, he lifted his head and wrapped his gorgeous lips around me, engulfing me in wet heat. Using the perfect amount of suction, he took me as deep as he could—and with Quaid’s perfectionism, it was a lot deeper than anyone had ever taken me before.

Quaid turned cock sucking into an art form, never rushing, always paying attention to my every reaction, and endlessly seeking all the tricks and nuances that turned me inside out. Quaid took notes and worked hard to continuously improve on something I didn’t think could ever get better.

I let him take control for a while as I savored his carefully orchestrated plan to slowly inch my pleasure higher and higher. His fingernails scored my ass cheeks, making me tense and tighten those muscles. When he pulled off, it was only to wet a finger so he could play with my entrance.

I growled, clenching my fists around the fabric of the couch as I rocked my hips. Quaid worked me with his tongue and throat muscles, a skillful and dangerous combination I could hardly replicate but one that made my toes curl and my breathing erratic. It made my blood tingle and race like lava through my veins. Between his mouth and the finger edging inside me little by little, I was lost in the building euphoria, drifting on a cloud of ecstasy, and happy to stay there for as long as Quaid would allow.

“You are so... *so* fucking good at that.” My words were broken by lust.

A few minutes later, when I was so lost in the bliss of his mouth, Quaid pulled off, his lips a punishing red, his eyes sparkling. “Come on. Step it up. Fuck my mouth, Az. Use me. Stop coasting.”

I chuckled. “Coasting? It’s called savoring.” But when Quaid took a notion toward something, he wouldn’t let it go, and he wanted me to abuse his throat. “I’ll make you hoarse for tonight if I do that.”

“Don’t care. I want to feel it.”

Some days, I wondered if Quaid had a tiny masochistic side or if he liked rougher sex because he thought he deserved it.

One day, I might ask, but I had a feeling he wouldn't know the answer.

Peering down into my lover's yearning gaze, I took myself in hand and traced his bottom lip with my tip. He flicked his tongue over my head, catching a bead of precum and humming with pleasure.

Quaid nodded, encouraging me to keep going.

I moved a hand behind his head and grasped his hair, tugging gently to put him at a better angle, opening his throat. He squirmed to a better position on the couch, getting comfortable.

“You asked for it.”

A sparkling thrill crossed his baby blues. From then on, I didn't think and abused his throat, bringing myself to a fast, furious, and raging orgasm.

When I came, it was on a roar. My arms trembled. My legs shook. My entire body vibrated. Knowing how erratic I'd become in those final moments, I pulled out and slipped down the couch so I was eye level with Quaid.

His eyes were watery from the strain, but he smiled when I asked if he was okay and took me into a brutal kiss. He tasted of coffee and my release, and I loved it. I kissed him back, seeking his cock, shoving his pajama pants out of the way so I could stroke him. He was hard as granite and moaned at the contact.

I gave myself long enough to catch my breath before I slipped down his body and returned the favor.

## Chapter 22



# Aslan



**W**e arrived at Strongwind Castle thirty minutes early. Francesca had assigned a man named Spencer to assist us with the rehearsal. We met him by the twin sweeping staircases in the grandiose foyer where we would be married. The chairs had already been arranged to Quaid's specifications. Spencer informed us fairy lights and garland would be hung the night before the wedding, and the flowers we'd ordered would arrive the morning of. Amelia had been in correspondence with their staff and was ensuring all decorating was done properly.

Spencer showed us the dining hall, where dozens of tables had been arranged in front of a raised dais. The wedding party would eat in a place of honor. When Spencer made a sweeping gesture to another stage-like area, I cut him off before he could spoil one of the surprises Ruiz had organized and I'd agreed to.

"Let me guess," I said. "That's where the DJ will set up."

Spencer, momentarily confused, must have read my expression and agreed. Quaid was too busy noting everything else to see through the ruse. Spencer showed us where the bar would be positioned—near the kitchen—and explained how the meal would be served and where the midnight buffet would be placed—alongside the cake, which would be displayed in the corner.

“The cake I have yet to see a picture of,” Quaid mumbled indignantly.

I poked him in the ribs. “Yep.”

Once we’d had a modified tour of all the areas we planned to use, ensuring we knew what was what, we gathered in the foyer beneath the mezzanine while we waited for our wedding party to arrive for the rehearsal.

Quaid seemed once again awestruck as he paced the wide-open space, climbed the staircases on either side of the room, and stood in the alcove where Barnabus would officially marry us. The whole time, he wore a wistful smile on his lips.

“Getting cold feet?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“Good. The time for backing out is almost up. Promise you won’t leave me at the altar?”

Quaid rolled his eyes, but his smile was brilliant.

The squeal of a rambunctious toddler and the echoey click of heels on a hardwood floor announced the arrival of my sister and the gang long before they were escorted into the room by

one of Spencer's assistants. Kylee ran on chubby legs around a pilaster, almost tripped on the edge of the crimson carpet runner, and crashed into my legs.

"Azzy, up. Azzy, up." She waved her fingers and made to jump, but her feet never left the floor.

"Hey, peanut." I scooped my niece into my arms as Amelia, Chris, and Graham caught up. Graham was decked out in a tuxedo, the same one he was supposed to wear for the Saturday wedding. Everyone else was dressed down, save for Quaid, who had also insisted on wearing a shirt and tie. He and my nephew were more alike than I cared to admit.

Kylee squished my cheeks, so I planted a smacking kiss on her puckered lips. "How's my munchkin?"

"She's wired," Amelia said. "Chris fed her cookies before we left."

"They were oatmeal," my brother-in-law protested.

"Still full of sugar."

Done with kisses and greetings, Kylee arched her back and squealed, "Down!"

I let her go, and she darted off in a flash, hightailing it to the other side of the room, her squeals bouncing off the high ceiling.

Amelia gave her husband a pointed look, and Chris ran after her as his daughter headed for the stairs. "No, you don't, you crazy girl. We don't need a trip to the emergency room tonight. Get back here."

Amelia, shaking her head, embraced Quaid first, holding him extra tight and whispering something in his ear that wasn't meant for me. He smiled and kissed her cheek. Graham stood a few paces behind his mother, taking in the room in the understated, inconspicuous way he had of doing everything. Nothing with Graham was ever direct. Anyone who didn't know him might think he was staring at the floor, lost in his head. I knew better.

Then Amelia was in front of me, full of mirth and radiating contentment. She took my hands, and tears instantly filled her eyes. "I can't believe this is happening. My big brother is finally settling down and getting married. Two more days. How are you holding up?"

"Not running for the hills yet. It's been a roller coaster ride getting it organized this fast, but worth it."

"Are you nervous?"

"Nah. I have a feeling married life will look good on me."

We hugged, and I squeezed my sister tight, rocking us back and forth. We had always been close, but our relationship had grown since I'd gotten sober two years ago. Amelia was one of my biggest supporters, and I might not have made it this far without her.

"I'm so happy for you," she said by my ear. "I love Quaid. He is so incredibly special. You two deserve all the happiness."

Amelia released me, bussing a kiss on my cheek. “Mom and Dad got in yesterday. Mom said she would have called but figured you would be busy and didn’t want to be a burden.”

I chuckled. “That’s a first. Mom usually likes to be a burden. Are they on their way?”

“Yeah. They should be here soon.”

We had created our own ceremonial format for the wedding—or rather, Quaid had. It was part traditional and part invented. Our parents would precede us down the aisle, so they were part of tonight’s dress rehearsal.

Chris returned with a perturbed Kylee in his arms, my niece squirming and protesting being confined. Instead of dealing with his unruly toddler, he passed her off to my sister, who had the magic touch and calmed her down.

Chris offered me a hand, but when I took it, he drew me in for a backslapping hug. “So proud of you, brother,” he said by my ear. “I don’t think I’ve said that yet, but I truly am.”

I hugged Chris back, his words having a greater effect than anticipated. We’d been at odds for so long. It was nice to make peace for once. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

When we came apart, Amelia caught my attention. She gestured with a tip of her head, and I glanced to where she indicated. Quaid was crouched down, having a conversation with Graham. My nephew had brought the wooden box we’d purchased to transport the rings.

With a scowl on his boyish face, he showed Quaid the inside. “I’m supposed to be the ring guard, but there’s no rings inside for me to protect. Mommy said I can’t have them until the wedding, but today is the practice. How can I practice being a guard without them? Did you know I wasn’t having the rings today? How can you have a practice without rings?” He was genuinely curious. My nephew was nothing if not logical and literal, and this dress rehearsal without props made no sense to him.

“He’s been very upset about not getting to carry the rings today,” Amelia said, her voice low. “I tried to explain, but he’s hung up on it. Almost had a tantrum leaving the house.”

My thoughtful fiancé didn’t even think twice. He twisted the engagement band off his finger and proceeded to use the silk ribbons inside the box to secure it in place. “There. Now you have a ring to protect, and this is a very special ring, so I’m trusting you to guard it with your life.”

Graham stood taller. His gaze flicked to Quaid’s face and held for a short beat. He rarely smiled or made eye contact, but the shadowy presence of pride and satisfaction touched the corner of his mouth. “Did you know the queen’s guards have to wear bearskin caps that weigh almost nine pounds, and they aren’t supposed to laugh, but sometimes it happens because people are funny and they can’t help it? Daddy thinks being a guard is boring, but I’ll be a good guard for your ring. I have on my uniform.” Graham touched a hand to the breast of his buttoned jacket.

“You look very handsome.”

“Is this a castle?” Graham asked, glancing up at the dazzling chandelier. His fingers on one hand fluttered against his thigh.

“Yes, it is,” Quaid said. “A long time ago, it was owned by a French lord named Alain Appoline, and he called it Château de Vent Fort because—”

“Because there are strong winds here?”

Quaid chuckled. “Yes. How did you know that?”

“That’s what *vent fort* means. I learn French at my school.”

“Impressive. Now they just call it Strongwind Castle.”

“Are you a king?”

“For one day, I get to be a prince.”

Graham mashed his lips together as he considered this, then, without another word, he dismissed Quaid, turned to Amelia, and displayed the wooden box. “I have a ring to protect now.”

At that moment, a commotion of clunking feet and childlike squeals erupted from the belly of the castle. We all glanced to where the noise originated in time to see Ruiz galloping into the room with two little girls, one on each hip, both wearing matching frilly dresses, stockings, and shiny dress shoes. Their hair was done in identical braids, one dark, the other blonde.

Ruiz came to a stop a few feet away and brayed like a horse. His girls squealed with delight. “Your carriage has arrived, wee lassies. Now off with you.” He set them down and

glanced back from where he'd come. His wife, Tia, trailed behind, shaking her head and smiling at her husband.

Tia was fair-haired and had a distinct girl-next-door appeal. I'd met her once before when Quaid and I had joined them for a double date. She was quieter and less intense than her husband, but she had a sharp intelligence and sweet aura that made you instantly like her. I had the distinct feeling she kept her abrasive and somewhat vociferous husband in line.

Tia grabbed hold of the girls' hands before they could thunder off. When Ruiz had asked if he could bring his family to the dress rehearsal, explaining how his girls wanted to see a prince get married in a castle, Quaid had quickly agreed. We'd told him the kids were welcome at the wedding too, but he and Tia preferred not to bring them.

"This place is sick," Ruiz said, spinning, admiring the ceiling, the chandelier, the mezzanine, and the twin staircases that swept down from the second floor. "Why didn't we get married in a castle?" he asked his wife.

"Because we were poor college students, and your mother wanted us to marry in a church."

"Riiight. Bummer. This is way cooler. Anna, Maddy, come here. I want you to meet someone."

His girls, in their coordinated ensembles, went over to their father. "This is Daddy's friend, Quaid, and this is Aslan. They're the ones getting married this weekend."



Anna shied away behind her daddy's legs, but Maddy peered up at Quaid with a concerned dip in her brow. "Is this your castle? Are you Prince Charming, or is he Prince Charming? You can't both be Prince Charming. Daddy said only one of you is a prince. My favorite movie is *Frozen*. We play it sometimes. I get to be Elsa, and Anna has to be Anna because she has the same name. We don't like Prince Hans. I hope you're not like him. Prince Hans is—"

Ruiz put a hand over his daughter's mouth, chuckling. "She's a bit of a chatterbox."

"Daddy!" Maddy squealed, peeling his palm away. "Don't make me stop talking. It's rude."

Quaid crouched to be at her level, offering her a hand to shake. "Pleased to meet you, Maddy. I'm not really Prince Charming, and I don't think I'm like Hans, but I've never seen the movie, so I guess I can't be sure. Your daddy told me all about *Frozen*, but he must have forgotten that part. I think it's his favorite movie too. What do you think?"

"He can sing all the songs."

Ruiz groaned.

Maddy shook Quaid's hand, but Anna refused, still hiding, still unsure.

"You're not a prince?" Maddy asked, seemingly bothered by this revelation. "Daddy called you a prince."

"He did, did he?" Quaid glanced at Ruiz, who glowered.

I crouched beside Quaid and wrapped an arm around him. “He’s my prince. Pleased to meet you, Maddy.”

Maddy willingly shook my hand as she studied us inquisitively, then she peered up at Ruiz before glancing back. “Daddy said two boys can get married, and it’s okay.”

“It most certainly is,” I said.

“I’m going to get married in a castle too someday. Just like this one.”

Graham, who’d moved back to Quaid’s side, thrust the wooden box in Maddy’s face. “I’m the ring protector. See?” He opened it carefully, displaying Quaid’s engagement band inside. “I have to guard it with my life.”

Maddy turned instantly shy and backed up against Ruiz. Graham wasn’t bothered. I wasn’t sure he noticed or cared. He was too busy examining Quaid’s band, nestled inside the box.

In the bowels of the castle came the distinct, echoey voice of my mother, talking loudly, saying, “I told you not to take those pills before we left the house. You’d have been better off constipated. Now we gotta find a bathroom. Is this gonna happen during the service too? Honestly, Ronan, you don’t think.”

I glanced at Amelia, who was peering at me with a smirk. “God help us all,” she mouthed.

We both laughed.

A moment later, Mom and Dad were escorted in by Spencer, who was an interesting shade of puce, eyes bulging as he

struggled and failed to hold a straight face and ignore my parents, who trailed behind.

Mom caught sight of me and bullied her way around poor Spencer. “There he is. Oh, I’m so excited,” she said as she dragged me in for a suffocating hug. “You could have dressed for the occasion. Jeans, Aslan, really?”

“It’s a dress rehearsal, Mom.”

“Exactly, so you were meant to *dress* appropriately. Look. Quaid understood. Isn’t he handsome?”

Dad announced, “Where’s the bathroom in this place?”

Mom withdrew from my arms but held my face so I couldn’t get free. “Air travel always makes your father constipated. Heaven knows why. He took some pills before we left, so now he—”

“Mom,” I said, my words mangled from having my cheeks squished. “Please don’t talk about Dad’s bowels. It’s traumatizing.”

“I really need a bathroom,” Dad said again.

By this point, Amelia and Chris were doing all they could not to laugh.

Spencer waved a hand, indicating for Dad to follow.

Mom finally looked around. “Well, I’ll be... Look at this place. Just look at it. Ronan. Ronan, get back here. Have you seen this place?”

“Dad’s gone to the bathroom. Leave him be.”

“His loss. Well, isn’t it just marvelous?” She patted my hand.  
“Amelia, you didn’t tell me it was a castle.”

“Didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

I made a quick round of introductions as Barnabus Rooney tottered into the room on the arm of a woman I didn’t recognize. I assumed she was Megan, his granddaughter.

Quaid jumped into action, greeting the elderly man who was spiffed out in an ill-fitting suit and tie, his pant legs long enough he was in danger of tripping on the cuffs, his shirt wrinkled. Of all the wedding prep we’d done and the companies we’d hired, Barnabus officiating was the one thing I worried about most.

Ironically, it was the one aspect Quaid was most sure of. He seemed to have developed a soft spot for the older gentleman on the day they met. Considering Quaid had no memory of a grandparent, I wondered if he saw Barnabus as a replacement. Either way, Quaid was set on his involvement, and no matter how many times I’d tried to encourage him to look elsewhere, he wouldn’t hear of it.

Quaid greeted the creaky old man, who squinted at Quaid without recognition. “How are you, Mr. Rooney? It’s good to see you.”

“What was that?” the man yelled.

Quaid raised his voice and asked again, smiling so big his eyes squinted.

“Oh. I’m great. I had to put my teeth in because I’m going to a wedding. Do you know who’s getting married?”

“I am. You’re performing *my* wedding, remember?”

The poor man looked like he’d lost the plot sometime before the turn of the century. He blinked at Quaid for an extended time, then shuffled to face his granddaughter. “What’d he say? I can’t hear a damn thing.”

Megan checked his hearing aids and waved a hand at Quaid. “This is one of the gentlemen who is getting married, Grandpa.”

Quaid, undeterred, took Barnabus’s hand. “I’m Quaid. Quaid Valor.” He gestured at me. “You remember Aslan? You used to do the gardening at his house when he was a teenager.”

Barnabus took a minute to examine me, his gears visibly spinning but not catching. Then he noticed my mother, and a light shone behind his rheumy eyes. “Oh. I know you.” He wagged a finger in my direction. “You’re Cellina’s boy. I hate your music. It’s too loud. Y’oughtta turn it down, or you’re liable to go deaf.”

Quaid laughed. He likely empathized with that sentiment.

I shook Barnabus’s bony hand. “How are you, Barney? I hear you’re officiating my wedding.”

Barnabus looked between Quaid and me, and something sank in. He nodded, sucked his teeth a second, then scratched his chin. “That’s right. I remember now.” He shuffled forward, wrenching his head so he could scan the upper floor of the

mezzanine. “So where am I going to do this? Sure hope I don’t have to go up them stairs. The old legs wouldn’t like that.”

“Nope. Just over here.” Quaid gestured to the alcove. “Can I show you?”

Barnabus nodded and patted a wad of papers sticking out of his jacket’s front pocket. “I have it all written down so I don’t forget. My mind’s not what it used to be. I used to be sharp as a whip.”

“You’ll do great.”

Quaid directed Barnabus and his granddaughter down the crimson carpet to the alcove to show them the platform where we’d be standing.

Dad had returned from the bathroom, and I was engulfed in more hugs and more oversharing. “Colonoscopy results said my bowels were in tip-top shape. Don’t know why they get all worked up on planes, but they do. Have you scheduled a colonoscopy yet, son? You’re in your forties now. You really should. Colon health is no joke.”

“Honestly, Ronan. Must we talk about this now?”

“I’m just offering fatherly advice.”

“I’ll make an appointment,” I said, more to move the conversation along.

As my parents bantered about the rights and wrongs of colon conversation at a wedding rehearsal, I glanced around, noting Chris and Ruiz chatting. Chris carried Kylee on his hip, and Ruiz followed his girls as they looked around the grand foyer.

They went up and down the stairs, around the pilasters, and along the mezzanine, glancing down and waving at their dad from above.

Tia and Amelia had found each other and were talking quietly. Graham hovered a few feet behind Quaid, always following him like a shadow. My nephew never bonded with anyone, but he'd bonded with Quaid.

“Hey, hey. Let's get this party started!” I spun and came face-to-face with my best friend and partner, Allison at his side.

Torin dislodged from his fiancée and hurled himself at me. We hugged, both trying to crush one another's ribs in the process.

“Fuck, man. I can't believe you're tying the knot in two fucking days. Did you send a memo to all the girls and boys, letting them know you're officially off the market?”

I shoved Torin, and he stumbled, laughing. “I've been off the market for over a year. I think they know.”

“The playboy settles down. It might make front page news.”

Allison nudged his side, smirking. “Tone it down a notch. There are children here, and your mouth is like a runaway train.”

“Right. Sorry. I got excited. God, look at this place.” Torin craned his neck, admiring the vast foyer. “This is lover boy's doing. Ain't no way you found something like this on your own.”

“Quaid found it.”

“Dayum.” He rubbed his hands together and wiggled his brows at Allison. “And we got ourselves a suite for the night.”

Allison sighed and offered me a hug. “Congratulations. I’d apologize for his behavior and mouth, but you’ve been putting up with it for far longer than I have.”

“Uh-oh.” I peered at Torin over Allison’s shoulder. “Is the honeymoon period over?”

“Shut up. We are rock solid. Crazy fools in love, right, Ali?”

Allison pecked my cheek before pulling away. “Sure. Whatever you say, Romeo. Just keep the F-bombs to a minimum if you can.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Torin, ever the extrovert, made his rounds, saying hello to my parents, sister, and Ruiz and his family.

Quaid came up beside me, checking his phone. “Dad’s not here yet. I should call him.”

We still had ten minutes before we were due to begin the rehearsal, but I knew Quaid worried about his dad. I pecked his cheek and squeezed his arm. “Go ahead. I’m sure he’s on his way and will give you crap for worrying.”

He smirked. “Probably. I’ll be back.”



## Chapter 23

# Quaid



I ducked into a side room off the foyer to make a phone call. The room resembled a parlor with plush, historically accurate seating and furniture, a fireplace, and walls of bookshelves. The windows along the back wall showed a dreary winter day beyond—gray clouds hanging low in the sky, the color drained out of the world, and bare trees shivering in a blustery December breeze.

No snow. Two more days. A man could hope, couldn't he?

I connected a call to Dad's number as someone entered the room behind me. It rang as I spun and found Graham on my heels. He didn't acknowledge me—he rarely did—but I got the sense he was absorbing the room.

In a flash, he moved to a decorative table where an ornate chess set was displayed. I smiled at Graham's noticeable enthusiasm as my dad picked up.

“Do you know how much I despise this hands-free onboard phone system bullshit or whatever you call it in this car?”

“It’s against the law to answer your phone otherwise. Where are you?”

“I’m almost there. Ran into traffic, then I had a detour for an accident. Should be there in fifteen minutes. Start without me.”

“I’m not starting without you, Dad. We can wait.”

I’d offered to pick him up on the way, but he wouldn’t have it, knowing Aslan and I would be stuck at the after-rehearsal dinner far later than he would want to be there. Dad needed an escape. It didn’t surprise me. My father and I were alike when it came to social events. If it wasn’t my wedding, I’d have felt the same.

“Someone should be at the front entrance to help you find us once you’re here.”

Dad grumbled a response, and we said goodbye.

I ambled over to Graham, who had crouched to examine the chess pieces. They were made of carved marble with felt-lined bottoms, so they slid easily across the checkered board.

“I’m not sure we have time for a game, but it’s pretty cool, isn’t it?”

“Your dad is coming to the practice too?”

“He is. Got held up in traffic, but he’s almost here.”

“He’s a master chess player, right?”

“I don’t know if he’s a master, but he’s better than me. I’ve never beat him.”

“I always win too. You need more practice.”

I chuckled. Although it came across as egotistical, Graham was merely stating the truth. He was matter-of-fact in everything he did.

“I think I would like to have a game of chess with your dad,” he said.

“I bet he’d like that. He should be here soon. Want to go wait outside with me?”

“Yes, I would. I’ll ask him if he wants to play chess later.”

“Let’s tell your mom where you’re going so she doesn’t worry. This place is big, and we don’t want her to think you got lost.”

We checked in with Amelia, who was chatting with Aslan and their parents, and headed through the depths of the castle until we found the main entrance. A less majestic staircase led to the second floor, and Graham and I sat on the steps while we waited for Dad.

Graham continuously opened and closed the wooden ring box, checking on the treasure inside and adjusting it so it sat just right. “Are you going to have a famous chef at your wedding to make the food?” he asked.

I smiled. “No. Just a regular chef and regular food.”

“Did you know a real chef wears a white hat with folds, and the folds tell the people how good he is at his job?”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s true. There are a hundred folds because he learns a hundred ways to make eggs.”

“Where did you learn that?”

“In a book Daddy bought me.”

“You’re a pretty smart guy.”

“I know. Did you know a lady got married once, and her veil was as long as sixty-three football fields?”

“That’s a long veil.”

“How come she didn’t trip on it?”

“She probably had people to take care of it when she walked.”

Graham mashed his lips, opened and closed the wooden box, and moved on. “Did you know it’s possible to get a checkmate in just two moves?”

“I did know that.”

“Did your dad do it to you?”

“When I was learning to play.”

“How old were you?”

“Probably about your age.”

“But you got better, and he didn’t do it again?”

“He probably did once or twice, but I finally learned to prevent it.”

“He’s a tricky player, huh?”

“He can be.”

“I’ll beat him.”

I chuckled.

“Did Uncle Aslan buy you this ring?” Graham asked, touching the white gold band delicately.

“He did. It’s my engagement ring. Do you know what that means?”

“Yes. Daddy told me.”

“Do you think you’ll get married someday?”

He contorted his face again, then shook his head definitively. “I don’t think so. It doesn’t sound like something I would like.”

“Maybe you’ll change your mind when you get older.”

It was then the front doors opened, and my dad hobbled in. Like Graham and me, Dad had dressed in a suit and tie for the occasion, even though Aslan had been adamant that people should dress casually and not get gussied up for a practice round.

Dad’s trench coat was rain speckled, and as he closed the door behind him, I realized the sky had opened up in the few minutes Graham and I had been chatting.

Graham was off the steps in a flash. His gaze might have been directed at a fancy side table with an ornate oil lantern poised on top, but his full attention was on my father.

“Are you Grandpa Valor?”

Dad, grinning widely, peered down at the distinguished child who wouldn't look him in the eye and said, “Indeed I am. And who might you be, young man?”

“I'm Graham Christopher Jarvis. I'm six years old, and I'm the ring guard for Uncle Aslan and Detective Valor's wedding. You're a master at chess. I think we should have a match.”

Oddly, I was still Detective Valor in Graham's eyes, but my dad had earned full rights to the title grandpa, which made my father beam.

“Well, I bet you would be a worthy opponent. I hear you win whenever you play against Quaid.”

“He's not very good.”

Dad chuckled.

I frowned.

Again, Graham didn't sugarcoat anything. He told it straight, and to date, I had yet to win against the wily six-year-old, and not from lack of trying. It was peculiar, but I'd gotten over the embarrassment of it.

“I found a chessboard. We can go play right now.”

“We have to do the dress rehearsal, Graham, remember? We need you to bring the rings,” I said.

Graham mashed his lips together, his fingers from the hand not holding the wooden box fluttered against his side.

“Tell you what?” Dad crouched—not without grunting and making his knees pop. “I have a feeling we won’t be needed for very long, and my old legs won’t want to keep standing, so I’ll need somewhere to rest. How about when they’re done with us, you show me that chess set, and we can have ourselves a game?”

Graham’s eyes lit up, and for a brief moment, he looked me right in the eyes. “Did you hear that, Detective Valor? Grandpa Valor said we could have a game of chess.”

“That sounds like a blast.”

Graham took off in a flash, likely to tell Amelia the big news. Dad waved a hand, and I helped him back to his feet.

“Don’t get cocky, Dad. Graham’s some sort of chess guru. I swear he can see every potential outcome in his head and works to effectively ruin all your skillful strategizing no matter how smart you think you are.”

Dad patted my cheek. “Sounds like you’ve had your ass handed to you a few too many times. Come here. Hug your old man.”

So I did, squeezing him tight and absorbing his comforting strength in return. “You could let me win once in a while. It would be good for my ego.”

Dad laughed. “Someday.”



I closed my eyes, not releasing him, savoring his scent and letting it calm me. No matter how excited I was or how effectively Aslan had tried to distract me all day, nervous energy popped and fizzled in my belly.

“How are you doing?” Dad asked, pulling back, holding me by the shoulders, and sizing me up. He sensed I was off-balance. Dad had always been astute at reading my moods.

“Anxious. I’m tired even though I’m sleeping better. I can’t believe it’s almost here.”

He rested a hand on my cheek. “Enjoy every second. You deserve the very best, kiddo, and I know you’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask. Can I stay at your house the night before the wedding? We’re doing the whole traditional, can’t see each other beforehand thing. I thought it would be nice.”

“Oh, I think I can put up with you for a night.”

“Gee, thanks, Dad.”

He chuckled. “I’d love to have you. Now come on.” He patted my cheek and stepped back. “Show me this amazing foyer you’ve been talking about for months.”

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Everyone had arrived, so the rehearsal got underway. Aslan let me explain the choreography I’d devised for the ceremony; how we would enter, where people would stand, who got to go

down the aisle and in what order. In general, I went over how the whole thing would play out.

“Ah, man. Why can’t we use the stairs too?” Torin asked, standing with Ruiz, swinging a thumb between them.

“Because I don’t want you to, and it’s my wedding,” I said. “You’ll start at the end of the aisle.”

“Az, talk some sense into him. Those stairs are insanely awesome. I want to make a grand entrance too.”

“I’m not overruling any of Quaid’s decisions on choreography. It would mean my balls, and I’m too close to the wedding to upset him, so too bad.”

“You suck. You suck too, Valor.”

“Book Strongwind Castle for your own wedding, and then you can go up and down the grand staircase as many times as you’d like.”

Torin glanced hopefully at Allison, who sat with Aslan’s sister. Allison shook her head. “We talked about it already.”

“Dammit,” Torin muttered under his breath. “Why’d I have to marry a dutiful Catholic girl. Fucking bullshit church wedding. They don’t have cool stairs. I gotta get married by a fucking priest. Go me.”

I snorted, then pinched my lips together when Ruiz nudged me in the ribs.

Aslan said what we were all thinking. “With that mouth, he’ll burst into flames the second he steps across the threshold.

You know that, right, Allison?”

“He’s a work in progress.”

“I’m going straight to hell.” Torin glanced at Allison again, realizing his mouth had gotten away from him. “I really am trying.”

“Try harder.”

He blew her a kiss, and she returned it with a smile and a head shake.

“Can we please focus on the rehearsal?” I asked, still trying to stifle my laughter. “We don’t have all night, and if we can’t get it perfect, I’m going to fret. Fretting will turn to stress, and stress makes me sick, and I don’t want Az to drag me to the hospital again.”

No one spoke, so I carried on.

Considering his age and the ease with which he became confused, we decided Barnabus would remain in the alcove. I provided him with a chair so he could sit until he was needed. His granddaughter planned to be present to assist and ensure he stayed on track. For the most part, Barnabus’s readings were all written out, and he had the full program of events in front of him, so I wasn’t worried.

Since Kylee was the hardest to wrangle, Aslan suggested Amelia walk with her down the aisle—at least for today. On the day of the ceremony, she would have a basket of rose petals to toss, and Chris thought that would excite her and help keep her focused.

As it stood, Kylee was not interested in rehearsing and much preferred running up and down the carpet and spinning around and around the pilasters.

Graham was like me and appreciated rigid structure, so he easily understood his task and took his job in the ceremony seriously.

Ruiz's girls sat with their mother, acting as our stand-in audience. More than once, Maddy tried to engage Graham in conversation, but he was in his own world, and apart from a few curt words, he wouldn't socialize, far too preoccupied with the task at hand.

The main focus of the dress rehearsal was ensuring Barnabus had the order of his program organized and knew how each section would play out. We didn't have him read the passages he'd prepared—we didn't want to spoil anything—but we had him touch on each reading so he kept them in the right order.

“Are you repeating the vows,” he asked at one point, indicating a spot on his papers.

“No. We're doing our own.” To Aslan, I said, “You remembered we're writing our own vows, right?”

“Yes.” He smirked roguishly. “I have it all ready to go. Have faith.”

“Just checking.”

Once we'd tackled the first official run-through, we did it again two more times. Our parents went down the aisle first, followed by the out-of-control, hopped-up-on-sugar flower girl

—thank you, Chris—then Graham, and the best men, who took their places off to the side. They would stand at the base of the alcove during the ceremony. Aslan and I descended the staircases together, meeting at the bottom and walking up the crimson carpet arm in arm.

Then Barnabus took over.

By the third time through, it was running smoothly.

We finished in a timely manner—Spencer had told us there was no rush and not to worry if we took longer than planned—and stood chatting details for another thirty or forty minutes. All in all, we were ready for the big day.

Ruiz tapped my shoulder at one point, Anna in his arms. “Tia and I are going to take the kids home. We have a babysitter arriving soon, and we’ll meet you at the restaurant in a bit.”

“Sure.” I smiled at Anna, who was still playing shy and had tucked her face in Ruiz’s neck. “Did you enjoy watching a castle wedding?” I asked her.

She nodded.

“Even with two princes and no princess?”

Another nod.

I shared a smile with Ruiz, acknowledging and appreciating how he’d normalized the event with his children.

“I’m glad you came,” I said to Anna.

“What do you say?” Ruiz encouraged her.

Anna lifted her face a fraction, her voice tiny and meek. “Thank you for letting us come.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Ruiz knocked my arm and winked. “See you soon. I’ll order you a drink.”

“Stay away from the shots. I’m never doing that again.”

He chuckled, raised his nose high in the air, and affected a British accent. “Yes, sir. I’ll order wine for the prince.”

Anna giggled as they went off to find Tia and Maddy.

The rehearsal broke up after that, and when I glanced around, noting who was still present, I couldn’t find my dad.

I touched Aslan’s shoulder, interrupting the conversation he was having with his sister and brother-in-law. “Have you seen Dad?”

“He’s with Graham,” Amelia said, smiling.

I laughed. “Let me guess. He’s hooked him into playing chess.”

“My boy has a one-track mind,” Chris said.

I found the pair in the parlor where Graham and I had first discovered the marble chess set. Sure enough, they were hard at it, engaged in a serious game, Dad getting an education in all the interesting facts about chess Graham had accumulated throughout his short life.

Dad had pulled up a chair, but Graham bounced on his toes, fingers busy at his sides, gaze never leaving the board. He was

absorbed and concentrating, but he was also talking nonstop, and it was a wonder he could strategize so effectively while carrying on like he did. Several pieces had already been taken out of play, an equal number on both sides.

“Who’s winning?” I asked as I approached, knowing the question was inane since chess wasn’t always cut and dry, especially in the early stages.

Graham ignored me, chattering on. “Grandpa Valor, did you know the pawn is the trickiest piece in chess?”

“And why is that?” Dad asked, beaming as he watched both Graham and the board.

“Because it can’t go backward, and so it can’t ever return to its old job on the board. Every move it makes gives it a new job. Did you know there are three special moves in chess?”

“Hmm.” Dad scratched his chin, moved his knight, then said, “Castling is one of them. It’s one of my favorite moves.”

“Me too. And pawn promotion is another. That’s my favorite because I can get my pieces back.”

“What’s the third?”

“En passant. Do you know that one? It’s French for in passing.”

“En passant? It doesn’t ring a bell. Is this a new rule?”

Graham mashed his lips, moved his bishop, then kept bouncing on his toes. “No. It’s a special rule. It was invented in 1561 but wasn’t officially put in the rulebook until 1880.

It's a hard one to explain. It gives a pawn a chance to capture another pawn that has just passed it. I can show you later. I don't use it very much because not many people understand it, but it's not cheating."

"You're a smart cookie, aren't you?"

"Yes."

Dad glanced at me, and we shared a smile. I wasn't sure if Dad was giving the game his full attention or thinking he needed to go easy on Graham because he was so young, but they seemed to be equally matched at the moment. If anything, the look on his face told me Dad was fully entertained.

Graham continued to share meaningful facts about chess, so I leaned on the armrest of an old Victorian settee to watch. Their conversation flowed. They exchanged ideas and took turns. Graham always moved his pieces seemingly without thinking, but I knew better. His mind worked differently, and he absorbed things quickly and thoroughly.

Something in my chest warmed and swelled as I observed their interactions. I'd never seen Dad around kids before. It had always been just him and me. Albeit, he had raised me on his own, so I knew he was familiar with kids, but I'd never been in a position to objectively judge his parenting skills.

It was the first time I got to see him in a different light, and I knew immediately he would be an amazing grandfather. My mind drifted to the future, to a time when Aslan and I had a rambunctious toddler like Kylee or a chess whiz like Graham,



visiting Dad and seeing him beam the same way he was doing now. He was so calm and reflective, so patient and kind.

I had to blink and chase away those images when my vision blurred.

It wasn't long before Graham's chatter fell away, and silence seeped into the room. Something had happened in their game, and I'd missed it. Taking them in, I recognized the glimmer in Dad's eyes. I hadn't been studying the board closely but examined it now.

Graham moved a piece but kept his finger on it for a second as though he was unsure about the move. From experience, Graham was rarely unsure when playing chess. He never hesitated. He never second-guessed himself.

Graham released the piece, and it was Dad who played without thought, sliding his rook to a place of dominance. I saw it then.

Graham's fingers fluttered as he mashed his lips together with a deep frown. "Grandpa Valor is going to win in four moves," he announced. "There is no way out."

"That's okay," Dad assured him. "Play it through to the end. Never let your opponent see you disappointed. Absorb your loss, take it with you, and learn from it. Next time, you'll play differently."

I was a child again. The words were an echo of what he'd always told me when I lost. I hadn't heard them in decades. When had Dad stopped reminding me to take a loss with my

chin held high? God knows I needed those reminders still. They were a life lesson applicable to more than chess.

Graham continued to play, but he no longer let Dad move his own pieces. He moved them for him, knowing the path that would bring the game to an end. When he laid his king down, submitting to defeat, Graham said, “Good job, Grandpa Valor. I think you’re a real master at chess.”

“Nah. Lots of years of practice. Now what do we do at the end of a game?”

Without missing a beat, Graham held out a hand to shake—it was one of the few times he allowed physical contact. “Good game.”

They shook and then spent time rearranging the pieces to their starting locations. Graham went over the rules of an en passant move, which I was vaguely familiar with but had never used. Dad paid attention and asked questions, letting Graham and his matter-of-fact tone explain it.

“We’re leaving for the restaurant soon,” I informed Dad. “Everyone is clearing out.”

“We’ll be there in a second. I need to see this en passant thing again. Graham, will you show me?”

“Like this, Grandpa Valor.”

I slipped from the room and found Aslan with Torin and Chris. Aslan wrapped an arm around me and kissed my temple. “I thought I lost you.”

“I was checking on Dad. He just beat Graham at chess.”

“No way. I wasn’t sure it was possible for that kid to ever lose.”

“He took it like a champ.”

“Good,” Chris said. “Sportsmanship is a hard thing to teach.”

“He’s educating Dad on a new move right now. They’re bonding. It’s cute.”

It was more than that. Witnessing Graham and Dad’s interactions had done something to me. I wanted to share all the feelings it had stirred up inside me, about my excitement over our future, about our plans to have a family, about how I’d seen Dad in the role of grandfather for the first time and how much I liked it. I wanted to express to Aslan how marrying him made all my dreams come true and that I didn’t think there would ever be a day I could thank him enough for being part of my life.

But I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t let those thoughts escape without crumbling. My throat was tight again, and my eyes burned. But I wouldn’t break down. Not here. Not in front of guests. I leaned into Aslan, absorbing his warmth and comfort and doing all I could to simply exist in a moment I never thought I’d know.

Two more days.

## Chapter 24

# Aslan

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 22ND: THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“**T**hat’s an awfully big bag you’ve packed for one night. Are you sure you’re not moving out?”

Quaid glanced at the overstuffed duffel he’d dropped at his feet. “It’s for two nights, not one. We’re staying at the castle after the wedding, remember? And besides, I have to bring all my bathroom essentials since I’m getting ready at Dad’s. Plus accessories. And shoes. Why are you judging me?”

I chuckled, drew him into my arms, buried my face in his neck, and inhaled. “I’m not. I’m teasing.”

A black garment bag hung by the door. It contained Quaid’s tuxedo. Mine was in the bedroom upstairs. Every time I looked at it, my nerves jangled, and excitement bubbled in my belly.

“Don’t forget to bring the rings tomorrow. They’re in the box on the dresser,” Quaid said.

“I won’t.”

“Did you call—”

“Quaid. Stop.” I took his face between my palms and kissed him. He sighed against my mouth, shoulders falling, muscles releasing their tension. “Everything is ready. Everything will be okay.”

“I know.”

“Did you pack your meds?”

“Yes. What if—”

“No. Stop. Ruiz and Torin have taken over from here. All we have to do is show up. They’re meeting with the cake people in the morning. Torin was there when the flowers were delivered this afternoon. Amelia has been up one side of the place and down the other making sure all the decorations are in place. Ruiz will ensure the... music people know where to go?”

“Music people? Plural? I thought—”

“The DJ. You know what I mean. We’re good. Everything’s perfect. Spend a relaxing night with your dad and try not to stress.”

He blew out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

“Take a sleeping pill tonight.”

“I don’t want to—”

“Quaid.”

“Half. I’ll take half.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise.”

I smiled and pecked his mouth again. “It’s going to be great. By this time tomorrow, we’ll be celebrating with friends and family. You’ll be my husband.”

Contentment softened his features. He flattened a palm on my chest and searched my face. “I’ll miss you tonight. I hate not having you beside me in bed.”

“This was your idea.”

“I know.”

“Enjoy it. From this day forth, you’re stuck with me forever.”

His smile turned bashful. “You make it sound like a bad thing.”

“Not at all.” We shared another kiss, long and lingering. The next one we shared would bind us officially as husbands.

Oscar mewled and weaved between our legs, protesting being ignored.

Quaid chuckled against my mouth. “Someone’s not happy they aren’t getting attention.”

He bent and petted the cat. Oscar soaked it up, rolling to his back and insisting on belly rubs. Whoever said cats didn’t like their tummies rubbed was wrong.

“You’ll be okay. Azzy’s staying with you tonight, and my dad’s going to check in tomorrow night and make sure you’re fed. Torin’s coming over too... for which I apologize. Smack him in the nose if he gets out of line. You have my permission.”

Oscar meowed and purred like he understood.

Standing, Quaid poked me in the chest. “Do not let Torin feed him a whole bag of treats like he did last time he was here.”

I smirked. “He was trying to teach him to do tricks.”

“Well, you’ll make him sick, and if that happens, you’ll be without a best man.”

“Always with the threats.”

Quaid drew me into his arms again. It was stupid, but I didn’t want to let go, even if it was for one night, even when we were getting married the next day.

“I should go,” Quaid said as I stroked his cheek.

“The next time I see you, we’ll be descending those fancy stairs and walking down the aisle arm in arm.”

Instant pools formed in Quaid’s eyes, and he blinked heavily before burying his face against my shoulder, hugging me tight. “Don’t be a bastard and make me cry. You know I hate that.”

I chuckled. “God forbid.” I closed my eyes and squeezed him with all my might. “I love you, Quaid.”

“I love you too.”



We stayed like that for a long minute before Quaid pulled away. “I better go.” He collected his duffle and garment bag.

I handed him the keys to his car. “Drive safe.”

Another long lingering look ensued. Every emotion Quaid couldn’t hide sat on the surface. “Bye.”

“Tomorrow.” I winked.

Then he was gone.

I peered out into the piercingly dark night. The air was brisk. Thick clouds blocked the moon and stars. Their heavy weight seemed to somehow dampen the sound of the noisy city, making the neighborhood feel isolated. A frosty wind blew out of the north, stinging my cheeks and making me draw the door closed before I froze.

Torin was spending the night, and we planned to eat junk food and watch endless movies that never appealed to Quaid. Aiming for the kitchen, I preheated the oven and pulled out the frozen boxes of appetizers I’d bought earlier that day. Quaid had spied them when I’d been unpacking the groceries, but he’d smartly refrained from making a comment, knowing it was a hopeless argument.

I filled a pan with jalapeño poppers, sausage rolls, mini quiches, phyllo pastry puffs stuffed with mushrooms and brie, peppers and parmesan, feta and artichoke—I’d pointed out the vegetables to Quaid, and he’d deadpanned—breaded boneless chicken wings, cheese sticks, and many, many more. They had various cooking times and temperatures, but I averaged them

—because that was how I worked in the kitchen—and popped them into the oven.

When Oscar meowed and spun circles, I gave him a few treats. “Don’t tell Daddy you got extra. If he notices, we’ll blame Torin again. Deal?”

Oscar was too busy munching and crunching to respond.

In the living room, I turned on the lights on the Christmas tree, letting it illuminate the room. Quaid and I had spent the previous day setting it up. Since his dad was staying at our place while we were on our honeymoon, he could monitor it and be sure Oscar didn’t tear it down. So far, the fluffball had been good.

Torin showed up fifteen minutes later. His overnight bag wasn’t remotely as extensive as Quaid’s, but Torin planned to head home in the morning and get ready there. He and Allison were heading to Strongwind Castle together.

“One last night of bachelorhood,” Torin announced as he dropped his bag beside the couch. “I never thought this day would come.”

“You and me both.”

“Where’s lover boy staying tonight? With Ruiz?”

I laughed. “No. I’m not sure who would have been more uncomfortable with that arrangement. He’s at his dad’s. I think it will be good for him. His dad will keep him grounded because I know he’ll be an anxious mess tonight.”

“He’s going to need a year off to get over the stress of this wedding.”

“Believe it. I’m hoping some time away helps. I’ve managed to somehow convince him to throw his food fears out the window while we’re away. I told him we can’t go to Paris and not experience the cuisine.”

“He agreed?”

“Mostly. He has limits, but I think I can convince him to indulge in croissants and crepes at breakfast. It’s the richer, dinner-type foods that will be the challenge.”

“Good luck with that.” Torin sniffed the air. “Speaking of food. Is something burning?”

“Shit.” I raced back to the kitchen and saved the appetizers in the nick of time. The phyllo pastries were significantly darker than they were supposed to be, but nothing was ruined.

I emptied the tray onto a platter and squeezed the sauce packages that had come with the appetizers into little bowls. Nothing fancy. I was not a chef, and this was a guys’ night with my best friend. We hadn’t had one in ages, and it was long overdue. We could eat caveman-style with napkins instead of plates and fingers instead of knives and forks. Less cleanup.

I collected everything and toted it into the living room, where Torin surfed through our many subscription services to find a decent movie. “Fuckin’ A,” he said when I displayed the spread.

“I have Coke, water, or Sunny D. Take your pick. No beer.”

“Don’t need it. I plan to do all my drinking at the wedding tomorrow night. I don’t need to be hungover two days in a row. Coke is great.”

I returned with two cans of pop and collapsed on the couch next to Torin.

“Is your speech ready?” I asked. Against Quaid’s wishes, Torin was acting as emcee at our wedding.

“Oh, baby, you have no idea.” He rubbed his hands together. “It’s gonna be epic.”

“Quaid’s going to kill you, isn’t he?”

“I’m hoping he’ll think twice since we’ll have an audience. If he comes at me, I plan to remind him what prison food looks like.”

I laughed. “You like to antagonize him.”

“He antagonized me first.” Torin snagged a jalapeño popper. “You know I’m just having fun, right? Valor’s a great guy. He’s quirky as all fuck, but he’s been good for you.”

“He has.” I couldn’t imagine where I would be today had Quaid not come into my life. Would my sobriety have stuck? Would I still be out there, making my way through men and women without a care in the world?

“What are we watching?” I asked before I got sucked into melancholic thoughts.

Torin spoke around a mouthful of cheese stick. “*It*. I haven’t seen the new one yet, and Allison won’t go near anything horror. Have you seen it?”

“When it came out, but I’ll watch it again.” I stuffed a mini quiche into my mouth and pulled the tab on my Coke. “Start ’er up.”

We settled in, stuffed our faces with far too much junk food, and watched the first half of the show without much conversation.

“It’s weird,” Torin said apropos of nothing.

“What’s weird?”

Torin put his empty pop can on the coffee table and stared at the TV without seeing it. “We’re two guys in our forties, moving into the second half of our lives, finally getting married—maybe a little late in the game, but who cares—we’re starting families and settling down. I thought I’d feel mournful about leaving my single days behind, but I don’t. It’s almost a relief.”

Using the remote, I lowered the volume on the movie. I knew exactly what Torin meant. The same realization had crossed my mind several times lately. “I get ya. My twenties were a riot. Parties, drinking, fucking, not giving a fuck. I became dependent on that lifestyle in my thirties.”

“Right? Like you didn’t want to let go and grow up, but you realized it was happening anyhow.”

“So you did everything to hang on. You partied harder, drank more, fucked more. Sucked every last drop of nectar out of life as though by doing so it would stay eternally the same.”

“Then you turn forty—”

“And you get tired.”

“So fucking tired. And you can’t keep up.” Torin laughed. “We’re old fucks now.”

“Speak for yourself. I have a few years of spunk left in me, but I’m no longer interested in proving a point. I’m all about savoring what I have. Seeing life with my eyes open.”

“Do you regret it? Your party days?”

I considered for a long time, revisiting several memories—the ones that weren’t fuzzy around the edges. So many concerts. Late nights and early mornings. Burning the candle at both ends. Working through a hangover. Sneaking out of a stranger’s bed at two in the morning, hoping they didn’t wake up.

“No. At the end of the day, it was a lonely, miserable existence. It just took me over twenty years to figure it out. I thought it was fun. I thought it was the only way to live. I was wrong.”

We sat in silence for a long time. It wasn’t often Torin embarked on serious discussions, but I sensed an introspectiveness in him, a need to talk. “Are you and Valor gonna have kids?”

“We’ve discussed it. We both want to. We’re going to look into surrogacy once the wedding’s over. It’s a process, and it could take a long time. He’s wanted to be a dad his whole life, and I love kids, so it’s a no-brainer.”

Torin nodded again with a thoughtful expression on his face. “Can I tell you something that you can’t share with anyone?”

“Of course. What’s up?”

Torin remained silent. His knee bounced. He wouldn’t look at me. When he did, several long seconds later, he turned on the couch to face me head-on. “Allison’s pregnant.”

“What!” My eyes blew wide, and I sat upright. “Oh my god. Are you serious? Holy shit. Dude!” I smacked his knee. “No way.”

He nodded, his head bouncing like a bobblehead toy, a clear indication Torin was full of nervous energy. “Yep. No joke. She found out before we went away to the cabin. I surprised her with a proposal, and she surprised me with the news I was gonna be a dad.” Torin blew out his cheeks, and his eyes glistened as he huffed a laugh. “I’m still absorbing.”

“This is a good thing, right? You’re okay with it?”

“Fuck yeah. Are you kidding? I mean, it wasn’t exactly planned. She had to come off her birth control a few months ago. Long story. But, well, we weren’t exactly diligent about taking other precautionary measures. Or at least not regularly. Maybe, deep down, we both wanted it to happen.”

“I’m happy for you, Tor. Congratulations.”

“Thanks. Nothing makes you feel more like a squirrely teenager than your girlfriend telling you she’s pregnant. I had to keep reminding myself I was an adult, and my parents weren’t likely to freak.”

“Do her parents know?”

“They do. They probably think it’s why we’re getting married, even though I had no idea when I proposed. I told my parents too. My mother is over the moon. No one else knows yet, so...”

“My lips are sealed. Can I tell Quaid?”

“So long as he doesn’t lecture me.”

“What would he lecture you about?”

“Dude, what *wouldn’t* he lecture me about?”

“Fair enough.”

“It would be condoms, wouldn’t it?”

“Definitely. He might even make a PowerPoint.”

Torin and I both laughed. When Torin sobered again, he said, “Forty isn’t too old to have kids. Not these days. I used to think so, but...”

“It’s not. You’re older, more mature... Well, *mostly* more mature.”

“Shut up.”

“You’ll need to work on your potty mouth.”



“I know. It was the first thing Allison said. I swear like a trucker and don’t know how to stop.”

“You’ll be a great dad, Tor.”

“You will too. I’m excited. Not just about the kid but about... this whole second half of life. I know I sound reflective and philosophical, but I’ve been thinking a lot lately. About the meaning of life.”

“Kinda deep for you.”

Torin snorted. “I know, right? It’s just... I used to believe it was all downhill after forty. That we were leaving the best years of our lives behind. But you know, maybe *these* will be the best years of our lives. We have more experience. More knowledge. We’ve learned how to appreciate the small things. I’ve got an amazing girl I love with all my heart. I’ve got a baby on the way. My best friend and partner is getting married too, and maybe he’ll have kids, and our kids can grow up together. Hell, we can be hockey dads together or something. Who knows?”

I chuckled. “It’s gonna be great, Tor. We’ve got this in the bag.” I offered him a fist, and he knocked it.

“I love you, man,” he said.

“I love you.”

Silence prevailed. After a long beat, Torin gestured to the TV. “Turn it up. We’re missing the show.”

I raised the volume, but my mind drifted to all Torin had said. It wasn’t often he got deep and contemplative, rarer still

to have him share his innermost feelings, but all he'd said resonated. For the first time in my life, I felt settled. In control. Happy. In my twenties and thirties, I'd always had the feeling of being on a search for understanding. Who was I? What was my purpose? I was stuck on a quest, looking for answers to questions I was too young to pose. Questions philosophers had been asking for centuries.

It was only now, on the eve of my wedding, that I understood what I'd been missing all those years. The piece had been located, and my unstable orbit had found stability. I didn't yearn for the past. I didn't miss it like I thought I might. Torin was right. We were on the cusp of a new age. A better age. Happiness wasn't discovered. It was created.

And I was ready to face tomorrow head-on, take Quaid's hand in mine, and venture into the second part of our lives together.

Because *he* was my happiness.

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Several hours later, long after the movie had ended and Torin had conked out on the couch, I found myself restless and unable to sleep. I paced, talked to Oscar, and reviewed my vows and speech for the hundredth time, making tiny adjustments where needed.

At three in the morning, I ended up on the back deck with my face angled to the sky. A billion tiny snowflakes danced and swirled as they fell and blanketed the earth.

Quaid's wish had come true.

## Chapter 25

# Quaid

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23RD: FOUR HOURS BEFORE THE WEDDING...



“I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to cry. I’m not going to cry... Pull. It. Together. You’re fine.” My reflection called me a liar—creased forehead, damp upper lip, blood-drained complexion. I was *not* fine. I was a mess. All I’d done that morning was weep. The world presented as a series of blurred images ever since I’d crawled out of bed.

Waking to a blanket of snow on the ground had kickstarted it. From my childhood bedroom, I’d stood awestruck, admiring the white and sparkling landscape beyond the frosted window. My breath had fogged the glass, and I’d continuously wiped it away, determined not to miss a thing.

The bare tree branches were thickly covered and glistening, weighed heavily with their burden. Birds, uncaring their world

had been altered overnight, nested on the back fence, chirping joyously, expressing aloud the song that vibrated in my heart.

Icicles clung to the eaves of every house like needle points, sharp and dripping under the morning sun. And although I was loath to admit it, the sprinkling touches of Christmas along the street amplified its splendor. It was a regular winter wonderland, and for probably the first time in my life, I'd been happy about it—happy enough to shed tears. As I'd stood by the window, swiping my breath from the pane, they had raced unbidden down my cheeks.

No one had been there to see, so I'd allowed them.

Then, shortly after I'd pulled myself together, Aslan's good morning text set me off again. *Good morning, my future husband. Today is our special day, and you got your wish. Wear your thermals under that tux. I anticipate we'll be outside for some pictures. <3*

More tears had streamed down my face. Unfortunately, those had been harder to hide since I'd been at the breakfast table with Dad, sipping coffee and eating scrambled eggs on toast. Dad, respectfully, had pretended not to notice as I'd wiped frantically at my cheeks to hide them.

Now, freshly showered, gussied up in my fancy tux—sans thermals because no matter how true Aslan's claims, I couldn't justify the extra bulk—my eyelids brimmed anew, threatening to overflow. The tuxedo was perfect, and as much as I'd bucked the idea of Aslan insisting on red and green—Christmas colors of all things—he knew deep down all I

wanted was a fairy tale wedding. And in the outfit we'd chosen, I felt like a prince.

The tuxedo was regal and almost Victorian, befitting royalty. With the bolo tie, featuring a jasper quartz at my neck and two golden cords hanging over my crisp white shirtfront, with the velvety emerald accents, the soft buttons, the coattails, and the finely crafted floral lapel pin, I felt like I'd woken up in a dream.

I'd shaved, styled my hair with precision, and dabbed cologne in all the right places. To top it off, I pulled on my shiny dress shoes and took in my reflection, twisting this way and that, admiring the ensemble as a whole. Who was the man staring back at me? The journey to this moment had been fraught with so many challenges it was hard to believe I'd come this far. How many times had I almost given up on a happily ever after? How many nights had I lain awake, wondering if I was too damaged to be loved?

My heart drummed with a resonating, quickened beat. I pressed a hand to my chest when I was sure it was about to expel itself or crack ribs. I didn't want to sweat, but my elevated nerves were getting the better of me. My palms were damp, and I trembled no matter how much I tried to stop it. In less than four hours, I would marry the love of my life in a castle fit for a king.

And this *wasn't* a dream. It was real.

A soft knock at the door made me start. I batted the brimming tears from my eyes and glanced in the mirror,

catching Dad's gaze as he poked his head into the room. "Can I come in?"

I sniffled, cleared my throat, and did all I could to pull myself together. "Yes. I'm dressed. How are you making out?"

I spun to face him as he entered.

Using a brand new polished wooden cane with intricate carvings around its circumference—something he'd bought specially for the wedding—Dad inched his way over the threshold. He too was dressed to impress in a stunning black suit with an emerald paisley tie that matched the one Ruiz would wear. Torin and Ronan Doyle would wear a crimson version, pairing their color with Aslan's tuxedo. In Dad's jacket was a neatly folded emerald pocket square, sporting the same paisley design.

For all my life, Dad had always had rough stubble on his cheeks. When he shaved, he did it with an electric razor and never a blade. Not today. My old man had gone the extra mile, and his sagging jowls were smooth as a baby's bottom. He'd combed his thinning salt-and-pepper hair into a neat side sweep, adding a touch of mousse he'd borrowed from me earlier.

"Wow. You look good, Dad."

His head bobbed, but he was too busy taking me in to properly accept or acknowledge the compliment. "You... Son of a gun, Quaid. Look at you." He reached for my hand and squeezed it. "You are the handsomest man that ever walked the



earth. I couldn't be prouder of you. Goddamn, kiddo. Just look at you."

Instantly, my vision blurred. I blinked and blinked again, but it was useless. The dam overflowed. Snagging a tissue from a box, I dabbed the tears away and huffed. "Stop it. You'll make me cry, and I've been trying hard to keep it together."

Dad chuckled, but his eyes were brimming too. Dad was like me, stolid to a fault, determined to never show emotion. "I need to say something before we go. Have a seat." He gestured to the bed in the corner. My childhood single had been replaced with a double long ago. Any traces of my youth had been stripped away, but memories lingered in the shadows and whispered from within the walls.

I sat, recalling a devastating moment from decades ago when my father had *needed to say something* and had asked me to sit in the same fashion. "*Mommy's gone away for a while. I don't know when she'll be back.*" Only my mother had never come back, and we'd gone on without her.

Dad sat beside me and patted my thigh, drawing me from the past into the present. "I'm not the best father there ever was, and I know I've made plenty of mistakes—"

"Dad—"

"Listen. I've never been a stellar communicator, Quaid, but I'm going to try to fumble my way through this. A wedding is a time for a father to pass along wisdom to his son, and I plan to do exactly that. I'm gonna say some stuff, and it won't be easy to hear, but don't interrupt, okay?"

“Okay.” I stared at where Dad’s hand rested on my leg. Age-marked skin and swollen knuckle joints aside, his hands were as familiar to me as my own face in the mirror. They had mended my cuts and scrapes as a child. They had squeezed a shoulder or patted a cheek when I’d needed reassurance as a teen. As an adult, I’d stared at them over a chessboard for hours.

“We’ve never much talked about your mother. For all these years, her name has been banished from this house. That’s on me, and it wasn’t fair.”

“Dad—”

“It wasn’t fair, Quaid. Let me say it because it’s true.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It stems from many things; anger, hurt, frustration... and an anguish so deeply embedded in my core I never thought I could explain it. Not to you. At least not when you were a child. I didn’t think you could understand. Maybe you can now.

“Shari was the love of my life. I met her when I was seventeen, a senior in high school. The sun rose and set for us alone. Christ, we were young. Too young maybe, but it didn’t matter. Times were different then. She was it for me. We married a few years later, had kids, and life was grand. I had a decent job, albeit with long, unpredictable hours, but she never complained. She was a good mother, Quaid. You need to know that. You probably don’t remember her much. You were young when she left.”

“I remember some things. A blue dress she wore at the beach. It had yellow flowers on it. She used to make strawberry milkshakes for Juni and me. We drank them with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and Mom used to laugh at our milk mustaches. She would get your shaving mirror from the bathroom and show us how ridiculous we looked. But it’s her laugh I remember with the most clarity.”

Dad’s grip tightened as I spoke like he was hanging on for dear life, each memory a knife to the gut. “She had a beautiful laugh. Could light up a room with it. It turned heads. She loved you and Juni and only wanted the best for you. Every now and then, I see her in you. You have her sensitivity. You have her passion. Christ, son, you have her looks. Sometimes, when you smile, it’s her. I took it all for granted.”

“Dad—”

He patted my knee again. “No. I did. You wouldn’t know. You were a kid. What happened to our family was tragic. It irreparably broke us, and it had a direct and lasting effect on you. Your mother and I both responded differently to the tragedy. Shari turned against me. She blamed me. How could she not? I was the one responsible for Juni’s care when someone took her. I’d have blamed me too. Not a day passed after Juni’s disappearance where Shari didn’t verbally castrate me for losing her daughter. But I was suffering too. I threw myself into work, a castaway on my own island of grief and pain as I did everything in my power to fix what I’d broken. I was determined to find your sister and make it better.”

“It wasn’t your fault, Dad.”

“I know that now. I don’t blame myself anymore. The point is, neither of us had the presence of mind to remember you were hurting too. Shari was suffocating on anger. I had shielded myself from everything but the case. The tension was bound to snap, and it did. Shari couldn’t take it anymore. In retrospect, I think her leaving was self-preservation. I won’t make excuses for her, but she wasn’t in her right mind at the end. No one could reach her. Not even her parents. She could barely take care of herself, never mind a six-year-old boy who had successfully melded into the shadows and, for all intents and purposes, made himself invisible. Was it fair? Absolutely not. Did she regret it later on? Maybe. I don’t know. Should I have gone after her and brought her back?” Dad paused for a long time. “Yes, I think so. That’s where I failed. Shari needed me, and I was too lost in my own head to know it. I let her walk away from us without recourse. I left you motherless and —”

“Don’t. Please.”

Dad patted my knee and sighed. “What I’m trying to say, and it’s not coming out right, is that when you find your person, Quaid, you need to be there for each other through all the ups and downs. I’m telling you this because, like your old man, you tend to be closed off sometimes. You come by it honestly. But you can’t let yourself become an island like I did. Love stays strong only when you work on it together. It won’t always be perfect, and it won’t always be easy, but nothing worth having in life comes without hard work. Aslan keeps

you grounded. I see that too, and I love him for it. But don't forget to be there for him. A brick wall can still crumble. Iron can still rust. And a leaning post, no matter how stable, can still fall if we don't take care of it now and then. Make sure you show him the same respect and support he shows you. Don't forget the fundamental importance of communicating. Don't go to bed angry, and don't take each other for granted. Life is unpredictable, and a love like the one you have and the one I took for granted is rare. Nurture it. You two have what it takes, but I don't want a random storm you don't expect to leave you in ruins like it did me."

My head swam with everything I wanted to say, but nothing came out. I had been choking off tears since midway through his speech, and I didn't trust my voice. Dad was a man of few words, and he'd spewed a lifetime of pent-up thoughts, worries, and lessons at me in under ten minutes.

"Would she... Would Mom have been happy for me?"

"She would have been over the moon. Shari always had big dreams for you kids. Your happiness would have been paramount. I know I have no right to ask this of you, but try not to blame her for her absence. She was lost and broken, but she loved you. I know that with every fiber of my being."

And maybe someday I would find it in myself to forgive her. As it stood, my relationship with my mother was complicated, made worse by the fact that she'd died long ago, and we had no means of reconciliation. The handful of memories I retained were barely soothing enough to cauterize the gaping

hole she'd left in my heart. I'd spent the past thirty years slowly bleeding to death from the wound. Aslan was right. Her abandonment had traumatized me on a level I was only now beginning to understand. I would make good on my promises to get into therapy when we got home from Paris.

Dad turned to face me for the first time since he'd sat down. He smoothed one of my eyebrows and ran his fingers over my clean-shaven cheek. "It feels like just yesterday you were a surly teenager. I don't know when you grew up, but you've become a fine young man. I'm the proudest dad on the planet today. I've spent my whole life hoping I did right by you."

"You did."

"I raised you the best I could."

"I think I turned out okay... mostly."

Dad chuckled and studied my face. "Are you ready to get this show on the road?"

"I am."

He patted my cheek and drew me in, kissing my forehead. "I love you, kiddo."

"I love you too, Dad."

"Let's get you married."

## Chapter 26

# Quaid

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23RD: THIRTY-SIX MINUTES BEFORE THE WEDDING...



The moment Dad and I had arrived at Strongwind Castle, we'd been swept away to a quaint sitting room on the second floor to await the commencement of the ceremony. Spencer had snuck us up a back staircase and rushed us down a scarcely used hallway, ensuring we didn't run into Aslan, who was supposed to be waiting on the other side of the castle in his own private area. Was he as anxious as me?

On my instruction, and because I needed some alone time, Dad had gone to take inventory of the guests and decorations. More specifically, I needed someone to check and be sure Barnabus had arrived and was being taken care of. He was a key player in our ceremony and the most likely to require some guidance.



I couldn't sit still and paced, my shoes soundlessly traipsing a path back and forth across the thick pile of the oriental area rug. A blindingly bright day shone through the vast floor-to-ceiling windows along the back of the room. Endless blue skies and a winter landscape stretched as far as the eye could see. The courtyard below was deserted. An untouched blanket of crisp snow coated every surface and hung off every dormant bush. A copse of deciduous trees in the distance, naked and yielding to the view, marked the winding path of the man-made creek that flowed through the property. Beyond it, farther than I could see, was the waterfall, a spot I'd dreamed more than once of using as a backdrop for photographs. The recent snow had made those dreams come to life.

One of Dad's missions was to locate Francesca and ensure she knew our plans to travel there after the ceremony.

Someone rapped on the door, and a moment later, it cracked open. Ruiz poked his head in. "There you are. This place is huge. Can I come in?"

"Please."

He entered, shutting the door behind him as he assessed my state of mind. "Are you going squirrely yet?"

"I've moved beyond squirrely to something far worse, an unnamable level of anxiety that is manifesting itself through pacing, shortness of breath, profuse sweating even though it isn't hot in here, and shaking. Look at me." I held up a hand, displaying the ceaseless jitters that had only worsened since morning.

I spun on my heels and took off in the other direction, chest heaving, flicking my fingers to dispel some excess energy. It wasn't working.

“Sit down.” Ruiz indicated a period couch near an unlit fireplace.

“I can't. Pacing is keeping me sane.”

“Quaid.” His voice softened. “Sit down before you fall down.”

When I still didn't listen, Ruiz snagged my elbow and directed me to the divan. The moment my ass hit the cushioned surface, I pressed a heel of a hand to my sternum. “My chest is hurting again, and I took my meds. I swear. I'm also kinda dizzy.”

“Because you're cracking up. Head between your legs. You're hyperventilating.”

“I'm fine. I just—”

Planting a hand in the middle of my back, Ruiz shoved my head down. “Now breathe slowly.”

“You're pushy.”

“I would think you'd be used to that by now. Breathe. Your chest hurts because of stress. You're dizzy because you aren't breathing.”

“I am so breathing.”

“Those short little gasping things are not breaths, and they will only make you lightheaded. Do you want to pass out on

your wedding day?”

“No.”

“Then breathe. Slowly and deeply. And stop stressing. This is supposed to be the best day of your life.”

“It is.” I closed my eyes and concentrated on inhaling and exhaling.

“That’s it.” Oddly, as my world stopped spinning, I became aware of Ruiz rubbing my back gently and methodically.

“Hope you’re not getting fresh with me,” I said, head still between my knees. “Aslan will be pissed.”

He huffed a laugh. “You wish.”

“Hardly. You’re not my type.”

“My feelings are so hurt.”

“How’s Az doing? Have you seen him? Am I the only one freaking out?”

“I haven’t seen him. He’s with Torin, but the news on the street is he’s squirrely as well. You aren’t alone.”

“Good. Did the flowers get arranged properly? They came, right? Are they nice?”

“Yes, they came, and they’re beautiful.”

“Is the cake here?”

“All set up in the reception hall.”

“What’s it look like? Am I going to be mad? I can’t believe I let Az and Torin pick it out unsupervised.”

Ruiz chuckled. “It’s gorgeous, Quaid. You’ll love it. Those two halfwits did all right.”

“Is it Christmassy?”

“Kinda, but what did you expect?”

I sighed.

Ruiz’s hand continued to trail along my shoulder blades as I concentrated on breathing.

“Is everything ready for the reception?”

“Yes. The room looks beautiful, by the way. Amelia did amazing.”

“Is it Christmassy too?”

Ruiz chuckled. “You really need to get over it. It’s December twenty-third.”

“I know. Can I sit up now?”

He moved his hand from my back and slid over a foot so we weren’t sitting with our thighs touching. “Feeling better?”

“The world has stopped spinning for five seconds, so yes.”

“Oxygen helps. How’s the chest?”

“It’s okay.”

I studied Ruiz for the first time since he’d walked in, noting his tux and the accents that tied his outfit with mine, marking him as my best man. He’d gotten a haircut—finally ridding himself of his out-of-date, nineties-style do—and was clean-shaven. None of his tattoos were visible for a change.

“What?” he said, catching me staring, touching his tie self-consciously.

“Nothing. You clean up nice is all. I would almost say you look handsome, but I don’t want you to deck me.”

He smirked. “You don’t look too shabby yourself, Valor.”

“Stop flirting.”

“You started it.”

We both laughed.

When my knee started to bounce of its own volition, Ruiz stilled it with a gentle touch. “Relax.”

“I’m trying. It’s a big moment.”

“I know, but don’t get yourself so stressed out you forget to enjoy it.”

“I’m trying not to.” I glanced around the elegant room, admiring the decor and letting reality sink in. I was getting married.

My vision blurred, and I blinked a few times, clearing it as I side-eyed Ruiz to see if he noticed. “Will you judge me if I cry? I don’t plan to, but it’s been an ongoing concern all day, and I hate crying in front of people.”

“No one will judge you. I promise. You won’t be the first man to cry on his wedding day, and you definitely won’t be the last. Wanna know a secret? I bawled at my wedding. Tia was rock solid, and I was Niagara fucking Falls. I sputtered

through my vows with snot and tears running down my face. It was disgusting.”

“You did not.”

“I did so. Ask my wife. She’ll tell you all kinds of stories about our wedding.”

“You don’t strike me as the emotional type.”

Ruiz shrugged. “I hide it well most of the time.” He looked down at his hands and then back up. “When you marry your soul mate, it gets you right here.” He reached out and tapped my chest over my heart. “It twists you up. You don’t get a choice about tears. Especially people like us who go to great lengths to hide those feelings. They overwhelm us, and you can’t do anything but accept it.”

*People like us.* It might have been the first time Ruiz had put us in the same category, compared our personalities, and insinuated we were alike in some ways. It was a small, silly thing, but it made me smile.

Another knock sounded at the door, and Spencer poked his head in a moment later. “The ceremony is about to begin. We’re asking everyone to take their places.”

He closed the door, and I glanced at Ruiz.

“You ready?” he asked.

I blew out my cheeks. “As I’ll ever be.”

Before I knew what was happening, Ruiz drew me in and hugged me—voluntarily and without flinching. “You’ve got

this. Just don't forget to breathe." He emphasized the last four words with a slap on the back each.

"I won't. Thank you."

He left a moment later to take his place, and I was alone again.

I wandered into the upstairs hallway to the spot where I would be out of sight, away from the balcony and invisible to the guests below but close enough to my staircase I would be able to descend when the time came.

Poking my head around the corner, I was able to scan the rows of people below—or some of them. It was an intimate gathering. The flowers caught my eye. They had been decoratively placed throughout the foyer and down the crimson runner on both sides. White arrangements mostly but interspersed with red fragrant blooms that perfumed the air. Aslan had ignored my *very* specific instructions. I'd told him white flowers, gold accents.

But they looked gorgeous—and fitting. How could I deny that? With their greenery still displayed and the pop of red, they had a Christmassy feel. I was starting to see how wrong I'd been to oppose the idea.

Until that point, a steady prerecorded classical symphony of music had been playing in the background as people mingled and were shown to their seats. The song faded, and when I expected the selected piece we'd chosen for the procession to begin, it didn't. Or rather, it did, but the music drifting up from

below was different. It wasn't coming over a sound system. It sounded like a live string quartet, but that couldn't be right.

We hadn't hired a string quartet.

Had we?

Mesmerized, lips parted in awe, I cocked an ear and listened as "Pachelbel's Cannon in D" echoed through the vaulted ceiling and drifted to the second floor, surrounding me. It was definitely live music, and it was heart-stoppingly beautiful.

I had been removed from music duty after I'd ended up at the hospital. Was this Ruiz's doing? Aslan's? My chest tightened again, and I realized I was holding my breath. I let it out slowly and pointedly and focused on inhaling and exhaling as tears swam to the surface once again. It was hopeless. I was doomed to be a ball of emotions.

A live string quartet. Could this day be any more special? I wasn't sure who I had to thank for this unexpected surprise, but I would find out.

I closed my eyes and let the perfectly resonant sound encase me. I'd always envisioned walking down the aisle to this song, and it was happening. Today. Right now. My dream was coming true.

Spencer appeared at the end of the hall, and we shared a smile. I knew Kylee was likely on her way down the aisle with her basket of rose petals, her mother beside her, monitoring her progress, encouraging her to sprinkle them on the ground.



Graham would follow, rigid and loyal, walking like a queen's guard, performing his duty exactly as he had been shown at rehearsal. Next would be Aslan's parents, then my dad, chin high, pride swelling his chest. My throat closed as I envisioned it, and I had to bite the inside of my cheek to ward off more tears. Suffice it to say, it would not be wise to descend the stairs when I could not see where I was going.

My time was fast approaching.

Spencer guided me to the top of the west side grand staircase. Peering down, I caught sight of Ruiz and Torin making their way down the petal-littered aisle. Only then did I glance across to the other side of the balcony and the top of the east side staircase, locking eyes with Aslan.

Dressed smartly in his matching tuxedo—a deep crimson—he was by far the most handsome man I'd ever seen. He smiled, and I returned it. He tapped his chest over his heart, and I copied.

On cue, we began our descent, unrushed, like we'd planned, timing each step with the music so we landed at the bottom simultaneously. The upturned faces of our guests watched our every move. I caught sight of Dad near the front. He dabbed at his eyes with a handkerchief, chin wobbling. Aslan's mother sobbed against his father's side. Amelia clung to Chris's arm, eyes glistening. Eden was there, and Tony. Jordyn with her girlfriend, and a handful of people from work. Friends and family both.

I glanced at Aslan again as we took the final few steps together. At the top of the crimson runner, we came face-to-face and stood there momentarily as though pressing pause to fully encapsulate the moment before moving on. In that time-suspended instant, it was just us. The world faded away as I took him in.

“Hey, hot stuff,” he whispered, scanning me up and down. “That tux looks mighty fine on you.” Then he leaned closer, taking his voice down a notch. “I bet it’ll look even better on the floor later tonight.” He wiggled his brows.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re such a pig.”

Chuckling, Aslan offered me his arm. “Shall we?”

I hooked us together, his touch warm and stabilizing, like it had always been, like I knew it always would be. “Lead the way.”

We walked slowly toward the alcove where Barnabus waited, spiffy in his outdated, too-big suit and with his rumpled papers clutched in his old, gnarled hands. Tufts of untamed white hair bobbed on the top of his head. He was busy looking around, popping his dentures in and out of his mouth. I was waiting for them to clatter to the floor and for him to scramble after them. God forbid we had to listen to him talk without his teeth because they broke. No one would understand a thing. The poor man really had lost the plot, but I adored him heart and soul. Since the day we’d met, I couldn’t fathom anyone else marrying us. He gave me the warm and fuzzies, like I’d always thought a grandfather should, but I’d

never gotten to experience those feelings before because my grandparents had never been part of my life.

When Barnabus saw us approach, he sucked his teeth back into his mouth with an audible *slurp* and seemed to pull himself together, standing as tall as a hunched-over ninety-three-year-old gentleman could. He trembled so much his jowls jiggled, and I smothered a smile. His eyebrows were white and wild like his hair, but they gave him personality.

Off to the side of the alcove, under a white freestanding trellis arbor woven with white flowers, sat six musicians playing various stringed instruments. The women had baby's breath weaved into their hair, and everyone wore white suits or dresses. Not a quartet but a sextet—two violinists, two violists, and two cellists. For a moment, I stopped walking and gawped. Aslan gave my arm a squeeze, acknowledging my dazed stupor, but he let me look my fill.

It was perfect. Everything was perfect. So perfect it was borderline surreal.

The song faded as we climbed the few steps to the decorated alcove. Torin and Graham stood off to the side near Aslan, and Ruiz stood to the side where I would be. As I passed him, Ruiz reached out and brushed a hand over my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. We shared a smile. He too was misty eyed. Goddamn him. I was doing well, but seeing tough guy Costa Ruiz almost in tears made the burn set in anew.

Barnabus, grinning and shaking with age, waited front and center for us to take our places.

“Are you the ones getting married?” Barnabus harshly whispered as we moved in front of him. The microphone clipped to his lapel picked it up clear as day, broadcasting it around the room. “I’m waiting for two grooms.” He held up two fingers. “No bride this time, and that’s A-okay with me. Are you them?” He scanned us. “Sure do look gussied up.”

“We’re them,” I said, unable to contain a smirk.

“Oh, good. Good, good. I’ve been waiting for you. Sure took an age. Weddings are such a fanfare sometimes. You never know when they’re gonna get to the good stuff. And I’m an old man, you know? Shouldn’t keep me waiting like that. Lord only knows how much time I’ve got left.” He shook the wrinkled papers. “I’m gonna start now if that’s okay. My hip’s bugging me, and I’d like to sit when we’re done.”

“Do you want a chair now?” I asked.

“Oh no, no, no. I’ll make it.” He pointed at his mouth. “Got my teeth in. It makes talking a bit easier, don’t you think?”

“I’m glad.” I was fighting a solid laugh and wasn’t the only one. Torin snorted, then coughed to cover it up. Aslan shook his head and looked at me, silently saying, *This is on you.*

A few guests snickered behind me.

Barnabus squinted at the papers he held. “I’m gonna read from this if that’s okay. My brain’s not what it used to be. Sure can’t memorize anything anymore, and I don’t want to forget to do something. This here day’s important.”

“It sure is. Have at ’er, Barney,” Aslan said.

A ripple of soft laughter flowed among our guests.

“I’ll have at ’er then. Like you said.” Barnabus sucked his teeth once or twice as he blinked at the program he’d written. In and out the dentures popped. In and out. In and out. It was distracting and looked ridiculous, but I didn’t care one iota. *These* were the memories we would talk about for decades. *Remember when...*

Aslan and I shared a look, and I shrugged, mouthing, “He’ll get there.”

Then Barnabus nodded as though the pieces all clicked. “Okay. I’m set. Are you set?”

“We’re set,” I said.

But then he dropped his arm and the papers to his side as he looked around. “The darndest thing though. I feel like we did this the other day. Sometimes my mind plays tricks on me, but I feel like I’ve been here before.”

“You have. And we did. It was the rehearsal. Two days ago, remember?”

“Oh. That’s right. Okay. That clears that up. Um... Face one another and hold hands like ya mean it. It’s gonna be a bumpy ride, folks. Only half the gears are spinning, and the ones that are are a bit rusty, but we’ll make it.” Then he laughed and coughed and laughed some more. “I tell my granddaughter, not all the cylinders are firing, but we’ll still get there.” Another laugh. “Oh, I’m kidding. It’s just a little altar humor. Smooth sailing, I promise. Now let’s see... Where was I?”

Barnabus pulled a hanky from a pocket and blew his nose with a giant honk, then he cleared his throat.

Everyone was in stitches again, and I was starting to wonder if our *short* ceremony might not take all afternoon.

Barnabus stuffed the hanky away and peered between us to the gathered guests below. “Good afternoon, everyone. I’m Barnabus Rooney, and I’ll be officiating the wedding. I’m an old man, so bear with me as I lumber along.” He clasped my shoulder and gave me a shake. “I’ve known this here boy since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. Worked on his parents’ garden for years and years.”

I bit back a smile, but Aslan corrected him. “That would be me, Barney. You just met Quaid a half dozen weeks ago.”

“Oh...” He stared between us. “Oh no. I’m already muddling it up. My eyes aren’t so good. Well, no bother. The point is, folks, we’re gathered today to celebrate the wedding of Quaid Andrew Valor and Aslan Ronan Doyle. Your dad’s name’s Ronan, isn’t it?” he said to Aslan.

“It is. It’s where my middle name came from.”

“I thought so. I knew him.” He contemplated and went on. “Today, it will be my pleasure to join these two young men’s lives together in matrimony. Nothing is more beautiful and sacred than love between soulmates. Love has no rules, no boundaries, and no limits. It is guided by the heart and is unique to those who experience it. I’m blessed to live in a day when two men, blissfully in love as Quaid and Aslan, can join

their lives together in front of loving and supporting friends and family.

“Life is a journey, and it’s always better to embark on it with someone by your side. With the strength of two, the burden of this life can be lessened and shared. Life is not always easy. The good days complement the bad. There will be ups and downs, rain and sunshine, moments of peace, and moments of heartache, but you will weather it all the better with a loving partner by your side. With someone to lean on and talk to. With someone who will take your hand when you’re weak and celebrate the joyous moments you will surely experience in abundance. I’d like to read a poem... just give me a second to find it.”

Barnabus sifted through his papers, and when he found it, he read it out loud. It was about love and friendship, about long roads and strong foundations. It was about treasuring the small moments and not taking life or each other for granted. The message was a reflection of what my dad had shared at the house earlier. It resonated as I stared into the deep brown pools of Aslan’s eyes. He stared back with unhidden affection, squeezing my hands at intervals as Barnabus regaled us in beautiful prose.

The next reading was a short biblical passage—the only religious touch to the whole service and something Aslan said would keep things kosher with his Catholic mother—then he moved on.

“It’s time for exchanging the vows, and I’m told you have written your own. Or at least I hope so because I don’t have anything on my paper, and I’m not sure I can wing it.”

“We have,” I said.

“You first.” Aslan nodded at me.

As I fished the prompt card I’d written from my suit pocket, my throat tightened with emotions. I was never going to get through this dry eyed. I stared at the cue card for a second, reminding my scattered brain where to begin, then peered up at my best friend, lover, and soon-to-be husband.

“I pondered these vows for a long time, unsure if there would ever be a way to express my heart to you. No matter what words I chose, they never seemed to adequately express what I felt inside.”

I swallowed a lump, and another, then squeezed Aslan’s hands for dear life as I continued. “Since we got engaged and started planning this special day, you’ve said numerous times how I was chasing the fairy tale wedding. You’d laugh, and I’d sneer and feign being insulted, but I don’t think you realized how true that statement was, and I was ashamed to admit it at the time.

“Fairy tales are magical, idealistic fables of unrealistic proportions. Often, they are superlative, over-the-top, shiny, and flashy stories meant for children. They present true love in a way that doesn’t seem possible in the natural world. Most adults would agree. When I envisioned my wedding day as a young boy—and I did, many times, even when I believed it to



be an impossibility—it was always in a majestic, unrealistic, fabulized way with idealistic love that can't exist in reality. But I was ten, so it was okay. When I grew older, I quickly understood those dreams would never happen, at least not in the sense I imagined them. Fairy tales don't come true. They aren't real. I figured the best I could hope for was a wedding at the justice of the peace and a mediocre companionship with someone who could tolerate my eccentricities. But it would never be blinding love. That only exists in storybooks. And there was definitely no such thing as a soul mate.

“Then I met you.” My eyes filled before I could go on. Aslan's face blurred, and blinking set them free, sending them cascading down my cheeks. I ignored them. “You defied all those beliefs. We started dating, and I thought, if I'm lucky, he'll be better than the rest. We grew close quite fast, and something happened I can't describe, but I knew, Aslan, *I knew*, I'd been wrong all those years. The love those fairy tales described wasn't too good to be true because I was suddenly surrounded by it. Heart and soul. Me, of all people. And my god I was terrified. It consumed me, and it scared me shitless. I was scared to lose it. Scared I would wake up one morning and find out I'd been dreaming all along. Scared I would one day drive you away with my quirks and moodiness because who could possibly love me? But every day by your side has been better and better and better. It's like we came together and knew all the dance moves without anyone teaching us. Every day, I feel stronger, more alive, and happier than I ever thought possible. And it's all because of you.”

I squeezed his hands, tears flowing free at that point. My voice warbled as I continued. “So I vow to you, Aslan Ronan Doyle, that from this day forward, I will remain faithfully by your side as your husband. I will love you, laugh with you, cry with you, and give you strength when yours is depleted. No matter the obstacles we encounter, I will remain your friend, your companion, your lover, and your soul mate until we are someday parted by death. And even then, I’ll find you in the afterlife, and we can go on from there because *this* love we share is eternal.”

Aslan reached out and thumbed the tears racing fast down my cheeks and dripping off my chin, but it was an open faucet, and there was no damming them.

“I love you,” I said, my voice officially cracking.

“I love you too. I don’t know if I can follow that.”

I huffed a soggy laugh. “Try. It’s not a competition.”

“If it was, you’d win.”

Another wet laugh and Aslan cupped my cheek, holding my head in such a way I looked him in the eyes.

“Where to begin? I have so much to say and no clue how to express it. Every time I rehearsed, the words came out different, but the sentiment is always the same, so I’m going to wing it.”

“You didn’t write it down?”

He chuckled. “I’m not you. I don’t have a cue card in my pocket.”

“Shocking.”

“Trust me.”

“I do,” I said without hesitation.

“Good. Quaid Andrew Valor, you are my whole world. *Never* doubt my love. Meeting you, getting to know you outside of work was the best thing to ever happen to me. You quite literally knocked me for a six because who was this guy? Who was this man who I’d always had a poor impression of? And why hadn’t I opened my eyes earlier? When I recovered from the shock of discovering that Quaid Valor was, in fact, not the cynical, uptight asshole I’d once believed him to be—”

“But I am... and I don’t think you should say asshole in your vows.”

“Shh.” Aslan pressed a finger to my lips, smirking. “My turn. When I discovered you were *not* the cynical, uptight asshole I’d presumed you to be, I knew my life was irrevocably changed. Here was a guy who hid his true self from the world. Here was a man who, deep down, was sensitive, emotional, and wounded. A man who thought himself to be utterly unlovable and who feared being hurt. A man who’d reinforced himself against a world he didn’t think could possibly understand him. It broke my heart.”

My chin quivered in his grip, and I clenched my teeth, unsuccessfully attempting to ward off more tears.

“I want you to walk away from today confident in the knowledge that I will be by your side, loving you, weathering

all life throws at us, from now until the end. No amount of sneering, or grumping, or pouting will drive me away. And if I have to eat lima bean and kale casserole or cabbage stew until I'm old and gray, bring it. I'll do it with a smile on my face because it means you worry about me too."

I gave another wet laugh. "These are your vows? Cabbage soup and casseroles?"

"Yes, they are. Shut up and let me keep going."

We both laughed.

"You really should have made a cue card."

Tears sparkled in Aslan's eyes. He took my hands, tracing his thumbs over mine. "Quaid Valor, you're the first thing I see when I wake up in the morning and the last thing I see when I close my eyes at night. I'm blessed to share my days with you. You make me smile like no one ever has. You make me laugh in a way I've never laughed before. I'm the luckiest man alive, and it's because you've chosen to trust me and to spend your life with me. You've torn down your walls and let yourself be vulnerable for me, which means everything."

His overflowing eyelids encumbered with tears let go. "You are unlike anyone I've ever met. You have the kindest, most loving heart I've ever seen. You feel things deeply, sometimes to your detriment, but it's that softer side of you that calls to me. I promise I will stand faithfully by your side for the rest of our lives. I will hold you up. I will fight for you. I will laugh with you and cry with you. I will help carry your burdens so

your load is lighter. From today until tomorrow and until time stops, we are one. I love you.”

I wasn't sure there was a dry eye in the room. My head buzzed, and I barely heard Barnabus announce it was time to exchange rings. At that point, all I wanted was to collapse into Aslan's arms and let him hold me. But we weren't done.

Graham appeared between us, box open and on display. Aslan untied my ring first, and I copied with his when he was done. Graham, the little soldier, bowed before retaking his place beside Torin.

We'd chosen something slightly different from the traditional exchange, and with Barnabus's prompting, Aslan spoke first, holding the ring halfway down my finger. Both of us were trembling as we stared into one another's eyes.

“The fitting of this ring with its unending circle symbolizes my everlasting love for you. The placing of this ring on your finger is the fulfillment of my dreams, to have you as my best friend, my love, my husband, and to live as one forever. With this ring, I give you my heart. From this day forward, you shall not walk alone. My heart will shelter you. My arms will be your home.”

He pushed the ring the rest of the way on my finger, and I took my turn.

“The fitting of this ring with its unending circle symbolizes my everlasting love for you. The placing of this ring on your finger is the fulfillment of my dreams, to have you as my best friend, my love, my husband, and to live as one forever. With

this ring, I give you my heart. From this day forward, you shall not walk alone. My heart will shelter you. My arms will be your home.”

Barnabus touched our shoulders. “You have now expressed your love to one another through the commitment and promises you have made. It is with these in mind that I pronounce you legally wed, husbands from this day forth. You have probably kissed a thousand times, maybe more. But today, the feeling is new. No longer simply partners and best friends, you have become husbands and can now seal your union with a kiss.”

I took Aslan’s face between my hands and connected us without a second thought. He held fast to my waist, and I felt the tremors rocking his system. We kept it relatively tame for our audience’s sake but lingered nonetheless. Aslan groped the back of my head, snagging my hair and keeping me close. He tasted of salty tears and endless love.

Whoops and cheers rose high in the room. People clapped. As we finally came apart, Aslan took my hand, and we turned to face everyone. The string sextet began to play, and there was confetti. I had no idea where it came from, but it fell like snowflakes all around us, dancing and swirling in the air, catching on our suit jackets and gathering on our shoulders.

Torin tackle-hugged Aslan from behind, and I lost my husband for a minute as his best friend congratulated him, squeezing him in his arms. People got up and came forward.

The official part was over, and we were quickly surrounded by friends and loved ones, all talking at once.

Ruiz clapped my shoulder and spoke in my ear above the hubbub. “Congratulations. Not a single dry eye in the room. Told you not to worry.”

Then Dad was there, hugging me senseless, his scent a comforting blanket. I didn’t let go for a long time. When we came apart, he patted my cheek, his eyes red-rimmed and glossy. “That’s my boy. What an incredible day.”

And it was. One I would remember always.

Aslan’s family surrounded him, but Amelia broke free and threw herself into my arms. “Welcome to the family, Quaid.”

“Thank you.”

It was all so much, but I’d never known happiness like it.

## Chapter 27



# Aslan



Quaid and I ended up separated in the commotion following the ceremony, but when I glanced over heads, seeking my husband—*holy shit, we were married*—I found him helping Barnabus toward the reception hall. The elderly man’s granddaughter was with them, her supporting Barnabus on one side and Quaid linked with him on the other.

I returned to greeting guests and accepting congratulations. I’d never been hugged so much in one day. Chris commented on the snazzy tuxes we’d chosen, Tony shook my hand, and Mom got a hold of my cheeks and wouldn’t let go, squishing them as she cried and told me how proud she was, kissing every inch of my face and forehead until I was sure to be covered in smears of lipstick.

Amelia rescued me, plunking my niece into my arms and dragging Mom away. Kylee was more interested in the confetti on my shoulders than chatting about her fancy dress. Friends

from work shook my hand. A few cousins I'd invited did the same.

When I got a side hug from Allison, I whispered my own congratulations into her ear, earning a shy smile. "Thank you," she said, then to Kylee, "You have a very pretty dress. I saw you throwing the rose petals."

My niece turned instantly shy and buried her face in my neck.

Quaid returned a short time later with Graham shadowing a few steps behind, still carrying the wooden box. "We need to gather the wedding party for pictures. We'll do the majority in the foyer, but I'd like a few of us by the waterfall."

"Definitely"—I tugged him in for a quick kiss—"husband," I whispered against his mouth.

Quaid's smile was bashful. "Husband," he repeated.

"Hey, Graham, my man. You did amazing." I offered him a fist to bump. He returned it unenthusiastically. He'd learned the gesture, but to him, it was no different from a standard handshake—a requirement when someone asked it of him.

"Uncle Quaid," he said, still toying with the latches on the box. "Why did that man's teeth keep falling out of his mouth?"

Quaid and I shared a smile. It was the first time Graham had referred to Quaid as *uncle* and not Detective.

"He wears dentures. Do you know what those are?" Quaid asked.

“Fake teeth.”

“That’s right. I guess they aren’t his favorite thing in the world, so maybe they feel uncomfortable, and it makes him want to play with them, so he pops them in and out.”

Graham mashed his lips together as he considered. “Teeth aren’t uncomfortable. Not to me.”

“Me either.”

Jordyn and June appeared. The two MPU partners awkwardly hugged. Neither of them was big on physical contact. Jordyn wore black trousers, a white silk blouse, and a black tie. Her dark hair was styled to one side and hung in a slope to her chin. Her makeup was the same as always, accenting her eyes but otherwise subtle.

Her girlfriend June was flashier in a teal sequined dress with thin straps and a plunging neckline. It stopped midhigh, and her heels, the same color as the dress, gave her several more inches of height, making her tower over her much shorter girlfriend. June’s auburn hair was curled and styled in a partial updo, pieces cascading over her bare shoulders. She was the opposite of Jordyn in every way.

Quaid didn’t hug her, but they exchanged cheek kisses in a dramatic manner that reminded me June was in school for theater.

“Congratulations,” Jordyn said, offering me a hand to shake.

“Thanks. Glad you could come.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Jordyn playfully punched Quaid's shoulder, and she and June moved off to let others from the crowd have a turn.

Eden, wearing a delighted smile, approached Quaid. The two had spent many years as partners, and their relationship was much closer than the one he had with Jordyn. In an instant, they were in each other's arms, hugging, rocking side to side.

It was a while before the well-wishers dispersed into the reception hall. Dinner would be served in two hours, giving us time for wedding photography.

Torin wedged himself between Quaid and me, wrapped an arm around us both, and smacked wet kisses on our cheeks one after the other. I laughed, and Quaid tried to dodge him unsuccessfully.

"You're disgusting," Quaid snapped, wiping his cheek.

"What the hell, Tor?"

"I love you," he said to me. "And I love you," he said to Quaid, "by default because you married my best friend."

"That's... You know what? I don't care. You can't hurt my feelings today." And Quaid pecked his own wet kiss on Torin's cheek, which he accepted with a laugh.

"The picture lady is here and ready to start," Torin announced. "Shall we?"

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It took a solid hour and a half to finish the photography, and by then, I was exhausted, starving, and sick of holding still and

smiling. We had managed to drag some of the wedding party to the waterfall for a few group shots, but most of those were of Quaid and me alone. I couldn't wait to see how they turned out.

As the two of us entered the reception room, a cheer went up. People stood and clapped. In an instant, the ring of silverware against wine glasses sang through the air. I dragged Quaid into my arms and gave the guests what they wanted.

Quaid smiled against my mouth. "Why do I get the sense we'll be doing this all night?"

I chuckled and kissed him again. "Because we will."

The string sextet had relocated onto their special stage in the corner. They would entertain us through the meal, and a DJ was scheduled to arrive for the after-dinner dancing.

"Whose idea was it to hire a string ensemble?" Quaid asked, fingers weaving with mine as we crossed the room to the dais and the wedding party's table.

"Ruiz's. He had connections, and when he suggested it, I knew it would be exactly perfect. I also told him to keep it a secret."

"He surprises me sometimes."

Ruiz was with his wife, standing before the dais, chatting with Amelia and Chris. Kylee and Graham were running around the room with silver and gold balloons, pairs of clinking champagne glasses painted on each.

Abraham was talking to my dad, and Mom was bustling about, rearranging chairs and place settings like we hadn't spent months making sure it was exactly how we wanted it.

It was a small wedding—fifty people at most—but the intimacy of it made it all the more special. The bar was open, but most people were enjoying a predinner glass of champagne in celebration.

I cringed when my gaze landed on a gussied-up twelve-foot-tall Christmas tree in a corner. That was not in the plan, and I assumed it might have been added by the castle staff as part of the holiday festivities. Knowing my sister, she would have allowed it to remain, forgetting or ignoring Quaid's insistence on having a non-Christmas wedding.

Quaid gasped, drawing my attention from the tree. At first, I thought he'd noticed it. Then I figured maybe he'd caught my mother reseating everyone by fiddling with the name tags on the tables, but it was neither. Quaid's eyes were on the cake at the far end of the room. It stood easily three feet high.

Quaid was on the move, fingers detaching from mine in a flash as he made his way toward it.

I followed, crossing my fingers and hoping it would be satisfactory.

I hadn't seen the final product in person, but Torin had shown me a few pictures he'd snapped earlier in the day when it had arrived. It was even more gorgeous than I'd imagined, but seeing it on display, watching Quaid's reaction... That was what counted.

He stared, lips parting as he took it in. The holly leaves, frosted berries, and delicately snow-dusted pine cones distributed on every level were exquisite works of art. At its peak, the two grooms were embraced mid-dance in front of a snowy castle. It was festive, wintery, and magical, and I hoped Quaid focused more on the latter aspects.

“Did we do okay? I know it’s a touch Christmassy, but it’s not in your face Christmassy. It used our color theme appropriately while also tipping its hat at the season, and—”

“Az, it’s... incredible.”

“It’s red velvet under the white icing.”

Quaid huffed a small laugh. “Of course it is. Did you and Torin taste test every flavor?”

“We gorged. You would have been disgusted. I’m pretty sure Mr. Prim and Proper who served us was disgusted. It was the best job we could have been assigned. But is it okay? Too much?”

He considered and shook his head. “No. I love it. It’s perfect.”

I kissed his cheek and took his hand again. “We should find our seats. I think it’s almost dinner time, and there are speeches to get through yet. God help us. Whose idea was it to let Torin talk?”

“You made him emcee.”

“I may regret that. He’s already sucking back a beer and has an empty wine glass in front of him.”

“If it ends in humiliation, just remember, he’s your friend, and he loves you.”

“Hey now. He loves you too. He said so.”

“Yeah. By default.”

I chuckled.

We weaved through the gathered guests to our table, greeting people and accepting more hugs, kisses, and well-wishes on our way. The dais was small, and seated with us were Torin and Allison on one side, Ruiz and Tia on the other. Mom had insisted the parents share their own table below—and I loved her for being so open and welcoming to Quaid’s dad. Amelia, Chris, and the kids were with them.

Someone—a thoughtful waiter, I presumed—had filled all our glasses with champagne. Allison hadn’t touched hers, and mine would go untouched too. Knowing Torin, he would stick to beer now that he’d switched. But I would need something to toast with, so once Quaid was seated, I found a waiter and asked for two glasses of sparkling water.

When he delivered them, I approached Allison and subtly exchanged glasses, whispering its contents in her ear.

She smiled over her shoulder and mouthed a thank you.

I found a seat between Quaid and Torin and set my bubbly water down, sliding my champagne to Quaid, hoping he’d indulge.

“Are you settled?” Torin asked, leaning against my side as he adjusted his tie.



“Meaning?”

“You and lover boy. I’m your emcee, and I’d like to get this show on the road because I’m starving.”

“Do your worst.”

Torin grinned and wiggled his brows. “I intend to.”

He pushed back from the table—he’d removed his jacket the second pictures were done—and with a beer in hand, headed for a podium set up at the far end. When he turned on the microphone, he leaned in too close and said, “Testing, testing. Is this thing on? Check, check, check.”

His voice boomed through the reception hall, almost instantly hushing the chatter of voices.

Torin chuckled. “I’ve always wanted to do that. Good evening, ladies and gents. I’m Torin Fox, your emcee for the evening. I promise I’ll make this short and sweet so we can feast, drink, and dance the night away. For anyone who doesn’t know me, I’m Aslan’s work partner and best friend. Also, the snazziest of all men here tonight if I do say so myself.”

“You wish,” Ruiz called.

A ripple of laughter ran through the audience.

“I’ve been repeatedly told to behave, but we all know that’s not going to happen. I will, however, in the interest of children being present, try to curb my potty mouth.”

“Good luck with that,” I said behind my hand.

It earned me an immediate middle finger, and Torin leaned over the microphone, saying, “Gestures don’t count because, hopefully, the children here tonight don’t know sign language.”

More laughter.

I spied Graham, seated beside his grandmother, still with our wooden ring box in front of him. I half expected him to pipe up and inform Torin he was wrong, but my nephew remained quiet, seemingly lost in his head. Kylee was in Chris’s arms, mouth wrapped around his beer bottle, trying to help herself to a drink.

“I’m going to start with a short story of how I met Az almost ten years ago. I was a young, handsome lad in my early thirties, a newly promoted detective at a time when the department had undergone a radical shift. Az had been a detective for a few months already and was more settled into the position. His old-timer partner was close to retirement, so I knew the heads would be looking to pair him up with someone fresh off street patrol sooner or later. I’d heard rumors about the hot shot Aslan Doyle, and let me tell you, those rumors were *all true*.”

“Oh boy,” I said under my breath. “Here we go.”

Quaid, chuckling, rubbed my back. “Paybacks are a bitch. Just remember he’s getting married too.”

“Oh, I’m taking notes.” I rested a hand on Quaid’s knee as Torin continued.

“We weren’t initially paired up. I was bounced around, worked with a few other detectives, and got to be extra hands on a few gnarly cases. They were trying to see who was the best fit for the new guy. Aslan and I ended up working a few cases together, and for as serious as those cases were, I had an absolute fucking blast... Shit.”

Laughter rippled around the room.

Torin covered his mouth a second, glanced at Allison, then leaned over the microphone. “Please redact that word from the record. I did not mean to use it, and I’d like it struck before I am held in contempt by my gorgeous fiancée.”

“You’re not in court, you idiot. Plow on,” Ruiz said, laughing.

Torin cleared his throat. “I’m trying. I swear. Anyhow, this guy”—he thumbed at me—“knew how to work a case without letting the motherload of it weigh him down. He could be serious and still joke around. He could process a scene and still talk about his evening plans. When we were stuck in a dark and dreary atmosphere, he never stopped smiling, and he never let it get to him, and I thought, wow. This is who I want on my side. This is the guy who will make working in homicide functional without there being a risk of losing my mind.

“A few months later, we were assigned each other as partners. In no time, we found our groove and developed a rock-solid friendship. I idolized him from day one. Was he perfect? Hell no. Az had a wild side in those days. He was a

party animal to the extreme—sometimes to his detriment. He was the master of burning the candle at both ends. An entertainer of both men and women alike. And he did not discriminate, folks. Let's give him that.”

“Thanks, Tor,” I said, cringing.

Guests laughed, most of them easily able to read between the lines.

“That was called tact. Remember it. I could have called you a whore, but I didn't.”

“Thank god for self-restraint.”

“You're welcome. Actually, thank Allison. She edited my speech. Like, hardcore, man. You should see the red marks on this paper.” He held it up, showing everyone. “Thanks, baby.” He winked at his fiancée.

Allison, shaking her head, waved for him to continue.

“Anyhow, you get the picture. Az wasn't exactly the settling-down type, but I appreciated all sides of him. I learned a lot from him. When he got in trouble at work, which was often back then, I always had his back because he was and still is an excellent detective. Approximately two years ago, something changed. It started with him getting sober, and I for one commend you on that accomplishment, brother. I know it wasn't easy. And I know it will be a lifetime battle, but I have no doubt you will continue to succeed. Without alcohol fueling his nights, I saw my best friend start to get serious about life. His good nature never wavered, but his outlook improved. He

no longer lived in the moment but started living for tomorrow. He started to give a shit. I knew then the self-proclaimed office playboy was growing up.” Torin dabbed at fake tears. “And I was so proud.”

He earned a few more chuckles.

“But what I didn’t expect was for him to one day tell me he was interested in dating the strangely neurotic, scowly, starchy, stubborn, sullen, sneering, cantankerous, and anal to a fault guy from MPU. Sorry, Quaid, no offense.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Be as insulting as you’d like. I’m still smarter than you, and that will never change. PS, I love you by default.” Quaid tipped his champagne glass at Torin and sipped, a distinct quirk in the corner of his mouth.

Torin narrowed his eyes. “You are not smarter than me.”

“Yes, he is,” Ruiz chipped in.

When Torin looked at me for backup, I shrugged. “He is.”

“*Anyhow...*” Torin stalled, searching his papers for where he’d left off. “Great, now I can’t fucking remember where I was.”

Allison cleared her throat.

Torin slapped a hand over his mouth again. “Shit.” It came out muffled. “Language. Sorry, kids. Ignore that. Here we go. I didn’t trust the change at first. I thought, there’s no way Az can be serious about one person. But he proved me wrong because when Aslan takes a notion to something, he throws

himself in wholeheartedly. And it didn't take long for me to see what Quaid meant to him.

“My first day as a detective, when I met the party boy I hoped might someday be my partner, I envied his free spirit and ability to take life by the horns and go with it. Ten years later, as I watched him fall in love for the first time, I thought, hell, I still envy him because I wanted that.”

Torin turned to face me. “Az, you've never wasted a day of your life. When you fuck up, you own it. When you work, you work hard. And when you love, you love with all your heart. I'm lucky and privileged to be your best friend. You've taught me a lot these past ten years, and I'm sure you'll go on teaching me more over the following ten. Congratulations to both of you. And despite the hell I give you, Quaid, I hope you know I love you too. And not just by default. Believe me when I tell you, you got the best man out there, and no one will take care of or love you more than that man by your side.”

Everyone toasted Torin's speech, but instead of drinking my bubbly water, I rose, met Torin before he got to his seat, and smothered him in a hug. We stood like that for a long time. “I love you, man,” Torin said, smacking my back.

“I love you too.”

When Torin pulled away, he looked around me at Quaid. “On your feet, lover boy. You're getting hugged whether you like it or not.”

Quaid smirked and stood. My best friend and husband shared a lingering hug, a real hug, and Torin whispered

something in his ear. It wasn't meant for me, but it made Quaid smile and nod. They hugged tighter, longer. For all the hell they gave each other, they really didn't hate one another. It was an act.

When they came apart, Torin glanced at Ruiz. "You're up, my man. Try to keep the swearing to a minimum. I think I went over our combined quota."

Ruiz stood, pulled his jacket straight, and adjusted his tie before heading to the podium. On his way past Quaid, he clasped his shoulder. My husband smiled, which caused me to smile. Quaid hadn't just broken out of his shell for me, but he had for Ruiz too, and I was quite sure our hardheaded IT expert was Quaid's first true friend in a long, long time.

"Good evening, everyone," Ruiz said. "It's an honor to be here tonight to celebrate the wedding of these two incredible men, one of whom has become very close to me over this past year, even though I don't think he always believes how important he is. He undersells himself and shouldn't because he's an amazing person."

Ruiz didn't carry a speech, but when he paused, he glanced down the table at Quaid. "That would be you, Mr. Oblivious. And Torin's wrong. *You* are the snazziest man here tonight. You're killing that tux."

Quaid, smirking, stage whispered, "Stop flirting."

Ruiz laughed into the microphone. "I deserved that." To the guests, he said, "I've worked with the Metropolitan Toronto Police Department for years in the capacity of information

technology specialist. That's fancy terminology for the geek squad or the nerd herd. Population one most days. Either way, it means I get to work with all the different units in the department, albeit most of my work is conducted solo, and they get my reports when I'm ready to make them. It's an incredibly lonely job sometimes, and to be honest, I'm rarely afforded enough time to bond with other detectives or make friends.

“A little more than a year ago, that changed. I ended up tangled in one of Quaid's cases, and I think he would agree that it definitely wasn't instalove between us.”

“More like instahate,” Quaid corrected.

The audience and Ruiz chuckled. “Yes, indeed. Instahate. That sounds about right. But that was all on me, and we won't get into it. It was an intensely personal case for Quaid, and a few things happened during the process that afforded me a chance to see him in a different light. We butted heads a lot, but Quaid never backed down. He was passionate and focused and wasn't about to let an A-hole like me get in his way.”

Ruiz turned to Torin. “Take notes on how to appropriately swear in front of an audience, dumb dumb.”

Torin gave him the finger.

The guests laughed.

Shaking his head, Ruiz returned to his speech. “Quaid rightfully put me in my place more than once during that case, and at the end of the day, it forced me to look at myself and



ask myself a lot of questions. I didn't like who I saw when I looked in the mirror anymore, and I knew I needed to change."

Ruiz glanced down the table again with probably the most serious expression I'd ever seen on his face. "Quaid, you've taught me a lot this past year. You've opened my eyes to many things, and I'm grateful to you. You've helped me be a better person, a better husband, and most of all, a better dad to my girls. Although you don't think we have anything in common, we do. One of those things is how far we'll go for the people in our lives we love and cherish. Family and friends both. During that case, and you know the one I'm talking about, I saw that passion in you clear as day. The man I'd despised on principle, who I'd unfairly stereotyped and ridiculed, put his neck on the line for the people he loved. Consequences be damned. And it made me take a step back. It kickstarted an active change in my life. The best thing to come from that change was I made an unexpected, lifelong friend in you."

Quaid searched for my hand under the table. I snagged it, weaving our fingers together and giving him a grounding squeeze. Ruiz was going to take shit if he made Quaid cry again.

"Like Aslan, I feel gifted to have glimpsed a side of you you don't always show other people. I hope our friendship continues to grow. I look forward to sharing parental advice with you someday and grumbling about marriage woes over too many beers. But I want you to know I've always got your back. No matter what. All you have to do is pick up the phone,

and I'll be there. And Az," Ruiz pointed at me, a hardened look on his face. "You take care of him, or I'll kick your ass."

With a wide grin, I waved him forward. "Bring it. Show me your tattoos, big guy. Make me good and scared."

"Just tell him to fuck off," Torin said, then he slapped a hand over his mouth. "Goddammit. What is wrong with me?"

Everyone was laughing, and Ruiz lifted his champagne glass. "To my best friend on his wedding day."

Quaid was off his seat instantly, and Ruiz barely had time to put his glass down again before Quaid crashed into him. They hugged, Ruiz laughing, and Quaid, if I wasn't mistaken, crying into Ruiz's shoulder. The poor guy was a mess.

A full minute into the hug, Ruiz patted Quaid's back and said, not quietly, "Okay, it's getting weird now."

Quaid, laughing, pulled away.

Torin took to the microphone again, asking if anyone else would like to say a word or two before the meal.

The response was more wine glass clinking, so Quaid and I stood and kissed to more whoops and cheers. Amelia said a few short words, then my dad got up and rambled on for ten minutes, starting with well-wishes and ending, somehow, with a stray dog he'd seen on the beach the week before coming home. "And there he was, eating a hamburger at the water's edge. A hamburger. I don't know where he got it, but boy was he happy. Scraggly thing. A mutt, but I don't know dog

breeds. Maybe he was something. I'd have brought him home, but the wife's allergic."

"I'm not allergic, Ronan. Good grief. Sit down. No one cares about the dog."

"I was making a point."

"You lost the point ten minutes ago. Amelia, Amelia, go get your father."

Before my sister was off her chair, Dad held up his wine glass in a cheers motion—"to the happy couple"—and drained it. It was likely his third, fourth, or sixth, hence the rambling.

With the speeches done, dinner was served. I had to give it to Quaid. He ate and didn't once comment negatively on the meal. His was salmon, mashed potato, and roasted vegetables, so really, it was all things he loved and would eat on a typical day. And although he regulated his wine intake, he did have at least a full glass with his meal—and that was after drinking both our flutes of champagne before dinner. His cheeks were slightly flushed, and he was constantly smiling.

"Is this the first time you've eaten today?" I asked when he cleaned his plate of every crumb.

"No. Dad made eggs for breakfast. And toast."

"And you allowed that without giving him a cholesterol lecture?"

"It's my wedding day. Everyone gets a free pass."

“So if I want to eat four pieces of cake later tonight, you won’t have anything to say?”

“Nope. But if you make yourself sick enough that you can’t perform your husbandly duties in our King’s Suite later, I’ll be seriously pissed off.”

I chuckled and wrapped an arm around him. “Fair enough. I’ll limit myself. And have no fear. There will be no sleeping tonight.”

Quaid beamed, and when the waiter came to clear our plates and asked if Quaid would like a top-up of wine, he agreed.

Our meal had been interrupted by glass clinking at least five times, and the last two had been initiated by Graham, who had quickly caught on to what it meant. The string sextet performed in the background throughout our entire meal, and Quaid watched them, awestruck and mesmerized. The happiness radiating through him was all a man could ask for on his wedding day. It made all the stress of getting this far worth it.

As dinner wound down and plates were cleared, people mingled. The bartender served drinks as the DJ arrived, settling in behind his station, readying to take over when the string ensemble was done with their evening duties. Ruiz, who’d taken responsibility for music, met with Horatio Mendez, the DJ and a buddy of his, to ensure he was organized.

A free-for-all dessert bar was set up along the far wall with tiny plates of pastries and tarts ready for the taking. Graham

hovered, admiring them as though he couldn't decide which one to have. Torin helped himself to two plates. My dad balanced four. If I knew anything about my old man, they were all for him.

The cake would be cut and served later on, and if I understood correctly, it too had some ritual attached to it.

Quaid kissed my cheek, drawing my attention from the dessert table. "I'll be back. I need to make sure Ruiz got the song right."

"What song?"

"Our first dance song."

"We have a first dance song? I thought the DJ was just putting something on?"

Quaid patted my cheek and kissed me with wine-stained lips. "Oh, you silly man. And you wondered why I insisted on lording over the wedding plans."

Wine glass in hand, he swerved away, leaving his suit jacket behind. For the first time, without his coattails in the way, I got a fabulous look at his perfectly shaped ass in his trousers.

I hummed to myself. "Perfection and all mine."

## Chapter 28

# Quaid



“Hey.” I startled Ruiz, who was leaning over the DJ’s table, hands braced on its surface as he chatted with his buddy. “Did you get the song?”

Ruiz stood and tipped his head at Horatio. “Ask him. I told him what you requested.”

“And?” I asked the man near the mixer board who was—thank god—not a hippy, nor did he appear to be a headbanging metal head. In fact, Horatio was dressed in a nicely pressed shirt and trousers. No tie, but I could forgive that. His open shirt exposed his hairy chest and a massive cross on a chain hanging between his pecs. His wrists were decorated with more clunky chains, matching the excess of rings on his tattooed fingers.

The man grinned, showing off a twinkling gold tooth where an incisor belonged, and plucked an album from a file, waving it in the air. “Right here, my man. Had to borrow it from a friend. It wasn’t in my collection. Why didn’t I simply

download it, you ask?” He indicated his setup. “As you see, I’m old school. I don’t work like the DJs of today. No, sir. I bust my balls. DJing is an art, and I intend to keep it alive correctly. My cousin did this for a living and passed his vibes and lessons to me when he retired. I promise you a fabulous night.”

“Thank you. So you have the song?”

“I have it. Had me a listen too. Very sweet.” Horatio made a gesture of clutching his heart. I wasn’t sure if he was teasing or being serious.

Sharing my likes and dislikes when it came to music always made me feel self-conscious, particularly when it came to love songs, and the one I’d chosen for tonight had accompanied me on many commutes to work over the past year. Every time I heard it, I thought of Aslan and how fitting the lyrics came to describing what he meant to me. Horatio or Ruiz could laugh all they wanted. This was *my* night. *My* first dance with *my* husband. Nothing would ruin it.

A while ago, when I asked Aslan if we had a song, he’d given me a funny look. I’d backed off, certain it made me sound like a swoony high school kid. Maybe people didn’t attribute songs to their relationships anymore. But I’d been contemplating what to use for our first dance and wanted to see if Aslan had an opinion.

He did not. In fact, as had recently been demonstrated at the table, he didn’t even recall the conversation, hence it wasn’t as important to him.



Well, it was to me, and the song I'd chosen was special.

"Are you two ready?" Ruiz asked. "We can dim the lights, and I'll have Torin announce it."

"I'm ready. Let's start so people can enjoy the night."

I headed back toward the dais while Ruiz went to find Torin, and Horatio prepared the music. Before I made it that far, the massive overhead chandeliers dimmed, giving the hall a soft yellow glow. Around the room, long strings of tulle-covered fairy lights had been artfully hung and wrapped around pilasters. Someone switched them on, producing further ambiance. Fake candles had been placed on every surface, and their glow now stood out. The room sparkled, changing from a large dining hall to a magical island made solely for Aslan and me.

Not for the first time, I took it all in, savoring it and logging it in my memory bank so I would remember it for all time.

"Ladies and gentlemen." Torin's voice came over the speaker system. "The newlyweds will be having their first dance of the evening. If we can clear the dance floor and make way for the happy couple, that would be great. After their dance, we'll ask the parents to come forward and join them for the second dance, then we'll open the floor for everyone."

Aslan gestured to my jacket, asking if I wanted it. I shook my head, so he removed his jacket as well and came to join me. Hand in hand, we made our way to the open dance floor, where people had gathered to watch. The idea of having an

audience was daunting, but I pushed it from my mind, determined to have our moment.

Aslan dragged me into his arms and held me close before the music began. “Have we ever danced before?”

“Not that I can recall. Maybe playfully around the kitchen a few times.”

“You should know I’m pretty good at the bedroom tango, better known as the horizontal mambo, so try to keep up.” He wiggled his brows.

“None of those fancy moves here, mister. We have an audience.”

He chuckled. “Can I at least grab your ass? I can’t stop staring at it.”

“Your mother’s watching.”

He sighed, glancing over my shoulder. “Touché.”

The music kicked on, and the song I’d chosen washed over us. Aslan cocked an ear and listened to the opening chords. “What is it? It sounds new age. How unlike you.”

“Just listen... It’s... something that makes me think of you. Don’t tease me. I’m sensitive about my music.”

“I would never.”

He took my hand and wrapped his other around my waist, drawing me close. Foreheads together, we danced as Skillet’s “Anchor” played. Yes, it was a newer song. And no, I didn’t usually gravitate to the new-age stuff, but I’d heard it on the

radio a while back, and it got stuck in my head. I was sure Aslan had been expecting something from my soft classic rock collection—and there were many that would have been fitting—but when a song clung to you and you couldn't shake it off, it must mean something, right?

This one did.

Every word had Aslan paying attention, and as he picked up the subtext, his eyes softened.

“Jesus, Quaid,” he breathed. “You slay me sometimes.”

I mouthed the lyrics, but my eyes swam, and I ended up burying my face in his shoulder instead. He cupped the back of my head and rocked us like we were on an ocean, perhaps weathering a storm. The singer reminded him to steady me, steady me now. And he did because Aslan would always be my anchor, and he would always be there, unflinching, to help me weather all life had to bring. With him, I no longer feared the future. I no longer wanted to cling to the awful parts of my past. I simply wanted to exist in the blissful here and now with Aslan by my side.

“I love you,” he whispered in my ear.

I lifted my head and whispered back, “I love you too.”

Then he kissed me as the music moved us. We forgot to dance at some point, and the world and people disappeared for a few minutes. We were alone on the open sea, riding the waves at sunset, embarking together on a new path, one we would share from now until forever.

As the song ended, I was afraid to look around. We'd had an audience the entire time, but no one cared that we'd gotten sentimental, lost in the ebb and flow of lyrics. They clapped and swooned.

Aslan's parents joined us on the dance floor, and Amelia guided my father by the hand to join us as well. Dad beamed, leaving his cane behind with Graham, who'd taken a shine to my dad and was no doubt proud to be the cane protector since his ring duties had come to an end. I'd seen them chatting through dinner, and my dad's face lit up with pride and joy.

The six of us danced to a new song, and I was more able to stay present, moving my feet and swaying to the gentle tune. "You're not a bad dancer," I remarked.

"My partner's doing all the work. I'm just following, trying not to step on his feet."

I laughed. "Are you going to dance with Torin tonight?"

"Not if I want my balls to stay intact."

"I'm thinking of cutting Costa some slack and letting him off the hook."

"Don't you dare. Torin and I have a bet going on how long he lasts."

"You're mean."

"I'm not mean. I think it will depend on how many drinks he's had. Torin thinks he'll cop out halfway through. I say he lasts the whole time."

“I won’t tell him you’re betting on his level of humiliation.”

Aslan’s mom touched my arm. “You two look so handsome. Don’t they look handsome, Ronan?”

“So handsome.”

“He dances better than his father. Not sure who taught him, but it wasn’t me. And we’ve taken classes.”

“So many classes,” Ronan said.

I smiled as his parents swayed in circles, eventually moving farther away from us. I checked on Dad and Amelia, who were shuffling on the other side of the dance floor. Dad seemed to be keeping up okay, and if his knee was giving him hell, he was doing a fine job of hiding the pain. I was happy Amelia had offered to dance with him.

The song came to an end, fading out as an upbeat dance song took over. Aslan hitched a brow, and I shook my head. “I draw the line at slow dancing.”

“I bet you can shake that ass like nobody’s business.”

“Only in the bedroom.”

Aslan bit his lower lip. “Don’t start.”

Chuckling, we moved aside and let others take over. Aslan’s parents remained, boogieing like they were in their twenties again. Amelia hooked arms with Dad and helped him back toward Graham, who returned his cane.

I lost Aslan to his niece, who ran over, crashed into his legs, and yelled for him to pick her up. He scooped her into his

arms, and they gravitated back to the dance floor, where Aslan bopped and hopped and swung her around in his arms to the beat, making her laugh.

I watched them, envisioning a future when it was *our* child he entertained, *our* child he tickled into fits of giggles, *our* child who he accepted sloppy kisses from without flinching. Aslan would make an incredible dad someday, and I looked forward to the next step in our lives.

A tugging on my elbow drew my attention from the dance floor. Graham was beside me, a different box in his hands. The wooden ring box had been left at his table. This one was a gift, wrapped in gold paper with a curly silver ribbon and a handmade card.

“I have a present for you, Uncle Quaid. I made it at school for your wedding. We do arts and crafts sometimes. Mommy said I can give it to you now if I want.”

I took the offered gift and examined it. “Wow, did you wrap it all by yourself? It looks pretty fancy.” The paper was unevenly folded, and the bow was clumsily tied.

“Yes, I did. It was tricky, but Daddy helped me. Open it.”

“Let’s go to my table where it’s not so busy, and we can sit down.”

At the edge of the dance floor, people were continuously jostling my elbows, and the crowd of people was a bit suffocating.

I moved to the abandoned dais, and Graham followed on my heels. We sat side by side on the far edge of the small stage. Graham kicked his feet in a swing, heels methodically tapping the boards that made up the foundation of the dais, a hollow thumping rhythm that never sped up or slowed down.

His attention seemed riveted to the dance floor, but I could never be sure with Graham.

“You did a great job as ring bearer today.”

Graham mashed his lips together but didn’t respond.

“You were very professional.”

“Like a queen’s guard?”

“Exactly like a queen’s guard. You can keep the wooden box if you like. Maybe you can use it for special treasures.”

“Okay. Are you going to open your present now, Uncle Quaid?”

I smiled. “Sure.” Graham would not be distracted from the task at hand.

When I went to remove the bow, Graham leaned against my side and helped, tiny fingers plucking it until it was undone. In fact, Graham unwrapped the entire present for me—I let him—uncovering a plain brown box.

“It’s on the inside. Careful, it’s breakable.”

Inside the box, buried in tissue paper, was a painted sculpture made from clay. It had a certain clunkiness and unevenness indicative of most childhood art projects, but what

it represented was not up for debate. It was a chess piece, about six inches high and two inches wide at its base, where an unevenly cut piece of felt had been glued in place.

“It’s a paperweight rook,” Graham explained. “For your desk at work.”

“You made this?” I knew he had, but I was in awe of his six-year-old ability.

“Yes. At school. Sometimes we work with Play-Doh, but I don’t like Play-Doh because everything gets wrecked at cleanup time. I like clay better. Mrs. Marsen says if we make something really great with the clay, she can take it home and cook it so it’s a hard statue forever, then we can paint it. That’s what she did with my rook. I told her about your wedding.”

“It’s incredible, Graham. Thank you.”

“Did you know the queen is the most powerful piece on the board?”

“I did.”

“But you’re a boy, so I didn’t want to make the queen. And the king is the weakest piece on the board, so even though you got married in a castle and you’re like a king, you aren’t weak like one. So I made a rook. The rook is the second most powerful piece in chess. And it’s my favorite piece. Mommy said it was a perfect choice. Do you have a favorite?”

I smiled at his logic and couldn’t argue. “I think the bishop is my favorite piece, but I agree, the rook is more powerful, and



this guy will look fantastic on my desk at work. I've never had a paperweight before."

Graham's gaze lifted briefly to mine before settling on my shoulder. "Did you know Grandpa Valor sometimes plays chess by himself?"

"I did know. Strange, isn't it?"

"He said it's a good way to practice, but the key is that you have to play your best with the white and black pieces. You can't have a favorite, or it won't work. You have to make it a strong competition. Do you play chess by yourself?"

"I have once or twice."

Graham's attention moved to the dance floor, where a crowd of guests was moving and jiving to the beat.

"I don't like dancing," Graham said, changing the subject. "Daddy said the ring guard doesn't have to dance a special dance."

"He's right. You're off the hook."

That seemed to please him, and like everything Graham did, which was spontaneous and made sense only to him, he hopped off the edge of the dais and wandered away to the dessert table without another word.

I stared at the clay molded rook he'd given me as a wedding present and felt inordinately proud and touched.

The night advanced with guests growing progressively more inebriated. The dance floor was never empty, and Aslan spent

so much time out there that his hair was sweat soaked at the temples. The DJ played an eclectic compilation of music, including the traditional “Macarena,” “Y.M.C.A.,” and “The Loco-Motion,” to encourage everyone to get up and dance together.

When Aslan stopped for a cold bottle of water at the bar and found me chatting with Eden nearby, he looped an arm around me and kissed my cheek. “Hey, hot stuff. Having fun?”

“You definitely are.” I pushed a sweaty chunk of hair back in place.

“It’s warm in here.”

“It’s freezing outside. Maybe step out for a breather and cool off.”

“I might. Hey, Eden.” He leaned in to kiss her cheek, which she accepted.

“Congratulations.”

Aslan downed the water in one go and passed the empty bottle back to the bartender. “The next slow song, you’re mine,” he said to Eden.

Then he was off again.

I’d danced to countless slower songs throughout the evening; with Aslan again, once with Eden, once with Allison, twice with Amelia, once with Cellina—Aslan’s mother was persistent and a little handsy—and even with Tia, Ruiz’s wife, who’d found me and asked. We’d had a nice conversation

during our dance and even made plans for a couples' night when Aslan and I returned from Paris.

It was nearing midnight. Chris's parents had come and collected their grandkids a few hours ago, so only adults remained. The cake had been cut, pictures had been taken, and I'd even indulged in a tiny piece after Aslan literally shoved it in my face, getting icing up my nose.

The castle kitchen staff were organizing the midnight buffet when another slow song came on. Aslan was beside me in a flash, snagging a handful of my ass and squeezing. "Want to dance, hot stuff? My arms are free, and they're all yours if you want them."

"I was thinking of humiliating Costa."

"Oh, that's way more fun." He scanned the crowd, seeking the head of IT.

"I figure he's probably had enough to drink by now to give him the necessary courage. What do you think?"

"I think that was a generosity he did not deserve, but you're right." Aslan pointed. Ruiz was at the bar, collecting more drinks and chatting amicably with the bartender.

I'd paced myself all evening, not wanting to lose my head or end up hungover the following day. Also, I respected my husband's sobriety, and getting shit-faced didn't sit right with me. I had a gentle buzz, leaving me relaxed enough to have fun.

Aslan pecked a kiss on my cheek, hand still groping my ass.  
“Do it. But the next one’s mine.”

I kissed him on the mouth, and we lingered there a few extra seconds before I disengaged and headed to the bar.

I arrived as Ruiz picked up two clear plastic glasses and turned around. He stalled. The dark liquid swished back and forth, threatening to spill over the lip of the cups.

“Oh no.”

“Rum and Coke?” I asked, indicating the drinks.

“You know me so well. Tia prefers I mix it with something rather than drink it straight. What’s up?”

He knew what was up. His body language told me he’d registered the music, the slower tempo, the ambitious and determined smirk plastered to my face.

“Deliver your drinks. You’re wanted on the dance floor.”

Ruiz tipped his head to the ceiling, muttered something that might have been Spanish, then downed one of the full cups of rum and Coke in three easy swallows. The second cup he placed on the counter, asking the bartender to “Watch this for me, would ya? I gotta do a thing.”

Facing me again, resignation and humor shone from his eyes. It told the tale of a man who’d had his fair share of drinks that evening in preparation for what was to come.

Ruiz offered out his arm. “A promise is a promise.”

“I really thought you’d put up more of a fight,” I said, hooking my arm with his.

“I’m pretty shit-faced. Regret is a thing for tomorrow morning.”

“Well,” I said as we reached the crowded dance floor, “if it helps, the song is close to half over. Therefore, so is your suffering.”

Ruiz faced me awkwardly. “I’m not suffering, Quaid. So... how is this done exactly? I mean, who leads and who follows?”

“Up to you.”

Ruiz stood there, either undecided or too afraid to make it happen. I wasn’t sure. I chuckled and took his hand. I placed it on my hip and clasped his other one in mine. “You lead. I won’t make you get cozy. We can keep a few inches between us. And mind that your hand doesn’t wander to my ass. According to Aslan, it’s magnetic.”

“I assure you that won’t happen.”

I laughed, and Ruiz, despite his clumsy discomfort, laughed too.

Was it awkward at first? Yes. Ruiz moved like an old rusty robot in desperate need of being oiled, and I knew the man could dance. I’d seen him on the dance floor with his wife several times throughout the evening. He’d even danced with Amelia once or twice—I was fairly sure she’d danced with everyone at that point.

But I was asking him to step outside his comfort zone.

“Az and Torin have a bet you won’t last the whole song. Torin says you’ll cop out before it’s half over.”

Ruiz chuckled, his muscles letting go a fraction. “Assholes.”

“Prove them wrong.”

“I plan to, and tomorrow, when my girls wake up, I’m going to tell them I got to dance with the prince. They will be so jealous.”

The song continued, and more of Ruiz’s tension let go. He swayed more purposefully, arms looser, legs less wooden, feet no longer sticking to the ground. And he smiled as he led me all over the dance floor.

“Are you dying inside yet?”

“No.”

“We can stop anytime. You’ve fulfilled your obligation.”

“I’m good.”

“I’m just saying, if you—”

“Quaid, shut up. We’re dancing, and I’m fine with it.”

I stopped pestering and decided to believe him.

“Thanks for being here... for agreeing to be my best man.”

“Thank you for asking me. I meant what I said during my speech.”

We danced in silence for a while. As the song neared the end, something radiated from Ruiz’s pocket. I felt the vibration

in the hand I'd rested on his hip.

He frowned.

"Phone?" I asked.

"Yeah." He seemed to hesitate like he wanted to dig it out but didn't want to break his promise to dance one whole song with me.

"Go on. The song's almost done."

We slowed our spin, and I broke us apart. Ruiz seemed torn. "I'm sorry. It could be the babysitter is all, and—"

"You don't have to explain."

He tugged his phone free, and his frown deepened, his brows knitting.

"Everything okay?"

"It's an unknown number. Hang on."

He tapped to open it, read for a minute, then handed me his phone.

*I read, Hey, it's me. Tallus. I know it's late, and I know it's your friend's wedding tonight, but if you could give me a call when you have a minute, I really need to talk. It's important. I hate to ask, especially after all the shit I gave you, but I need your help.*

My brows inched up as I handed his phone back. "That's... surprising. What do you think he wants?"

"No idea, but he's going to have to wait until tomorrow. I'm not bailing on your wedding, and besides, I'm kinda

hammered and not in any position to tiptoe around my cousin, who still thinks of me as a homophobic asshole. I might get mouthy and don't want to be the bad guy anymore."

"Don't let him get to you. You've done all you can."

But he was. I could read the hurt on his face.

"Actually, I have an idea. Come here." Ruiz wrapped his arm around me and tugged me against his side. He'd opened the camera app on his phone and held it aloft in selfie mode. "Smile, *bestie*."

So I did, and right as Ruiz went to take the picture, he turned his face and licked my cheek. He was prepared for my sudden shock at his action and clamped his other hand on the side of my head so I couldn't pull away. He captured the stunned look on my face, the nose crinkle, and how my eyes squinted with the wet attack.

When he was done, he let me go and laughed as he examined the image on the screen.

"What the hell was that?" I ran my sleeve over the wet spot he'd left behind. I couldn't stop laughing and was mildly grossed out at the same time. "You are definitely drunk. We have boundaries, and that was... I feel violated."

Ruiz was in stitches as he tapped away at his phone. "I'm sending that picture to Tallus and telling him I'm too busy partying with my best bud to be bothered with him tonight. If it's important enough, he can wait until morning."



I leaned against Ruiz's side, still laughing, still swiping rum-laced slobber off my face, as I watched him do exactly that. Tallus's response was a simple *I have no words. Call me when you wake up in the morning.*

A second text followed the first. *Tell Quaid I said congratulations.*

Ruiz and I indulged in more selfies of the less disgusting variety, ones fitting for a photobooth we were not in, ones indicative of good friends having a blast at a wedding, until possessive arms wrapped around my middle from behind and a chin landed on my shoulder. The face that entered Ruiz's phone screen belonged to my husband. It was mock-scowly and aimed at the camera's owner.

"I saw that wandering tongue, Ruiz. I would appreciate it if you kept it away from my husband's cheek."

"Words I never thought I'd hear," Ruiz said.

"Words I never thought I'd have to say," Aslan countered, laughing.

"But look at it." Still snickering, Ruiz pulled up the picture and showed Aslan. They both howled, and Aslan requested it be texted to him as well. I had a sneaking suspicion Ruiz would regret everything in the morning. The photograph was going to be blown up and displayed somewhere at the office. I had no doubt.

"Are you two finished dancing?" Aslan asked, hand slipping to my ass once again. "Can I steal my husband back now?"

“He’s all yours.” Ruiz knocked my arm and returned to the bar with a wide smile to retrieve his abandoned drink, then he went to find his wife.

Aslan spun me to face him, his grin devious as he brought his forehead to mine and dug his fingers into the globes of my ass cheeks, making me squirm. “Explain yourself.”

“He was out of control. I told him not to touch my ass, but how was I to know he’d try to lick my face off? I’m too sexy. What can I say? You shouldn’t leave me alone.”

Aslan laughed, and we were dancing again, chest-to-chest, heart-to-heart, moving and swaying and falling in love all over again. Tia and Ruiz joined us. Torin and Allison were only a few steps behind them. On the far side of the dance floor, I caught sight of Jordyn dancing with June. Amelia had snagged Tony, and Aslan’s sponsor looked pleased as punch to have a beautiful woman on his arm. Chris was at the table, enduring a long chat with Cellina, watching his wife and likely wishing he could escape.

The night unfolded, the party stretching on for hours, only dying off when the bar was forced to stop selling alcohol at two in the morning. By that point, our guests dwindled away, home to their beds where they could hopefully sleep off hangovers the following morning. Christmas was around the corner.

## Chapter 29

# Aslan



It was close to three in the morning when Quaid let us into our room on the upper floor of the castle. The King's Suite was hands down the most incredible room I'd ever stayed in in my life. Between the high ceiling, inlaid wood floor, the Alaskan king bed, and the vintage decor, it was like something out of another era. The red and gold color theme was appropriately fitting.

The staff had left a bottle of champagne chilling in a bucket with two flutes and a basket of treats, including fresh fruits, berries, and decadent chocolates.

The wall sconces had been turned to a dim setting, leaving the room bathed in a soft yellow glow. The heavy red velvet curtains had been pushed aside, and the wall-length window displayed a blustery winter night.

It was snowing again. Bright white flakes danced and swirled against the darkness, gathering on the stone ledge of our private balcony. In the courtyard below, garden lights—the

ones not already buried—marked the winding paths. Fairy lights twinkled from the bare branches of the trees. Whether they had been hung for the Christmas season or if they were out there year-round, I wasn't sure.

I poured Quaid a glass of champagne as he peered out the window. Despite his already pink cheeks and obvious buzz, he accepted it without argument, sipping and smiling, lost in his head but evidently happy. I found fizzy fruit water in a mini fridge and added it to my glass before standing beside him, observing the landscape and recapping the night, shifting through all the memories I'd gathered.

We didn't speak for a long time as we absorbed the view, content at the end of a special day.

“It was perfect,” Quaid said into the quiet.

I stared at his reflection in the glass, admiring the wistful smile touching his lips.

“It really was.” I held up my flute of fizzy water. “To us.”

“To us.”

Quaid tapped his glass with mine. A ring resonated in the room when they connected. He turned to me, sipping more champagne before setting the flute aside. “I don't want to sleep, and if I drink that, it will make me drowsy. I want to be awake when the sun rises in the morning. I want to watch it.”

“That's a few hours off yet. What would you like to do in the meantime?”

“That's a loaded question.”

I chuckled. "I'm still asking it."

Quaid removed the glass of fizzy fruit water from my hand and placed it beside his. Then he looped his arms around my waist, drawing me close and swaying us side to side. "I want to dance."

"Oh yeah?" I swayed with him, moving to a tune only we could hear. "The waltz?"

"No."

"The foxtrot?"

He snorted. "No."

"A little swing?"

"One more guess."

I deepened my voice, injecting a thick, rasping quality to my tone. "The horizontal mambo?"

He nodded, his smile growing mischievous.

"Ah... The bedroom cha-cha?"

Another nod.

"The—"

"Enough." He kissed me with champagne-laced lips, fingers digging into my hips and urging me to move closer. I gravitated into his orbit. The heat radiating from Quaid's body fueled a fire I never wanted to tame. It bound and fused our souls together as surely as the rings we now wore.

I was willing and wanting and had been waiting for this moment all night. In my heart, in my mind, this act, this consummating of vows, signified so much more than I had ever realized. The importance at once became clear. Everything and everyone that had come before Quaid was obsolete. All that mattered was how we moved forward after this day. We were one, and we would share it all; the good and the bad, the ups and the downs, the joys and the heartaches.

Quaid broke the kiss, eyes glassy and smiling, cheeks rosy. Breathlessly, he said, "Take me to bed, Az."

"Oh, I'm getting there."

But before we tumbled into the realm of uninhibited lovemaking, our expensive suits needed to go. I wasn't risking our deposit because I got too reckless and forgot to be careful. As it stood, I was in danger of becoming so lost in Quaid that nothing else mattered.

Besides, hadn't I been undressing my gorgeous husband in my mind all night? It was about time I got to do it for real.

I started with the bolo tie, tugging the golden cords free and looping it around his head. He removed mine with the same care, taking them both and setting them aside. Our jackets had long ago been discarded. Next, I worked on his vest with its velvet-covered buttons. Mine was crimson, Quaid's was emerald green. They too were set aside.

Our hands knocked into one another as we carefully removed each other's white dress shirts. We shared smiles and tiny laughs, stumbling and fumbling like it was the first time.

It reminded me of when Barnabus had told us to kiss. He'd remarked on how we'd likely kissed a thousand times before but how the one we'd been about to share was special because it was the first on our new journey as a married couple.

This was the same. A first, and it felt like it. If my hands trembled a little, it was no worse than the jitters that had also taken over my sweet husband.

Quaid finished undoing my dress shirt first. It got to join the ties and vests. He dragged a hand over my abdomen, smoothing a warm path over the undershirt I still wore. I got his dress shirt undone and removed it, setting it aside. He too had an undershirt, but I stopped there, admiring his long, lean torso, the pale color of his skin—several shades lighter than my own—and the distinct curve of his collarbones. I followed their path with my fingertips, awestruck and overwhelmed.

Quaid gravitated to removing my trousers while I continued to explore what I'd been slowly revealing. Inching his undershirt up, I dragged my knuckles over the tight skin above his navel, feeling the muscles tense and relax. I pressed my palm over his heart, and he stilled.

Underneath, the organ beat a strong, steady pace. Quaid pressed his hand over mine. "All yours," he said.

"I'm the luckiest man on earth."

"No, I am."

Quaid finished undoing my pants. When they hit the floor, I stepped out of them, urging Quaid toward the massive king-



size bed as I fumbled to release the button on his trousers. I dragged them over his ass before he sat, then I tugged them down and off, leaving him in a pair of silky boxer briefs.

He took his undershirt off, and I did the same, both of us staring into one another's eyes. The intensity of the moment rang in my ears and thrummed through my veins. Quaid held out his hand, and I took it, letting him draw me to stand between his legs. Before letting my hand go, he brought it to his mouth and kissed the gold band he'd slipped on my finger a handful of hours ago.

“Husband,” he said.

My cheeks hurt with the strength of my smile. “Husband.”

Then his gaze fell to the swell inside my briefs, and he caught his lower lip in his teeth as he hummed. He drew a dainty path with his fingers up my thighs, slipping his hands around and taking hold of my ass. He brushed his nose along the bristly hairs at the waistband of my underwear.

“May I?” he breathed.

“You never need to ask, Quaid.”

Quaid mouthed me through the fabric, his hot, moist breath electrifying my blood. I grew harder with the attention and closed my eyes, absorbing the sensation, threading my fingers through his soft blond hair and clinging to him like I might float off into the atmosphere.

It was too good.

All of it.

Him.

His teeth rasped gently along my hardening shaft, and he peered up, locking those intense baby blue eyes I loved so much with mine. “I love you,” he said, his words choked with emotion.

Snagging his hair, bending to be at his level, I kissed him hard on the mouth. “I love you, Quaid. So fucking much I don’t know how to handle it sometimes.”

“Let me...” His hands moved from my ass cheeks to the waistband of my underwear, pulling them down, freeing me. Then his warm, wet mouth was right where I needed it, tongue gliding gracefully over my length, lips like fire as they played their part.

My skin buzzed and tingled. My breath caught in my throat.

When he took me into his mouth, I groaned.

Quaid worked me slowly, with skill and control, taking his time as he drew me down the rabbit hole of blissful sensations and pleasures yet to come. I wished it would never end. Fumbling, I cupped his chin and felt the way his throat moved when he took me deeper. I toyed my thumb along the crease of his lips, feeling the drag and pull of his efforts as my cock slipped in and out of his mouth.

“Fuck, Quaid. Give... give me a minute.”

He pulled off, grinning, lips rosy and abused. Again, I kissed him, urging him to lie back on the bed and move to the middle. I blindly removed his briefs, tossing them on the floor.

Touching, groping, exploring, I glided my palms over his overheated skin, working my way over his hips and mapping my way to his straining length, where I took him in hand and worked him effortlessly.

God, he was beautiful like this; yearning, needing, wanting.

Quaid hummed into our kiss, arching his hips off the bed in encouragement. I broke from his mouth and descended on his cock, giving back what he'd so readily and eagerly given me a short time ago.

Quaid whimpered and thrust into my mouth, head tossed back, chest flushed with both drink and building desire. I loved this side of him. Uninhibited. Open. Free. I continued giving him attention until his excess writhing and increased vocals warned me he was tumbling beyond the cusp of control.

I climbed his body and hovered, peering down into depthless pools of blue, drowning in everything Quaid. There we were, on our wedding night, embarking on a journey into the future together, one that would take us into old age and beyond. And I couldn't be happier.

He handed me the lube—when he'd found it, I had no idea—and nodded for me to keep going.

“Prep?” I asked, popping the lid.

He answered in the negative, wetting his lips eagerly.

I coated my length, and he drew a leg around my hip, angling himself to better receive me.

I entered him slowly, for his sake and my own. I didn't want to rush the moment. If I could make it stretch until dawn, I would. Hell, if there was a way to stay like this for all eternity, sign me up.

Fully seated, Quaid drew me into another kiss, his arms, legs, and soul wrapped solidly around me. The velvet glide of his tongue sent me soaring.

Out of nowhere, I was hit with a wave of emotion so solid, dense, and powerful that it knocked me off-balance. Tears rolled down my cheeks unchecked, and the kiss turned desperate and blubbery. Not for the first time, I wondered how I'd gotten here, how I'd found this man, how I'd managed to get my life back on track after I'd messed it up so thoroughly.

Did I deserve this happiness?

Someone thought I did.

Quaid held me tighter as I moved inside him, rocking us, making love to my husband as my heart called out, vowing, promising, and declaring myself his and only his forever.

As much as I wanted it to, as much as I stretched it to its limits, the shared bliss couldn't last all night. The wave was too powerful to hold off. When our peaks took us, we were left trembling and clinging to one another. It wrapped us up and took us away for a time, and we let it.

After, both of us needing a breather, we fed each other strawberries, grapes, and cantaloupe. When I unwrapped a

piece of chocolate, Quaid let me place it on his tongue where it melted, and he savored it. Our kisses after that were rich and wonderful. We drank sparkling fruit water—Quaid was done with champagne—and chatted about all the funny things that had happened at the reception. Torin’s attempt to breakdance. My dad’s runaway speech. Barnabus forgetting his teeth in the men’s room. And Chris getting barfed on by Kylee when he’d spun her in too many circles on the dance floor after feeding her two huge pieces of cake.

We made love again in that quiet twilight hour as the sky showed hints of the coming day in the east.

Sated and somewhat overheated from all the activities of the night, we donned fluffy white bathrobes and slippers and went out onto the covered balcony. The snow had stopped, and the ground and tree branches were blanketed in a fresh new layer of flakes. The predawn air was crisp and cold, but I wrapped Quaid in my arms and held him close as we watched the horizon in the east glow brighter and brighter with the coming day. When the sun inched its way over the horizon, a blazing glow of brilliant orange, we soaked it in.

The following day was Christmas, but today was something better. It was our first full day as a married couple. From today, we would go forth and forge a new path together. It was the first full day of the rest of our lives.

\*\*\*

*“Have you ever accidentally shoved your junk in a guy’s face before you even asked for his name? I mean, literally, dick in the face. I wish I was joking. He was kind of hot too. I mean, behind the death glare and under the hard-worn exterior.”*

There’s a story there, and it’s **FREE** for a limited time. Join Tallus Domingo and ex-cop turned brash PI, Diem Krause, as they clash and burn and eventually fall in love in the new spin-off series, *Shadowy Solutions*.

Cameos from Valor and Doyle guaranteed.

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## Note from the Author



This series takes place in Toronto, Ontario, and I've taken great pains to ensure I stuck as close as possible to the geography of the area and surrounding areas. Any mistakes are my own and I take full responsibility. That being said, although many of the locations discussed in this series are real places, there are an equal number of locations that I made up for creative purposes, so not everything can be found on a map.

Thank you for reading!

# Need More Nicky James?



## *Everything I Didn't Know*



It was supposed to be an escape. A new life living off the land.

It was supposed to be a peaceful community. A family.

But it was a lie.

Six months after he arrived, Bowie learned the hard truth  
about Oasis.

There are rules, and they are made to be followed.

The consequence of disobedience is deadly.

Once you're in Oasis, you're never getting out. And its  
cultish founder has eyes everywhere.

One year into his survival, with a plan to escape slowly  
simmering to life, Bowie is faced with a problem. New  
members have joined the community, among them a man who



catches Bowie's eye. Foster is attractive, older, and so far as Bowie is concerned, completely unavailable. This doesn't stop Foster from flirting or poking his nose where it doesn't belong.

His reckless behavior will get him in trouble, but Foster doesn't seem to realize he's playing with fire.

One wrong step and history will repeat itself.

Bowie can't allow that to happen and telling Foster the truth about Oasis comes with risks.

A fragile alliance forms. A budding romance develops. And more secrets are unveiled.

When their plans fall apart, Bowie and Foster find themselves in a tangled race to escape Oasis and expose the commune before it's too late.

\*\*\*

### ***NOT WHAT IT SEEMS***



***They say I killed them. They say I'm sick. They're wrong.  
Nothing is as it seems.***

Renowned psychiatrist Dr. Cyrus Irvine takes his job and his life *very* seriously. He is well-respected in his field and has worked hard to get where he is.

But he's lonely.

When called in to evaluate a murder suspect, the last person he expects to find is the man he slept with a few months ago.

The man who ghosted him and wounded his fragile heart.

Ethically, he should turn around and walk away, but he doesn't. For as much as Cyrus understands the human brain, he can't understand the pull he feels toward the patient.

One session with River Jenkins and Cyrus is sure of three things: River and everything about his preliminary diagnosis is a lie, his feelings toward River haven't gone away, and despite his professional code, he isn't going anywhere.

Someone needs to get to the bottom of this.

Cyrus's world is turned upside down as he and River team up to find the truth.

During their quest for answers, Cyrus discovers the hardest part of his decision isn't the risk to his career, it's the risk to his heart.

**\*\*Not What It Seems is a 115k MM romantic suspense with doctor / patient, forced proximity, and age gap themes.\*\***

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Cravings of the Heart

Heal With You

A Very Merry Krewmas (Trials of Fear Special)

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New Beginnings: Abel's Journey

The Escape: Soren's Saga

Lost Soul: AJ's Burden

Taboo

Sinfully Mine

Secrets & Lies

End Scene

Risk Takers

Rule Breakers

Historical

Until the End of Time