



Perfect

~~*Communities*~~

Bragg

D.E.HAGGERTY

Perfect Bragg

The Bragg Brothers #3

D.E. HAGGERTY

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Introduction

I'll do anything to keep custody of my cousin's baby. Even marry the man I want but can never have.

Love and marriage are not for me. Not when it's my fault I no longer have a family.

If anyone can make me change my mind, it's Elder Bragg. Those long lean legs, sparkling brown eyes, and that dang dimple on his right cheek are hard to resist.

But resist I must. So, when he asks me out, I push him into the friend-zone faster than Lucy the llama can run.

Everything changes when my cousin dies and I'm granted custody of her baby. The second I look down at Robin, I realize I will do *anything* to protect this baby.

Even marry Elder to keep Robin when her biological dad shows up and demands custody.

Elder thinks our marriage is a chance to start a relationship. Not likely. This marriage is **FAKE**.

If only I could stop imagining how his lips would feel on mine.

This fake marriage, friends to lovers, small town romantic comedy features an introverted woman who would rather spend her day chasing Lucy the llama than go out on a date with a man, a man who knows what he wants but is too chicken to go for it, five brothers who think it's hilarious to watch their brother run scared from a tiny baby, and a whole town of hippies convinced they're the best matchmakers this side of the Mississippi.

Perfect Bragg is a standalone novel in The Bragg Brothers Series.

Bragg's Truth – Riley and Moon's story

Bragg's Love – Miller and Eden's story

Perfect Bragg – Elder and Harmony's story

Bragg's Match – Brody and Soleil's story

Bragg's Christmas – Damon and Love Hill's story



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thinks we're done. She's wrong. Because I'm getting her back.

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Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[An Excerpt from Bragg's Match](#)

[About the Author](#)

Chapter 1

Harmony ~ a woman who would rather spend the rest of her days surrounded by animals than speak to another human being



“Don’t you dare,” I growl.

Lucy huffs.

“I’m serious. If you jump over the fence, there will be no watermelon for you.”

At the word watermelon, the llama’s ears perk up. Phew. My shoulders relax. Crisis averted.

I wiggle my fingers at Lucy. “Come here.”

Her head swivels to the fence one more time. Crap on a cracker. She’s going for it. She’s going to escape the Wildlife Refuge. She huffs before taking a running leap at the fence and bounding over it. Crisis not averted.

“No!” I chase after her. “Bad llama! Bad Lucy! Get back here.”

By the time I reach the fence, Lucy is nowhere to be seen. Llamas can run up to forty miles per hour while I have a stitch in my side from sprinting to the fence. What the hell am I going to do?

I can’t phone Juniper, my boss and the manager of the Wildlife Refuge, because it’s her wedding day and I promised her I had everything under control. And I did! Until her future husband decided to stop by the refuge but forgot to say hi to Lucy. An offense Lucy takes very seriously.

I dig my phone out of my pocket. I’ll call a friend to help me out. Except there’s no one to call. All of my friends are

busy preparing for the Winter Falls wedding of the century. I'm not exaggerating. Juniper is marrying Maverick Langston – aka the hottest romantic comedy actor in Hollywood – today.

You can phone Elder, a voice I've dubbed Rebel Harmony, because she always wants me to do things I shouldn't do, whispers in my mind. *He'll come running.*

Elder is a friend, nothing more, I remind her. *But you want more.* Oh, shut up.

"Hey, Harmony," Elder greets when he answers the phone. Rebel Harmony perks up. *Elder is coming!*

"I need your help."

"Where are you? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, but Lucy escaped."

"Which one is Lucy?"

"The llama."

He chuckles. "You and those animals. I'm getting in my truck now. I'll meet you at the entrance to the Wildlife Refuge."

Thank goodness Elder has a truck. Most residents of Winter Falls don't have vehicles since internal combustion engines are banned in town. As the first carbon neutral town in the world, Winter Falls takes saving the environment very seriously.

But Elder, as co-owner of *Naked Falls Brewing*, has an exemption to own a vehicle. You can hardly haul around barrels of beer on a golf cart, which is how most people get around town. I prefer my bike. But my ten-speed is no match for a llama in love with a movie star.

I watch as the brewery's truck approaches the refuge five minutes later and hurry outside to the parking area. I open the door before Elder comes to a complete stop.

"Hurry. We need to get to Juniper's house before Lucy does."

"Hello to you, too, Harmony."

I scowl at him. “This is no time to be cute.”

“Cute? You think I’m cute?” He puffs out his chest. “I prefer hunky, but I’ll settle for cute.”

“Hunky? Do people under the age of seventy use the word hunky? How old are you again?”

“I’m thirty-two and three-quarters.”

I can’t help the giggle from escaping. “Three-quarters?”

“Next month is my birthday. Why are birthdays good for your health?”

I roll my eyes. Elder is quite the jokester. Unfortunately, most of his jokes are meant for five-year-olds.

“Research suggests people with more birthdays live longer,” he says before laughing at his own joke.

I wish I could laugh and joke the way he does. I can’t. Life is no laughing matter.

“Turn here,” I say.

“This isn’t the way to Juniper’s house.”

I point up ahead to where Lucy is meandering through a field. “Someone has a hankering for watermelon.”

Thank goodness. Juniper would lose her ever-loving mind if one of her animals showed up at her house before her wedding. Or, more likely, Maverick would lose his mind when Juniper ran out of her house to cuddle Lucy while wearing her wedding dress.

Juniper loves animals as much as I do, which is saying a lot since I prefer animals over humans every day of the week and twice on Sunday.

“Stop here,” I order Elder and jump out of the vehicle.

I don’t hurry toward Lucy. Knowing the llama, she’d think I’m playing a game and run away, forcing me to chase her. It wouldn’t be the first time, but I have no plans to spend my day chasing an animal all over town.

A door slams behind me and I cringe. Did Lucy hear? Is she going to bolt?

“What are you doing?” I hiss at Elder.

“Helping.”

“What do you know about corralling animals?”

“Humans are animals, aren’t they?” He waggles his eyebrows. “I’m pretty good at corralling humans. I have a blue ribbon in corralling.”

I wish I could say I don’t respond to his comment. But I’d be lying. My body warms as I imagine Elder corralling me into a corner where he pushes me up against the wall before pressing his body against mine and—

I slam the shutters down on those thoughts. Elder is not for me. He should find some nice woman who’s worthy of him to fall in love with.

I don’t respond to Elder’s comment and continue toward Lucy. Elder tromps next to me.

“Can you walk quieter?”

“Walk quieter?”

“Yes. Stop stomping your big feet.”

“You know what they say about a man with big feet —”

I hold up a hand before he can continue. “Can we secure Lucy and get her back to the Wildlife Refuge before I lose my job? Please. I love my job.”

Elder sobers. “Of course.” He motions forward. “After you.”

I tiptoe through the field. It’s fallow since it’s February but Lucy isn’t convinced. She’s rooting around through the weeds for watermelon and doesn’t notice my approach.

“Hey, sweetie,” I sing in a soft voice.

Lucy’s head pops up and I swear she frowns at me. Someone is not happy about having her freedom curtailed. She’s

not the only one who isn't happy.

“Shall we go back home?”

She huffs.

“I have watermelon.”

I have her attention now.

“And maybe a banana.”

She steps toward me.

“There's my good girl.”

I inch forward until I'm nearly within touching distance. Lucy stands still staring at me as I approach. I swear she's considering her options. *Can I get away with it if I flee? Or should I stay?* She better stay. I don't have time to chase a llama all day. I have a wedding to attend.

Crack. The sound of Elder stepping on a branch reverberates through the valley. Lucy rears back and retreats a few steps.

“No, you don't,” I mutter as I dash forward and snatch her halter before she can escape again. As soon as I tug on the halter, Lucy yields.

“Thanks for your help,” I tell Elder.

He puffs out his chest. “You're welcome.”

“I was being sarcastic.”

“It's okay. You can't hide your attraction from me behind sarcasm forever.”

Attraction? I'm not attracted to him. Why would I be attracted to a six-foot-three-inch man with lean muscles, sparkling brown eyes, and a dimple on his right cheek?

Okay, fine, Elder Bragg is one handsome man. It doesn't mean I'm attracted to him. My fingers don't itch to scratch his beard. My tongue doesn't long to trace the dimple on his cheek. And I haven't spent nights wondering how those brown eyes heat when he comes. Nope. Not I.

“Thanks for your help,” I say instead of responding to his comment. “I’ve got it from here.”

His brow furrows. “You’ve got it from here? It’s two miles to the refuge.”

“I’m aware,” I mutter as I begin the trek.

“Can’t you hold onto Lucy from inside the truck?”

I giggle. “You want me to hold onto Lucy’s halter while I ride in your truck?”

“Or you can drive the truck and I’ll return Lucy to the refuge.”

He reaches for the halter and Lucy immediately sidles up to him. The llama is the biggest flirt. She loves men more than watermelon and she seriously loves watermelon.

“Go on. The keys are in the ignition.”

I debate arguing with him. Lucy is my responsibility after all. But I’m tired from doing the chores this morning at the Wildlife Refuge. If Elder wants to walk two miles, I’m not going to stop him.

“See ya back at the farm.” I salute as I jump in his truck.

By the time Lucy and Elder return to the Wildlife Refuge, I’m nearly finished for the day.

“I believe this is yours,” Elder jokes as he hands me the llama’s harness.

I pat Lucy’s side. “Not mine. Lucy is her own animal. She belongs to no one.”

Most of the animals at the Wildlife Refuge are former pets. None of the animals should have been pets in the first place. But Hollywood stars – who are most of the former ‘owners’ of these animals – don’t think the rules apply to them.

Luck for all the animals, Maverick is a big ‘ol softie who didn’t want the former pets to be put down because they were unfortunate enough to be the former pet of a famous person.

Elder bumps my hip. “We make a good team. You should go on a date with me.”

Date with him? I wish I could. But I can't. I'm not worthy of a man like Elder Bragg.

“A good team?” I snort. “Lucy totally played you.”

“I am fun to play with.” He winks.

I shove his shoulder. “You're a goofball. Get on out of here. I need to close up before I can go home to change for the wedding reception.”

He waves as he saunters off. I sigh as I stare at how his jeans hug his ass. If I weren't destined to spend the rest of my life alone, I'd jump at the chance to date him. But alas. This woman is not meant to have a partner or a family.

Chapter 2

Elder ~ a jokester who isn't joking when he says he wants Harmony



Elder

“Hey,” Harmony greets when she opens her door to me.

I rake my gaze over her. She looks as beautiful as she always does. Her blonde hair is piled on top of her head in a messy bun, her face is free of make-up, but she doesn't need it anyway, and her skin is flawless. I want to touch it to discover for myself if it's as soft as it looks. Afterwards, I'll peel those leggings off of her long, lean legs.

She snaps her fingers in my face. “Earth to Elder. Earth to Elder.”

I capture her hand. “I was admiring your t-shirt.”

I hadn't even noticed her t-shirt. Lucky for me, it's one of those funny ones about animals she prefers to wear. This one says *Always be yourself, unless you can be an otter. Then, be an otter.*

She tugs on my hand and I reluctantly let her go.

“What are you doing here?”

“Can't I stop by my friend's house to check up on her?”

Her eyes narrow. “Check up on me? Why would I need checking up on? Did someone send you here?”

I chuckle as I force my way inside her house. As soon as the door shuts behind us, her dogs rush us. I kneel down to pet them.

“Hello, Black Ops. How are you? Did you execute any successful missions today?”

Harmony snorts. “If hiding my panties is considered a successful mission, then, yes, he executed a successful mission today.”

My cock perks up at the mention of her panties. He wants a chance to play with them. I tell him to calm down. There will be no playing with Harmony’s panties tonight. But soon. I hope.

Her other dogs, Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow, bark as they prance around me. I scratch behind Pup Tart’s ears as I rub Little Bow Wow’s belly. Black Ops presses his snout under my arm.

“Sorry, big guy, I only have two hands.”

Harmony snaps her fingers and Black Ops bounds to her. He gazes up at her with devotion in his eyes. I can’t blame him. I wouldn’t mind worshipping Harmony myself. Preferably while she’s naked and sprawled out on my bed.

I feel my cock begin to lengthen and harden. Time to shut thoughts of Harmony naked down before I’m stuck kneeling on the floor all night long to hide my condition. Considering how she laughed the first time I asked her out, I don’t think she’d appreciate me having a hard-on while petting her dogs.

“Hold on,” I tell Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow. “I have your treats here.”

At the word treats, they lose their minds. They bark and spin around in circles. Pup Tart launches herself at my lap and promptly releases a stream of pee.

“Pup Tart,” I scold as I lift her off of me and stand. She doesn’t stop peeing until I set her back down on the floor where there’s now a puddle of piss.

Harmony laughs. “It’s your own fault. I’ve warned you about using the t-word before.” She points to the puddle. “And you’ll be cleaning the mess up.”

She whirls around – presumably to grab some cleaning supplies – and I enjoy the show as her ass cheeks jiggle with the movement. I can't wait to watch those glorious globes as I pound into her from behind. I should send the inventor of leggings a thank you card.

My cock – momentarily distracted by a peeing dog – perks right back up again. I'm going to have the worst case of blue balls in the history of mankind if Harmony continues to push me away.

A towel lands on my face. "Pick up your mess."

"Hey! This is Pup Tart's mess."

"You're the one who excited her."

I smirk. "I can't help it my natural charm causes women to get excited."

"Women?" She snorts. "Pup Tart's a dog."

I hug the furry animal to my chest. "She's still a woman, aren't you?" Pup Tart barks before licking my jaw. "She obviously agrees."

I catch the bottle of all-purpose cleaner Harmony lobs my way. "More cleaning of the floors. Less flirting."

I bat my eyelashes at her. "Are you saying I'm a flirt?"

"You're something all right," she mutters under her breath. "Why aren't you at movie night?" she asks in a louder voice.

Since the town of Winter Falls is too small to have a movie theater, the library hosts a movie night once a month. Harmony hardly ever attends. I doubt the woman would go into town at all if it weren't for her friends pressuring her. The word introvert was invented for her.

I clutch my chest. "And miss spending the evening with you?"

"Who said we're spending the evening together?"

"I guess you don't want to know what's in the bag I brought."

She points to the bag on the floor behind me. “The mystery is solved.”

I look down to find Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow rooting around in my backpack. They’ve managed to break open the bag of treats I brought them and spilled them all over the floor. I squirt the cleaner at them, and they scamper away.

“It’s a good thing my cleaner is all natural or I’d have to kill you and bury you in my backyard for harming my babies.”

I flex my bicep. “As if there’s any way you can drag my body all alone into the backyard to bury.”

“Who said I’d be all alone? I could ask my friends to help bury a body and they’d bring the shovels and tequila.”

I shiver. “Your friends are scary.”

“And don’t you forget it.”

I grin at her mock outrage. She’s so darn cute with her nose scrunched up and her eyes narrowed at me. I want to kiss those pretty pink lips and test how soft they are before I dive into her mouth to explore how she tastes.

She taps her foot. “Aren’t you supposed to be cleaning up instead of smiling at me like a dork?”

“I can do two things at once,” I say as I squirt cleaner all over the floor before mopping up Pup Tart’s mess.

I stand. “There. All done. And now it smells all lemony fresh in here.”

“This has been fun. Don’t let the door hit your ass on the way out.”

I gasp. “The door hit my ass? What did my ass do to deserve such treatment? Besides being hard and firm.”

Her eyes flare and her gaze dips down my body. I’m tempted to whirl around and shake my booty for her but she’d use the opportunity to kick me out of her house. Not happening.

I snare the bag from the floor and wave it at her. “Aren’t you curious to find out what I brought?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “No.”

“Liar.”

She sniffs and sticks her nose in the air. “I’m not lying.”

“Are to.” I point to where her knee is bouncing up and down. Her knee always bounces when she’s cornered or lying.

Her arms fly in the air. “No fair.”

“What’s not fair? How I pay attention to you?”

“You’re annoying.”

I seize the opportunity. “I promise to stop being annoying if you go out on a date with me.”

“I thought we already discussed this. I don’t want to date you.”

“Still playing hard to get.” I sigh. “I guess I won’t show you what’s in the bag.”

“I’m not playing hard to get, and I don’t care what’s in the bag.”

“Not even if the bag contains a DVD of your favorite movie?”

“You don’t know what my favorite movie is.”

“I don’t? I guess I’ll be going home then.” I start for the door.

“Out of curiosity.” I pause. I’ve got her now. “What movie do you think is my favorite? And if you say, *Lassie*, I’m going to make good on my promise to bury you in my backyard.”

I shiver. “Such repressed violence. You should probably talk to someone about it.”

“My violence isn’t feeling very repressed at the moment.”

“I’m going to steal all of your shovels before I go home tonight,” I mutter before raising my voice. “Your favorite

movie is *Hachi*.” Her eyes light up. “Except it’s not really your favorite movie.”

She scowls.

“*Hachi* makes you cry, and you hate crying.” Her scowl deepens. “Your actual favorite movie is *Dog* because you think Channing Tatum is hot.”

“I don’t think it. I know it.”

I ignore the burn of jealousy in my stomach. Channing Tatum is a movie star Harmony will never meet. There’s no reason to be jealous of her thinking he’s hot.

“I guess I’ll be off.” I saunter toward the door.

“Are you kidding me?”

I clear my throat. “Kidding me? What do you mean?”

“You come all the way over me, torture me, and then leave without letting me watch the movie?”

Torture her? She has no idea what true torture is. Torture is spending time with the woman you desire who brushes you off each and every time you ask her out. Who puts you in the friend-zone despite clearly wanting you. That’s what torture is.

“You didn’t seem in the mood to watch the movie,” I say and open the door.

“Get your butt back in here. I’ll grab some beers while you set the movie up.”

I cough to hide my amusement before turning to face her. “Will do.”

I kiss her cheek as I pass her on my way to the living room. She stands in the hallway frozen for a while before shaking herself and marching to the kitchen.

“I’ll wear her down,” I whisper to Black Ops who moans and covers his eyes. I address Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow, “You two believe in me, don’t you?”

They don’t respond as they twirl around twenty-seven times before settling in the corner of the sofa where I always sit.

“No treats for you next time,” I grumble.

Chapter 3

*Welp. I didn't see that coming. ~ Text from
Harmony to Eden*



I frown when I notice my purse is not in its usual place on the table in the hallway near the door in my house.

“Black Ops!” I holler, but my black Labrador doesn’t come running the way he usually does when I’m at the front door.

“Where did you hide my purse this time?”

I march to the living room where Black Ops is laying in his doggy bed. He doesn’t respond when I enter the room. He might as well scream GUILTY – assuming dogs could talk. There’s a reason I changed his name from Blackie to Black Ops when I adopted him, after all.

“Black Ops,” I growl.

He whines and covers his eyes with his front paws. I can’t help but notice how cute he is – if only for a second – he’s still a thief. And he’s never going to change.

“Show me.”

He whimpers in response. He’s a drama dog. He’s not scared of me. He knows I would never hurt him. The most danger he’s in from me is from getting suffocated with hugs.

I stomp my foot. I don’t have time for this. As much as I’d love to stay at home all cuddled up with him and my other dogs, I can’t. Today is Eden’s party to celebrate her new business venture with *Naked Falls Brewing*. I need to be there to support my friend.

Elder being part owner of the brewery has nothing to do with it. I'm not longing to see him. I'm not. *Liar*.

"Fine. I'll find my purse myself."

I check all his usual hiding spots – doggy beds, under the sofa, under the bed, in the closet – and finally locate my purse behind my mud boots in the hallway closet.

"I'm going to stop using a purse if you keep this up," I tell Black Ops.

He barks from where he's now standing at the end of the hallway. "I'm serious."

My other dogs, Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow, slink to his side. Pup Tart tilts her head to the side while Little Bow Wow perks his ears up. They are so dang cute! It's hard to refuse them when they gang up on me this way. But I can't give in today.

"Must support Eden," I mutter to myself.

Although, today's party is officially to celebrate the collaboration between *Eden's Garden* and *Naked Falls Brewing*, the real celebration is for the relationship between Eden and Elder's twin, Miller.

Eden and Miller fought – literally – their attraction to each other for over a year, but they've finally overcome their fears and are adorably in love. I'm happy for my friend. She has what I never can have – a loving relationship.

"I won't be long," I tell the dogs and they scurry away. I swear Black Ops gives me a disappointing shake of his head first.

I hop on my bike and pedal to the brewery. Although I live slightly outside of town, it isn't long before I'm leaning my bike against the building.

The second I enter, I can feel eyes on me despite how packed the place is. I scan the room until my gaze connects with Elder's. His look could ignite a fire and my belly warms in response. I tell my belly in no uncertain terms to calm down. Nothing can happen between me and Elder.

The man has made it no secret how he wants more than friendship from me. It's tempting. Too tempting. I wish I could love him. But I can't. He deserves someone better than me. Someone who's worthy of him.

He prowls toward me, and I have to lock my muscles from launching myself at him as his long legs eat up the distance between us. I love a tall man considering I'm fairly tall myself at five-eight. And those lean, compact muscles? My tongue longs to taste them.

He smiles and the dimple on his right cheek pops out. Another part of his anatomy my tongue longs to taste. The man is temptation personified. But I will resist. I must.

"Hey, sweetheart," he greets and kisses my cheek.

My knees tremble but I keep them locked. No swooning over a man. Especially a man I don't deserve.

"How's the party going?" I ask as I retreat a step.

Elder chuckles at my retreat. He thinks I'm playing hard to get and this is all a game. It's not. Not even close. But I can't tell him why not. Not unless I want to reveal my past. Something I have no intention of doing. Ever.

"Where's Eden?" I scan the crowded room but I don't see my friend.

He waggles his eyebrows. "Where do you think?"

I hold up my hand. "I don't need to know."

His nose scrunches. "I wish I could unsee what I saw the time I walked in on her with Miller."

"Liar. You knew what they were up to and barged into the supply room anyway."

He smirks. "I thought Miller was going to kill me."

"And yet you're happy about it. Brothers. I'll never understand them."

Pain slashes through me at the idea of never getting the chance to understand my brother. I force those thoughts out of my mind, but obviously not quick enough considering Elder's guiding me with a hand on my lower back toward his office.

I shake him off. “I’m fine.”

“You don—”

He’s cut off when someone yells my name. “Harmony Kingsley!”

The crowd quiets down. “Harmony Kingsley!”

I wave my hand. “I’m Harmony. Can I help you?”

“Oh, thank goodness I found you. When you weren’t at home, I went to your neighbor’s house and they suggested I come here,” a woman says as she approaches me.

“Do I know you?”

“I’m Ms. Cross, the social worker.”

The social worker? The way she announces her title makes me think I’m supposed to know who she is and why she’s here.

She frowns when I don’t respond. “Did Mr. Craven not contact you?”

“Who’s Mr. Craven?”

“The executor of Amy Kingsley’s estate.”

I must have heard her incorrectly. “The executor?”

“Oh dear. You don’t know.”

“Don’t know what?”

She clears her throat. “I’m sorry to inform you of the passing of your cousin.”

My heart stops. Amy, my only living relative, is gone? No, it can’t be. “Amy’s dead?”

I sway to the side and Elder wraps an arm around my shoulder to support me. I lean into him and his arm tightens around me.

“I’m afraid so.” She pauses, but I don’t have time to ask what happened and when before she speaks again. “As the sole remaining living relative, you are being given temporary custody.”

“T-t-temporary custody? I don’t understand.”

She reaches down to pick up her bag except it's not a bag, it's a baby carrier. Holy bananas. It's a baby.

"Is this Robin?"

Amy gave birth two months ago, but I haven't met Robin yet. I wanted to drive down to Denver for the birth, but my cousin asked me to wait.

Ms. Cross lifts the baby out of the carrier and hands her to me. "I'll be back soon to help with all the paperwork. I hadn't realized how far the drive to Winter Falls was." She checks her watch. "I have other families I need to attend to. I'll be in touch."

She snatches the baby carrier from the floor before marching away.

"Wait!" I holler after her. "What happened to Amy? Where's Robin's father?"

"Mr. Craven can fill you in on the details," she says before disappearing.

"What just happened?"

At my question, Robin lets out a wail. I stare down at the tiny human being in my arms. Her eyes are scrunched closed, but her mouth is wide open as she howls.

"Whatever you need, I'm here," Elder declares.

"I'm... I... What?" My brain isn't working. I have a gazillion questions, but I can't figure out which one is the most important.

"Come on," Elder mumbles before leading me by my elbow toward the rear exit.

I hear the elderly ladies of Winter Falls gather behind us.

"Ladies, I think we have our next project. Let's go."

"What should we name it?"

"Project Baby."

"What are you doing? They're getting away."

I ignore their comments. I can't deal with the town busybodies now. I have more important things to handle.

"My cousin died and I have her baby," I tell Elder once we stop in the alleyway behind the brewery.

"I know, darling. I know. We'll figure this out."

"We?" I may be shell shocked, but I know this isn't going to be a joint effort. This is my responsibility. This tiny human being is mine to watch over, mine to protect. She's mine.

I stare down at Robin and a fierceness I've never felt before overcomes me. I will do anything to protect Amy's baby. Anything.

Chapter 4

*Did you hear the one about the woman
who gets a baby dropped in her lap? ~ Text
from Elder to Miller*



Elder

“**W**hat am I going to do? I can’t care for a baby. I can’t even take her home, because I don’t have a car,” Harmony wails.

She’s not the only one panicking. Harmony – the woman I want more than my next breath – is now the guardian of a baby. A tiny baby. Terror the likes of which I’ve never experienced before grips me. I can’t be responsible for a baby.

One glance at the fear in Harmony’s eyes has me swallowing my panic. She needs me to step up now. Not air all my fears about being a father.

“I’ve got the truck.” I wave toward the vehicle.

I lead her to the truck and open the door, but she backs away instead of climbing inside. “No. No. No,” she chants as she retreats.

“What’s wrong?”

I sniff. The truck smells of beer but I’m fairly certain the smell of hops is not harmful for a baby.

“We don’t have a car seat!”

“I got this!” Harmony’s friend, Ashlyn, shouts as she runs through the alley toward us. “Here.”

Ashlyn tries to hand me a car seat, but I hold my hands up and retreat. I have no idea how to use one of those things. I’m not a parent. I’m not meant to be a parent.

Her brow wrinkles before she shrugs. “These things can be tricky. I’ll secure it in the truck.”

She climbs into the rear seat. “My sisters, Ellery and Aspen, are putting together some clothes and diapers and other necessities for you. I’ll bring them out in a bit,” she chatters away as she secures the car seat.

Harmony gulps. “Other necessities? It’s a baby. What could she possibly need besides food and diapers?”

Ashlyn barks out a laugh. “You have no idea. I swear my baby girl, Patience, has more luggage than I do when we travel.” She climbs out of the truck. “There. You’re all set.”

Harmony places Robin in the car seat, but the moment Harmony releases her, her little face scrunches up and she lets out a scream.

“I’ve got you covered,” Ashlyn says before leaning across the seat and stuffing a pacifier in Robin’s mouth. The screaming dies as the baby sucks on it. “Works every time.”

Harmony stares at Ashlyn. “How did you know what to do?”

Ashlyn sticks out her chest and places her fists on her hips. “Because I’m super mom.”

“I hate how I kind of agree with you right now,” Harmony mutters.

Ashlyn winks. “It’s okay. I know it’s hard to live in my shadow.”

Harmony rolls her eyes. “If you call me a serf, I’m going to smack you.”

Ashlyn smirks. “You said it first.” She checks over her shoulder. “Now, get out of here. Elder’s brothers are strong but they can’t hold back the gossip gals forever.”

I have five brothers – none of whom are pushovers – but no one is a match for the gossip gals. The five elderly women think they’re in charge of Winter Falls – including digging up any and all secrets a person may have. They’re actually proud of how big of gossips they are.

They also fancy themselves matchmakers. And by matchmaker, I mean they enjoy interfering in the love lives of everyone in town.

“Say no more.” I usher Harmony to the truck.

“You’re such a wuss,” Ashlyn teases me as I slam the truck door.

Once we’re both in the front seat with the baby settled in her car seat sucking on the pacifier, I grasp Harmony’s hand. “Are you okay?”

Her laugh is hysterical. “Sure. I’m totally fine. I just found out my one remaining living relative in the entire world is dead and I’m now the guardian of her baby. Just another Saturday in April. No big deal.”

“Your one remaining living relative?” I can’t resist asking.

Harmony hasn’t exactly been forthcoming with details about her life. I’ve tried my best to pry information out of her. The woman can claim she’s my friend while at the same time shutting me out of her private life. It’s her special skill.

Her nose scrunches. “I guess I’m related to Robin since she’s Amy’s daughter.” She yanks her hand from mine to grasp her chest. “Amy.”

I want to pull her into my arms and comfort her, but she’s made it clear physical contact from me is not welcome.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

The words sound trite but what else can I say?

“T-t-thank you.”

Tears well in her eyes. To hell with not pulling her into my arms. I wrap an arm around her waist and draw her toward me until she’s cradled on my lap. She shoves her face in my shoulder and her body quakes as she cries.

I rub my hands up and down her back as I whisper nonsensical words to her. “I’m here. You’re not alone. You don’t have to do this alone.”

She whips her head up and glares at me as she swipes the back of her hand under her eyes. “Of course, I have to do this alone. I have to do everything alone. It’s my destiny.”

She tries to climb off of my lap, but I dig my fingers into her hips to keep her where she is. “What the hell? Your destiny?”

“Forget what I said.”

I growl. “I’m not forgetting any of the bullshit you just spouted.”

Her eyes narrow. “It’s not bullshit. And it’s none of your fucking business.”

“You’re my friend.” I nearly choke on the word friend. I don’t want to be her friend. I want to be more. Much, much more. “Of course, it’s my business.”

“Now is not the time to discuss this.”

Fuck. She’s right. Minutes after she found out she’s the guardian of a two-month-old baby is not the time for a serious discussion about her past. But I also know she’s never going to willingly discuss this with me. She could give a master class at avoiding revealing private information.

I kiss her forehead before releasing her and helping her settle in the passenger seat. “Buckle up.”

I switch on the engine and drive out of the alley. I glance in the rearview mirror and notice the rear door of the brewery flies open before the gossip gals pile out. We’re just in the nick of time.

We reach the town limits before Harmony speaks. “Do you smell something?”

I sniff. “I smell beer.”

Pfft.

“Did the...” Harmony coughs. “Did the baby let out the loudest fart ever?”

Pfffft.

I chuckle. “That one sounded louder.”

Harmony twists to look back at the baby. Her eyes widen. “Oh shit.”

“What? Do I need to stop?”

“I meant shit as in literal shit.”

I pull over to the side of the road and glance over my shoulder.

“Holy crap.”

Brownish-greenish liquid leaks out of the bottom of the onesie the baby’s wearing onto the car seat.

“What do we do?” Harmony asks.

“You’re asking me?”

I have no experience with babies. Three of my brothers are younger than me but – considering how close we are in age – I wasn’t ever involved with their child care. Miller, as my twin, is barely an hour younger than me. My other two younger brothers, the twins Riley and Brody, were born when we were two. I could hardly help change their diapers when I was shitting in diapers myself.

“Oh no! It’s leaking from the car seat onto the truck’s backseat.”

“Damn.” I jump out of the front seat and open the door to the backseat. I grasp the car seat to pull it out but it doesn’t move. “How the hell do I get this thing out of my truck?”

Harmony joins me and yanks on the car seat from the other side. “It’s stuck.”

“Forget it.” I jerk my hands away as baby poop glides down the side of the car seat onto the truck’s upholstery. “It’s too late anyway. Let’s get her home, and I’ll deal with it later.”

We settle back into the front seat and I drive the remaining mile to Harmony’s house. When I switch off the truck in her driveway, she doesn’t move.

“I’m sorry. I don’t think the smell is ever going away.”

I groan. “I’m going to have to buy a new truck.”

She giggles but slaps a hand over her mouth. “Sorry. I didn’t mean...”

“To say my truck will smell of shit until the end of time?”

Her hand drops and her giggles intensify. “If the butt fits...”

I tickle her ribs. “I’m supposed to be the jokester.”

Robin lets out a wail and I freeze. “Where’s her pacifier?”

Harmony’s lip purse and she points to the car seat. “Just when you think shit can’t get worse.”

I look to where she’s pointing. “You drop your pacifier in it.”

We get out of the car and stare at the baby crying in the car seat.

“I’d probably cry if I was covered in shit, too,” I say.

“But how am I going to get her inside?”

I sigh before reaching forward and unbuckling Robin. I hold her at arm’s length – my arms stretched as far away from me as I can manage – as I hurry inside the house.

“Where do you want your package?”

Harmony rushes ahead to open the door. Her dogs immediately attack but she snaps her fingers and they drop their bottoms.

“Behave, boy and girls. We have a baby here.”

I swear Black Ops nods as if he understands her words.

“Shall I put her in the sink in the bathroom?”

“Do you usually change a baby in the sink?” Harmony asks as she follows me.

I’ve barely managed to settle Robin in the sink when the front door bangs open.

“I’m here,” Ashlyn shouts. “What’s going on?” she asks as she enters the bathroom. “Uh oh. Your first blowout. I got this. Rowan!” she hollers for her husband. “I need the changing stuff.”

“Thank goodness. Someone who knows what they’re doing,” Harmony mutters as she backs out of the bathroom. I follow her.

“Hey! I would have figured it out.” Maybe.

“But now you don’t have to.” She motions toward her front door. “I’ll see you later.”

“Are you dismissing me?” I’m the one who’s supposed to be helping her. Not Ashlyn.

“Do you know how to change a baby’s diaper?”

“No,” I pout.

“Harmony!” Ashlyn yells. “Get in here, so I can show you how it’s done.”

“I’ll see you later,” Harmony says as she scampers away.

It’s final. I’ve been dismissed. Damn it. This was my chance to show Harmony how much I care for her. How good I could fit into her life.

But her life just took a drastic turn. She’s now the guardian of a baby. And I never want to be a father. Maybe a retreat from her isn’t the worst idea.

Chapter 5

*Why was the leather shoe so stubborn?
Because it couldn't be suede. ~ Text from
Elder to Harmony*



Elder

The second I ring the doorbell at Harmony's house, the dogs go wild. The dogs usually don't bark when I arrive. Is something wrong? Is Harmony okay?

The door flies open. "What?" Harmony snarls.

I study her. There are dark circles under her eyes and her light green eyes appear dull. She's beautiful as ever, but she appears ill. I lift my hand toward her face as I step forward.

"Are you okay?"

She bats me away. "Why wouldn't I be okay? I spent the entire night trying to calm a crying baby. When nothing I did worked, I ended up vacuuming the entire house at two a.m. since the sound of the vacuum cleaner was the only thing to calm Robin. I've had less than two hours of sleep."

"I'm sorry. I would have stayed and helped."

And I would have. I may not want children of my own, but I'm not an asshole who would abandon Harmony the day she discovered she's the guardian of a two-month-old baby. But she kicked me out.

"I don't have time to deal with you today."

This is going to be fun. I bite my tongue before I smirk and wave a set of keys at her. "I'm your ride."

"My ride?" Her nose wrinkles. "I'm not driving in the stinky truck."

I can't blame her there. I drove home last night with my head sticking out of the window and I still felt nauseous the entire way. I'd burn the vehicle if the townspeople of Winter Falls wouldn't hunt me down to tar and feather me for it while giving me a lecture on how bad burning is for the environment.

"I don't have the stinky truck."

"Doesn't matter. I don't need your help."

I lift an eyebrow. "You don't? How are you getting to Denver for your meeting with Mr. Craven without my help?"

She pauses. She doesn't think I know about the meeting, but of course I do. I make it my business to know everything happening in Harmony's life. Plus, the gossip gals called this morning to tell me about the meeting.

"Eden's driving me."

I smirk. "She can't drive you when I have Miller's truck."

"Miller loaned you his truck?"

I shrug. "My twin loves me."

"You didn't tell him, did you?"

And miss out on him throwing a massive hissy fit for borrowing his truck without telling him? No way. It's my duty as a twin to ensure I harass my brother as much as possible and I take my duties very seriously.

"I told Eden. Good enough."

She checks her watch. "I don't have time for your shenanigans. I need to be in Denver in two hours."

I bow. "Elder Bragg. At your service."

She huffs. "I'm serious, Elder. I don't need your help."

"Uh oh. The stubborn queen has arrived at the party."

"I am not stubborn."

I chuckle. She's the most stubborn woman I know, and this town is full of stubborn, opinionated women.

“Which is why you’re standing on your porch arguing with me instead of getting your butt in the truck so I can drive you to Denver?”

“Eden’s supposed to help me today,” she repeats proving exactly how stubborn she is.

One thing I’ve learned about Harmony since I began pursuing her months ago is how she thinks accepting help from a friend makes her weak. It doesn’t make her weak, but she needs to come to the realization on her own. Although, I do plan to help her along the way.

“Eden’s not here. I am.”

“I should ring her.”

“If my son was being stubborn on a flight would I check him with my luggage?” I pause. “Or would I have to carry on my wayward son?”

I chuckle. I’m hilarious if I do say so myself. Harmony ducks her chin but not before I notice her lips tip up. She’s wavering.

“I’ll get the car seat.”

I grasp her hand to stop her. “No need. I’ve got a car seat all set up in the backseat of the truck.”

I met with Harmony’s friend, Ashlyn, early this morning and she gave me a quick lesson on putting in a car seat.

“Let me get Robin.”

She hurries away and returns with the baby and a diaper bag thrown over her shoulder. I grab the diaper bag before grasping her hand and opening the door. The dogs howl the second the door opens.

“What’s wrong with your dogs? They don’t usually howl when you leave.”

“They’ve become very protective of Robin. They were glued to her side the entire night. Except for when I got out the devil machine.”

“Good.”

I didn't want to leave Harmony alone last night, but it makes me feel better knowing her dogs protected her and Robin.

I open the truck door and place the diaper bag on the floor before taking the baby from Harmony and placing her in the car seat.

"You learn quick," Harmony says once I've got Robin all strapped in.

I feel my face warm and drop my chin. "I practiced."

Ashlyn wouldn't let me drive away this morning until I could get her daughter, Patience, into the car seat. Good thing Patience's name suits her since I needed several tries before I managed the task.

"Where am I headed?" I ask as I switch on the engine. Harmony shows me the address on her phone and I plug the directions into the navigation system.

"Do you need to do any shopping for Robin?" I ask once we've left Winter Falls.

When Harmony doesn't answer, I glance across the front seat to find she's fallen asleep with her head leaning against the window. I should have brought a pillow and blanket for her. I should have realized she'd be exhausted this morning.

I make a note to stock the items in my truck – when and if I ever drive it again – and lower the volume on the radio.

The lawyer's office is in a suburb of Denver. I park in front of the small building and switch off the engine. Neither Harmony nor Robin wake.

I tuck a stray strand of Harmony's hair behind her ear and palm her neck. Her body leans toward mine in her sleep and I grin. Harmony might fight the two of us being together but her body knows what it wants.

"Harmony," I whisper.

"Five more minutes," she mutters.

I check the clock. I wish I could let her sleep, but her meeting is in five minutes.

“You need to wake up,” I say with a squeeze of her neck.

Her eyes fly open. “Who? What? Why?” Her confusion is adorable. She sits up and looks around. “Why are we stopped? Where are we?”

“At the lawyer’s office. You slept the whole way.”

“Sorry.”

“There’s no need to be sorry. You were up most of the night with the baby. I’m glad you got some sleep. Robin slept the entire way, too.”

She glances over her shoulder at the baby and her face goes soft. I feel a ping of jealousy. I want her to look at me with the same adoration in her eyes.

“Your meeting is in five minutes. Do you want to take Robin with you? Or do you want me to watch her?”

She bites her lip as she studies me. I know I’m not exactly babysitter material, but I’m a grown man. I can handle a baby for an hour while she meets with her lawyer.

I tweak her nose. “It’s okay, stubborn girl. I promise to be a dick tomorrow, so you won’t fall in love with me.”

She scowls. “I’m not going to fall in love with you no matter what.”

I chuckle. “You keep telling yourself that.”

“Whatever. Can you babysit Robin?”

She doesn’t wait for an answer before jumping out of the truck and marching across the street to the law firm.

Chapter 6

Where the hell are you and where is my truck? ~ Text from Miller to Elder



The second I enter the lawyer's office, the woman behind the reception desk looks up and smiles at me.

"You must be Ms. Kingsley," she says as she stands.

I frown when I notice how perfectly she's dressed. I glance down at my outfit. There's a stain on my shirt from where Robin spit up on me this morning and my skirt is wrinkled. Although I'm not usually too bothered by my appearance, this is a new low for me.

"Follow me." I trail behind her down the hallway with my hand covering the dirty mark on my shirt. "Mr. Craven will be with you in a minute," she says as she opens the door to an empty meeting room.

I collapse into a chair at the table and notice a tray of cookies in the center. My stomach rumbles. I can't remember the last time I ate. I know I missed breakfast. Getting a baby dressed takes way longer than I expected.

Did I have dinner last night? The entire evening is a haze from the moment Ms. Cross placed a baby in my arms.

My stomach rumbles again. A chocolate chip cookie for breakfast it is. I grab a cookie and bite into it. As soon as the taste of chocolate hits my tongue, I moan and take another bite. I finish the cookie in three bites.

I stare at the remaining cookies as I contemplate eating another one. My stomach rumbles. One cookie was not enough to fill it. What the hell. I grab another one.

The door behind me opens and I jump to my feet. Crumbs from the cookie fall to the floor and I look down to find my skirt is covered with miniature specks of cookie. For crying out loud. I could be a vagabond. I swipe at my clothes while I chew as fast as I can.

“Ms. Kingsley?” The man extends his hand.

I shake his hand as I swallow. “I’m sorry. I was hungry. I skipped breakfast. It was a long night with the baby and I ...” I trail off when he laughs.

“Don’t worry. I completely understand. I have three children, and I had nine months to prepare for their arrivals.”

I blow out a puff of air. “I got the shock of my life yesterday when Ms. Cross showed up with Robin.”

He cringes. “I apologize. I didn’t realize Ms. Cross was bringing the baby to you yesterday or I would have called to prepare you.”

“What happened?” I ask. “What happened to my cousin Amy?”

He motions for me to sit down. “Please. Sit. And I’ll explain.”

I settle in the chair across from him. He opens a file and studies it. Does he need to reacquaint himself with the file? Is his not being familiar with my case a bad sign? Or a good sign? What’s he reading? What does it say?

“I’m sorry for your loss,” he finally says.

I inhale a deep breath before I snarl at the lawyer. He can’t know how much I hate those words. How often I’ve heard those words in my life. How trite they sound to me.

“How did Amy die?” I ask instead of explaining to him how his words are completely meaningless to me.

He consults his file. “Amy Kingsley had a massive stroke and was declared dead upon arrival at the hospital on April third.”

I gasp. “A massive stroke? It wasn’t a car accident?”

His brow wrinkles. “Were you informed it was a car accident?”

“No. I ... uh...” I trail off. I’m not explaining to this stranger about my fear of people I love dying in car crashes. He doesn’t need to know what a freak I am.

I clear my throat and try again. “Why am I learning about Amy’s death from her lawyer? Why didn’t the hospital contact me?”

“Apparently, you weren’t listed as Amy’s emergency contact.”

I wasn’t? Why not? Amy doesn’t have any relatives besides me. Who could possibly be her emergency contact if not me?

I swallow those questions. They don’t matter. Not anymore. There are other matters to attend to.

“What about her remains? I need to arrange her funeral.”

Unfortunately, I’m experienced in these matters and know what needs to happen next.

Mr. Craven clears his throat. “Ms. Kingsley left explicit instructions. She wanted to be cremated. No funeral. No memorial service.”

I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. Amy and I were both more acquainted with funerals at eighteen than most eighty-year-olds. We even made a pact way back when. No burials. No funerals. I never took the pact seriously, but I guess my cousin did.

“H-h-her remains?” I clear my throat. “Do you know where her remains are?”

He lifts a box from the seat next to him and slides it across the table. “The funeral parlor delivered these yesterday.”

I place my hand on the box and bow my head. *Amy*. I never should have let her convince me to not come to the hospital when Robin was born. And I definitely shouldn’t have stayed away after the birth. I missed the final months of Amy’s life and I don’t even know why.

“Please,” Mr. Craven says as he holds out a tissue for me.

I blot my eyes as I pull myself together. I can cry later. When I’m alone. What I need now is answers.

“What happens to Robin now?”

“As Amy’s sole remaining living relative, you have temporary custody. It shouldn’t be difficult to procure permanent custody should you desire such.”

Should I desire such? Does he think I’d let a relative of mine grow up in foster care? No effing way.

“But what about Robin’s father? Where is he? Who is he?”

Shame burns through me at the last question. I don’t know who Robin’s father is. And I should. But no matter how much I begged and cajoled Amy, she wouldn’t reveal any information about her baby daddy.

When I joked she must have had a sperm donor, Amy made it clear Robin has a father. I know nothing else about the man.

“The baby’s father was not named on the birth certificate but I have this.” Mr. Craven slides a letter across the table toward me.

I gasp when I notice the letter is addressed to me in Amy’s handwriting. Did Amy know she was dying? Why else would she write me a letter? I shove the letter into my purse. I’ll read it when I’m alone.

“What happens now?”

“What do you mean?”

“About Robin? Do I have to prove I’m a fit guardian? Do I need to file paperwork? How does this work?”

“Your guardianship is contingent on you being declared a fit parent. As a woman with a good job and no criminal record, I don’t foresee any problems, but Ms. Cross will be conducting a few visits to make certain we cross all our t’s and dot all our i’s.”

I open my mouth to ask him how he knows I'm not a criminal but snap it closed again when I realize he must have researched me before Ms. Cross delivered Robin to me.

"There are a few other administration matters to discuss," Mr. Craven says. "Regarding Amy's estate and the provisions she made for Robin."

Fifteen minutes later I exit the law firm to find Elder waiting for me on the sidewalk. He smiles as he strolls toward me but when he's nearly upon me, his smile dies.

"What's wrong? What happened?" Elder growls. "Who do I have to kill?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been crying," he says and reaches forward to cradle my face with his free hand.

I lean into his comfort. I shouldn't. I can't have a relationship with Elder. No matter how much I want him. But at this moment, the moment when I've just discovered my cousin is gone forever, I'm going to accept the comfort he's offering.

I close my eyes and enjoy his warmth for a few seconds before inhaling a deep breath and stepping back. He frowns at me but I ignore him. I don't have the mental bandwidth to deal with his feelings at the moment.

I hold out my hands. "Give me Robin."

He kisses Robin on the nose before placing the baby in my hands. I cuddle her close.

"It's you and me from now on, baby girl," I murmur to her.

"And me," Elder adds.

"Someone doesn't know how to take no for an answer. Don't worry, Robin. I'll teach you everything you need to know about men and their sly ways."

"You're going to be a wonderful mother."

I look down at the baby in his arms. I hope so. I hope she isn't affected by my bad luck. Because this baby girl is mine to protect. And I will protect her at all costs.

Chapter 7

It's not rude to arrive uninvited if we bring food. ~ Text from Ashlyn to Harmony



“We’re here,” Ashlyn announces as she barges into my house.

The dogs scramble to the front door. I chase after them. “Black Ops, Pup Tart, Little Bow Wow. We pretend Ashlyn is our friend. Don’t attack her.”

I hold my dogs back as they snarl at Ashlyn. She’s not alone. My other friends, Moon, Eden, and Soleil are with her.

“I’m the best friend you can want in the world,” Ashlyn says as she rocks her baby in her arms.

“Did you forget you’re my best friend?” Moon asks Ashlyn.

“Better you than me,” Eden mumbles.

I glare at her. “You’re on my shit list.”

She doesn’t bother to pretend to not know what I’m talking about. “It’s not my fault. Elder phoned when he was already in Miller’s truck on his way to your house.”

I fist my hands at my hips. “You couldn’t call to warn me?”

“I did. You didn’t pick up.”

“You did?” I try to remember if the phone rang before Elder arrived. I remember Robin spitting up on me minutes before he arrived. The rest of the morning is foggy. Damn. Eden probably did phone. “You’re forgiven.”

She snorts. “Thank you for forgiving me for not doing anything wrong.”

“Come on. Let’s not stand in the hallway all morning. I’m ready to meet Robin.” Soleil herds us into the living room.

The dogs rush in front of us and gather around the playpen Robin’s sleeping in. They each take a side and lay down as if protecting her.

“Ah, they’re precious. I want a doggie,” Ashlyn says.

Moon snorts. “Rowan won’t let you have a dog.”

Ashlyn lifts her nose in the air. “My husband is not my keeper. If I want a dog, I’ll have one. All I have to do is—”

I clear my throat before she can finish her thought. “Baby present,” I remind her.

She juggles her baby, Patience, in her arms. “She doesn’t understand sex yet, do you?” she coos at Patience before addressing me. “You do understand babies are too young to comprehend sex?”

I do. But I also know Ashlyn will go on and on about her sex life with her husband if we let her. No thanks. Considering I’m going to spend my entire life dedicated to my battery-operated boyfriend, I don’t need to hear about how her real man treats her.

You can have a real man, Rebel Harmony whispers to me.

Yeah, right. I have tons of time for a man since I now have a baby to care for.

Elder will help.

Whatever. I’m not listening to her today or any day for that matter. She should know better by now. I’m unworthy. Relationships are not for me.

“She’s precious,” Soleil whispers as she leans over the playpen to study Robin. “She could be your child.”

Eden stands next to her. “It’s true. Robin looks exactly like you.”

“She’s a baby,” I insist. “She doesn’t resemble anyone yet.”

And if she does resemble anyone, it'll be my cousin Amy. Not me. I won't let Robin forget who her mom is. Little Robin will know everything about Amy. How she only ate the stuffing of an Oreo but never the cookie itself. How she wouldn't go to a movie theater if they didn't have Red Vines. How she used to read the last five pages of a book before buying it 'to make sure the bad guy got his comeuppance'.

"I want to hold her. Can I hold her?"

Soleil reaches into the playpen but I slap her hand away.

"If you wake Robin, I will smash your pottery wheel into a gazillion tiny pieces before burying them all over town."

Soleil is an artist. She has a gift for making pottery. People come from all over the US to attend her pottery classes and purchase her pieces.

She yanks her hand away. "You're mean."

Eden giggles. "You do know planting pottery pieces won't result in any plants, don't you?"

Eden would know since she's an expert when it comes to plants. She owns the plant store, *Eden's Garden*, in town. In addition to selling plants, she has a big garden behind the store where she grows the plants as well as hops for the brewery.

"Here," Ashlyn says as she offers her baby to Soleil. "You can hold Patience."

Soleil reaches for the baby but sniffs and retreats. "She needs a change. You're seriously going to hand me a baby who just crapped her pants?"

Ashlyn shrugs. "She craps her pants a lot. There's a fifty-fifty chance anytime I hand you Patience, she has a dirty diaper."

She stands. "I'll go change her." She pauses and raises an eyebrow at me. "Do you need another changing lesson?"

"I think the lesson I got the other night was quite sufficient, thank you."

After Robin had her blowout in Elder's truck, Ashlyn helped me clean her up and showed me how to change her diaper. In fact, she made me change her diaper again and again until I could do it with my eyes closed.

At the time, I was annoyed. Now, I understand since I've spent the past two nights doing diaper changes while half asleep.

When my stomach rumbles, Moon asks, "When was the last time you ate?"

"Um..." The last thing I remember eating is the chocolate chip cookies at the lawyer's office yesterday. Surely, I must have eaten something since then.

Moon stands. "Good thing I came prepared." She lifts a bag before heading toward the kitchen.

Moon is the owner of the diner in town, appropriately named *Moon's Diner*. Lucky for me, she never arrives at a friend's house without provisions. My stomach rumbles again at the idea of eating whatever she prepared. The woman is an artist in the kitchen.

"How did yesterday go?" Eden asks.

I grunt. "Fine."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "I'm dating the biggest grump in Winter Falls. I know when a grunt means 'not fine'."

"I thought Miller wasn't a grump anymore since you've tamed him."

She wiggles her eyebrows. "I enjoy it when he's grumpy."

Moon groans as she returns carrying a tray loaded with food. "Don't tell me. I don't want to know what my brother likes in bed."

Eden bumps Moon's hip. "He's not your brother. He's the brother of the man you're living with."

Moon is dating Riley who is the younger brother of Miller and Elder. There are five brothers in all. Damon is the

oldest and the only one who didn't move to Winter Falls when Elder and Miller discovered they have a half-brother in town. After Damon comes Miller and Elder who are fraternal twins. Last are Riley and Brody who are identical twins.

I sigh. "I wish the Bragg brothers never moved to town."

Eden wags her finger at me. "Don't you lie. You want to be a member of the sisterhood of the Bragg brothers, and you know it."

"The sisterhood of the Bragg brothers?"

"Yep," Moon agrees as she sets the platter of food on the coffee table. "You'll be a member as soon as you give in to Elder."

"I'm not giving in to Elder. I don't have time for a relationship. I have a baby to raise."

"Oh please." Ashlyn rolls her eyes as she returns to the room with a freshly diapered Patience. "I am a successful business owner, wife, and mother, and I still had time to come here today to get the scoop on you and Elder."

I wish I could say Ashlyn's lying. But she's not. In addition to being a well-known audiobook narrator, she owns *Bertie's Recording Studio*. Thanks to her husband's connections – Rowan was an NFL quarterback – the waiting list to record at her studios is over a year long.

My stomach rumbles again and I use the excuse to change the topic. "What did you make for us, Moon?"

She hands me a napkin and a plate. "I didn't have much time to prepare since someone," she glares at Ashlyn, "didn't warn me about today's visit."

I fill up my plate with caprese skewers, pita bread with tzatziki sauce, and bruschetta. Despite not having time to prepare, everything looks delicious.

Ashlyn shrugs. "I wasn't letting another day pass by without coming to check on Harmony and baby Robin."

Moon rolls her eyes. "Translation – learn all the gossip before the gossip gals."

“Hush you.” Ashlyn’s eyes dart around the room as if she expects someone to pop up from behind the sofa any second now.

“You do know you can’t conjure the gossip gals up by saying their name,” I say.

The gossip gals are five elderly women in town. They’re incredibly spry for their age and somehow manage to show up at the right place at the right time to find out the gossip before anyone else.

They also fancy themselves matchmakers. They currently have their sights set on matching me and Elder. They’re mistaken if they think they can match me. Not happening. Not in this lifetime. I don’t deserve to be matched.

“They’re not Voldemort,” Moon adds.

Ashlyn shivers. “Are you certain Sage isn’t paranormal?”

“You’re jealous,” Moon says.

Ashlyn nods. “Damn straight, I am.” She turns to me. “Spill.”

I glance down at my shirt but it’s surprisingly clean. “I didn’t spill.”

“Don’t be cute with me. We know you had an appointment with the lawyer yesterday.”

“There isn’t much to tell. My cousin Amy died of a stroke.” I swallow. Those words do not get easier to say no matter how many times I say them. “And now I have custody of Robin. End of story.”

Ashlyn narrows her eyes on me. “You’re not telling us everything but I’ll let it go for now.”

“How gracious of you.”

She ignores me. “Because, if there’s one thing I’ve learned from watching Moon and Eden fall in love with their Bragg brothers, it’s how we have to wait until you’re ready for you to spill your dirty laundry.”

“I don’t have dirty laundry.”

I don't have any secrets in my past that I'm ashamed of. I have a past I don't want to discuss. There's a difference.

"Sure you don't."

Robin lets out a wail. I start to stand, but Soleil jumps to her feet. "Finally. I get to hold the baby."

"Who knew Soleil was baby crazy?" I ask.

The discussion switches to how baby crazy Soleil is because the woman is apparently completely obsessed with babies and I let out a breath of relief.

Ashlyn may think my life is some secret needing to be revealed, but it's not. I don't plan to ever tell anyone about my past. It's mine. Not theirs.

Chapter 8

What do you call a brotherly invasion? A bro-fensive. ~ Text from Brody to Elder



Elder

“What are you doing here?” I ask Riley and Miller when I open my front door to find them standing on the porch.

Miller grunts and pushes his way inside.

“I thought he was talking since he found love.”

Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy for my brother. Eden is perfect for him. But it’s my duty to tease him at every opportunity. And I take my duties seriously.

Riley shrugs as he follows Miller inside. “He’s your twin.”

Brody stands from where he’s lounging on the sofa in the living room when we enter. I sigh. I agreed to let Brody crash with me when he moved to Winter Falls. He was supposed to find his own place, but it’s been months and he acts as if he lives here now. In case there’s any confusion, he doesn’t.

Whereas Miller and I are fraternal twins, Riley and Brody are identical twins. Although, all of us Bragg brothers look alike. Even our oldest brother, Damon, who isn’t a twin, has the same brown hair, brown eyes, and six-foot-plus height as the rest of us.

The doorbell rings again and I go to answer it.

“Peace,” I greet my half-brother.

“Is this a Bragg brother invasion?” I ask when we join the rest of my brothers in the living room.

“Did you forget I’m not a Bragg?” Peace asks.

Riley waggles his eyebrows at him. “You’re a Bragg in spirit if not in name.”

Peace has the same biological dad as us – Damon Bragg Senior. But he has a different mother. Our dad cheated on our mom when they were engaged with Peace’s mom and Peace is the result of their one-night stand.

Whereas my brothers and I grew up in San Diego, Peace grew up in the small town of Winter Falls. Miller and I actually moved to town a few years ago to meet him. Riley and Brody joined us here a few months ago, but Damon refuses to leave San Diego. He also refuses to tell us what’s going on with his life and there’s definitely something going on.

“Are you here to discuss Mom and Lennon?” I ask, although I have a sneaking suspicion I know why they’re here. And it’s not to discuss our mom dating Lennon, a local of Winter Falls.

Brody waves his hand. “Don’t worry. I’ve got it covered. I already have a list of pranks I plan to play on them.” He smirks. “Lennon won’t last, don’t you worry.”

I scan my brothers who are sprawled out on the furniture in my living room. “Are we going to rely on the bozo to handle Lennon for us?”

Peace shrugs. “Lennon’s a good guy. I don’t understand what the problem is.”

I scowl at him. “Lennon’s a player, and our mother has had enough of men who can’t keep their dicks in their pants.”

Miller grunts and I glare at him. “Not you, too!”

He grunts again and I throw my arms in the air. “Well, if Eden approves of Lennon, I guess we should, too.”

“Exactly,” he grumbles.

“I was being sarcastic.”

Brody raises his hand. “What?”

“I’m wondering how long we’re going to avoid the topic of conversation. I’ve got things to do.”

“Things to do? What things do you have to do? Are you viewing some apartments today?”

He rears back. “What? Why would I? I have a place to live.”

I rub a hand down my face. I’m never going to get rid of my brother and his mess. I haven’t seen my dining room table for a month and I only saw it then because we were playing poker. Brody loves to play poker. Correction. Brody loves to cheat at poker.

Riley rubs his hands together. “I can’t wait for the betting to start. I’m winning Project Baby.”

I glare at him. “You are not betting on me.”

Betting is the favorite pastime of the residents of Winter Falls. They’ll bet on anything – including what the daily special at the diner will be – but their all-time favorite thing to bet on is the gossip gals’ matchmaking projects.

I’m not an idiot. I’m well aware the gossip gals have their sights set on matchmaking me with Harmony. Thus, Project Baby. I’m not against their plan. But I know Harmony. She’s skittish. I wouldn’t put it past her to snatch Robin and flee. Never mind she has no family and all of her friends live in Winter Falls.

“Have you managed to find any information out about our possible brother?” I ask Peace.

We found Peace when we did one of those home genealogical kits. It didn’t take long to ascertain Peace is our half-brother. We discovered another possible match months ago, but as of yet, we haven’t been able to discover any further information.

Peace scowls. “It’s as if someone has erased his past. I can’t find him, let alone any information on him.”

“Weird.” I scratch my chin. “What do we do now?”

“I vote we stop letting you beat around the bush,” Riley says, and Miller grunts in agreement.

“I’m not beating around the bush.” I’m lying. I totally am.

Brody rolls his eyes. “You’re avoiding the topic and you know it.”

“What topic?”

I widen my eyes and try to make myself appear innocent despite knowing exactly what they’re talking about. They want to discuss me and Harmony. If they think I’m divulging any of Harmony’s secrets, they have another thing coming. Her secrets will always be safe with me.

“What happened yesterday?” Brody asks.

“Besides you stealing my truck,” Miller grumbles.

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t steal your truck. It’s not theft if you return the item.”

“Actually,” Peace begins.

“Eden gave me permission,” I say before he can explain the legal definition of theft. Peace is a police officer and thinks it’s his job to school us in all things legal. Hasn’t he figured it out by now? We’d rather not know.

At the mention of Eden, Miller grins. It’s hard to believe the grump met his match in a hippie gardener but the two of them are obnoxiously in love.

Obnoxiously in love? There’s nothing obnoxious about a man being in love. Especially when it’s my twin. I should be happy for him. But I’m not. Because I’m jealous. Of course, I am. The woman I desire wants nothing to do with me.

“I’ll rephrase my question,” Brody begins. “What happened yesterday other than you borrowing Miller’s truck without his express permission?”

“I couldn’t use my truck. It smells of shit. I’m going to have to sell it.”

Riley wags his finger at me. “We won’t be distracted by stinky truck.”

“Besides, the gossip gals are already cleaning it,” Peace adds.

“They are?”

Peace smirks. “How else are you going to transport Harmony and her baby around if you don’t have a truck?”

“Not in my truck,” Miller says.

“Robin isn’t Harmony’s baby.”

“Tell us more,” Brody says, and I realize I stepped right into their trap.

“There isn’t much to tell. You already heard it all at the party. Harmony’s cousin died and Harmony now has guardianship.”

“Why Harmony?” Peace asks. “Where is the baby’s father?”

I grunt. “The baby has a name.”

Miller’s eyes widen. They would. He knows I don’t want children. Unlike him, I’m not ready to build a white picket fence and have two point five children.

“Where is Robin’s father?” he asks.

“No idea.”

“Do you want me to check into it?” Peace asks.

I consider his question. On the one hand, I want him to find out everything he can about Robin’s dad. On the other hand, it’s not my decision. This is another one of those situations where Harmony would go fleeing into the night if she found out I meddled.

“I’ll discuss it with Harmony and let you know.”

“When are you going to discuss it with Harmony?” Riley asks.

“The next time I see her.”

“Which will be when?” he prods.

“I don’t know.”

And I don’t. I’d love to drop in on Harmony the way I have been over the past few months as our friendship grew, but things have changed. Ever since the social worker dropped Robin in her arms, Harmony appears ready to run for her life.

“Rumor has it Harmony wants to return to work tomorrow,” Riley says.

I scowl. “It’s too early. It’s barely been a week since Robin came into her life.”

He shrugs. “Nonetheless.”

“She’ll probably need someone to watch the baby,” Brody says.

Hmm... He’s got a point. “I’m working evenings tomorrow,” I tell Miller.

“Fine by me.” He stands. “We done?” When no one responds, he grunts, “We’re done.”

Riley follows him. “I am so winning this bet,” he mutters.

I shove him out the door. “No more bets.”

“Turnabout is fair pay,” he sings as he dances off the porch.

My response? I slam the door. I can’t very well claim he’s wrong. When he was working his ass off to get Moon to give him a second chance, I was right there giving him a hard time. And I may have placed a few bets as well.

My situation is not the same. I didn’t hurt Harmony. I’m not in need of a second chance because I was an idiot.

In fact, I should probably stop pressuring Harmony to give me a chance at all. We should stick to being friends since I will never want a child and she is now the shiny new owner of a baby girl. Based on what the lawyer told her, this is no temporary solution.

I nod to myself. Decision made. I’ll back off. I’ll remain Harmony’s friend, but no more pressuring her to give us a chance.

Chapter 9

*The beer's on me if everyone agrees not to answer their phone when Harmony calls. ~
Message from Elder on the Winter Falls
Facebook page*



I frown down at Robin. What am I going to do? When I told Juniper I'd return to work today, I assumed I wouldn't have any problem finding a babysitter.

This is Winter Falls after all. Between the gossip gals and all the other nosey residents, I thought I'd have to draw straws to pick who could babysit Robin while I work.

But I was wrong. I've reached out to everyone I know – including all of the members of the gossip gals – but everyone's busy today.

I juggle my phone in my hand. Call Juniper to tell her I can't come to work after all or call Elder to ask if he can babysit?

I don't want to phone Elder. I can't rely on him. I mean I can. The man is the definition of responsible. But I don't want to rely on him. The more I rely on him, the closer we become – the more difficult it is for me to keep him at arm's length.

I don't want to keep him at arm's length, Rebel
Harmony murmurs.

Naturally, she doesn't. Rebel Harmony is a bit of a hussy. Or, rather, she would be, if I listened to her. Which I don't because she's trouble. Thus, the name rebel.

The doorbell rings before I can decide what to do. Black Ops lifts his head from where he's lying on the floor next to Robin's playpen and growls. He stands and, after yipping at Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow to stay put, trots to the door. I check to make sure Robin's still sleeping before following after him.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Elder when I open the door.

He smirks. "Good morning, Harmony."

He kisses my cheek and I lean into him. When I realize what I'm doing, I scowl and step back.

"What are you doing here?"

"I agree. It's a lovely day."

I roll my eyes. Elder the goofball has arrived at the party.

"Are you going to tell me why you're here or am I going to sic Black Ops on you?"

He kneels to pet the dog. My black lab rolls onto his back for some tummy rubs. Such a traitor.

"Did you hear about what happened to the guy who accidentally made his morning coffee with Red Bull instead of water?" Elder asks as he stands. "He got halfway to work before he realized he forgot his car."

I cough to hide my laugh.

"You smiled. I saw it. I win."

"What do you win?"

"The opportunity to be the babysitter for the day."

I don't bother hiding my laughter this time. "You think being a babysitter for the day means you're a winner?" A day dealing with dirty diapers will change his tune.

"Yes." He bows. "Elder Bragg. Reporting for duty. I am available for any and all services you need."

I have a few ideas of what he can service, Rebel Harmony says. Shush you. He's here for the baby not to satisfy

my sexual desires. *Look at him*, she insists. *I bet he'd satisfy your desires and then some.*

I rake my gaze over Elder. He's wearing a white *Naked Falls Brewing* t-shirt stretched taut over his lean, hard muscles. Does he have hair on his chest? Is he hiding a six-pack under his t-shirt?

I force those thoughts out of my mind. I've spent entirely too much time fantasizing over Elder. I need to stop. Elder and I will never be more than friends. He deserves better than the likes of me.

"What services do you need, Harmony?" Elder asks, and my eyes fly up from his chest to his face to discover his eyes are full of fire. Oh my. I want to help put that fire out. After I feed the flames until we both explode.

I fan my face. "It's a warm day today."

Elder chuckles. "It's raining."

Drat. It *is* raining. "Um. I..."

He winks as he pushes past me. "Why don't you tell me where everything is?"

I scamper after him. "Where everything is? You're serious about babysitting?"

He opens his arms. "I don't see anyone else here reporting for babysitting duty."

Which is weird unless... I glare at him. "You called everyone and told them to say they're busy."

"Not exactly."

"You realize the gossip gals will use this as proof we should be matched."

He stalks toward me until he's nearly touching me. I can feel his heat surround me and smell his musky scent. I should retreat, but Harmony Kingsley does not retreat. She stands her ground no matter how painful or tempting such ground is.

"I don't give a crap about the gossip gals."

I gasp and scan the room to check none of them suddenly popped up behind my couch. “Be careful. You don’t want to be on their naughty list.”

“They can’t hurt me.”

I giggle. He should know better. He’s lived in Winter Falls for a few years now. “Do you enjoy soy milk in your coffee?” I ask despite knowing he doesn’t.

He shivers. “Soy milk is gross. I drink my coffee with oat milk.”

“Try telling Clove how you drink your coffee once you’re on the naughty list.”

“I can avoid *Clove’s Coffee Corner*.”

“Do you enjoy whipped cream on your ice cream cone?”

His nose wrinkles. “You know I hate whipped cream.”

“I bet Feather won’t remember how much you hate whipped cream when you order a cone at *Feather’s Frozen Delights*.”

“Fine,” he snaps. “You made your point. I don’t want to be on the gossip gals’ naughty list. But if I’m cornered, I’ll choose you over them any day of the week.”

I hold up a hand. “Stop.”

“Stop what?”

“We are friends. Nothing more. We will never be more than friends.”

He clears his throat and the sparkle in his eyes dies. He retreats and stuffs his hands in his pockets. Why do I suddenly feel cold? He’s doing exactly as I asked him to. After months of him asking for more, he’s finally getting the message. Friends only.

But why do I feel as if I lost something important? Why are my eyes itchy? Robin grunts before letting out a wail. Awesome. A distraction. I rush to her.

“What is it, baby girl?” I pick her up and cradle her to my chest. “Are you hungry?”

Elder rubs his hands together. “I’m starving. I didn’t get a chance to eat breakfast.”

“I wasn’t asking you.”

“If you’re feeding her anyway...” He shrugs as he trails off.

“She’s two months old. What do you think she eats?”

“Bacon and eggs?” I gasp and he bursts into laughter. “You are too easy.”

I blow out a breath. I can’t believe I fell for his silliness. Again.

“Why don’t you show me how to prepare her formula?”

My jaw drops open at Elder’s question. He’s serious. He’s actually here to babysit Robin.

“Give her to me. I’ll hold her while you get her bottle ready.”

He doesn’t wait for a reply before taking the baby from me. I expect Robin to scream at him – she finds strangers a bit scary until she gets used to them – but she looks up at him with her big blue eyes as if she’s enraptured by him. I get it, Robin. I get it.

“Hi, Robin. I’m Elder.”

She coos at him in response.

“Go on. Make her bottle. Robin and I will get better acquainted in the meantime.” Elder nudges me and I realize my mouth is still gaping open. I snap it shut and do as he says.

“I have five brothers. Well, four brothers and a half-brother. But I’m the funniest brother of the bunch. You’re going to love me.”

While I prepare Robin’s bottle, I listen to Elder tell her all about his life. Robin doesn’t make a peep. She stares up

at Elder as he goes on and on. I can't blame her. Elder is pretty fascinating.

Stop it. Elder is not fascinating. He's annoying. And tenacious. Oh, so tenacious. Except he pulled away today when I reminded him we're just friends. Does he not want me since I now have Robin?

My phone alarm blares to remind me I need to go now if I want to make it to work on time, and I force thoughts of Elder and what he wants out of my mind. It doesn't matter what he wants. We can never be more than friends.

"Go on," Elder says as he snatches the bottle from me. "I know you need to get to work. I've got Robin. Promise."

I bite my lip as I stare at the baby. I don't want to leave her. She's mine to protect. She wiggled her way into my heart and I will do whatever needs to be done to protect her.

"Promise?"

"Of course." He kisses my forehead before urging me to the front door. "Get on your bike and pedal as fast as your tiny feet can before you're late for work."

I grab my purse and keys. "I'll be home early."

"Did you hear about the man who got hit by the same bike every single morning?" He pauses. "It was a vicious cycle."

If he's trying to comfort me with one of his silly jokes, it's not working. "Ring me if you need anything."

"Go."

"Promise you'll ring if you need anything."

"I promise I'll ring if I need anything."

"Okay."

Robin will be fine, I reassure myself as I bike toward the Wildlife Refuge. Elder may be a goofball but he's a responsible business owner. He would never allow something bad to happen to a little baby.

Chapter 10

What happens when Elder babysits? He calls his mommy. ~ Text from Brody to Elder



Elder

I watch Harmony bike away until she's out of sight.

"It's just you and me now, baby girl," I tell Robin as I shut the door. The dogs circle my ankles as I return to the living room.

"Two months old and you've got the boys wrapped around your finger already."

Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow bark.

"Sorry. Of course, boys and girls. I didn't mean any disrespect."

I draw a finger down Robin's face. "You have the boys *and* girls wrapped around your finger already."

I settle in the rocking chair as Robin finishes her bottle.

"Someone has a big appetite," I tell her when she's done. I place her over my shoulder and pat her back. When she doesn't immediately burp, I rub circles on her back.

"Buh-UUuurrp!"

"Good girl." Why am I feeling wetness on my t-shirt?
"Damn it. Did you spit up on my t-shirt, little girl?"

I jump to my feet and Robin cries.

"I was ready for a nap, too, but now I need to wash my shirt." I set her down in her playpen and she scrunches up her face before letting out a wail. The dogs bark in response.

“I’ll be back in a second,” I promise as I whip off my shirt.

I dash to the laundry room, throw my t-shirt in the washing machine, and start a new cycle. It’s considered sacrilege to do a load of wash with less than a full load of laundry in the machine in Winter Falls – it’s not environmentally friendly – but I’m making an exception for t-shirts covered in baby spit-up.

By the time I return to the living room, the baby and the dogs are making an awful racket. I pick Robin up and settle her on my hip.

“I’m here, baby girl. There’s no reason to cry.”

I sway her from side to side as I hum *Sweet Child O’ Mine*. She continues to wail.

“Not a Guns N’ Roses fan? What kind of music do you prefer?”

“How about an oldie but a goodie?” I ask and begin to hum *My Girl*.

Robin is not impressed. It can’t be with my humming. I’m an excellent hummer. Wait. That sounds bad. No, not a hummer. I’m excellent at humming a tune.

“Maybe you’re not into music. We’ll work on it. How about a joke instead?”

I bounce her up and down as I pace around the living room trying to think of an age appropriate joke.

“Do you know what a baby computer calls his old man?” I waggle my eyebrows at Robin. “Data!”

“Not funny?” I ask when she doesn’t stop crying. “How about this one? What do you do when you find a baby spinning in circles? Stop laughing and untie him from the ceiling fan.”

“I agree,” I tell the crying baby girl in my arms. “I shouldn’t tell Uncle Brody about the last one. I wouldn’t want to inspire the prankster.”

I'm officially out of ideas. "Let's ask Google how to get you to stop crying. Google knows everything."

I dig my phone out of my pocket and unlock it with one hand. I try to type with one hand, too, but it's impossible. "Can I let you down while I consult The Google?"

Robin's little fists flail in response. "I'll take your response as a no."

I look around for a solution but there isn't anyone wandering around with an extra hand for me to use. How annoying. I guess I'm learning how to use my phone one-handed. How hard can it be? All the young kids do it.

I click on my internet browser. So far, so good. I'm typing 'how to calm a crying baby' when Robin kicks her leg out and connects with my phone. It goes flying across the room.

"Fuck," I mutter as I try to catch it. The phone clatters to the floor and I reach down to pick it up. Fortunately, it didn't break but Googling is not going to work.

"I don't see any other option," I tell Robin before I make the call.

The doorbell rings five minutes later and Robin screeches in response. And here I thought she couldn't get any louder. Lesson learned. There is no sound limit on a small baby.

"I'm here," Mom announces when I answer the door.

"She means we," Clementine says and Mom whirls around to confront Peace's mom.

"Were you spying on me?" Mom asks.

"Naturally."

"Why?"

"I've always wanted a baby girl."

"Join the line," Mom says. "I had five boys. The one time I tried to dress them in pink tops, Miller had an absolute fit. He threw off the adorable matching t-shirts I had made and threatened to flush it down the toilet." She purses her lips. "My boys and their obsession with flushing things down the toilet."

She snatches Robin from my hands. “What have you done to this poor girl?”

She marches inside with Clementine hot on her heels. I chase after them.

“What do you mean? What have I done? I’ve spent the past hour trying to calm her down.”

Mom bounces Robin in her arms. “Did you feed her? Change her diaper? Burp her?” She frowns at me. “And why are you not wearing a shirt?”

“Because she spit up all over my t-shirt when I burped her.”

Clementine sighs. “I can’t count the number of shirts Peace ruined when he was a baby.”

“I went through an entire wardrobe with Damon,” Mom adds. “By the time my first set of twins came around, I lived in ratty old clothes.”

“Can we schedule a walk down memory lane for a time when Robin isn’t bawling her head off?”

Mom lifts Robin up until she’s face to face with the baby. “You’re not bawling your head off, are you, little girl? You’re merely communicating in the one way you know how to.”

Which is by bawling.

“I tried everything. I sang. I danced. I told her jokes. Nothing worked.”

Mom snorts. “You do know she’s a baby?”

“Really? And here I thought she was an alien from another planet.”

“You joke but the fluids that come out of a baby?”

My nose scrunches up in disgust. “No need to tell me.”

Clementine giggles. “Ah yes. The infamous blowout in your truck.”

I gag. “It was gross.”

“Welcome to the life of a parent,” Mom says, and I freeze.

The life of a parent? I don’t think so. I’m never going to be a parent. I’m happy to help Harmony out in any way she needs, but I’m not Robin’s dad. I’m not even her guardian. And I never will be. Parenthood is not for me.

The washing machine beeps to indicate the laundry is finished, and I grab hold of the excuse to flee. “My t-shirt.”

I open the washing machine to remove my t-shirt and grimace when I realize my white t-shirt is now pink. What the hell? I root around the machine until I find a pair of red panties. Red lace panties that don’t leave much to the imagination. Is this what Harmony wears under her ripped jeans and worn t-shirts? Do her bras match?

My cock twitches. He’s ready to find out exactly what Harmony wears underneath her clothes. And how she looks without any clothes at all. Calm down, I tell him. There will be no exploratory expeditions concerning Harmony.

I throw my now pink t-shirt in the dryer before returning to the living room where the baby is no longer crying.

“It’s quiet.”

“Did you doubt my ability to calm a crying baby?” Mom asks.

Clementine snorts. “You changed her diaper and took off her pants and socks. You didn’t wield a miracle.”

“But I changed her,” I say.

“I guess I have the magical touch.” Mom nuzzles Robin’s neck. “Don’t I, baby girl?”

This isn’t good. Mom is getting attached to Robin. She thinks she has a new granddaughter. She doesn’t. Harmony and I won’t be co-parenting Robin.

“I’m home,” Harmony shouts as she rushes into the house. “I came back early. I couldn’t ...”

She trails off when she enters the living room and discovers my mom and Clementine sitting on the sofa together

with the baby. “What are you doing here? Is there something wrong with Robin? Do we need to take her to the doctor?”

I squeeze her hands. “There’s nothing wrong with Robin.”

“But—”

“She’s fine. I promise. My mom and Clementine are here because they couldn’t wait to meet Robin.”

Her eyes narrow in disbelief. “They came to meet her when I wasn’t home?”

“We didn’t realize you went back to work today,” Mom lies.

Harmony snorts. “Am I supposed to believe this?”

Clementine bats her eyelashes. “Why wouldn’t you?”

“Maybe because I contacted everyone over the age of eleven in town this morning to find a babysitter for Robin.”

Mom frowns. “No one contacted me.”

Clementine crosses her arms over her chest. “Me either.”

“Whatever,” Harmony mutters before yanking out of my hold. “Why are you shirtless?”

Her gaze focuses on my abs and I suck in a breath. Her eyes flare. If my mom wasn’t here now, I’d drag her off to the bedroom.

Robin squeals as she notices Harmony’s arrival.

Thanks for the reminder, baby girl. There will be no carrying off of Harmony. Not since she’s now the guardian of a baby.

“I had a little accident and washed my t-shirt and now it’s pink.”

Harmony’s nose wrinkles. “Why is your t-shirt pink?”

“I think the question is why did you abandon your red panties in the washing machine.”

“Abandon my red panties in the washing machine? What are you talking about?” Before I get a chance to answer, she clears her throat. “Never mind.”

She holds out her hands for the baby. Mom sighs but hands Robin to her.

“Did you miss me?” she coos as she kisses Robin’s cheeks.

The relief at having Robin back in her arms is clear to see on Harmony’s face. Which sucks.

Don’t get me wrong. I’m happy Robin has someone to care for her and won’t be thrown into the foster system. But it’s obvious Harmony will never let Robin be taken from her. Since I’m not parental material, any chance of Harmony and I ever being more than friends just went down in a blaze of glory.

Chapter 11

'I have an idea' are words no one wants to hear Elder utter. ~ Text from Brody to the Bragg brothers



The phone rings and I rush to answer it before the sound wakes Robin. After the hour I spent rocking her to sleep, I'm not risking waking her.

"Hello," I whisper into the phone as I creep backwards out of the nursery. Black Ops rushes into the room to lay next to Robin's crib.

"Ms. Kingsley?"

Something about the way he says my name has me on high alert. "Yes?"

"This is Mr. Craven, the executor of Amy Kingsley's estate."

Fear grabs hold of my heart and squeezes.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm afraid I have some bad news."

The fear claws at me. "B-b-bad news?"

He clears his throat. "It appears you becoming the permanent guardian of Robin is a bit more complicated than I first anticipated."

Breathe, Harmony. Just breathe through this.

"A bit more complicated? How complicated?"

"Another person is claiming they should be the legal guardian."

Confusion replaces fear. “What other person?” Robin and I have no other family. Who could possibly claim custody?

“Robin’s father.”

“Robin’s father? I thought he wasn’t in the picture.”

“He is now.”

Who does he think he is? He can’t just show up and claim custody. I will not allow anyone to steal Robin from me. She’s mine. Mine to care for. Mine to raise. Mine to protect. No one is taking her from me. No. One.

“And he wants custody?”

“Yes. He wants his child with him. He believes as the father he should be the one to have custody of Robin.”

Think, Harmony! Think! “How do we know this guy?” I pause. “What’s his name anyway?”

“Wesley Zimmerman.”

“How do we know Wesley Zimmerman is Robin’s father? Didn’t you say there was no father named on the birth certificate?”

“Not being named on the birth certificate does not preclude Mr. Zimmerman from proclaiming parental rights.”

Well, damn. If Robin has a dad, she should be with him. A daughter should be with her daddy.

“What do we know about this guy? Is he a good guy? Will he properly care for Robin?”

“I’m afraid I don’t have any further information. I’ve asked my investigator to look into him.” He pauses. “But I believe you may know the man.”

Know the man? Why would I know the man? I didn’t know the name of Robin’s father until two minutes ago. “How could I possibly know him?”

“Have you read the letter Amy Kingsley wrote to you?”

The letter? What letter?

“I gave the letter to you at our meeting.”

He did? I don't remember any— Oh, yeah. I forgot all about the letter. What with having a small baby to suddenly care for and all.

“I haven't read it yet.”

“Perhaps you can read it and then we can decide how we want to proceed.”

“Want to proceed?”

“If you want to fight for custody of Robin.”

I could fight for custody? Do I want to fight for custody?

“Okay. I'll be in touch.”

I disconnect the call and shove the phone in my back pocket. Who is Wesley Zimmerman? How did Amy know him? Why didn't she tell me any of this? We were close. Or, at least, I thought we were.

I check to make sure Robin's still sleeping before going in search of the letter. I brew myself a coffee and sit at the kitchen table to read it.

Dear Harmony,

If you're reading this, then I'm gone. I hope no one tells you 'I'm sorry for your loss'. I know how much you hate those words.

I'm sorry we haven't been as close this past year as we have been in the past. Getting pregnant, having a baby – it changes your entire life. And I wasn't prepared.

But you're not reading this to learn about my regrets. We always promised we would have no regrets. Do you have regrets in your life? I hope not.

You must be wondering who Robin's father is. I always avoided the question when I was alive. (Man, is it weird writing 'when I was alive'.) I never told you because I was ashamed. I can hear you protest now. I can't remember how many times you told me to 'never be ashamed'.

Well, when you do something awful, you feel ashamed. No matter how many times your cousin tells you not to be!

I got involved with the wrong man. It was a one-night stand with Wesley Zimmerman at first. But I was lonely and bored and I let myself get lost in him.

When I told him I got pregnant, he accused me of trying to trap him. And, I can admit it now, I might have gotten pregnant on purpose. Not to trap Wesley. Not likely! But to be less alone.

When Wesley accused me of trying to trap him, we broke up. Which is when I found out what kind of man he was. He'd show up at the house drunk or stoned or whatever at all times of the night begging me to take him back.

You know I would never take a man back who drinks or uses drugs. Not after what happened to my family. The last time I saw him – when I was six months pregnant – he claimed he was going to rehab. I don't know if he ever did.

I do know he wasn't there for the birth of his child. I broke down and messaged him. He helped create Robin after all, but I couldn't get in touch with him.

This is where I make the big ask. Will you keep Robin? Will you raise her? Teach her all the things you taught me? Tell her about her mommy. The good stuff – how I could do a handstand for thirty seconds – and not the bad stuff – how I fell for the wrong man.

I know it's a big ask but I have no one else. I can practically see you rolling your eyes now. 'Of course, Amy. Whatever you want, I'm here for you.'

Thank you for always being there for me. I'll miss you.

Love,

Amy

“Harmony. Harmony! What's wrong?” Elder shouts as he rushes into the house.

I should probably ask what he's doing inside my house, but I have more important matters to deal with.

“It’s Amy. I’m losing the baby,” I blubber

He picks me up and cradles me in his arms before sitting on the sofa. I bury my face in his shoulder and cling to his t-shirt as I allow the tears, I haven’t had a chance to cry since Amy died, to fall.

“I’m sorry,” I tell his t-shirt.

He rubs his hand up and down my back. “There’s no reason to be sorry. You cry as long as you need to. I don’t have anywhere I need to be.”

“Thanks.” I hiccup.

“Is there any particular reason you’re crying on your kitchen table today?” he asks once I calm down. “Or is this one of those I’ll cry if I want to moments.”

I lean back to meet his eyes. “You’re dying to tell a joke about crying, aren’t you?”

“Maybe.”

“Go ahead. Get it out of your system.”

“Why did Han Solo cry during his steak dinner?” He grins. “Because it was Chewie.”

“You’re a weirdo.”

“I prefer the term unique.” The amusement disappears from his face as he palms my neck. “You said you’re losing the baby. What did you mean?”

I blow out a breath. “The baby’s father wants custody.”

His brow wrinkles. “The baby’s father? I thought he wasn’t in the picture.”

“Apparently, he just put himself in the frame.”

He chews on his bottom lip. “But isn’t this a good thing? He’s Robin’s dad. She should know her dad.”

I growl. “Not if he’s a drug addict.”

I will never ever let Amy’s child be raised by an addict. She’d come back from the grave to haunt me if I did.

And I wouldn't blame her one bit considering a drug addict took her family from her.

His eyes widen. "Drug addict?"

I nod. "Yep."

"What are you going to do? Are you going to fight for custody?"

"I want to, but what chance do I have? I may be Robin's second cousin, but I'm a single woman with no other children. Wesley is her dad. Trust me. Courts prefer to give custody of the child to a biological parent."

"Even if the biological parent is a drug addict?"

"Yep. Even then."

"What do you want to do? Do you want to keep Robin?"

I don't hesitate. "Yes. Robin has burrowed her way into my heart. I don't want to let her go. I want to protect her from the world."

"I have an idea."

"I am not kidnapping my cousin and going on the lam."

"Going on the lam?" He chuckles. "Sounds fun, but I have a better idea."

"I'm afraid to hear this."

"We'll get married."

My heart skips a beat. Married? To Elder? *Say yes, Rebel Harmony screams. We'll show him a wedding night he won't forget!* I ignore the woman with sex on her brain.

"But—"

He pinches my chin. "Hear me out. What judge in his right mind will award custody to a drug addict if he can choose a married couple who both have good jobs and live in a small town?"

The idea has appeal, but "I don't know."

Elder kisses my forehead. “Think about it. The entire town will show up as character witnesses for us. Seriously, the baby daddy won’t have a chance.”

The baby daddy won’t have a chance?

I straighten my back. If this is what needs to happen for me to keep Robin, I’ll do it. I’ll do whatever I have to in order to protect Amy’s baby girl. Even if the person I need to protect her from the most is her father.

“Okay,” I say and Elder grins. I wag a finger at him. “But this can’t be real. The marriage will merely be an arrangement for me to gain custody of Robin.”

“Naturally.”

“We need boundaries. No sex. No sleeping in the same bed.”

He bats his eyelashes. “I would never take advantage of a woman, even if she is my wife.”

I hold out my hand. “You have a deal.”

He shakes my hand before lifting me from his lap. “I need to contact Peace. I’ll ask him to perform a background check on the father as well. If he’s a drug addict, there’s bound to be dirt on him we can use.”

“I need to check on Robin,” I say and flee the room.

This is ridiculous. Marry the man I secretly desire in order to keep my cousin’s child? This has disaster written all over it.

I enter the nursery and head straight to the crib where Robin is sleeping. Fierce protectiveness overcomes me. This baby is not going anywhere.

“I love you, baby girl. I’ll do whatever I have to in order to keep you,” I promise.

Even marry Elder.

Chapter 12

*This is NOT a drill. ~ Text from Brody to
the Bragg brothers*



Elder

I climb into my truck after I've made the last delivery of beer from *Naked Falls Brewing* for the day. It's been a hectic day as I had to make deliveries for today and tomorrow since tomorrow's my wedding day.

My wedding day. I never dreamed of finding the 'one' and making a family with her the way my twin Miller did, but when I found Harmony? I was ready to make new dreams. But those dreams were always limited to the two of us. A baby girl named Robin was never part of my new dream.

"Gotcha!" someone shouts before slamming a hood over my head.

"What the hell?"

I reach up to pull the hood off but my wrists are shackled before I'm dragged out of the vehicle. I struggle to remain upright as my arms are yanked behind me and rope wound around them.

"Leave me alone." I kick out at the intruder but hit air and stumble. "You can't kidnap me."

Someone grunts before I'm picked up and thrown in the backseat of my truck. I land half on the seat, half on the floor. The door slams before I have a chance to right myself.

"This worked out better than I expected."

Hold on a minute. I know that voice.

"Brody?"

“There’s no Brody here,” Brody says in a deep voice.

“I’ve known you since you were a baby. I know your voice, idiot.”

“What voice? This voice?” he says in a high-pitched voice.

“That’s the same voice you used to phone the high school principal to say you were sick whenever you had a chemistry test.”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about but chemistry sucks, n’est-ce pat?” This time Brody attempts a French accent.

“It’s n’est-ce pas. Which you would know if you paid attention in French class instead of cheating off of the girl next to you.”

“She was the hottest sophomore in high school and offered to let me cheat off of her.”

“Is she the girl you lost your virginity to?” Riley asks.

“No,” Brody snaps. “You know I lost my virginity to a senior. Not a sophomore.”

“Excuse me for not keeping a list of your conquests ready for any possible discussion,” Riley says.

“I don’t mean to interrupt this walk down Brody’s sexual history lane, but can someone untie me and remove the hood from my head?”

Miller grunts before lifting the hood. I blink at how bright it suddenly seems outside.

“What the hell are you doing?” I ask him. “Since when do you go along with Brody’s pranks. Where’s the twin loyalty?”

Riley sighs. “I’ve told you this a million times before. Twin loyalty only applies to identical twins. Fraternal twins are merely brothers from the same mother. They shouldn’t be able to refer to themselves as twins.”

I snort. “I’ll be sure to tell Mom what you said the next time I see her.”

“Tattletale.”

I place my tied hands on the seat and try to pull myself upright. I slip and manage to fall further onto the floor.

“A little help here?”

Miller grunts, which means no in this instance.

“Can you at least untie me?”

“No!” Brody shouts. “No untying. It’s bad enough Miller removed your hood.”

A police siren wails and I swivel to look behind me. Yes! “Cops.”

“Don’t get too excited,” Riley says as he pulls the truck to the side of the road and stops. “It’s Peace.”

When I notice Peace approaching the truck, I shout, “I’ve been kidnapped!”

He rolls his eyes. “I told you to kidnap him within the town limits of Winter Falls.”

“You knew they were going to kidnap me?”

“Of course, I knew.”

“Traitor!”

He shrugs. “You say traitor, Brody says brotherly duty.”

“I’m right as usual,” Brody says.

“You’re lucky my hands are tied or I’d strangle you is what you are.” I snap my teeth at him. “I know where you sleep.”

“Maybe not threaten to strangle him in my presence,” Peace suggests. “It’s bad enough there’s an APB out for the truck due to a possible kidnapping.”

Brody chuckles. “An APB? Sounds like fun.”

“I hate paperwork,” Peace grumbles, and Miller grunts in agreement.

“Why are you kidnapping me anyway?” I ask.

“Duh. You’re getting married tomorrow. This is your bachelor party,” Riley says.

I snort. “This is my bachelor party? Sitting in the back of my truck with my hands tied?”

Riley chuckles. “Sitting? More like lying on the floor of the back of your truck.”

“Because my hands are tied behind my back,” I repeat.

“Miller, untie him,” Peace orders.

“Don’t untie him!” Brody yells.

Peace nods to Miller. “Do it.”

“But tying him up is part of the fun,” Brody pouts.

“Which you messed up when you did your whole fake kidnapping thing in another town,” Peace explains. “Now, I have to fill out paperwork explaining this was all a misunderstanding.”

Miller grasps my hands and begins untying them.

“It’s not a misunderstanding,” I claim.

Miller stops. “It isn’t?”

My shoulders deflate. “Fine. It’s a misunderstanding. Now, untie me.”

As soon as my hands are free, I climb onto the seat.

Peace knocks on the hood of the truck. “Have fun,” he says before leaving me with my nitwit brothers.

“Have fun?” I snort. “There’s no reason to have a bachelor party.”

“Yes, there is,” Riley insists.

Brody sighs. “Did you forget you’re getting married tomorrow, already?”

“I didn’t forget I’m getting married tomorrow.”

How could I? I’m marrying the woman I want but can never have. And now I’m going to be living in the same space

as her. Smelling her perfume. Seeing her first thing in the morning. I groan. It's going to be torture.

“But did you forget the marriage isn't real?”

Riley wags his eyebrows. “You wish it was.”

He's wrong. Once upon a time, I did wish Harmony and I could be a real couple. But not anymore. Not since she has custody of her cousin's baby. I can't be a parent. I couldn't save my twin from being bullied by our father. How the hell am I going to raise a child without fucking it up? I'm obviously not cut out to be a parent.

“Whatever,” I mumble. I'm not going to win this argument anyway. “What else do you have planned for this surprise bachelor party? Or is this drive around town it?”

Brody gasps. “Of course not. We're having a real party at *Electric Vibes*.”

Electric Vibes is the only bar in Winter Falls.

“As long as there isn't a stripper.”

“Stripper? Why would there be a stripper?” Brody's voice is high-pitched again meaning he's lying.

“There's a stripper,” I say, and Miller grunts in agreement.

“Won't Moon and Eden be upset about their boyfriends attending a stripper show?”

Brody wiggles his eyebrows. “Not if they're going to be there.”

Riley brings the truck to a stop behind *Naked Falls Brewing* and we walk to the bar.

“Act surprised,” Brody orders before opening the door and shoving me inside the bar.

“Surprise!”

It sounds as if the entire town of Winter Falls is here. I search the place but I can't find Harmony anywhere.

“She's not here,” Miller says.

“Tomorrow’s the wedding,” Brody adds. “You can’t spend the night before your wedding with your bride.”

Riley wiggles his eyebrows. “No matter how much you want to.”

“Here.” Cassandra, the owner of the bar, shoves a tray of shots at us.

I hold up my hands and back away. “No way. I’m not drinking tonight. I can’t trust these bozos to not paint my face with clown makeup when I’m passed out.”

Brody rolls his eyes. “That happened once.”

“Or short sheet my bed.”

“I haven’t short sheeted a bed in years,” he claims.

“Or replace all my underwear with underwear a size smaller.”

He grins. “Good one. I’ll add it to my repartee.”

“Or handcuff me to a blow-up doll.”

He scowls. “I’ll have you know I spent good money on that doll.”

“Or put my foot in a cast and claim I broke it.”

“Oh, come on,” he huffs. “That one was hilarious. And you got out of classes early for the rest of the school year.”

“I also hobbled around on crutches for two weeks until Miller got annoyed and told me the truth.”

Brody shakes his head at Miller. “I thought I could trust you.”

Miller grunts.

“One shot of tequila won’t kill you,” Cassandra cajoles.

Brody rubs his hands together. “Tequila?”

“I am not on Brody duty the night before my wedding,” I say as I hand out shots. My youngest brother is a menace when he drinks tequila.

“You have to admit a bit of burglary would be a good ending to a bachelor party,” Brody says.

“I am not hauling your naked ass out of a bathroom window again,” Riley says.

And I’m not listening to this argument again. “Brody Bunch!” I shout as I lift my tequila in the air.

I expect the liquor to burn as it travels down my esophagus but it doesn’t. In fact, this shot tastes a lot like water.

“Is this water?” I ask and Cassandra bursts into laughter.

“Gotcha!” she shouts as she saunters away. “I know better than to give Brody Bragg tequila.”

“Project Baby was too easy,” Sage says as she enters with the other gossip gals – Feather, Petal, Cayenne, and Clove – trailing behind her.

Feather crosses her arms over her chest. “Because Project Baby isn’t over.”

Clove nods. “This is merely the beginning.”

I inch backwards.

I have no desire to discuss my relationship status with the matchmakers of Winter Falls. They have magical powers. Whenever they decide two people will be a couple, they end up a couple.

I can’t end up as half of a couple with Harmony. Not since Harmony isn’t alone anymore. I can’t raise Robin. I’d fuck her up worse than her druggy dad.

Miller moves to block me to stop my retreat.

“If you let me hide behind you, I’ll stay and enjoy this bachelor’s party and pretend my marriage is real.”

He nods in agreement.

Great. Now I’m having a bachelor party for a fake marriage to a woman I wish I could have. I only hope I don’t end up getting married tomorrow with a tattoo on my neck. I

wouldn't put it past Brody to learn how to tattoo in order to pull off a prank. My brother is serious about his pranks.

Chapter 13

*Shut up and put the dress on. ~ Text from
Sage to Harmony*



The doorbell rings and I rush to answer it before Robin wakes from the sound. I should probably disconnect the stupid thing. I swing the door open and my jaw drops when I get a good look at Elder's appearance.

"Oh crap."

He grins before kissing my cheek. "Exactly the greeting I was hoping for from my bride on our wedding day."

"You're." I motion toward what he's wearing. "And I'm." I indicate my outfit with a sweep of my hand.

"Ah, shucks. You're tongue-tied because of how good I look."

"I'm not tongue-tied," I immediately deny despite my earlier inability to find the words to describe the situation. "I'm annoyed."

He rocks back on his heels. "You're annoyed because of how good I look? Don't worry, darling. You're gorgeous."

I snort. "I'm wearing a t-shirt and jeans while you're wearing khakis and a button-down shirt."

And, dammit, he looks good in the outfit. The green shirt accentuates his tanned skin. It's tucked in at his waist showing off his trim hips. I lift my gaze and notice his face is devoid of facial hair.

"You shaved."

I reach out to touch his smooth jaw but before I can touch him, I realize what I'm doing and drop my hand. He

captures it.

“You can touch me whenever you want.”

Awesome! Rebel Harmony cheers. *Let’s touch his butt first.*

I clear my throat and yank my hand away from his.

“No touching. This is fake, remember?”

He rubs a hand down his face. “I wish my brothers would have remembered how this marriage is fake before they organized a bachelor party.”

“Are you hungover? On our wedding day?” I screech.

I don’t care if this marriage is real or not. Being hungover is just plain disrespectful.

“Ah, you do care about me.” Elder smiles and that damn dimple on his right cheek comes out to tempt me to touch his face.

We can touch him. He said we could.

Shush, Rebel. If I need your input, I’ll ask for it. Spoiler alert – I won’t be asking for her input when it comes to Elder. He’s tempting enough without her opening her big mouth and adding her two cents.

“We should probably get going.”

Crap. How long have I been standing here staring at him? I clear my throat.

“Yep. Let’s go.”

I grab my purse and step onto the porch.

“Are you forgetting something?” Elder asks.

I glance down. I’m wearing shoes. I have my purse. What could I possibly be forgetting?

He chuckles. “The baby?”

My eyes widen. “Fuck. Robin. I’m a horrible guardian. Maybe we shouldn’t do this. Maybe I shouldn’t fight Robin’s dad on custody. I freaking forgot her.”

I whirl around to go back inside but Elder snags my hand before I can go anywhere.

“Stop,” he growls. “You aren’t a horrible guardian. Or a horrible person. Or whatever other bullshit you’re telling yourself now.”

“I forgot her,” I whisper.

He rubs his thumb against my pulse point and I shiver in response to the feel of his calloused thumb against my skin. How would his thumb feel rubbing other parts of my body? *Now we’re talking.*

I yank my hand away from Elder. When Rebel Harmony and I agree, I know it’s time to step back.

“I’ll get the baby,” I say and flee into the house.

I reach the nursery and collapse in the rocking chair while I wait for my heartbeat to slow down. Robin kicks her legs in her sleep before stretching her arms out. I get to my feet and stand over her crib to stare at her.

She’s worth doing anything for. Even marrying a man I wish I could marry for real but can’t because he deserves way better than me. I pick her up and cradle her in my arms.

“Ready?” Elder says from the doorway. He lifts up Robin’s diaper bag. “Anything else I should bring?”

I shake my head and follow him out to his truck.

“Is this stinky truck?”

“Not anymore.” He opens the door and I sniff. The interior smells of lemons.

“How did you manage to get the smell out of the upholstery?” I ask as he straps Robin into the car seat.

“Don’t ask me. The gossip gals performed magic.”

We drive in silence into town and park behind the courthouse. When we turn the corner and the crowd comes into view, I hesitate.

“I thought we agreed to have a small wedding with a few witnesses.”

Elder leads me up the stairs. “We did.”

“She’s here!” his mom, Daisy, shouts before rushing forward and snatching Robin out of my hands. “I’ve got the baby.”

“I thought we agreed I could hold the baby during the ceremony,” Clementine pouts.

I reach for Robin. “I’m holding the baby.”

Daisy sways away from me. “You’re needed elsewhere.”

“Needed elsewhere?”

“We’re waiting,” Sage hollers from the entrance to the courthouse.

Elder grasps my elbow. “Come on.”

Sage shakes her head at him. “Not you.”

“I don’t know how you’re going to have a wedding without the groom,” Elder says.

“The ceremony’s in an hour,” Feather answers.

I check my watch. It’s five to ten. “No, it’s in five minutes.” Did I get the time wrong?

“We don’t have time to argue about this. We’ve got things to do.” Cayenne grabs my hand and tugs me up the stairs.

“What’s going on?”

“We’re getting you ready for your wedding,” Clove answers.

When we reach Sage, she grips my hand and drags me inside the courthouse. “I hope the dress fits,” she mutters as she leads me toward the police station.

“Dress? What dress?”

She rolls her eyes. “Your wedding dress. What other dress would I be talking about on your wedding day?”

“But—”

“No sass, young lady,” Petal orders as I’m thrust into the interrogation room in the police station.

Or, at least, this used to be the interrogation room. Now, it resembles a boudoir. There are several dresses hanging on the back of the door while a large mirror with make-up spread all around it covers the table.

“Surprise!” Moon, Eden, Soleil, and Ashlyn shout in unison. My friends bustle into the room as the gossip gals retreat.

“Thank goodness. I thought the gossip gals were going to dress me.”

“I’ll have you know I picked out the dress!” Sage shouts.

I wait until the door closes before I speak again.

“What’s going on?”

Ashlyn rolls her eyes. “Duh. As your bridesmaids, we’re getting you ready for your wedding.”

“You’re not my bridesmaids.”

She sniffs and lifts her chin in the air. “We would be if you weren’t having a shotgun wedding.”

“I don’t think a fake marriage to keep custody of your niece is considered a shotgun wedding.”

Her nose wrinkles. “It’s not? I made Rowan get his shotgun out this morning.”

“Your husband doesn’t own a shotgun.”

She shrugs. “But he could.”

Soleil shoves me into the chair. “We don’t have time for the Ashlyn show today. We have less than an hour to do your hair, makeup, and get you dressed.”

“I—”

“Nope. I don’t want to hear it. We’re doing this.”

I zip my lips and allow them to do their thing. By the time the hour is over, I don’t recognize myself in the mirror.

“Holy crap. I’m pretty.”

“Duh. You’re gorgeous. You always are. It’s rather annoying,” Eden says.

“I put up with your gorgeous-ness because you usually smell like dog shit,” Moon adds.

“I do not smell like dog shit all the time.”

Soleil giggles. “And I don’t smell of clay all the time.”

“Whatever,” I mumble. I inhale a deep breath. “I’m doing this. I’m really doing this. I’m marrying a man I don’t love.”

Ashlyn rolls her eyes. “Sure, you don’t love him.”

“I don’t,” I insist.

“But you want to bump uglies with him.” She juts her hips out. “Yes, Elder. You hit the spot, Elder.”

There’s a knock on the door before Damon Bragg peeks inside. “Are you ready?”

“What are you doing here?” Damon doesn’t live in town. He’s the sole Bragg brother who didn’t move to Winter Falls when the brothers discovered Peace is their half-brother.

He offers me his elbow. “Escorting you down the aisle.”

I close my eyes before the tears can escape. Before life went to hell in a handbasket, when I was a little girl, I had the best daddy in the world. A daddy who would be proud to walk me down the aisle to the man I love. But he’s gone and there’s no way I can love a man. I’m not worthy of love.

“Please, don’t cry,” Damon murmurs as he sweeps me into his arms. “Elder will kill me if his bride arrives at the ceremony with puffy, swollen eyes and smudged mascara.”

I allow myself to enjoy the comfort of his arms for a few moments before I step away. I open my eyes to discover my friends have deserted me.

“We wouldn’t want Elder to kill you.” I indicate my dress with a wave of my hand. “Bloodstains are hell to get out of white.”

“I think I’m going to enjoy this, Harmony soon-to-be Bragg.”

“This is fake. I’m not changing my name for a fake marriage.”

He doesn’t respond and escorts me out of the room through the police station to the foyer of the courthouse which has been transformed into a wedding chapel in the past hour. There are rows of chairs with an aisle down the middle. At the end of the aisle stands Elder who is now wearing a dark suit.

Damn. He can wear a suit. Everyone stands as Damon and I enter the area and Elder turns around. When he sees me, his jaw drops open.

Damon leans close to whisper to me. “I think your groom approves of your outfit.”

I elbow him. “Stop making it sound as if this wedding is real.”

“Darling.” He shakes his head.

“Shall we get this over with?”

“Wait a sec.”

“What...” I trail off when the first strains of *Perfect* from Ed Sheeran begin.

Damon’s grasp on my hand tightens. “Don’t run. He’ll just chase you.”

“I’m not running,” I claim despite inching backwards.

Elder steps toward me and I swear at how unfair this all is. How dare my friends buy me the perfect dress and play the perfect song for me to walk down the aisle to the perfect man?

The perfect man I can never have. Because he’d bolt as fast as he could if he knew the truth about me. And I can’t handle another person leaving me.

“This is fake,” I say as I begin down the aisle.

Damon chuckles. “This is fun.”

We reach Elder and Damon kisses my cheek before handing me to his brother.

“You got a good one, brother. Don’t screw this up.”

“This is fake,” I mutter.

“I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear what you said,” the chief of police who’s officiating the wedding says.

Elder kisses my cheek before whispering into my ear. “Remember why we’re doing this.”

I inhale a deep breath and nod. This is for Robin. I’ll do anything for my baby girl. And make no mistake about it, Robin is mine.

Chapter 14

Why did the bride change her last name? Because it had a nice ring to it. ~ Text from Brody to Elder



“I now pronounce you husband and wife,” Lyric, the chief of police, announces after finishing the basic necessities of the wedding ceremony. “You may now kiss each other.”

Kiss him! Kiss him! Rebel Harmony shouts.

“Kiss! Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!” The crowd chants.

“I hate to disappoint Winter Falls,” Elder smirks as he bends toward me.

My gaze snags on his lips. They appear firm. Are they hard? Or soft? Does he taste of beer and musk and man?

His lips meet mine in the softest of kisses. My eyes close and I lean into him. He does taste of beer but also something spicy with a hint of musk. Put it all together and it’s yummy. I grasp the lapels of his jacket and push up on my toes to get closer.

“Yahoo!”

I jerk away from Elder when someone cheers. Damn it! I shouldn’t have kissed him. Now I know exactly how delicious he tastes. I was better off not knowing. Because I could become addicted to his taste far too easily.

He grasps my hands. “No running.”

“Running. I wasn’t...” I trail off when I notice I’ve already retreated several paces. Oops.

Elder chuckles and throws an arm over my shoulders. “What do you say we walk down the aisle as husband and

wife?”

I glare at him. “You’re having too much fun with this.”

“Did you hear about the two cell phones who got married?” He smirks. “The reception was terrific.”

“This is what my life is now? Listening to a grown man tell jokes meant for children?”

“Lucky you.” He grasps my hand. “Race you to the end of the aisle.” I don’t get a chance to respond before he bolts.

“How is this racing when we’re holding hands?” I ask as he tugs me down the aisle with him.

“I’m still winning!”

He opens the doors to the courthouse and rushes down the stairs while the crowd throws olive leaves at us. I watch the stairs as I walk down them to make sure I don’t trip but there are no leaves on the ground. The stairs are littered with pacifiers instead.

“Why are they throwing pacifiers at us?”

“Trust me. All wives wish they had a pacifier for their husband,” Ashlyn’s mother answers. I don’t believe her since she’s cuddled up to her husband at the moment.

“Where are you going?” I ask Elder when he turns left at the bottom of the stairs. “Stinky truck is parked out back.”

“My truck isn’t stinky anymore.”

I place a hand over my heart. “She’ll always be stinky to me.”

“And I’m supposed to be the goofball.” He grins. “We’re going to our wedding reception.”

I come to an abrupt halt. “Elder Bragg, I can’t... Hold on. Do you have a middle name?”

“Jason.”

“Elder *Jason* Bragg. Did you know the town was throwing us a wedding and reception? Why didn’t you tell me? I showed up in jeans and a t-shirt!”

He uses his hold on my hand to swing me around until we're facing each other.

“What’s your middle name?”

I make a face. “Elaine.”

“Harmony Elaine Kingsley Bragg.”

I purse my lips. “I didn’t agree to change my name.”

“You didn’t change it. You made it better.”

“Don’t make me mad at you for another thing. I’m still mad at you about the wedding and reception.”

“You can’t be mad at me for the wedding and reception because I didn’t know about either one until the gossip gals dragged you away from me. My brothers had to tackle me to stop me from going after you.”

My stomach warms. Was he protecting me? “Your brothers had to tackle you?”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Naturally. You’re my bride. And I don’t trust the gossip gals. I didn’t want them upsetting you.”

“Okay. Fine. I’m no longer mad at you about the wedding and reception. But I’m still mad at you about...” I sputter.

Oh crap. What was the second thing I was mad about again? It’s hard to remember when I’m surrounded by Elder’s warmth and his brown eyes are sparkling down at me. Add in that damn dimple and my mind is mush.

He kisses my forehead. “I get it. My magnetism is messing with your circuits.”

I shove him away. “You’re a goofball.”

He puffs out his chest. “I’m an adorable goofball.”

“Whatever,” I mutter. “Let’s do this reception thing.”

By the time we reach *Electric Vibes*, the place is packed. I glance around but I can’t find Robin anywhere.

“Where is she?” I stand on my tiptoes to look over the crowd but I don’t see my baby anywhere. “Where is she?”

My heart races and I clutch my chest. Where’s Robin? I can’t lose her. I can’t lose my baby girl. I only just got her.

Elder wraps an arm around my waist from behind, props his chin on my shoulder, and points to a far corner where his mom and Clementine are fighting over Robin.

“Do they realize she’s not a toy?”

“They’re excited to have a granddaughter.”

“This marriage is fake. Your mom didn’t gain a granddaughter and your stepmom or whatever you call the mother of your half-brother didn’t gain a granddaughter either.”

He slaps a hand over my mouth. “Please don’t tell them they aren’t Robin’s grandmother unless you want World War Three breaking out.”

I nip at his hand. “Ouch,” he yips and yanks his hand away. “You’re mean.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m mean because I nipped your hand? I never thought the six-foot-three Elder Jason Bragg would be a sissy.”

“I’m not a sissy.”

“Yes, he is,” Brody claims as he joins us with the rest of the Bragg brothers. “He cried louder than a baby when he broke his arm after he fell off his bike.”

“One, I didn’t fall. You pushed me. Two, it was a compound fracture and I had to get surgery.” He waggles his eyebrows at me. “Do you want to see my scar?”

Riley shoves him. “Please excuse the Neanderthal. He skipped charm school.”

Elder shoves him back. “At least I passed algebra without cheating.”

“It’s not cheating if the girl gets kissing lessons in exchange for helping me pass class.”

“Riley Bragg!” Moon scolds. “You did not give kissing lessons in high school.”

“Okay. I did not give kissing lessons in high school.” He winks.

“Would the bride and groom please come to the stage?” Sage asks.

“Why? What’s going on now?” I glance around but everyone avoids my gaze.

Elder grasps my hand and leads me toward the stage.

“If they make us cut a cake, I’m shoving you face first in it.”

“Does anyone know where I can get a wedding cake last minute?” Brody asks and Elder flips him off behind his back.

The entire gossip gal group is standing on the stage.

“This can’t be good,” I mutter to Elder. I clutch his hand for support. One gossip gal is trouble enough. All of them together? Yikes.

“Do you want to make a break for it?” Elder asks.

I eye the hallway to the back exit. Miller moves to block the entrance.

“You tackle your brother and I’ll make my escape.”

He snorts. “If I tackle my brother, he’ll pound me into the ground while you get away.”

I grin up at him. “Exactly.”

He pinches my chin. “You’re devious. I love it.”

“Kind recognizes kind.”

He clutches his chest. “Are you saying I’m devious?”

I shrug. “If the shoe fits, don’t throw it away.”

“Harmony Kingsley and Elder Bragg. Welcome to your wedding reception,” Sage says and everyone cheers. “Let’s show them our t-shirts girls. Three. Two. One.”

The five women whip open their cardigans to reveal bright pink t-shirts with the words *I Do Gossip Gal Crew* written in gold on them. They're adorable. I clap with everyone else.

"Now, it's time for wedding karaoke," Sage says.

I really hoped the t-shirts was the reason they summoned us to the stage. I should be so lucky. "There's no such a thing as wedding karaoke."

"There is now."

Elder doesn't have any qualms about singing in front of the whole town while sober. He climbs onto the stage while dragging me behind him.

"What song shall we sing?" Music starts up. "I guess we don't get a choice."

And he doesn't seem to care. "What song is this?"

He grins. "Don't Go Breaking My Heart."

"Am I Elton John or Kiki Dee?"

"You're wearing a dress."

"So, I'm Elton. Awesome."

"Neither one of you can sing. They should let someone who can carry a tune sing," Love Hill shouts and I groan.

Love Hill is the mean girl of Winter Falls. If she's not stealing someone's boyfriend, she's making nasty comments.

"And, afterwards, I can show Elder a good time since everyone knows Harmony is out of practice."

Told you she's a mean girl.

"Who invited the mean girl to the party?"

I step forward – intent on giving Love Hill a piece of my mind – but Elder grabs hold of me to stop me. He nods toward his brother. "Damon will handle this."

Damon marches toward Love Hill. She licks her lips as he approaches her. I almost feel sorry for him. He has no idea

the type of predator Love Hill is. He places a hand on her lower back and herds her out of the bar.

“Your brother is in trouble. She’s a maneater.”

“Maneater! Let’s sing that song instead.”

“You’re such a goofball.”

“I thought we agreed. I’m an adorable goofball.”

I giggle. The sound surprises me. I didn’t expect to laugh at my fake wedding reception. I glance over at Elder. And I certainly didn’t expect to find my fake husband sexy in his suit. He throws off the jacket and rolls up his sleeves before loosening his tie.

Oh boy. If I thought he was sexy in his suit before, I was wrong. This look is even sexier.

I tug at the neckline of my dress. It’s entirely too hot in here all of a sudden and I know exactly why. I’m looking at the reason.

Chapter 15

I saw a cop pull over a moving van. He must be trying to bust a move. ~ Text from Elder to Brody



Elder

“You need to give me a key,” I tell Harmony when she opens her door for me the next morning.

“A key?” She raises her eyebrows. “Why do you need a key?”

I roll my eyes. “Duh. So, I don’t have to use the doorbell and chance waking Robin every time I come home.”

“H-h-home?” She stutters.

I lift the box I’m caring. “I’m moving in.”

Her eyes widen. “Moving in?”

I plow past her before she has a chance to stop me. “Where do you want me to put my stuff?”

“Your stuff?”

I set the box down on the coffee table in the living room. “Are you going to repeat everything I say this morning?”

She props her hands on her hips. “If you keep making nonsensical remarks, then yes.”

My brow wrinkles. “Nonsensical remarks?”

“Nonsensical means—”

I grin. This is too much fun. “I know what nonsensical means.”

“In which case, you can stop with the nonsense.”

I bat my eyelashes. “What nonsense?”

She throws her arms in the air. “This nonsense of you living here with me. We never agreed to this.”

I feign confusion. “But we’re married.”

“On paper.”

I clasp my chest. “Married one day, and my wife already doesn’t love me.”

“I never loved you to begin with,” she grumbles.

“You don’t love me? We need to work on our feelings.”

“We won’t work on anything because you’re going to turn your perfect butt around and go back home.”

I smirk. “You think my butt is perfect.”

She huffs. “It was a slip of the tongue.”

“Are you sure?” I twirl around and wiggle my ass at her. “You don’t think this is perfect?”

“I am not evaluating your butt!”

“Did you know the gluteus maximus is one of the largest muscles in the body?” I chuckle. “It’s a huge ass muscle.”

“This is why you can’t move in here. Your corny jokes will drive me to the brink of madness.”

“Only to the brink? I need to try harder.”

“Elder,” she growls. “This isn’t funny anymore.”

I debate dialing up the goofball but now isn’t the time. Harmony has a lot on her plate. I’m supposed to be helping her not making things worse, although a bit of comic relief is always welcome in my opinion.

I clutch her hands. “I’m not being funny. I need to move in here to show the judge we’re married.”

She bites her lip and glances away. “But we never discussed this.”

She's scared. Harmony is literally scared. Why? During all the months I chased her, I thought she was playing hard to get. It appears I was wrong. There's something else going on with her. I can't wait to discover what.

The baby monitor squeaks with the sound of Robin gurgling in her sleep and I remember. Any chance of Harmony and I being together died when the social worker placed Robin in Harmony's arms. I can't be with a woman who has a baby. I can't raise a child.

I clear my throat. "We didn't discuss me living here because I thought it was obvious."

"Obvious?"

"Married couples live together."

She frowns.

"We can live in my place if you prefer." My nose wrinkles. "Except my idiot brother, Brody, is couch surfing at my place."

"If Brody's an idiot, you are, too, since the two of you are practically twins."

"Harmony. Harmony. Harmony." I shake my head. "Do I need to draw you a family tree? Brody and I are not twins. Miller is my twin, and Brody and Riley are twins."

"Your poor mother."

"Our mother couldn't ask for four better sons."

"Aren't there five Bragg brothers?"

I scrunch up my nose. "Damon doesn't count. He's a fussy pants."

"A fussy pants?"

"Always trying to ruin our fun. Aka fussy pants."

"Let me guess. Your fun would have caused the house to burn down."

I purse my lips. "There's no evidence the fire couldn't have been contained. Eventually."

She giggles. “I feel sorry for Damon.”

“There’s no need to feel sorry for Damon. He feels sorry enough for himself.”

“Did Damon fly back to San Diego already?”

I tweak her nose. “Trying to change the topic of conversation. Clever girl.”

She feigns confusion. “What’s the topic of conversation? Between your jokes and lectures about your family tree, I’ve forgotten.”

She hasn’t forgotten, but I’ll indulge her anyway. “Where to put my stuff since I’m moving in.”

She wags a finger at me. “No. No. No. We weren’t discussing where to put your stuff. We were discussing you *not* moving in here.”

“I guess you remember the topic of discussion after all.”

She stomps her foot. “You are not moving in here. Not today. Not tomorrow. Not ever.”

“Don’t you want the judge to believe we’re truly married?”

She rolls her eyes. “The judge isn’t going to visit Winter Falls.”

“I don’t think we should chance it.”

A cough comes over the baby monitor before the sound of Robin crying starts. I squeeze Harmony’s hand. “Go deal with the baby. I can move my stuff in by myself.”

She opens her mouth to protest but Robin cries again. “How much stuff are we talking about here?”

I shrug. “A few boxes of clothes.”

And some pictures of us together on our wedding day. I’m not telling her about those, though. Miss out on the chance to watch her have an epic fit when she notices them? No way.

She wavers and I go in for the kill. “I’ll put my stuff in your bedroom then.”

Her eyes widen. “No, you will not.”

“I’m wounded. You don’t want to stay in the same bedroom as your husband? Do you not love me anymore? Should we start meeting with a marriage counselor?”

“This is fake, remember?”

I do. I also think it’s fun to wind Harmony up and watch what happens.

I flutter my eyelashes. “No, judge. This marriage is not fake. We’re truly married.”

Her nostrils flare, and I bite my tongue before I smile. She’s adorable when she’s mad. What am I saying? She’s always adorable. But when her nose scrunches up and her nostrils flare? She’s double adorable.

“Aren’t you worried I’ll kill you in my sleep?”

“I’m a light sleeper. Whenever you come close to my side of the bed I’ll know.”

“Your side of the bed?” she shrieks. “Do you think we’re going to sleep in the same bed?”

“Don’t married couples sleep in the same bed?” I waggle my eyebrows. “It facilitates other marital activities.”

“Elder Jason Bragg! You stop this right this minute. We’re not sleeping in the same bed and we’re certainly not having sex!”

I sigh. “One day married and I’m already cut off. Where’s the honeymoon phase?”

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Are you saying your heart is beating super fast from being in my presence?”

Her face turns red and a muscle in her jaw ticks. Uh oh. Harmony’s mad. I poked the beast. I wonder how the beast is going to respond. I stuff my hands in my pockets before I rub them together in anticipation.

“I’m going to kill you. And it won’t be an easy death either. No poison for you.”

“Poison’s an easy death? Should I be taking notes?”

Harmony ignores me to continue her tirade, “I will make your death as painful as possible. I understand waxing a man’s balls is extremely painful.”

I cover my junk with my hands. I’ve wanted Harmony’s touch on me for months, but she’s not coming near me with hot wax.

“And it can’t be comfortable to bleach an asshole.”

I’m not proud of the noise I make at the idea of her coming near my asshole with bleach. Not happening.

“I guess I’ll sleep on the couch.”

Her grin is triumphant. “You’ll sleep on the couch with the dogs.”

“Don’t the dogs sleep in their doggy beds?”

She shrugs. “I can’t be responsible for what Black Ops, Pup Tart, and Little Bow Wow do when I’m asleep.”

I glance at the sofa. It’s barely big enough to contain my six-foot-three-inch frame. How the hell am I going to fit on there with three dogs?

“The couch or the door? Your choice.”

I scowl. She might as well be asking which fingernail she should remove first because this is torture and she knows it.

“I’ll sleep on the couch,” I grumble.

Her smile is triumphant. “Excellent.” She starts toward the nursery but pauses to add, “And I don’t think you need boxes and boxes of clothes. You’ll be moving out once the judge makes his ruling next month anyway.”

With her final shot fired, she continues to the nursery with a bounce in her step.

I’ve been played. Harmony knew what I was up to the entire time and she played me. Harmony is a master manipulator and I never knew it. Too bad knowing about her deviant ways only serves to make her more attractive to me. And it’s double too bad I can never have Harmony. I missed my chance.

Chapter 16

Is it still called a tug of war if a baby is used instead of a rope? ~ Text from Brody to Elder



“I don’t understand why I have to do this,” I whine as we arrive at Clementine’s house.

“It’s family dinner night. We have to join or Clementine and Mom will be disappointed.”

“I still don’t understand how your mom and Clementine are friends.” Considering Clementine had sex with Damon Senior when Daisy and him were engaged.

I glance over at Elder and a ball of jealousy burns in my stomach. No way could I be friends with a woman who slept with him while we were engaged. I’d be more likely to scratch her eyes out.

Knock it off. There will be no jealousy when it comes to Elder. He’s not mine to be jealous of. He’s free to be with whoever he wants to be. Except. We’re married.

I tug on his hand. “You can’t sleep with other women.”

His brow wrinkles. “Sleep with other women? I have my hands full sleeping with three dogs.”

“Are you going to complain about Pup Tart humping your leg again?”

“She’s a girl. She shouldn’t be humping my leg.”

“What are you saying? Are girls not allowed to hump?”

“Of course, girls are allowed to hump. What fun would there be in life if girls weren’t humping?”

“Then, why—”

“Excellent!” Brody shouts as he stops on the sidewalk in front of Clementine’s house next to us.

“What’s excellent?” Riley asks as he and Moon arrive.

Brody waggles his eyebrows. “We’re discussing humping.”

“Who’s humping?” Eden asks as she and Miller join us. Miller scowls down at her. “What? I’m allowed to ask who’s humping.”

He growls in response and she pats his stomach to calm him. “Grumpy pants doesn’t want me thinking about other men humping.”

“We’re discussing girl on girl action,” Brody says.

“Girl on girl action?” Moon’s eyes widen. “Which girls are we referring to?”

I roll my eyes. “There is no girl on girl action. It’s girl on boy action. To be specific, Pup Tart humping Elder.”

“Dude.” Brody shakes his head. “I know you’re hard up but a dog? Gross.”

Elder grins. “It’s not my fault females of all species find me irresistible.”

Moon raises her hand. “I don’t find you irresistible.”

Riley wraps an arm around her shoulders and pulls her near. “And you better not ever find him irresistible.”

“Are the Bragg brothers and their entourage going to stand on the sidewalk all evening or are you coming inside?” Peace shouts from the front porch.

“It depends,” Brody shouts back. “What did your dad make for dinner?”

Moon growls. “You better not be implying Eagle’s food is better than mine.”

Brody rubs his hands together. “We have no choice. We’ll have to have another eating contest.”

Riley sighs. “You played straight into my twin’s hands, moonbeam.”

Moon doesn’t have a chance to reply before Daisy rushes out of the house and makes a beeline for me and Robin.

“How’s my baby girl?” she coos as she steals Robin from my arms before making her way back inside.

“Is nice to see you, too,” Riley hollers after her.

“Give me a granddaughter and you’ll be my favorite son,” Daisy yells back.

“What do you say?” Riley waggles his eyebrows at Moon. “You wanna make a baby?”

Moon bites her lower lip as she pretends to consider his question. “I don’t know. I think we might need more practice first.”

“I’m all for practicing.”

Miller grunts at Eden. She wags her finger at him in return. “Don’t you dare grunt at me. I’m not ready for children yet.” He frowns. “Nope.” She holds up a hand. “I will not discuss this in front of your brothers.”

She marches toward the house and he chases after her.

“Can she read his mind?” I ask Elder.

“It’s not difficult. Miller has always wanted kids and a wife.” His nose scrunches together as if the idea is disgusting.

“You don’t want kids and a wife?”

Brody throws his arm around Elder’s shoulders. “He’s already got a wife and a kid.”

“Our relationship is fake, remember?”

Has Elder’s entire family forgotten this whole marriage is an arranged thing? Elder and I are not in love. We’re not staying together. And we’re definitely not making more children together.

But we could practice making children, Rebel Harmony suggests. You know you want to jump Elder's bones.

Do not! I glance up at him from beneath my lashes. I do not want to know how it feels to have his naked body wrapped around me as he plunges inside me. My body warms and wetness gathers in my panties.

“Come on. Fake wife of mine.” Elder takes my hand. “Let's go have a real family dinner.”

Real family dinner? I haven't had one of those in... My heart races and my legs wobble. I squeeze Elder's hand to steady myself.

He winks at me. “You got this.”

What does he know? He doesn't have the first clue how difficult this is for me. Probably because I've never told anyone about my family and what happened to them. What *I* did to them.

I take deep breaths to steady myself as he leads me into the house behind the rest of his brothers. Except Damon. He's apparently gone back home to San Diego. He didn't stay long in town.

“She's my granddaughter,” Daisy is arguing as we enter. “You can't have her.”

“I adopted Elder. Therefore, she's my granddaughter, too,” Clementine claims.

“Do I need to save Robin?” I ask Elder.

“Save her from two women who love her and want to claim her as their granddaughter? She's fine.”

Claim Robin as their granddaughter? Robin doesn't have any parents, let alone grandparents. All she has is me. All she will ever have is me. I can't let her get used to having other people around. No one will stick around when they find out what I've done.

I start toward Daisy to steal Robin back, but the look of adoration on Daisy's face has me stopping in my tracks. I guess it won't do Robin any harm to spend some time with Elder's mom.

Elder holds a chair for me. “For my lovely wife.”

Peace’s girlfriend, Olivia, giggles. “And you call me a troublemaker.”

“Because you are,” Peace says.

“What happens when your dinner table catches the coronavirus?” Elder asks and his brothers groan. “It turns into a coughy table.” He elbows me. “Get it? Coughy? As in coffee?”

“Does anyone have a button to switch him off?” I ask the table.

Riley winks. “I think you’re the one who’s supposed to know where his buttons are.”

“Those buttons are for turning him on. She’s searching for one to turn him off,” Moon explains.

I hold up my hands. “I don’t want to know where any of Elder’s buttons are.”

Clementine’s husband, Eagle, arrives with a platter of hamburgers. “Who’s hungry?”

Miller grunts and reaches for the platter. Eden slaps his hand away. “You can wait for him to set it down at least.”

“I’m hungry,” he grumbles.

“You had a bowl of cereal before we left the house.”

“What’s your point?”

She sighs. “He’s going to eat me out of house and home.”

“I guess it’s a good thing you’re not living together,” I say and Miller scowls at me.

Elder wraps an arm around my shoulders. “I don’t know. Living together isn’t so bad.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Really? I guess you won’t mind if Billy French kisses you again in the morning.”

“Whoa! Who’s Billy? And why is Elder French kissing him?” Riley leans forward. “I want to hear everything.”

Elder sighs. “There’s nothing to tell.”

“Sure sounded like there was lots to tell when you screamed like a little girl this morning about Billy sticking his tongue in your mouth.”

“Billy’s tongue was not invited?” Olivia asks.

Peace frowns at her. “Don’t you start, troublemaker.”

“Billy is a goat and I certainly did not invite him to stick his tongue in my mouth,” Elder growls.

I roll my eyes. “I told you if you don’t want Billy’s tongue down your throat, keep your mouth closed.”

“Because keeping my mouth closed is easier than locking the backdoor to keep the goat out.”

“Wait! Billy’s a goat?” Eden asks.

“A horny goat,” Elder mutters.

I open my mouth to deny Billy’s horniness but the television blares and cuts me off. The sound wakes Robin up and she immediately starts wailing. I jump from my chair to go to her.

“Classic!” Brody claps.

Elder glares at him. “Did you set the television to switch on loudly during dinner?”

“I did.”

“And you didn’t consider how the noise would wake up the baby? The baby who Harmony has a difficult enough time getting to sleep?”

“Um...”

“If you pull another stunt and end up waking Robin again, I will kick your ass so hard you’ll spend the rest of your life terrified of pulling another prank.”

Elder stands and walks over to where I’m bouncing a screaming Robin in my arms. “Let’s go. You’ll never get Robin back to sleep with the racket of my family.”

Clementine jumps to her feet. “I’ll wrap you up some food.”

“We don’t have to go,” I say despite the relief the idea brings me. “We can stay.”

He rubs a finger down Robin’s face. “Baby girl is not happy. Let’s get her home.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

“No reason to thank me. Merely doing my job.”

Does he realize what he’s doing? He’s not doing his job of being a fake husband and father. He’s acting the same as a real father. A father Robin would be lucky to have.

Uh-oh. I’m getting attached. I can’t get attached. Everyone I’ve ever gotten attached to in the past dies. I can’t survive another person dying.

Chapter 17

The best way to stop a woman in the middle of a hissy fit is to kiss her. Trust me. I'm an expert. ~ Text from Miller to Elder



The truck does its magic and Robin falls asleep on the short drive to my house.

“I got her,” Elder says before I can climb out of the vehicle.

“I can get her,” I argue. I can’t start to rely on him. Soon enough he’ll leave and I’ll be on my own.

He squeezes my shoulder. “You’re exhausted. Go put your feet up. Maybe have a glass of wine. I’ll put Robin to bed.”

There he goes again – attaching himself to me. I bet he doesn’t even realize what he’s doing.

“Thanks,” I mutter and make a quick escape before I blurt out something stupid such as how good a dad he is.

A glass of wine does sound like heaven. I make my way to the kitchen but freeze when I notice there’s a message on the answering machine. My lungs seize and I have to remind myself to breathe. Breathing’s important.

I’m still standing there – not daring to press the listen button – when Elder enters the room.

“What’s wrong? Is that an answering machine? Who still has an answering machine?”

“Me. Obviously.”

I don’t tell him how I will always have an answering machine. Missing an important phone call is a fear I battle on a daily basis.

“Why are you staring at it?”

I point to the blinking red light. “There’s a message.”

“What do you know? There is a message. Maybe you should listen to it.”

He can’t know the terror his words cause. Listen to it? What if it’s a policeman phoning to notify me of another death? Another family member who’s left me.

“Did you hear the joke about—”

I can’t listen to a joke about an answering machine. I just can’t. I press play before he can finish.

“This is a message for Harmony Kingsley from Ms. Cross. I will be stopping by tomorrow for a home visit to check on how things are going with Robin. This is a routine visit, but any findings I make will be made available to the court as your custody of Robin Kingsley is contested.”

“Oh no.” My knees tremble and I stumble. Elder catches me before I can fall.

“Easy, Harmony.”

He picks me up and carries me to the living room where he sits down on the couch and arranges me on his lap.

“This is a disaster,” I wail.

At the sound of my distress, the dogs come running from the nursery. Black Ops sits on top of my feet while Little Bow Wow and Pup Tart jump on the sofa. They attempt to wiggle their way between me and Elder but he’s not having it. He nudges them away.

“This is not a disaster,” he claims.

I glare at him. “How can you say this isn’t a disaster? This situation has disaster written all over it! She’s going to come here and say I’m a bad mother and then she’s going to take Robin from me.”

“Whoa! Slow down.”

“Slow down? I’ll slow down when I’m good and ready to slow down.”

“You’re going to give yourself a heart attack.”

I snap my teeth at him. “What do you care if I have a heart attack?”

He rears back. “Naturally, I care. Have I given you the impression I don’t care?”

“Make this all about you, why don’t you? Now I have to deal with your precious ego? I don’t have time for this.”

“Maybe you should try taking a deep breath.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Are you telling me to calm down?”

“I wouldn’t dare. But a nice, deep breath wouldn’t hurt.”

“You are telling me to calm down! What kind of man thinks it’s okay to tell a woman to calm down?”

He squeezes my hips. “Let’s discuss this matter like adults.”

“Let’s? Let’s! Why are you part of this discussion? This is my problem to deal with. That baby girl lying asleep in the nursery is mine and no one is taking her from me. Do you hear me? No one!”

“You give me no choice,” he says before he slams his mouth on mine.

“I—” I open my mouth to protest and Elder shoves his tongue inside.

The second his spicy musk taste hits me I forget all about everything except his taste, his smell, his warmth surrounding me. He deepens the kiss and I cling to his shoulders as I hold on for the ride. And it’s definitely a ride. He’s devouring my mouth like it’s the most delicious thing he’s ever tasted.

I want to taste his mouth. I use my tongue to push his aside, but Elder doesn’t let me. He growls and his fingers dig into my hips before he drags me closer. My breasts hit his chest and I rub up against him. It feels good so I do it again.

Something wet and slimy touches my hand and I yank away from Elder. “What the hell?”

“What? What’s wrong?”

I lift my hand. “Pup Tart licked my hand.”

“Poor Pup Tart. She wants a bit of loving herself. Maybe we should get her a boy dog to be her boyfriend.”

My brow wrinkles. We? As in me and Elder? Um, no. Me and Elder aren’t a couple. Except I’m sitting on his lap and his hard length is pressing against my core.

I scoot away from him. “This is supposed to be fake.”

“Darling, there was nothing fake about that kiss.”

Damn him. He has to point out the truth? He can’t join me over here in the land of denial? There aren’t any scary booby traps on this side.

“We agreed this marriage is a sham.”

“I wouldn’t use the word sham.”

“We have rules and everything,” I remind him. “No sex. No sleeping together.”

I try to stand but Elder tightens his hold on my hips. “Hold on. Let’s discuss this.”

“Discuss what? We have rules for a reason.”

“What reason?”

I cross my arms over my chest. “Because.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Because why?”

Does he think I’m going to confess all my deep dark secrets to him? Not hardly.

“Because I said so.”

He chuckles. “Okay. Let’s skip this discussion.” I blow out a breath in relief. “For now.” So much for a breath of relief. “And return to the problem of the hour.”

“The problem of the hour?”

“The visit from Ms. Cross.”

Crap. How could I forget about the visit from the social worker? One kiss from Elder and my mind goes blank. It's as if his tongue has the special power to make me forget everything but him.

His tongue has powers all right, Rebel Harmony says. We should investigate those powers further. Such as when he—

Nope! Enough from you!

“What are we going to do? Ms. Cross is never going to believe we're a real couple.”

He drags my hips closer until his hard length presses against me. My core weeps in response.

“We're not?”

“We are definitely not,” I try to make my words sound strict but my voice comes out all breathy. Probably because I'm imagining how his hardness feels when he... *Knock it off, Harmony.* I will not be exploring his hard length with my hands or my mouth.

“All we have to do is fool Ms. Cross while she visits,” Elder says and I'm glad for the interruption from my naughty thoughts.

“Look around this place.” I point to the bedding piled up on the chair. “It's obvious you aren't sleeping in bed with me.”

“We'll put the bedding in the closet for her visit. No problem.”

“What about your clothes?” I motion to his clothes on the floor.

“We'll move those into your bedroom, too. You're making too big a deal of this.”

“Too big a deal of this?” I scowl. “You have no idea how it feels to be a child and have social services in charge of where you'll sleep. Whether you get to stay at the pretty house with the nice people. Or whether you have to move.”

“It's true. I don't. But it sounds as if you do. Why don't you tell me about it?”

Crap on a cracked cracker. I didn't mean to tell him anything.

"No." I push away from him and this time he lets me go. "I need to check on the baby."

"I don't think we need to worry about Ms. Cross," he says before I can flee.

"Why not?"

"She dumped Robin with you and rushed off before you had the chance to respond. She seems overworked."

"Maybe." I give in.

"Go on." He motions toward the hallway. "You check on Robin. She'll probably want her bottle soon. And I'll move my clothes into your bedroom. I'll move the bedding in the morning after I wake up."

He sounds reasonable. It's reassuring. But he shouldn't be reassuring me. Reassuring me is another way to tether my heart to his. I won't let it. My heart is not going to tether itself to anyone.

Robin cries and I rush down the hallway. Except to this baby. She has my whole heart and I don't want it back.

Chapter 18

Sure. It's the dog's fault. ~ Text from Miller to Elder



My alarm blares and I groan before burying my face in the pillow. I'm not ready to wake up. Not even close. I got maybe a grand total of two hours of sleep last night since Robin was awake most of the night.

Oh no! Robin. My alarm can't wake her, especially after last night. I throw off my pillow and reach for my alarm. I slap it several times before it finally stops blaring. Phew. I roll over. One more minute and I'll get out of bed.

I stretch my arms over my head. I needed that extra minute. I feel much better now. I glance over at the clock and shriek when I see the time. Ten in the morning? Ms. Cross will be here any minute.

"Elder!" I scream.

I jump out of bed as he rushes into the room. "What's wrong? Who do I need to kill?"

"What is your obsession with killing people?"

"I'm not obsessed with killing people."

"This is the second time you've offered to kill someone for me."

He puffs out his chest. His naked chest because he's only wearing a pair of boxers. And not the loose kind either. The tight kind. The kind that makes it perfectly clear someone just woke up. Oh boy.

"Because you're my woman and I will protect you," Elder says in an awful Russian accent bringing me out of my 'it

would be incredibly easy to pull those shorts down'-daze.

“Whatever.”

“Why did you scream for me?” He wiggles his eyebrows. “Do you need my services?”

His services. What kind of services? The kind that requires a bed? I glance toward the bed and notice the clock.

Shit! We're late! How the hell did I forget we're going to be late? There's something wrong with me when it comes to Elder.

“No! The time!”

“Ten? I thought you set your alarm for eight.”

“I did!”

“No reason to panic.”

I growl. “Don't tell me to not panic.”

“You deal with Robin. I'll move the bedding and clean things up a bit.”

He rushes out of the room and I take a second to admire his perfect ass displayed in those skintight boxers. I snap a mental picture because I will not be enjoying that view again. Must resist Elder.

I dress as quickly as I can before hurrying to the nursery where Robin is awake in her crib with the dogs laying on the ground around her.

“Good morning, baby girl,” I coo as I pick her up. “Shall we get you dressed in something pretty this morning?”

The doorbell rings and Robin screeches in response. I really need to get rid of that doorbell.

Elder rushes into the room. “You okay?”

I bounce Robin on my hip. “I'm okay but little missus hates the doorbell.”

He frowns. “I'll deal with it later. Ms. Cross is here.”

Of course, she is. She wouldn't come at a time when we've got everything under control. Nope. She's here when the

baby is screaming, Elder's still not wearing a shirt, and— I sniff. Someone needs a change.

“I need to change Robin.”

He reaches for the baby. “I got her. You go handle Ms. Cross.”

“Are you sure?” I ask instead of handing him the baby. Robin is my baby girl. Not his.

He snatches the baby from me. “I'm sure. Now go.”

When I don't move, he nudges me toward the door. “I got this. It's not my first time changing her diaper.”

True. He is pretty good about taking turns with diaper changing. In fact, he was up most of the night with me when Robin couldn't sleep. I frown. Did he forget this marriage is fake? I mentally slap myself upside the head. Deal with Ms. Cross now. Elder later.

The dogs flank me as I walk to the living room. Ms. Cross stands in the middle of the room studying the area. What does she see? Does she approve?

I clear my throat. “Ms. Cross. Good morning.”

“Good morning.” Her brow wrinkles. “You have an awful lot of dogs.”

Dogs? Are dogs a problem? Can a guardian not have dogs?

“I'm a vet tech. I work at the Wildlife Refuge here. I assure you my dogs are not a threat to Robin. In fact, they love her.”

“Yes, well...,” she mutters as she makes a note.

Bang! Bang!

I glance at the sliding door to the backyard and cringe when I notice Billy standing there. Oh no! The dogs might not be a problem, but a goat is definitely a problem.

“Is that a goat?”

Any hope I had of Ms. Cross not noticing Billy flies out the window with her question.

“Yes. It’s Billy.”

“Billy the goat?”

“He’s perfectly harmless.”

“Unless he’s feeling amorous,” Elder mumbles as he enters the living room. Phew. He finally found a t-shirt to wear.

“Here’s my girl now,” I say as I take Robin.

Elder’s eyes widen and he shakes his head.

“What’s wrong?” I whisper.

Ms. Cross clears her throat. “Ms. Kingsley?”

I drag my attention away from Elder who’s making some kind of hand gestures I can’t make heads or tails of. “Yes?”

“Can I see the baby?”

“Of course.”

“Keep her preoccupied,” Elder mutters as I pass him.

“What?” I hiss.

He points to a sheet and pillow behind the couch. “Why didn’t you put those in the bedroom?” I whisper.

“I did.” He motions toward the dogs. Black Ops practically smiles at me. Damn devious dog.

Distraction. I need to distract Ms. Cross.

“This is our little Robin,” I say in an overly loud voice.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch as Elder creeps toward the back of the couch. What is he doing? Creeping looks suspicious. I snap my fingers at him. When he glances over, I mouth *Act normal!* at him.

His response? He starts tiptoeing. As if tiptoeing is better than creeping.

“Do you want to hold her?” I ask before shoving the baby at Ms. Cross.

She drops her notebook in order to catch the baby. "I'll get it," I say and drop to my knees.

"Stop tiptoeing. It practically screams I'm doing something nefarious," I whisper to Elder.

"What's going on?" Ms. Cross asks and Elder falls to the ground.

"Nothing," I answer as I stand. "I'm picking up your notebook."

I motion to Elder to get going while Ms. Cross is distracted. He gathers the sheet and pillow in his arms and rushes out of the room. The dogs think this is some kind of game and bark and chase after him like.

Naturally, Ms. Cross notices the commotion. She shakes her head as she watches Elder hurry into the hallway with his loot. This can't be good.

I snatch the baby from her. "Isn't Robin gorgeous? She's such a good baby."

"Except when she's up all night screaming," Elder adds as he re-joins us. He places an arm around my shoulders and gazes down at the baby. "You're quite the screamer, aren't you?"

Robin reaches out for him in response. He offers her his finger and she holds it in her little fist. "She's strong, too." He feigns trying to yank his finger away. "She's going to be a wrestler."

"Shall we sit?" Ms. Cross asks.

"Do you want to see the baby's nursery?" I ask. A home visit always includes a tour of the bedrooms. "We've got it all set up. The people of Winter Falls are incredibly generous. Within a day of Robin appearing in our lives, we had everything we needed."

"And then some," Elder adds.

"I'm certain it's fine," Ms. Cross says as she sits on the couch.

I sit in the armchair with Robin and Elder stands behind us. He places a hand on my shoulder and squeezes in support.

“Look.” Ms. Cross sighs. “I know what’s happening here.”

Elder chuckles. “A just married couple trying to cope with having a baby they didn’t expect?”

She raises her eyebrows. “A just married couple who are sleeping apart?”

Elder forces a chuckle. “I was in the doghouse last night. Have you ever told a woman to calm down?” He shudders. “I don’t recommend it.”

When Ms. Cross’s only response is to purse her lips, my pulse races and I pull Robin closer to me. “Please, don’t take her away. She’s the only family I have left.”

“The situation isn’t ideal. A young woman with no family raising a child amongst her animals.” She motions toward the dogs. Black Ops barks in return while Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow slink away as if they’d been scolded.

“Which is why I assume you got married.”

Elder clears his throat. “We got married because we love each other. Do you want to see the wedding pictures?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer before bounding away. He snatches a picture from the sideboard and hands it to Ms. Cross. “Harmony was a beautiful bride but, then again, I might be a bit prejudiced.”

Ms. Cross frowns at the picture before handing it back to Elder. “Nevertheless.”

Nevertheless? What does nevertheless mean? Does she know the marriage is a sham?

“Please don’t turn us in. I can’t lose Robin.”

Elder scowls at me. “Turn us in for what? Loving each other? I’m pretty sure loving each other is not illegal.”

Ms. Cross ignores Elder to address me. “I know your background. I assume it’s the reason you’ve gone to the lengths

you've gone to. But you needn't worry. I'm in your corner. I've spent too many days rescuing children from drug dens. I do try to prevent it when I can."

She stands. "I'll see myself out."

Elder stares at the door after she exits. "What just happened?"

"I think we gained an ally."

He stares at the door with a puzzled expression on his face for a while before shrugging. "As long as she doesn't take our baby girl from us."

Our baby girl? I glance up at him. How I wish Robin could be *our* baby girl. But she's not. She's mine. She'll never be ours.

Chapter 19

In case you come back anytime soon, I recommend staying away from the bathtub. I swear it was an accident. ~ Text from Brody to Elder



Elder

“I’m begging you. Please tell me she’s asleep,” Harmony pleads as I enter her bedroom.

“She’s asleep,” I say as I collapse on the bed. “I know. I know. I know. I shouldn’t be in the bed, but my back is fucking killing me.”

“It’s fine. It’s not as if we’re going to get any sleep anyway.”

Not get any sleep? Does she mean we’ll be busy doing other things? My cock perks up.

“Robin will be awake again in five minutes anyway.”

Oh, she means the baby. My cock deflates.

Harmony slaps at my shoulder. “Thanks for all your help.”

“No problem.”

“I’m serious. You don’t need to help. This is a fake marriage after all.”

I grunt. I fucking hate the word ‘fake’ attached to our marriage.

“I’m not going to sit on my ass while you work yourself to the bone taking care of Robin. I’m not an asshole.”

“I know you aren’t,” she mumbles.

I open my mouth to respond but she sighs. I glance over to discover she’s fallen asleep in her clothes. I pull the blanket up to cover her before I snuggle into the pillow. I need a break from the couch for one night.

I awake to a hand in my briefs. Not merely in my briefs. On my dick. On my hard dick. What the hell? Am I dreaming? I better not be whacking myself off in my sleep while I’m in bed with Harmony.

The hand pumps me once and I can’t help myself from punching my hips. Fuck. It feels good. And that hand is way too small and soft to be mine.

I glance over at Harmony. Her eyes are closed and she’s breathing steadily. Crap. She must be sleeping.

“Harmony.” I nudge her. “Wake up. You’re dreaming.”

“I’m not sleeping.”

Do sleepwalkers claim to be awake? Her hand twists before tugging me and liquid beads at the head of my cock while my balls tighten. Ah hell. I’m going to come and she’s barely touched me.

“Harmony,” I growl.

Her eyes fly open. “What? Am I doing it wrong?” Her finger dips into the liquid on my tip. “Feels like I’m doing it right.”

As much as I want to close my eyes and enjoy how she’s touching me, I can’t. It would be wrong and Harmony would have regrets in the morning. I refuse to be a regret.

I grasp her wrist to stop her. “You’re the one who put the rules in place. No sex. No sleeping together.”

“I’m a woman. It’s my prerogative to change my mind.”

Is she saying what I think she’s saying? “I need you to be sure.”

“I’m sure. I want to have sex with you, Elder Jason Bragg. I want you to show me if you know how to use your big cock.”

“I know how to use it,” I growl. “Trust me.”

“I don’t trust you. You need to show me.”

My cock twitches and she grins in triumph. I pull her hand away from me before rolling on top of her.

I tuck a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear. “Promise me you won’t regret this in the morning.”

She blinks up at me. “I won’t regret this in the morning.” She smiles and I know I’ll give her whatever she wants. “Now, are you going to ravish me before the baby wakes up or what?”

“I prefer to take my time.”

She shrugs. “Then, I’m coming first because Robin is due for another feeding any second now.”

I pause. I want to take my time tasting every inch of Harmony’s skin before burying myself deep in her pussy. But I don’t want to be buried deep in Harmony when Robin wakes.

She lifts her eyebrows. “Are you not up for the challenge?”

Screw it. I’ll taste every inch of Harmony’s skin next time.

“Hands above your head.”

Harmony stares into my eyes as she slowly lifts her hands and grasps hold of the headboard. She arches her back and rubs her breasts against my chest.

“Vixen.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She pauses. “Sir.”

“Are you teasing me?”

She flutters her eyelashes. “Me? Tease you? I wouldn’t dare.”

I nip her bottom lip before kneeling above her. I whip my t-shirt off and she licks her lips in response. I know she likes my chest. I've seen her stare at it often enough.

Now to deal with the overabundance of clothes Harmony's wearing. I unsnap her jeans and tug the zipper down. She lifts her hips for me.

"Good girl," I murmur as I draw the jeans down her long legs. She helps by kicking them off.

"Someone in a hurry?"

"Baby waking soon."

I love her inability to speak in complete sentences. When I'm done with her, she's going to forget how to speak altogether.

I draw my finger along the edge of her panties. "I was really hoping to see those red panties."

"You have seen them. In the washing machine, remember?"

Hmm... Her speaking abilities have returned. Not for long if I have my way.

I drag my finger along the gusset of her panties. I stop when I feel a wet spot. "Did jerking me off excite you?"

Her eyes narrow. My stubborn girl has arrived at the party. I'm going to fuck the stubborn right out of her and enjoy every second of it.

"We're about to have sex. I should be excited."

I pull her panties to the side and plunge two fingers into her. She gasps and lifts her hips before winding her legs around my waist.

"More."

I pump my fingers in and out of her a few times. Her walls tighten around me as she moans and uses her legs wrapped around my hips for leverage to fuck herself on my fingers. I freeze and her eyes fly open.

"Why did you stop?"

“Who’s in charge here?”

She glares at me. “No one.”

I pinch her clit. “Who’s in charge of giving you orgasms?”

“Oh. You can be in charge of that.”

I chuckle. This girl. She drives me batty but there’s no other place in the world I’d rather be. Even if I am under a time limit to finish us both off before the baby wakes.

“Time to get rid of these.” I yank her panties down her legs and throw them behind me.

“What about you? You can hardly show me how your big cock works if said cock is hidden underneath your boxers.”

“You said you wanted to come first.”

She rolls her eyes. “I can come first with you inside of me.” She frowns. “Unless you’re the five-second man.”

“I am not a five-second man,” I growl.

She sighs. “Promises. Promises.”

“Condom.”

She nods to her bedside table. “Top drawer.”

My stomach sours as a spark of jealousy runs through me. Not now. I refuse to think about the reasons why she would have condoms next to her bed.

I lean over her to reach the drawer and she uses the opportunity to shove my boxers down my legs. My cock jumps out. He’s ready to sink into her as deep as he can go. Hold on. Condom first. We can’t have little Elders running around.

I kneel above her before biting open the packaging and rolling the condom on. Her breasts heave as she watches me and I realize I forgot to remove her top. Next time.

I notch my cock at her opening. “You ready?”

“Show me what you’ve got, big guy,” she says as she circles my hips with her legs and squeezes.

I thrust into her wet warmth until I can go no further. Her walls flutter around me and my balls draw up. She better stop with the fluttering or I am going to become the five-second man.

I get to my knees and throw her legs over my shoulders. Her hands tighten on the headboard as she arches her back.

“You enjoy this position, darling?” I ask as I slowly withdraw from her. My cock protests but he’s not the boss of me.

“I haven’t had sex in over a year. I think I’d enjoy any position at this point.”

I pause with just the tip of my cock inside her. “I can do missionary if you prefer.”

Her feet tighten around my neck. “I guess not,” I mutter before thrusting into her again.

And now I’m done talking. I find my rhythm and pump in and out of her. She sighs each time my balls slap against her. I don’t want sighs. I want moans and groans. I want her squirming underneath of me.

I sink into her and swivel my hips. She moans in response, so I do it again.

“You ready to come for me, my stubborn girl?”

“So ready,” she groans.

I sneak my hand between our bodies to find her clit. I pinch it as I swivel my hips. Her walls squeeze me in response.

“Oh my god.”

“Not god. Elder.”

“Shut up and do that thing again.”

“Happy to oblige, darling.”

I pinch her clit and swivel my hips as I dive deep into her. Her inner walls flutter around me as she groans long and hard.

“Yes. There. Right there. Don’t stop.”

No need to worry. I'm not stopping now. I keep my finger on her clit as I pump in and out of her until her back arches off the bed.

"Yeesss," she groans as she explodes around me.

I continue to play with her clit as I quicken my pace. My balls tighten at the feel of her squeezing my cock.

"My turn," I growl as I feel a tingle in my lower back before I climax. My rhythm is lost as I chase the feeling of ecstasy.

"Holy crap," I mutter as I collapse on top of her.

She pats my shoulder. "Good job."

"Satisfaction guaranteed."

She giggles and since I'm still buried inside her I feel her walls flutter against me. My cock – satisfied less than five seconds ago – perks up. *Again?*

The baby monitor crackles before *waaah!*

Harmony groans. "Miss Poops A Lot is awake."

I kiss her forehead. "I'll go. You get your rest."

I roll off of her and grab my boxers from the floor. Before I've managed to deal with the condom, she's snoring. I shake my head as I tiptoe out of the room.

Chapter 20

What the hell did you do to my bathtub? If there are scorch marks, you better hide. ~

Text from Elder to Brody



Elder

I stretch as I slowly wake up. Damn, it feels good to wake up in a bed. What's even better? Waking up with the woman I've been obsessing over for months after spending the night buried inside her.

I reach out my hand for Harmony but frown when I encounter empty space. I roll over to discover Harmony's hugging the edge of the opposite side of the bed. I scooch forward until I can reach her and wrap an arm around her waist before pulling her near.

She bats my arm away. "What are you doing?"

"Waking up with a beautiful woman in my arms."

"I wasn't in your arms."

"No, you were testing how close you can sleep to the edge of the bed without falling off."

"I was staying on my side of the bed."

"We have sides of the bed now?"

This idea has merit. Not only do I get to sleep in the bed, but I get to sleep in the bed with Harmony on the opposite side of me. But I prefer it when she sneaks over to my side. Especially in the middle of the night when she shoves her hand down my briefs. My cock begins to harden at the memory.

Harmony rubs her ass against my hard length and I pull her closer. Best. Wake-up. Ever.

The baby monitor crackles and Harmony sighs before pushing me away and rolling off the bed. I watch her leave and as soon as she's out of sight, I jump out of bed. Time to make my lady some breakfast.

When Harmony strolls into the kitchen a few minutes later with Robin in her arms, the bacon's already in the oven and I'm about to put the eggs in the frying pan.

She scowls. "What are you doing?"

I motion toward the stove. "What does it look like? I'm making you breakfast."

"Why?"

"Why, why?"

"I asked first."

"Why am I making you breakfast?"

She rolls her eyes to the ceiling before inhaling a deep breath. "Yes. Why are you making me breakfast?"

"Because I can. Because I want to."

Because I want to show her how good we are together. Because I've finally figured my shit out. No more hot and cold with Harmony. She deserves better. I can't give her forever, but I can have her for a while. At least until the situation with Robin is settled.

And during this time, I'll treat her the way she deserves to be treated. Thus, breakfast. I'd prefer to give her breakfast in bed, but there's no chance of breakfast in bed with a baby around.

"Have a seat," I tell her when she enters the kitchen.

"I need to prepare a bottle for Robin."

"I've got it."

I motion toward the bottle cooling on the kitchen counter. I wait for her to sit down before picking it up and shaking a few drops of the formula on the inside of my wrist. Not too warm. Perfect.

"Here you go." I hand Harmony the bottle.

“Thanks,” she mutters before offering the bottle to Robin who immediately latches on. Baby girl is a good eater. A good screamer, too.

“How do you prefer your eggs?” I ask as I return to the stove to prepare breakfast.

“You don’t need to make me breakfast.”

“True,” I agree. “Now, how do you prefer your eggs?”

“Sunny side up.”

“Wonderful.”

I pour her a cup of coffee and add sugar before setting it in front of her on the kitchen table. She picks it up and drinks half of the cup in one go.

“Ah. I needed that,” she says as she sets the cup down.

“Someone keep you up most of the night?” I wink at her.

“Yep. This baby.”

I scowl. I wasn’t referring to the baby and she knows it.

I return to the stove to finish our breakfast while she feeds the baby. When I set our plates on the table, Robin is finished eating. I take the bottle from Harmony as she places the baby on her shoulder to burp her.

“I think she’s asleep,” I whisper.

“I’ll lay her down.”

By the time Harmony returns, I’ve topped up her coffee and poured her some orange juice.

“You didn’t have to do this,” she says as she sits down and picks up her fork.

“I wanted to.”

She chews on a piece of bacon before setting her fork back down.

“I hope you understand last night didn’t change things.”

“Last night? What do you mean?”

She glares at me. “Don’t tease.”

I clasp my chest. “Me? Tease?”

“I’m trying to be serious here.”

I grin. “I once stayed up all night trying to figure out where the sun went. Then, it dawned on me.”

She rolls her eyes. “Can you be serious for one minute?”

I dig my phone out of my pocket and place it on the table. “Starting the timer now.”

“Stop being cute.”

I bat my eyelashes at her. “I can’t help it. Cute is my default.”

“Goofball is your default.”

“Cute and goofball are not mutually exclusive.”

“Yes, the—” She cuts herself off with a shake of her head. “You’re really good at distracting a person.”

I puff out my chest. “Thank you.”

“It’s not a compliment.”

I shrug as I shove a piece of bacon in my mouth. “You praised me. It’s a compliment.”

“Enough with the distractions. I’ll say this once and for all. Last night did not change things between us.”

“We’re still husband and wife.”

She growls. “This is a fake marriage, remember?”

“I remember how you moaned for me when you came all over my cock.”

Her cheeks darken but she’s undeterred. “I’m serious, Elder.”

“Why doesn’t last night change anything? We’ve confirmed what I knew all along. You and me in bed are dynamite.”

“I wouldn’t say dynamite.”

“You wouldn’t? I guess I need to try harder next time.” I waggle my eyebrows. “Get it? Harder?”

“There will be no next time.”

“Why not?” I ask since distraction isn’t working despite the use of some of my best distraction methods.

“Are you deaf or is this some kind of selective deafness? Are you refusing to hear what I’m saying? We are not really husband and wife.”

“I was at the wedding. You wore a white dress. I wore a suit. I’m pretty sure the whole thing was real.”

“It’s an arranged marriage, then. We agreed to no sex and no sleeping in the same bed.”

“But we did both of those things last night.” She opens her mouth to speak but I place a finger over her lips. “No. You promised me you wouldn’t regret it in the morning.”

She shrugs. “I don’t regret it. But not regretting it and wanting a repeat are two different things.”

“You don’t want a repeat?”

Her cheeks darken. She wants a repeat. But she’s scared.

“I don’t want things to change between us.”

“What’s going to change? We’ll still be friends.”

She blows out a puff of air. “Just friends?”

I reach across the table to grasp her hand. “Is that what you want?”

She nods. “Yes. Just friends. Nothing more.”

I scowl. “Tell me why.”

She yanks her hand from mine. “None of your business.”

“I was inside you last night, which makes it my business.”

“Having sex with me doesn’t mean I’m going to tell you my entire life story.”

She’s running scared and hiding secrets. It’s cute how she thinks she can keep me in the dark.

I open my mouth to press her to open up but Robin cries. Harmony jumps to her feet and rushes down the hallway. I’m not stupid. I know she’s escaping this conversation and using Robin as the perfect excuse.

I smirk as I begin to form a plan. I know how to convince Harmony to tell me all of her secrets. She’s going to be mad at me. Supremely mad. But she’ll have to get over it. Because I am not going anywhere.

At least, not yet.

Chapter 21

Why is Clementine chasing Mom down Main Street? ~ Text from Brody to the Bragg brothers



“Hi, Daisy,” I greet Elder’s mom when she arrives at my house. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to see my baby girl,” she says before snatching Robin straight out of my arms.

“Here you go, Mom,” Elder says as he hands her the diaper bag.

“What’s going on here?” I ask but everyone ignores me.

“Thanks for hurrying,” Daisy says to Elder. “I took precautionary maneuvers as I was driving out here but I couldn’t avoid the whole town. Someone’s bound to blab to Clementine soon.”

“Precautionary maneuvers?” Elder chuckles. “Are you worried about Clementine stealing your baby time?”

“She won’t be stealing anything if I’m quick enough.” Daisy rushes off.

“Where are you going with my baby?” I shout after her. She waves in response.

I plant my hands on my hips and glare at Elder. “What’s going on? Why did your mom steal my baby? And why is she worried about Clementine?”

He closes the door before leading me toward the living room.

“I asked Mom to babysit today.”

“You what? And you didn’t consult me?”

He snorts. “Of course, I didn’t consult you. Do I look stupid to you? You would have said no and then ran away before I had a chance to come up with another plan.”

“Plan?” What is he up to?

“It’s time for us to talk.”

“Time for us to talk? Who decided this? Because I sure as hell didn’t agree to a talk.”

“And you wouldn’t, my stubborn girl.”

“I am not stubborn, and I’m not your girl.”

He rubs his hands together. “Excellent. We’re on topic already. Why aren’t you my girl?”

Son of a bitch. I should have stuck with fighting about my not being stubborn. I can fight about that all day long.

I straighten my back and meet Elder’s gaze. “Because we agreed this marriage is a sham.”

“Our marriage being arranged and you being my girl aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“What is your obsession with mutually exclusive?”

“What is your obsession with refusing to consider the possibilities?”

I roll my eyes. “What possibilities? We fall in love and live happily ever after?” I snort. “Not likely.”

Elder frowns. “Why not?”

“I’m not discussing this with you.” I start to walk away but he captures my wrist.

“I’m the best person in the world to discuss this with.”

“You think awful highly of yourself.”

He smirks. “I do. But I’m also your husband, which means whatever you tell me stays between us. No running to the gossip gals to spill your juicy secrets.”

“I don’t have any juicy secrets.”

He rubs his thumb along my inner wrist and heat spreads through my body as I remember how his hands feel touching other parts of my body. The good parts.

Let's seduce him, Rebel Harmony suggests.

I glance up at him from beneath my eyebrows. I haven't discovered how skillful his mouth and lips are yet. He smiles and his dimple makes an appearance. I'm with Rebel on this one. Seduction it is.

"No."

I bat my eyelashes. "No, what?"

"No, you won't seduce me to get out of this conversation." I scowl. "But you can seduce me once we're finished."

I yank my hand from his grip. "We're finished now."

He plants his feet and crosses his arms over his chest. My gaze dips to his hips. Those hips can perform magic. I bite my lip as I imagine him above me—

He wags a finger at me. "Nuh-uh. No sending secret sex thoughts at me to force me to do your bidding."

"Secret sex thoughts?"

"You're biting your lip and staring at my junk with a blush on your face, I don't need to be a genius to figure out what you're thinking."

Busted! Rebel Harmony shouts.

"Whatever," I mumble. "I've got to..." I pause. There must be something I need to do. Besides, get away from this conversation.

He settles on the couch. "It's fine. I've got all day to wait you out."

"All day? When is your mom bringing Robin back?"

"When I call her to."

"But it's my day off," I pout. "I planned to take Robin to the park."

“And we will,” Elder pauses, “once you explain to me why we can’t be more than friends.”

Who does he think he is? Trying to force me to reveal my secrets to him? Not happening.

“I don’t need to explain shit to you,” I hiss at him.

“I guess I’m waiting all day then.”

“Screw this. I’m going to pick up Robin.” I stomp away.

“How?”

I freeze.

“Mom has my truck.”

“I’ll use my bike.”

“Good luck finding it.”

I whirl around and stomp back toward him. “Did you hide my bike?”

“It’s for your own good.”

“For my own good? Who the hell do you think you are deciding what’s for my own good? I’ve had enough of people making decisions on my behalf for my own good. I won’t put up with it again!”

He stands and shackles my wrists. “Let’s start there. What people made decisions for your own good? Your parents?” I flinch. I didn’t have enough time with my parents for them to make decisions for my own good.

He pulls me into his arms and sways me from side to side. “Whatever it is, you can tell me. I promise on my dad’s grave I won’t tell another soul.”

Damn it! He can’t be sweet to me. He’s supposed to be annoying. I can’t resist sweet Elder.

“You need to get this out. Bottling up all this hurt and anger isn’t helping anyone, stubborn girl.”

I sniff. “I’m not stubborn.”

“Of course not.”

He frames my face with his hands as he wipes the tears from my cheeks. “Please, don’t cry. I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

I’m crying? I didn’t realize I was crying. “You didn’t.”

He sits down and pulls me into his lap. “Please tell me. I promise not to push you again after today, but I can’t stand being afraid to hurt you by saying the wrong thing or making the wrong joke.”

“You? Worried about making the wrong joke? I thought you didn’t care if you offended anyone.”

He kisses my nose. “When it comes to you, none of my normal rules apply.”

Those words warm my heart in ways I thought it could never be warmed again. Uh-oh. I’m cracking.

“Everyone I love dies.” The words are out before I realize I’m going to speak.

His eyes widen. “Note I’m not making a joke about you having superpowers.”

“Duly noted.” I clear my throat. “When I was nine, I was driving in the car with my mom, dad, and brother to visit my cousin Amy and her family.” I pause. Saying those words out loud is harder than I thought.

Elder squeezes my hips in encouragement.

“We had an accident. Everyone died except me. It was my fault. The end.”

“Hold on. Slow down. What do you mean it was your fault? I thought you said you were nine years old. How could a car accident possibly be your fault?”

“It was.”

“Nope. I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t believe me?” I snarl.

“What do you know about it? Nothing. A big fat nothing. You can’t possibly know how my three-year-old brother Ethan was crying. How I tried to calm him but he started

screaming. How his face turned red. How I yelled at my dad to stop the car. How he switched from the left to the right lane but didn't notice the car in his blind spot. How the car hit us and my whole family died. How it was All. My. Fault.”

I'm wailing with tears flowing down my cheeks by the time I finish my tirade. Elder wraps his arms around me before hauling me near. He rubs his hands up and down my back as loud sobs rack my body.

“Darling, please stop. You're going to make yourself sick.”

I rear back. “I deserve to make myself sick. I'm a murderer! I killed my whole family!”

He pinches my chin. “Hear me on this. You. Are. Not. A. Murderer.”

“I killed my family, which makes me a murderer.”

“No,” he growls. “A car killed them when it hit the car you were in. You had nothing to do with it.”

“But we wouldn't have changed lanes if I hadn't insisted we stop.”

“Your dad, who was an adult, was driving the car. Not you. You can't accept responsibility for actions outside of your control.”

“But—”

“No. I refuse to allow you to carry around this responsibility which isn't yours to carry any longer.”

“You refuse? You refuse?” Who the hell does he think he is?

“Yep. I refuse. Harmony Elaine Kingsley will no longer feel guilt for an accident she wasn't responsible for.”

“You can't snap your fingers and I'll no longer feel guilty.”

He cocks a brow. “I can't?” He snaps his fingers. “There. I just did.”

“I—” I slam my mouth shut when I realize what he’s doing. “Are you distracting me to stop me from crying?”

He kisses me. It’s one of those barely there whisper soft kisses. And, despite everything, I want more.

“You figured me out, stubborn girl,” he murmurs against my lips. “But I’m also right. You aren’t the guilty party.”

When he pulls away, I open my mouth to argue with him but stop when I realize it’s futile. Elder will never understand the guilt and fear I carry. How could he? He has a huge loving family. I have no one.

“I don’t understand,” I say instead.

“What don’t you understand?”

“Why aren’t you fleeing as fast as you can away from me?”

“Why would I flee?”

Is he deliberately being obtuse? “Because I’m a murderer.”

He growls. “You’re not a murderer.”

“Yes, I am.”

I try to stand, but Elder’s fingers dig into my hips to stop me. “Stop running away.”

“I’m not running away,” I lie. “Story hour is done. I’ve explained why I can never be in a serious relationship with you.”

“You have?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I killed my family. Therefore, I don’t deserve love.”

“You didn’t kill your family. A car killed your family.”

“Wrong.”

This time when I try to stand, he lets me.

“You want to have a friends with benefits relationship? I’m all for it. Anything more?” I shake my head.

“Not happening.”

Never ever. I leave the room before Elder has a chance to recover. I’m done talking about this.

Chapter 22

If anyone asks, I have no idea what happened to Soleil's phone ~ Text from Brody to the Bragg brothers



“Ah, someone’s all dressed up for the Beltane festival and looking absolutely adorable,” Elder says as he takes Robin from me.

As soon as he has the baby, I retreat. He frowns but doesn’t say anything. The same way he hasn’t said anything for the past few days after the big reveal of my past.

It hasn’t exactly been awkward. Elder doesn’t do awkward. He fills silences with silly jokes. But he has moved back to sleeping on the sofa. A move I don’t like. But you won’t hear me admitting to it. No way.

It’s better this way. I don’t deserve love. Not after what I did. I’m surprised he didn’t run off after learning about my past. I would have if I were him.

“I thought we’d go in early,” I say as I hitch Robin’s diaper bag on my shoulder. Elder frowns before taking the bag from me. “Before it gets wild.”

He chuckles. “Because the gossip gals can’t be wild before noon?”

“They’ll leave us alone since we’re now ‘married’.” I hope.

He tweaks my nose. “You’re cute when you’re in denial.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about any fertility rituals associated with Beltane since we already have a baby,” I

say as we make our way out of the house toward his truck.

Elder stumbles and I rush forward to help him. “Don’t drop the baby!”

“I’m not going to drop the baby.”

I notice he has a protective hold on Robin and step back.

“Did you stub your toe?”

“I’m fine,” he claims, but I know he’s lying. But I’m not pushing him to open up. Elder’s a tit for tat person. If he opens up, he’ll expect me to open up some more. And I am done discussing my past.

I open the truck door for him and he secures Robin in the car seat.

“You’ve gotten good with the car seat,” I remark as he switches on the engine.

“Practice makes perfect.” He waggles his eyebrows at me. “And I am good at practicing.”

I slap him. “Stop flirting with me or the gossip gals will shove us at the May Pole faster than you can say ‘We already have a baby!’.”

He clears his throat. “The May Pole is not for me.”

“No? Please tell me you’re not sexist.”

“I’m not sexist.”

“There’s no reason to worry about being the only man. Since last year, men are welcome to dance around the May Pole with the women.”

“I prefer to be the only man.” He winks.

“Then, you must be scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Really? You sound awful scared.”

“I’m not scared,” he screeches in a high-pitched voice. “That’s my scared voice.”

I giggle. “That’s your scared voice? You sound like someone’s squeezing your balls off.”

“I have a different sound for that.”

“You are such a goofball,” I say before he can demonstrate his getting his ‘balls getting squeezed off’-voice.

“But I’m a loveable goofball,” he sings.

I snort. “Loveable? I think you mean annoying.”

But he is awful loveable, Rebel Harmony says.

Doesn’t matter. I don’t deserve love. I’m responsible for all of my family dying, remember?

But Elder said it’s not our fault.

He doesn’t know everything.

And he’s not leaving us after hearing our story.

Elder squeezes my hand. “You okay? You spaced out there for a minute.”

I force a smile. “Trying to come up with some synonyms for goofball.”

“I have a few – adorable, endearing, cute—”

“I think you’re confused about the meaning of the word goofball.”

“Nope, I’m not.” He pulls the truck to the curb and parks. “You okay to walk a block to Main Street?”

I roll my eyes. “Are you serious? I usually bike into town.”

“I’ll get the stroller. You get Robin,” he says before hopping out.

By the time I’ve freed the baby from the backseat, he has the stroller open and ready.

“You’re quick,” I say as I settle Robin into her stroller.

“I’ve been practicing. Don’t want our baby girl to have to wait.”

“You sure enjoy practicing,” I joke to hide how my pulse spikes at the words ‘our baby girl’.

Despite this whole marriage thing being fake, he’s taking his duties as a ‘father’ very seriously. He doesn’t hesitate to get up in the middle of the night when Robin wakes. He switches his schedule up to stay home to watch the baby when I have to work during the day. And he’s loving to the baby, too.

You’re falling for him, Rebel Harmony taunts. Am not!

“Let’s go,” I tell Elder before Rebel Harmony can argue with me. She hates to lose an argument.

We walk the block to the town square. Main Street is all set up for the festival. I love these Winter Falls festivals. I usually avoid them, though. Interacting with people is a huge drain on my energy. But today I have Elder to run interference.

“Oh my,” a stranger says as she kneels down to greet Robin, “what a beautiful baby you have.” She stands and her gaze skims over me and Elder. “A beautiful family all together.”

“We’re not—” I start to correct her but Elder cuts me off.

“Thank you.” He wraps an arm around my shoulders and beams a smile at the stranger. “I got lucky.”

“Yes, you did. Have a lovely day!”

As soon as the stranger disappears in the crowd, I elbow Elder. “What are you doing? We’re not together. Did you forget again? Do you have short-term memory problems? Are you going dement in your old age?”

“Hey now. I’m barely thirty-three. I’m not old.”

I tap my chin and pretend to study him. “I think you’re getting wrinkles.”

“Why do elephants have such wrinkled skin?” He pauses. “Because they’re difficult to iron.”

I sigh. “At least your jokes will be age appropriate for Robin once she’s old enough to understand how horrible your sense of humor is.”

He clutches his chest. “I do not have a horrible sense of humor.”

“Yes, he does,” Brody says as he and Soleil join us.

“And your sense of humor is better?” Soleil asks Brody.

“I can’t help it if you lack a sense of humor.”

She glares at him. “It’s not funny when my phone moans whenever I get a call.”

“True. It’s not funny. It’s hilarious.” He barks out a laugh. “You should see your face when it happens. Your lips purse and you remind me of a disapproving grandmother.”

“Are you saying I’m a prude? I’ll have you know I knit vibrator covers for a living.”

“I know. I’ve bought every model you make.”

“Why do you—” She shakes her head. “Never mind. I do not want to know why you want vibrator covers.”

“I want to know,” Riley says as he and Moon arrive.

Moon rubs her hands together. “Oh, goodie. I want all the details.”

Riley scowls. “I amend my statement. I don’t want to know.”

Moon sighs. “Too bad.” She motions to me. “You’re looking very domesticated.”

I glare at her. “Don’t.”

She blinks her eyes. “Don’t what? Buy you a Bragg woman t-shirt?”

“Exactly.”

She smirks. “Too bad. I already ordered it.”

“How often do I have to explain it to everyone? This is fake!”

“Doesn’t appear fake to me,” Sage says from behind me.

My eyes widen. Crap. *Are the gossip gals standing behind me?* I mouth to Moon. She bobs her head. She couldn't have warned me?

Elder throws an arm over my shoulder and whirls me around. Yep. There they are. Feather, Petal, Sage, Cayenne, and Clove. All together.

"Project Baby is my favorite," Petal declares as she kneels down in front of Robin's stroller.

"She says that about all the projects," Cayenne grumbles.

Petal frees Robin from her stroller to pick her up. "How can this little girl not be your favorite?" She rubs her nose against Robin's.

"Don't let Ashlyn hear you say Robin's your favorite baby," Moon mutters from behind me.

Moon is full of it. She'd love for her best friend to hear. Ashlyn would have an epic fit if she heard anyone say any baby other than her own is the favorite, and Moon would be standing on the sidelines selling popcorn and beer for the show.

"Stop hogging her. I want to hold her," Feather reaches for Robin who decides she is done being tossed around like a hot potato.

Before I have a chance to move, Elder rushes forward and snatches the baby from Petal.

"Hey now, baby girl. There's no reason to cry," he murmurs as he rocks her back and forth. "You want me to sing you a song?"

Robin stares up at him as he begins to sing *Big Girls Don't Cry*. He doesn't know most of the words but Robin doesn't care. She's enamored with him.

"Holy crap. Elder's the baby whisperer," Riley says.

Moon nods in agreement. "I'm totally ordering Harmony a Bragg woman t-shirt."

I barely hear them. I can't look away from Elder with my baby. The two of them are perfect together.

My heart seizes and my pulse spikes. *Perfect together?* They can't be perfect together. I don't deserve them.

I want to snatch Robin away before fleeing far, far away from here but I plant my feet and hold my ground. I can't go anywhere if I want legal custody of Robin. I need to stick this out and finish the court custody case.

I just hope my heart survives.

Chapter 23

Can I borrow the hood in case I need to kidnap someone? ~ Text from Elder to Brody



Elder

“I don’t understand why I couldn’t stay home with Robin,” Harmony grumbles as we climb the steps to city hall for the Winter Falls monthly business meeting.

“I’ve got the baby.” I open the door and nod for her to enter in front of me. “You go have fun with your friends.”

I nudge her toward where Moon, Eden, and Soleil are standing. “Go.”

She scowls. “Stop pushing me.”

I have to push her. She won’t leave the house otherwise. But she needs to have fun once in a while. Especially since she’s working full-time and caring for a three-month-old baby while dealing with a custody battle.

I’m perfectly happy hanging around her house with her and the baby, but I— My thoughts come to a screeching halt.

I’m perfectly happy hanging around her house with her and the baby? That can’t be right. I’m Elder. The jokester and the life of the party. I don’t sit at home on the couch watching television and movies. I go out. To the bar. To a party. To visit a friend.

Robin gurgles up at me. “I blame you, baby girl.” She coos. “Yes, you are irresistible.”

Ever since Robin came into my life, I don’t care about going out. My sole concerns are making sure the baby is taken

care of and Harmony isn't overdoing it.

Hold on. What am I thinking? I can't be Robin's dad. I'd make a lousy father. I'd ruin her. Or, at the very least, cause her to have huge therapy bills as an adult. Is it possible to create a trust fund for therapy bills?

Harmony giggles and I glance over at her. But damn do I want it all. I want Harmony in my bed every night and Robin sleeping in her nursery down the hall.

"We need to start up childcare during these monthly business meetings," Ashlyn announces as she arrives with Patience on her hip.

Her husband grunts at her and she holds up a hand.

"I don't want to hear it, Rowan. We're both business owners. It's unfair for one of us to stay at home."

Ashlyn hands Patience to her husband before pushing up on her toes to kiss him. "See ya later, Jeeves."

"I think we are the childcare," I say once Ashlyn rushes off to join her friends.

"Yep." Rowan isn't much of a talker.

"Do we sit in the back so we don't disturb everyone and can leave quietly if we need to? Or do we sit in the front and cause a racket?"

His smile is wicked. "Front."

Good. The front is where Harmony always sits with her friends. This way I can keep an eye on her.

The second we enter the meeting room the gossip gals attack.

"I want a cuddle!"

"I want to hold them both at once!"

"I should get the first cuddle!"

"What do we do?" I ask Rowan.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

“I now call the May business meeting to order,” Moon – who is the current mayor of Winter Falls – shouts.

“I better find a seat,” I say and rush away from the gossip gals while trying to appear as if I’m not running.

Rowan and I sit behind Ashlyn, Harmony, Eden, and Soleil.

“Today’s word is ‘never’,” Ashlyn announces as she hands out beers.

Ashlyn likes to ‘liven these meetings up’ with a drinking game. It’s Winter Falls. No livening up is needed.

Harmony refuses to accept a beer. “I can’t drink.”

“Why not?” Ashlyn asks. “You’re not breastfeeding.”

“I can hardly change a poopy diaper when I stumbling down drunk.”

Ashlyn rubs her hands together. “Awesome. We’re getting stumbling down drunk tonight.”

“Do you have a hearing problem? I literally said I can’t get stumbling down drunk seconds ago.”

Ashlyn shrugs. “All I heard was stumbling down drunk.”

I lean forward to whisper in Harmony’s ear. “Go ahead. I’ve got baby duty for the night. Have some fun. You deserve it.”

“You’re going to change poopy diapers at two in the morning?”

“I usually change Robin at three, but I can switch it up and do two.”

She frowns, which means she’s wavering, and I decide to push it.

“How is this different from any other night?”

Ashlyn shoves a beer bottle in Harmony’s hands. “It’s decided.” She lifts up her bottle. “Cheers!”

Moon bangs the gavel on the table. “Is the disrupter ready to proceed now?”

Everyone in the room looks at Ashlyn who widens her eyes. “What? Me?”

“The first order of business today is the festival for Litha,” Moon begins.

“No, it’s not,” Sage says as she stands. “I believe the first order of business today is Robin.”

“Robin?” Harmony scrunches her nose. “Do they mean my baby girl?”

“Yes.” Petal stands as well. “What are we going to do?”

Harmony jumps to her feet. “What do you mean? What are you going to do? Are you planning to steal my baby?”

The panic is clear to see in her eyes. I grasp her hand before she can run off. “No one’s stealing Robin.”

I’ll break all the non-violence rules Winter Falls has ever made – and add some they’ve never heard of – if someone tries to steal Robin away from Harmony.

“Ahem!” Lilac, one of Ashlyn’s older sisters, and the town comptroller clears her voice, and everyone immediately settles down. No one wants to be on Lilac’s bad side. Not since she controls the purse strings to the town’s money. “Robin is not on the agenda.”

“Agenda schemda.” Sage dismisses Lilac’s comment with a wave of her hand. “The court case is coming up soon and we need a plan of attack.”

Harmony swallows. “A plan of attack?”

“To ensure the sperm donor doesn’t get custody of our Robin,” Clove explains.

“We are not letting a drug addict raise our baby,” Cayenne adds.

Petal nods in agreement. “Never happening.”

“Drink!” Ashlyn shouts.

“Can you be serious for ten minutes?” Harmony hisses at Ashlyn.

Ashlyn shrugs. “There’s nothing to be serious about.”

“Are you crazy?” Harmony screams. “This is the most serious thing in the world. Amy wants me to raise her baby. Me!” She pounds her chest. “No one, and I do mean no one, will take this baby from me.”

“Which is why we need the plan,” Sage says.

“We? This has nothing to with you gossip gals.”

“I meant ‘we’ as in the whole town,” Sage clarifies.

Harmony scans the crowd. “The whole town?”

“Duh.” Soleil rolls her eyes. “We’re not letting anyone take your baby away.”

Harmony snatches her beer before taking a long draw. “I didn’t... No one has to...”

“Did you forget this is Winter Falls?” I ask. “No one is on their own here.”

“It takes a village!” Cayenne declares.

Mom gets to her feet. “But I am the only person Robin will be calling Grandma.”

Clementine scowls. “She’s my grandchild as much as she is yours.”

Mom points to me. “Elder’s my son.”

Clementine fists her hands at her hips. “Biology has nothing to do with it.” She motions to Robin. “That baby girl is for all of us to protect.”

Ashlyn sways as she gets to her feet. “Don’t forget my baby girl. She needs a town to protect her, too!”

Rowan growls next to me. “I’ve got Patience. She’s safe. Let’s worry about Robin for now.”

“Okay, big guy.” Ashlyn hiccups before sitting back down.

“Why is everyone worried about Robin?” Harmony asks. She’s freaking cute when she’s confused.

“Because Robin is a citizen of this town and no one messes with the citizens of this town,” Sage declares.

“And we love you and want to support you,” Soleil adds.

Eden raises her fist in the air. “Bragg women stick together.”

“I’m not a Bragg woman,” Harmony insists.

Eden shrugs. “I love you anyway.”

“Despite your obsession with animals,” Ashlyn adds.

Harmony stares at her friends as if it’s the first time she’s heard them say they love her. Which can’t be right. She must know they love her.

“I need a minute,” she declares before running off. I chase after her and catch her in the hallway. I clutch her hand and drag her to the baby changing room.

“Are you okay?”

Her chest heaves as she nods. “I think so. I mean. I didn’t expect. This town.”

I wrap an arm around her. I want to embrace her but I’m holding Robin. “This town is crazy, annoying, and full of busybodies.” She chortles. “But it’s also the most amazing place in the world. They’ve got your back.”

“I didn’t expect them to.”

My Harmony. She thinks she has to brave the world alone.

“Who showed up at your house with baby stuff within an hour of Harmony arriving in your world?”

“Ashlyn’s family.”

“And?”

“The rest of the town,” she mutters after a long pause.

“And who cleaned up stinky truck?”

Her nose wrinkles. “The gossip gals.”

“You get it now? This whole town is here for you.”

She lets out a breath and nods. “I got it.”

She doesn't, but she will. I can repeat how she's worthy of love a million times, but she's never going to listen. Considering how she blames herself for the crash that killed her family, her behavior is no surprise.

Someone needs to *show* her she deserves love. And I just volunteered for the job.

“Good. Because someone just laid a brick in her diaper and it's your turn to change her.”

I shove the baby at her before escaping the room.

Chapter 24

Has anyone seen my phone? ~ Message from Soleil on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Elder

“Is Robin already asleep?” Harmony asks as she enters the house.

I smile at her but my smile dissolves when I notice her face. Her eyes are red and swollen and her cheeks are all blotchy. She’s obviously been crying.

I walk to the refrigerator to retrieve two beers and hand one to her. “Sit down. Tell me what happened.”

She collapses on the couch. “Thanks for staying home to watch Robin,” she says instead of answering me.

I sit next to her and squeeze her thigh. “You don’t need to thank me.”

“I didn’t realize how late it was. Do you need to go to the brewery?”

“Nope. Miller offered to handle the evening shift as long as I did his day of administration work this week.”

Her nose wrinkles. “But you hate admin work.”

I shrug. The truth is I don’t mind the admin work much anymore. Not when it gives me the chance to stay home two days a week and work from the kitchen table while I care for Robin.

“Stop avoiding the question. What happened at the Wildlife Refuge?” I know it’s bad. Harmony wouldn’t miss an evening with Robin without a reason.

She frowns down at her beer bottle. “We lost Clara.”

“Clara?”

“Clara the capybara.”

“What happened?”

A tear escapes from her eye. I reach up to capture it. “Come on, my stubborn girl. You can tell me.”

“I’m not stubborn.”

“And I don’t have a joke for every occasion.” I grin. “Why didn’t the stubborn lion have any family? He was told to swallow his pride.”

She snorts. “Goofball.”

“Made you laugh. Now you have to tell me what happened.”

Her nose wrinkles. “Since when is this a rule?”

I tweak her nose. “Robin and I agreed on it while you were out.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re not allowed to use the baby to get what you want.”

“Sure, I am. Didn’t I get us a table in the restaurant in White Bridge because of Robin? Besides, you do it, too.”

“Do not!”

I raise an eyebrow. “You didn’t skip the line to the restroom at *Bake Me Happy* claiming Robin had a blowout?”

“She could have had a blowout. She has lots of them.”

“She has nearly as many blowouts as you are stubborn.” I elbow her. “Tell me already. I have ways to make you talk.”

“What are you going to do? Torture me?”

“Is orgasm denial considered torture?”

She glares at me. “Yes.”

I rub my hands together. “I’ve got my plan all ready.”

She huffs. “How is this plan different than the past weeks of orgasm denial?”

I freeze. Is she serious? Does she think I’ve been denying her for weeks? My cock stirs. Intrigued by the idea.

“What do you mean?”

She throws her arms in the air. “You gave me a great night of sex, I offered you a friends with benefits arrangement, and then radio silence.”

I puff out my chest. “A great night of sex?”

She slaps my chest and I capture her hand. “Cocky much?”

I rub my thumb along her inner wrist and she shivers. “I’ll show you cocky.”

“What are you waiting for? A private invitation?”

I’m waiting for her to say we’ll be more than friends with an arrangement. I’m waiting for her to realize I’m more than a friend. She leans into me and presses her breasts against my chest. I’m waiting for nothing.

I haul her into my arms and crash my lips down on hers. Finally. It’s been too long since I felt her soft lips against mine. She gasps and I push my tongue into her mouth. I want to taste every inch of her starting with her mouth.

She moans and I draw her closer until her core is centered over my hard length. She squirms against me and I groan before withdrawing to nip her bottom lip.

“No teasing, darling.”

She bats her eyelashes at me. “Why not? Is the five-second man about to make an appearance?”

She’s joking. I’m not. I’ve spent the past weeks living in close quarters with the woman I desire. And now I finally have her right where I want her. My cock is ready to explode and we’re both still fully clothed. I stand with her in my arms. She squeals.

I pinch her ass. “Quiet. You’ll wake Robin and I have plans for you.”

Her eyes flare. “Plans? What kind of plans?”

I snatch the baby monitor from the table as I carry her to the bedroom. I lay her on the bed before returning to shut the door.

“The door is shut but sound still carries. You’re going to have to be quiet.”

I whip off my t-shirt and unbuckle my belt.

“I can be quiet,” she breathes out as her eyes devour my chest. I unsnap my jeans and she licks her lips.

“Clothes off. Now,” I order her.

I’d much rather undress her myself, but we haven’t got the time. Robin wakes up every two hours on the hour, and she’s already been asleep for nearly an hour. If I have to make a choice on how to divvy up my time, I’m choosing touching Harmony with my hands and mouth over stripping her.

I shove my jeans off as Harmony undresses. She isn’t shy about it at all – no taking her bra off with her shirt still on or squirming under the covers before removing her panties for this girl – which is a massive turn-on for me.

She crooks her finger at me. “Come here, big boy.”

I jut my hips out. “I am a big boy. Thanks for noticing.”

She rolls her eyes. “The one time I try to do something sexy and it backfires on me.”

I pounce on her. “You don’t need to try to be sexy. You simply are.”

She wiggles underneath me. “I don’t believe you. I think you need to show me what you mean.”

“I am amenable to this idea,” I say before beginning to crawl down her body.

She grasps my ears and pushes me down.

I chuckle. “In a hurry?”

Her cheeks darken and she glances away. “It’s been a while since a man has...” She shrugs. “You know.”

I growl. “I don’t want to hear about other men being with you. When I’m in bed with you, the only man you will think about is me.”

Her breath catches as she nods.

I squeeze her breast. “Say it. The only man you’re thinking about is me.”

“The only man I’m thinking about is me.”

I pinch her nipple and her eyes fall closed as she arches her back. I want to yell at her for being stubborn again but her breasts are right here for me to enjoy however I want. I can yell at her later.

My head descends. I nip and bite and nibble on her breast until her nails dig into my skull. Only then do I release my tongue to trace her nipple. She moans and I do it again. I play with her nipple until it’s a hard peak. Time to move on.

I release her breast and travel down her body to her core.

“Open wide for me.”

Her eyes open and she looks down at me. I tap her thigh. “Open.”

She nods as she opens her legs until I can fit my shoulders between her thighs. I notice her excitement is already leaking out of her. My cock twitches. He wants inside her now.

I tell him to calm down. I’m bringing Harmony pleasure first. Afterwards, it’s his turn.

I trace her clit with my tongue and her hips fly off the bed. I press an arm against her belly to keep her where I want her before I dive in.

While my tongue flirts with her clit, I trace her opening with one finger. I feel moisture gather there. She claims she hates being teased but her body doesn’t lie. She gets off on it.

“Elder,” she growls.

I glance up at her. “What?”

“Get to work.”

“You want me to go into the brewery now?”

Her eyes narrow. “You know what I mean.”

“I do?”

She pounds a fist into the mattress. “Make me come or I’ll get out my vibrator and handle business myself.”

“Vibrator?” The idea has appeal. Watch Harmony get herself off? Yes, please!

“You won’t be watching.”

I frown. “You’re no fun.” Before she has a chance to speak again, I plunge two fingers into her pussy and she moans.

Replace me with a vibrator, will she? No vibrator can do to her body what I can. I press my tongue against her clit as I pump my fingers in and out of her. My hand on her stomach glides upward until I reach her breast.

This is a full feeling assault. I’m going to make her come so hard she forgets all about her vibrator. She’ll throw it away and ask me to stay with her forever by the time I’m finished with her.

I tweak her nipple as I suck her clit and plunge my fingers into her. Her walls flutter around my fingers and I add another finger.

“Holy shit.”

I don’t stop sucking to point out it’s holy Elder. I know she’s close to coming and as much as I love to tease her, I’m not an asshole who brings her to the brink before walking away. No. I’m the guy who’s going to throw her over the edge and get her addicted to me.

“I’m almost there. Just a bit more...” she gasps out.

I pinch her nipple while pressing my tongue against her clit. Her walls tighten around my fingers and her back bows as she explodes.

“Yeeeees,” she shouts.

I continue to pump my fingers in and out of her while she rides her climax. As soon as it begins to wane, I get to my knees and press my eager cock to her entrance.

I'm inching into her tightness when the baby monitor crackles.

“Waaaah!”

Harmony pushes me off of her. “Robin’s awake.”

She rolls off the bed, grabs my t-shirt from the floor, and runs out of the room.

I collapse with a moan. I thought I had blue balls before. I was wrong.

Chapter 25

The Bragg brothers are meeting. Who has the binoculars? ~ Message from Sage on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Elder

“I don’t understand how Brody is hosting poker night when he’s couch surfing at my house,” I grumble as I walk into my house with Miller, Riley, and Peace.

Brody grins from his spot on the couch. “Not couch surfing anymore.”

I glare at him. “You better not be sleeping in my bed.”

“Why not? Are you afraid I have cooties?”

I snort. “No. I’m afraid you’re jacking off to pictures of Soleil while in my bed.”

“Whoa. Hold on.” Peace holds up his palm. “Soleil? Does Brody have the hots for Soleil?”

“They hang around all the time,” I point out.

“Maybe we’re friends. The same way you and Harmony are ‘just’ friends.”

I roll my eyes at Brody’s use of air quotes. “Are we a bunch of teenage girls now?”

“Good,” Miller grumbles. “We’re getting straight to the point.”

“I’m still stuck on the Soleil thing,” Peace mutters.

Riley throws an arm over Peace’s shoulder. “Aren’t you glad you’re a Bragg?”

Peace shoves him away. "I'm not a Bragg. You're the one who was vehemently opposed to me being your half-brother."

Riley shakes his head. "You have me confused with the big guy. Miller was opposed to you. Not me."

Peace cocks a brow. "And you didn't nearly ruin all your chances with Moon because of my existence?"

"Don't worry. Moon and I are going strong now." He waggles his eyebrows. "If you know what I mean."

"Do you want to hear about me having sex with Olivia?"

Riley wrinkles his nose. "No."

"Then, stop talking about sex with Moon. She's like a sister to me."

"You mean sister-in-law."

"You proposed?" Brody asks. "And you didn't tell us?"

"Being my twin doesn't give you a right to know everything about my life."

Brody chuckles. "Yes, it does. Every single detail."

Miller growls and Brody rolls his eyes at him.

"I don't need to know every single detail of your life, grumpy guy. You're my brother, not my twin."

I head toward my bedroom. I'm going to ensure Brody isn't sleeping in my bed while I'm away.

"He's leaving," Miller grumbles.

"I'm checking the sheets."

Riley snorts out a laugh. "Does he think he's fooling us? He knows tonight isn't about poker."

I hurry my pace. I did think tonight was about poker. I know better now. I rush into the bedroom and make a beeline for the window. I open the curtains and Riley waves at me from outside. My shoulders slump.

“Busted!” Brody shouts from behind me.

I motion toward the bed. “Damn straight. I told you not to sleep in my bed while I was gone.”

Brody shrugs. “Why do you care? You’re sleeping in Harmony’s bed.”

“Finally,” Miller grunts.

“I need a drink,” I mumble before marching past him and Brody.

“Tequila time?” Brody asks as he follows me.

“No tequila for you,” Peace says.

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

Peace holds up his police badge. “Yes, I can.”

Brody crosses his arms over his chest and huffs. “I thought having a brother who is a police officer would be fun. Silly me.”

Peace ruffles his hair. “Silly you.”

Brody bats him away. “Knock it off.”

“Knock it off, *officer*.”

“Does no one in this family have anything better to do?” Miller asks.

Brody raises his hand. “I don’t.”

Riley shrugs. “Moon kicked me out of the house.”

“What did you do?” I ask.

“Nothing,” he pouts. “I might have tasted the cookie batter, but it was an accident. She didn’t have to chase me out of the house with a wooden spoon.”

I chuckle. “Do you know why you can’t use a wooden spoon on a Teflon pan?” I waggle my eyebrows. “It’s non-stick.”

“I want to hear more about this accident,” Brody says. “Did your spoon accidentally slip into the bowl?”

Riley frowns. “It was my finger. But it’s Moon’s fault. What does she think’s going to happen when she spends the entire evening baking stuff? It smells fucking incredible. She can’t possibly expect me to resist it.”

Brody tsks at his twin. “It never turns out well when you blame a woman for sticking your finger in her cookie dough.”

“Do you have something you want to tell us?” I ask Brody.

Peace clears his throat. “I want Elder to tell us why he hasn’t locked Harmony down yet.”

“Locked Harmony down yet?” I shiver. “Dude. You may be into some sadomasochism shit, but I’m not into locking a woman in the basement.”

“Enough,” Miller growls.

I bat my eyelashes at him. “Enough what?”

“Enough avoiding the subject. Unlike our idiot brother, my woman enjoys spending time with me.”

“Hey!” Riley interrupts to say.

Miller ignores him and continues. “And I want to get home to her.”

I motion toward the door. “Go ahead.”

He crosses his arms over his chest and glares at me. “Tell us why you and Harmony aren’t a couple and I’ll leave.”

“Aren’t a couple? I’m married to her or did you forget?”

“Try again.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Harmony and I are friends who are helping each other out of a difficult situation.”

“And you needed to have sex with her to help her out of this difficult situation?” Peace asks.

I scowl at him. “How do you know we’ve had sex?”

“Winter Falls, remember? Your mom told my mom.”

“I don’t know if Mom being friends with Clementine is a good idea.”

“I want to know why Mom knows you had sex,” Riley says. “Do you call her and chat about it afterwards?”

Brody clutches his chest. “Ah, Elder needs his mommy.”

I clasp his shoulder. “Brody needs a new place to live.”

“Can we cut the shit now?” Miller asks.

I don’t want to cut the shit. I’m happy to avoid the subject all night long. Discussing my non-relationship with Harmony is the last thing I want to do. Maybe I can cut them off at the pass.

“Harmony doesn’t want more than a friends with benefits arrangement and I’m fine with that.”

Miller scowls and I wag my finger at him.

“Not everyone wants a wife and two point five kids.”

“One point five kids to go,” Brody says.

I shake my head. “No. There will be no more kids. Harmony doesn’t want more.”

“Harmony didn’t want to be more than ‘just’ friends with you either. Yet you convinced her to have sex with you twice,” Miller says.

“Twice? How do you know how many times I’ve had sex?”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re my twin. I know your ‘I had sex last night’-look.”

“Harmony obviously wants you if she’s having sex with you. What’s stopping you from making her yours?” Peace asks.

“Did you forget the part about me not wanting two point five children?”

He shrugs. “Times change. She has a kid now. What’s the big deal?”

I rear back. “What’s the big deal? The big deal is I can’t ever be a father.”

Peace bursts into laughter. “Why are you laughing?” I scan the room and all of my brothers are laughing. “What’s going on? What’s the joke? What did I miss?”

Miller points at me. “You thinking you can never be a father when you already are one.”

“I am not. I always glove up. I don’t have any surprise babies out in the world.”

“But you do have Robin,” Riley says.

“No. Robin’s not my kid.”

“You could have fooled me,” he says.

“Me too.”

“Me three.”

I hold up my hand to stop my brothers. They’re wrong. I’m no one’s father. I can’t be. “I’m merely helping out until the custody hearing is over.”

“Which is why you change Robin’s diapers in the middle of the night.”

“And switched up your schedule so you can care for Robin during the day while Harmony’s working.”

I scowl. “Someone has to care for her. I’m not letting Harmony lose her job.”

“Mom would babysit,” Riley says.

“My mom, too,” Peace adds.

“Time to tell the truth,” Miller orders. “What’s holding you back from committing to Harmony?”

“I told you, Robin.”

“And we’ve cleared up the Robin situation,” Brody says.

“I’ll get out the rum.” Miller starts walking toward the kitchen.

“I am not playing truth or punch.”

Truth or punch is a ‘game’ we play when one of us is struggling but won’t admit what’s going on with him. It usually ends up with all of us drunk and one of us bruised.

He shrugs. “Okay. I can punch you and skip the truth part.”

I retreat a few steps. Miller’s my height but he has a good twenty pounds of muscle on me. A punch from him would not be pleasant.

“You want to know why I can’t be with Harmony?” I hiss.

“I think we’ve made it obvious we do,” he replies.

“It’s your fault.”

His brow wrinkles. “My fault? How is it my fault?”

I rub a hand down my face. Shit. I didn’t mean to blame him. “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault.”

“Damn straight. It’s not.”

I inhale a deep breath before admitting the truth. “I can’t be a dad because I would ruin the child.”

“Ruin the child?” Brody shakes his head. “I admit your jokes are horrible but listening to crappy jokes for a lifetime won’t ruin anybody.”

“I’m not referring to my jokes. I’m referring to how I allowed my dad to bully my twin and didn’t do anything to stop it.”

Riley chuckles. “I thought I was the idiot in the family.”

“Don’t worry,” Brody says. “You still are. Leaving Moon because you worried you’d turn into our dad was pretty idiotic.”

Riley points at me. “Not as idiotic as thinking you can’t be a dad because your own dad bullied your twin.”

“Not because Dad bullied Miller, but because I did nothing about it,” I hiss at him.

Miller clears his throat. “One, I hid how bad Dad was hurting me from everyone. Including you. How could you have done anything about it when you didn’t realize what was happening?”

“I should have paid better attention.”

He ignores my protests. “Two, you did run interference for me all the time.”

“I should have done more.”

“No, you were a kid. It wasn’t your responsibility to protect me.”

“I’m your older brother. I should have protected you.”

“We’re twins. You’re an hour older than me. But this discussion is fucking stupid anyway.”

I rear back at the venom in Miller’s voice. “What the hell?”

He pokes me in the chest. “You are acting as Robin’s dad at the moment. And you’re not ruining her.”

“Because she’s a baby. Once she’s older, it’ll be a different story,” I claim.

Miller grasps my shoulders and pulls me near before laying his forehead on mine. “You are a great dad to Robin. A blind person could see how much you care for her.” I open my mouth to argue with him but he doesn’t let me. “I understand you’re scared. Being a parent is scary. But don’t let fear make you miss out on the greatest thing in your life.” He squeezes my shoulders. “You hear me? Fear is not your master.”

I nod.

“Good.” He releases me and steps back. “My work here is done.” He marches to the door and leaves without another word.

I stare at where he was standing. Is he right? Am I capable of being a parent to Robin without ruining her? Am I letting fear rule my life?

Chapter 26

Did someone order a police escort? ~ Text from Peace to Elder



I groan when the alarm clock goes off.

“Make it stop. Make it stop.”

Elder’s arm tightens around my waist. “Why do I have to make it stop? You’re the one who wanted to get up at the butt crack of dawn this morning. Not me.”

“I didn’t want to...” I trail off when I realize I did indeed want to get up early this morning because today is the day. Today is the custody hearing. Eek! The custody hearing!

I shove his arm off of me and jump out of bed. “Hurry up! Get your ass in gear.”

Elder hugs my pillow. “We have three hours before we need to be in White Bridge for the court case. It’s a thirty-minute drive.”

I yank the covers off him before slapping his butt. “Get. Up. Now.”

“All right. All right. I’m up already.”

He rolls onto his back and scratches his belly. I notice little Elder is awake as well.

“See something you like?” He juts his hips into the air. “We’ve got two hours and twenty-five minutes to kill before we need to leave.”

I’m tempted. I know how enjoyable jumping back into bed with him would be since I’ve spent the past few nights enjoying our new friends with benefits arrangement. But no. I

can't. Today's the court case. I tear my gaze away from his body.

"No time. We need to hurry."

He sighs. "I'll start on breakfast."

I place a hand on my stomach. "I don't think I can handle breakfast this morning."

"Toast it is," he says as he stands.

He bends over to grab his t-shirt, putting his perfectly lean ass on display. The same ass I enjoy digging my nails into as he moves above me. The ass I'm going to miss once he leaves. Because he will leave. Everyone does.

He whips the t-shirt at me. "Get moving, stubborn girl. We only have two hours and twenty minutes left to get ready now."

"Stop making fun of me," I say before rushing out of the room.

I check in on Robin first. She's still sleeping with the dogs laying on the floor surrounding her. Black Ops glances up as I sneak into the room. When he notices it's me, he chuffs before laying his head back down.

I close the door softly behind me and hurry to the bathroom. I'm usually a quick shower kind of gal. But not today. Today I take extra time to wash and condition my hair as well as shave my legs. By the time, I exit the bathroom Robin is making waking noises.

"I got her," Elder says as he passes me wearing a pair of khakis and a button down shirt.

"How are you already dressed?"

"It's quite simple. I removed my clothes from yesterday before putting on clean clothes."

"Don't be a smart ass."

"I can't help it if my ass is smart."

"A pain in my ass is what you are."

He wiggles his eyebrows. “I can be a pain in your ass if you want. All you have to do is say the word.”

“Not every conversation is about sex.”

He blinks. “It’s not? I don’t know why not.”

Robin cries letting her impatience be known.

“Duty calls.” He salutes before entering the nursery.

I watch him for a second before shaking my head. I don’t have time for his shenanigans today.

I remove my one and only suit from the closet and hang it on the mirror before rummaging around in my drawers for a pair of pantyhose. I must have a pair here somewhere.

“Pantyhose. Pantyhose. Where are you?” I mutter as I throw items onto the floor. “Aha!” I finally find a pair at the bottom of my t-shirts.

No idea what pantyhose are doing in my t-shirt drawer but I’m not organizing my drawers now. I stare down at the floor now littered with my clothes. Damn. I need to organize my drawers.

Once I’m finally dressed, I stand in front of the mirror. “Yes, your honor, I promise to care for Robin as if she were my daughter.”

Truth be told, I wish she was my daughter and Elder was her dad. Then, I’d have an excuse to stay together with him instead of this whole friends with benefits arrangement. I could wake up snuggled in his arms every morning.

I scowl. What am I thinking? My life is not some kind of romantic fantasy. I should be avoiding Elder. He deserves better than me.

I grab my suit jacket and leave the bedroom. I step on a doggy toy in the hallway and my pantyhose catch on the edge of it.

“No!!!” I wail when I notice my pantyhose now have a huge snag in them.

Elder comes running. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

I lift up my foot. “I’m not hurt, but my pantyhose are dust.”

“You have time to put on another pair. Isn’t this why we had to wake up earlier than the farm animals?”

“I don’t think I have any other pantyhose. I found these buried in a drawer.”

“We can stop at a store on the way to the courthouse and buy another pair. We have time.”

I blow out a breath of air. “Okay.”

The microwave dings. “Ms. Robin’s breakfast is ready.”

I follow him into the kitchen and scowl when I notice Billy rooting around on the floor. “What is the goat doing in the kitchen?”

“You’re asking me? You’re the one who lets Billy do what Billy wants.”

“Not today.” I grab Billy’s collar and herd him toward the door. He fights me by thrashing and stomping.

“Be a good goat, Billy.”

“Baa!”

“I swear I’ll make you into goat stew if you don’t listen to me today.”

Wrong thing to say. Billy fights me even harder. I open the back door and try to push him outside, but he doesn’t want to go outside. He wants a banana. He knows I have one for him. I do most mornings. Not today, though.

“Are you going to help me or stand there watching?” I hiss at Elder.

He drops the toast into the toaster before running over to me. “What do you want me to do?”

“Are you serious? Help me get Billy outside before he shits all over me.”

He holds up his hands and retreats a step. “Do goats shit as a defense mechanism?”

“Get your behind over here and help or I’ll tell your brothers where you get your jokes from.”

He gasps. “You wouldn’t.”

“I’m wrestling a goat. Do you really want to test me now?”

He picks up a dish towel and wraps it around his hands. While I pull on Billy’s harness, he pushes on the goat’s butt.

“Come on, Billy. I’ll give you two bananas tomorrow.”

Baa!

“Yes, I promise.”

Baa!

He stops fighting and dashes outside. I release his collar but not before he manages to drag me outside with him. He jumps off the porch and I fall to my knees before skidding to a halt.

“Harmony!” Elder rushes to my side. “Are you okay?”

He helps me stand and I brush the dirt off of my skirt.

“You’re bleeding.”

I glance down at my knees. Shit. I am bleeding.

“Great. Just great,” I grumble as I march back inside. “What judge is going to award me custody when I show up at the courthouse in a rumpled suit and bloody knees?”

Elder grips my shoulders. “Relax. You have plenty of time to change.”

“Into what? This is the one nice outfit I own.”

“You must have a dress you can wear.”

“My dresses are not intended for a court appearance.”

“Harmony.” Elder lays his forehead on mine. “The judge isn’t going to care what you’re wearing. Unless you’re

wearing pajamas. She'd probably frown on pajamas in the courtroom."

Despite the panic building in my chest, I snort. "I'll have you know I have very nice pajamas."

His eyes flare. "I know." He clears his throat. "Which is also why I know your pajamas are not suitable for a courthouse."

EEK! Courthouse!

"I need a nice outfit. Maybe I should call Moon." My nose wrinkles. "But she doesn't dress up any more than I do. And all of Eden's clothes have grass stains. Then there's Soleil. All of her clothes have paint stains. I need different friends."

He squeezes my neck. "You can wear the dress you wore to the celebration of the collaboration between *Eden's Garden* and *Naked Falls Brewing*."

"You remember what I was wearing?"

He kisses my nose. "How could I forget? The green brought out the color of your eyes." He spins me around before patting my ass. "Go change. I'll feed Robin."

I start to walk away when I smell something burning. "What am I smelling?"

"The toast!" Elder runs to the kitchen and pops the button on the toaster. Charred bits of what used to be bread pop up.

The smoke alarm blares and Robin screams in response. I grab a broom and lift it up to wave in front of the alarm while Elder dumps the toast in the sink and pours water on it. The alarm stops and my shoulders drop in relief.

"What's going on in here?" Peace asks as he rushes inside.

"What are you doing here? And how did you get in here?"

"I rang the bell but no one answered."

I frown. "I didn't hear the bell."

“Probably because I disconnected it,” Elder says.

“You disconnected the bell,” I shriek.

“You complained the doorbell woke Robin, so I disconnected it.” He shrugs.

“What if the social worker arrives and we don’t realize it?”

He snorts. “As if you don’t check out of the window twenty million times when you’re expecting her.”

“I do not check out the window twenty million times!”

“Guys!” Peace shouts.

“Do too!”

“Do not!”

“GUYS!”

I snarl at Peace. “What?”

He smiles as he bounces Robin in his arms. “Maybe you can have this argument later?” He checks his watch. “When you’re not on your way to a custody hearing, perhaps?”

I check the clock. “Shit. We’re late. And I need to change. I look like I was wrangling a goat.”

“You *were* wrangling a goat,” Elder mutters.

I point at him. “Shut it, you.”

He mimes zipping his lips before he takes Robin from Peace. “Go get changed. I’ll finish feeding baby girl.”

“And then I’ll give you a police escort to White Bridge to make certain you aren’t late,” Peace adds.

“Okay. Okay.” I blow out a breath. “I can do this.”

“Of course, you can. My stubborn girl can do anything.”

I’m in my bedroom before I realize Elder called me *his* girl. My belly warms at the thought of being his. This isn’t good. I’m too attached to him already. I need to cut him loose soon. It’s for his own good.

Chapter 27

Has anyone seen Brody's pants? He's streaking through town naked again. ~ Text from Peace to the Bragg brothers



Elder

Despite the goat incident and the toast incident, we arrive at the courthouse in White Bridge with a few minutes to spare. Having a police escort certainly didn't hurt. I salute Peace as he drives off.

I wrap an arm around Harmony's shoulders. "You ready?"

She clutches her stomach. "I think I'm going to be sick."

"I knew I should have packed those barf bags in Robin's diaper bag."

"Barf bags? You can't be serious."

"I made little drawings of someone throwing up on them." I didn't but I'll do anything to get Harmony to smile today.

"What's goofier than a goofball?"

"I don't know. What?"

"I don't know either. I'm asking you."

I shrug. "I thought you were telling a joke."

She snorts. "You're the king of telling bad jokes in this family. Not me."

This family? I want to be a family with Harmony and Robin. More than I've ever wanted anything else in my life

before. But I'm not sure I can be a father to Robin despite what my brothers think.

I wipe those worries from my mind. Standing in the parking lot of a courthouse is not the place to think about whether or not I can be a father.

I puff out my chest. "I am the king."

She elbows me. "King of corny is nothing to be proud of."

"Ms. Kingsley," a man greets as he rushes toward us.

"It's Mrs. Bragg now," I correct.

Harmony glares at me. "I told you I'm not changing my name."

"We agreed you'd use our shared name in public." We agreed to no such thing, but Harmony hates to argue in public. She narrows her eyes on me. And she knows I know it.

The man sticks out his hand. "You must be Elder Bragg. I'm Mr. Craven."

I unwind my arm from around Harmony's shoulders to shake hands with the attorney.

"I'd say it's nice to meet you, but the circumstances aren't exactly ideal," I say.

"I understand. Such is the life of an attorney." He checks his watch. "We better get inside."

I clasp Harmony's hand. "We've got this." She nods before starting up the courthouse stairs.

As soon as we enter the building, there's a security check. I place Robin's diaper bag and my wallet on the belt before passing through the metal detector, which beeps in response.

Harmony holds out her hands. "Give me Robin."

I try to place the baby in her arms, but Robin screams in response.

"Someone's a daddy's girl," the security guard notes.

I rub my nose against Robin's. "She sure is."

"Hold onto her. I'll use the wand on you."

Harmony purses her lips as she watches the security guard wave the wand over my body. When he nods, I hitch the diaper bag back over my shoulder and join her.

"What's wrong?"

"Robin didn't want me," she pouts.

"You have to admit I'm irresistible." I wink at her.

"We're upstairs," Mr. Craven says and motions us forward.

"Do you have any instructions or advice for us?" Harmony asks as she follows him.

He smiles at her. "You're a beautiful family. Show the judge how you're a family and you'll be fine."

There's that word again – *family*.

Mr. Craven opens a courtroom door and peeks his head in before waving us inside. We sit on a bench with him and wait for our case to begin. When the matter of Robin Kingsley is announced, we stand and move to a table in front of the judge.

The judge arrives and notes the absence of Robin's biological father. She frowns. "We'll give Mr. Zimmerman five more minutes to appear before this matter will be postponed."

"What does postponed mean? Do we have to do this ___"

Harmony's questions are interrupted by the door banging open. She swivels to glance at what the commotion is, and her mouth drops open. "Oh. My. God."

"What?" I ask as I follow her gaze.

I scowl when I realize she's staring at a man swaggering through the room. He doesn't stop until he reaches the table across from us. Shit. This must be Wesley Zimmerman. The man who's trying to steal Robin from us.

I lean close to Harmony. "You have a little drool here." I motion to the corner of her lip.

“Don’t be jealous, goofball.”

I wish I could deny being jealous, but I can’t. I am beyond jealous. I’m the only man Harmony should be staring at. Me! I’m her husband. I’m the one helping her raise Robin.

“Let’s begin,” the judge says.

I keep Robin occupied and quiet while Mr. Craven and Zimmerman’s lawyer discuss legal shit I have no clue about with the judge.

“Mr. Bragg,” the judge calls in a loud voice and I realize my attention has drifted.

“Yes, your honor.”

“Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Of course. I’m happy to help in any way I can.”

“Mr. Zimmerman is claiming you and Ms. Kingsley are married in name only.” I scowl.

“I don’t mean any disrespect, your honor, but Mr. Zimmerman is full of sh— doggie doo-doo.”

She chuckles. “You have to admit the timing of your marriage is suspicious.”

“I agree we skipped the engagement and went straight to the wedding when Robin came into our lives.” I smile down at my baby girl. “But our marriage is not fake or a sham.” I reach over to grasp Harmony’s hand. “We love each other and our marriage is real.”

With a start, I realize I’m not lying. Harmony is mine and I never want to be without her. I love her. I want to spend the rest of my life teasing the stubborn out of her with my jokes.

Robin gurgles and I glance down at her. This baby girl is mine, too. Am I worried about fucking her up? I am. But I’m not alone in this. In addition to Harmony, I have my mom, Clementine, and my brothers. Hell, the entire town of Winter Falls has shown itself ready to step in whenever necessary.

“To summarize, you are saying, under oath, your marriage to Harmony Kingsley is not a sham.”

I nod. “Correct, your honor. Harmony is truly my wife.” I smile at her. “And this little baby girl is mine.” I bounce Robin on my lap.

“This is bullshit,” Wesley speaks for the first time.

“You will refrain from using such language in my court,” the judge tells him.

“Why? That guy.” He tries to point in my direction but his arm wobbles and he pitches to the side before catching himself on the table. “Lied his ass off.”

The judge glares at him. “Mr. Zimmerman, are you under the influence of drugs or alcohol at the moment?”

“Nope. Drugs and alcohol don’t influence me at all.”

“I’m ordering you to undergo a drug test.”

He pounds his fist on the table. “I’m not taking a fucking drug test.”

“I’ll ask you to curb your language while in this court, Mr. Zimmerman.” Wesley huffs. “I’ll also ask your counselor to remind you any failure to comply with my order will have a negative influence on your desire to have custody of your daughter Robin.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “Fine.”

“I’m adjourning this meeting,” the judge says and stands before marching out of the room.

“What does this mean?” Harmony asks Mr. Craven. “I didn’t even have a chance to speak.”

Mr. Craven shoves papers into his briefcase and shuts it before answering her. “It means we’ll need to wait for the result of the drug tests.”

“How long will it be before we know the results?”

Mr. Craven scans the room to ascertain we’re alone before answering, “Anywhere from a week to two weeks.” He leans close and lowers his voice. “This couldn’t have gone any better for us.”

Harmony’s nose wrinkles. “I don’t understand.”

“One of the reasons we claimed Mr. Zimmerman cannot be a guardian for his daughter—”

I growl. Robin is not his daughter.

“His biological daughter,” Mr. Craven corrects. “We’ve claimed Mr. Zimmerman cannot be a guardian due to his drug and alcohol use. Arriving at court while under the influence after recently finishing a stint in a rehabilitation facility will work in our favor.”

“I hate this for Robin,” Harmony says and I squeeze her hand. “Her mother is dead, and her father is a deadbeat.”

Mr. Craven smiles at her. “Lucky for Robin, she has new parents who love her very much.” He stands. “She’s one of the lucky ones. I’ll be in touch,” he says as he walks away.

“I thought we’d have clarity one way or the other today,” Harmony complains as we leave the courthouse.

I settle Robin in her car seat before palming Harmony’s neck and drawing her near to me. “Hold on, darling. This is merely a bump in the road.”

“Easy for you to say. This doesn’t affect you.”

“Doesn’t affect me?” I growl. “This affects me.”

Does she not realize how I feel about her? Does she not know I’d do anything for her?

It’s time to show her I’m the man for her. She thought I was pushy before Robin came into her life. She hasn’t seen pushy yet.

Chapter 28

*Who thinks death by spoon is a bit harsh
for accidentally eating a cookie? ~ Text from
Riley to the Bragg brothers*



Damn. Elder's truck is in the driveway. He's supposed to be at work this evening. I check my watch. It's after six. I stayed extra long at work to make sure he was gone when I got home.

"You going to stand out here all night long or are you coming inside?" Elder calls from the porch.

I scowl at him. "Can't I have a moment for myself?"

"A moment for yourself? Sure. A moment to hatch an escape plan? No."

"I'm not planning my escape."

"Yes, you are, my stubborn girl."

"Stop pushing me."

"What do you mean?" He widens his eyes to make himself appear innocent. Innocent my ass.

"You know exactly what I mean. All the little touches, the sweet nothings in my ear, holding me while I sleep."

"I'm confused. Don't wives usually complain when their husbands don't do those things?"

"You're not confused. You're sly and cunning. And you're not my husband."

"I have a marriage certificate that says otherwise."

"This is fake," I hiss at him.

“It didn’t feel fake when you were coming all over my cock last night.”

I wish I could say he’s lying or even exaggerating. He’s not. I’ve been taking full advantage of the friends with benefits arrangement. Or, at least, full advantage of the benefits part of the deal. The friends part, on the other hand? I haven’t been much of a friend lately.

But who can blame me? Elder’s been nothing but sweet since the court hearing. He’s trying to worm his way into my heart.

He’s already in your heart, Rebel Harmony sings.

“You’re impossible,” I tell Elder instead of admitting how I’m getting closer and closer to cracking. I can’t crack. I can’t love Elder. I don’t deserve Elder. And he certainly deserves better than me.

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear before palming my neck. “Stop fighting us.”

I lean back forcing him to drop his hand. “Where is this coming from all of a sudden? We agreed to be friends with benefits. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

He sighs before opening the front door. “Let’s eat before the beast in your stomach escapes.”

At his comment, I realize my stomach’s rumbling to be fed.

I follow Elder into the house and down the hallway. I stumble when I catch sight of the living room.

“Are you trying to start a fire?”

He sighs. “Of course, my stubborn girl would be worried about a fire instead of appreciating the romantic setting.”

“There’s a baby and three dogs in the house.” I pause. Where are my dogs?

I search the room and discover Robin in her playpen and my three dogs laying on the floor surrounding her. They

don't even bother to greet me when I come home anymore. They're all about Robin now.

I can't blame them. Robin is pretty loveable. I tiptoe to the playpen and glance down at her sleeping form.

Elder grasps my hand and pulls me away. "The candles aren't real. They're LED."

"Oh." My ire dissipates.

"Have a seat." He motions to a blanket on the floor with a picnic basket and a bottle of champagne. It's romantic and lovely and exactly what I need after a long day of work, which is why I scowl. Elder is not supposed to be giving me what I need.

"Romance isn't part of our deal."

He pushes on my shoulders until I'm forced to sit or fight him. I'm not fighting him with Robin sleeping a few feet away.

Rebel Harmony snorts. *Sure, you're afraid to wake Robin. Uh-huh.*

"Every woman deserves a bit of romance in their lives." I can't argue with him there. We do. "And a woman who's working a full-time job while caring for a four-month-old doubly deserves romance."

"Double?"

"Okay, triple," he says as he sits across from me and pops the champagne bottle.

I hold up my palm. "I don't think we should both be drinking with Ms. Screams A Lot in the house."

He shows me the bottle. "Already way ahead of you. It's sparkling apple juice."

Darn it! How dare he know my objections in advance and make adjustments?

He fills my glass and hands it to me before raising his own. "To us."

I scowl. "There is no us."

“Not yet,” he sings before drinking his apple juice. “Ugh! Gross. Remind me never to buy sparkling apple juice again.”

He feigns retching and I giggle. He’s such a goofball.

“I had Moon put together the picnic basket. What do —”

“Moon? What a little traitor,” I mutter.

“Eden helped, too.”

“Are all my friends traitors?”

“Helping prepare a basket of food for you is a betrayal? You have a weird definition of betrayal. Your friends wanted to make sure you’re well fed since you’ve been working a lot lately.”

I haven’t been working a lot lately. I’ve been hanging out at the Wildlife Refuge while avoiding everyone – especially Elder.

I blow out a breath. This has to stop. I can’t avoid Elder forever. And I don’t want to miss any more time with Robin than absolutely necessary. She won’t be this age forever.

“Elder,” I begin.

He grins. “Yes?”

“Stop.”

“Stop what? Stop grinning? I can’t help it if I have resting grin face.”

“There is no such thing as resting grin face.”

He points to his face. “Yes, there is. I’m proof.”

I open my mouth to argue with him but stop when I realize he’s done it again. He’s maneuvered the topic away from what I want to discuss. And he knows darn well what I want to discuss.

“Stop changing the subject.”

He reaches into the basket and removes a box. “What’s the subject?”

He pries off the lid and the smell of meatloaf wafts toward me. My stomach grumbles and my mouth waters in response. The meatloaf from Moon's diner is the best meatloaf in the world.

"How big of a piece do you want?" He doesn't wait for a response before placing a large slice on a plate. "Mashed potatoes?" he asks as he removes another container from the basket.

"You don't say no to Moon's mashed potatoes." You don't say no to Moon's food period. Unless she's experimenting. Maple syrup does not belong in pasta, no matter what she says.

He hands me a plate loaded with food and we dig in. I eat a few bites before broaching the subject again.

"You need to stop, Elder."

"Stop what? Being my magnificent self? I'm afraid I can't promise to dim my magnificentness. It happens all on its own."

I huff as I set my plate down on the blanket. "You know what I mean."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you need to stop planning romantic gestures."

"You're not enjoying the picnic?"

"I didn't say anything of the sort."

"You don't enjoy it when I make you breakfast in the morning?"

"I—"

"Or when I prepare your lunch?"

"You're obsessed with food."

"No, I'm obsessed with you eating. You forget to eat when you're busy. You need to stay healthy for the baby and me."

"No."

“You don’t need to stay healthy?” His brow wrinkles. “Healthy is important.”

“If you’d let me finish, I’d point out how I don’t need to stay healthy for you.”

He sets his plate down and grasps my hands. “Why not?”

I try to yank my hands away but he tightens his hold. “You’re a great friend.”

“Uh oh. I’m getting the friend-zone speech.”

“Will you be serious for one minute?”

“Nope. Not when serious means you pushing me away.”

“I’m not pushing you away.”

“What do you call it then?”

“I call it what it is. We’re friends. Nothing more.”

“Darling,” he begins but is cut off by a wail from Robin.

I jump to my feet. “I’ve got her. You finish your dinner.”

I pick Robin up and hurry out of the living room down the hallway to the nursery. I’m running away, but I don’t care how I look like a scaredy cat.

I thought I could handle a serious conversation with Elder. I was wrong. I can’t. He pokes holes in my ‘friends only’ theory without even trying. I’m starting to worry there’s a reason it’s easy to poke holes in my theory.

It’s because you’re falling for him, Rebel Harmony says.

I am not falling for Elder. I can’t. He can be as sweet and kind and loving as he wants to, I— Shit. I’m falling for Elder. This needs to stop. I don’t deserve him. Not after what I did to my family. It’s better I push him away.

Chapter 29

If you see Eden make sure to tell her I had nothing to do with the plants that got run over. ~ Text from Miller to the Bragg brothers



The phone rings as I'm walking into the house with my hands loaded down with groceries.

"I got it," Elder says as he rushes past me.

I scowl at him. This is my house. My telephone. But try telling Elder anything of the sort. Since the picnic last week, he hasn't let up one bit. His new nickname should be 'full-court press'. My adorable goofball is nowhere to be seen.

I shake my head. Where did the 'my' come from? Elder isn't *my* anything.

"It's for you," he says as he takes the bags from me before handing me the phone.

I push thoughts of Elder away. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Bragg? This is Mr. Craven, your attorney."

As if I can forget the name of my attorney.

"Do you have news?"

Elder pauses with unloading the groceries to come stand next to me.

"I do."

My knees wobble. This is it. This is the moment I learn whether Robin is mine. Elder guides me toward the couch where I collapse. He sits next to me and holds my hand.

“Is it good news?” I ask Mr. Craven.

“It is.” He clears his throat. “Mr. Zimmerman’s blood test came back positive for cocaine and alcohol.”

What a douchebag. Showing up at a custody hearing for his daughter stoned off his face.

“What does this mean with regard to custody of Robin?”

“The judge has dismissed his petition for custody.”

My whole body tingles with excitement. “She has?”

“Yes, but I have to warn you.”

The tingles evaporate and a cold sweat replaces them. “Warn me?”

“As the biological father of Robin, Wesley Zimmerman has the right to file for custody again. Unless he terminates his parental rights, there’s always a chance Wesley will file again but the longer Robin is in your care and the more settled she is, the less his chance of success.”

Over my dead body will Wesley Zimmerman steal my baby away. “Okay. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

As soon as I end the call, Elder asks, “What happened? What did Mr. Craven want?”

A smile breaks out on my face. “Wesley’s petition for custody has been dismissed.”

He whoops before jumping to his feet and pulling me into his arms. He twirls me around in circles and I giggle in response.

“Best. News. Ever,” he declares. His gaze dips to my mouth and I lick my lips in response.

Unfortunately, this lick of lips is not in anticipation of feeling his lips on mine – no matter how much I may want to feel his lips one last time.

This is me preparing myself for the battle to come. Because it’s time. Enjoying a friends with benefits relationship

with Elder was all fine and good while the custody battle for Robin raged, but now that it's over, it's time to move on.

I tap his shoulder. "Put me down."

"Are you dizzy?" He waggles his eyebrows. "I have that effect on women."

"Goofball time is over."

"I gotcha." He shackles my wrist and draws me toward the bedroom. "Time for sexy Elder."

I plant my feet before yanking my hand away. "No. It's time for Elder to exit stage right."

"Stage right? Why is it always stage right? Why never stage left?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "Fine. Time for Elder to exit stage left."

He frowns. "What are you talking about?"

"You should go home."

"Go home? I live here."

"No," I growl. "You live in a house off of Main Street in Winter Falls. You don't live here."

"I sleep in the bed in the bedroom down the hallway with you every night and my clothes are in your closet. Pretty sure those two acts together spell living here."

I'm not going to argue about this. It's hard enough to push him away as it is. But push him away I must. He deserves better than me.

"Regardless. It's time for you to leave."

"Why?"

"Because this whole arrangement is fake."

He growls. "This hasn't been fake for weeks and you know it."

Maybe not. But it's time for the fun and games to end.

I lift my nose in the air. "I know no such thing."

“You can’t out stubborn me on this one. I’m right.”

My hands fist. “You can’t declare you’re right and – poof! – you’re right. ”

He sighs. “I know you’re scared.”

I lean close and hiss at him. “I am not scared.”

“Darling girl, I know your history. I understand your fears.”

“You understand nothing.”

He raises his palms. “You are correct. I can’t possibly understand how it feels to lose all of my family. It was hard enough losing my dad and we weren’t very close.”

“Then, you understand why you need to leave.”

“I understand nothing of the sort.”

“I explained this. I’m responsible for the death of my family.”

He growls. “No, you are not.”

I ignore the warmth spreading through my body at his declaration. I wish he was right. I wish I wasn’t guilty. But I am.

“You deserve better than me.”

“There’s no one better than you.”

More warmth threatens to flow through my body but I stop it. I don’t deserve to feel all warm and fuzzy. “You’re wrong.”

“What about Robin?”

“What about her?”

“Aren’t you worried she deserves better?”

Every fucking second of every day. But I will not allow a drug addict to raise Amy’s child. “I’m Robin’s cousin. I love her and I’m going to protect her and make sure nothing bad ever happens to her.”

A muscle in his jaw ticks. “You better not be saying I’m a bad influence on her.” He pounds his chest. “I would do anything for our baby girl. I’d walk through fire for her. I’d

harness the moon for her if she asked. Whatever she wants, she's getting."

I wish I could be the woman who has the privilege of raising children with Elder. He's such a great dad. But he's not the dad for Robin.

"You'll make a great dad someday." He winces. "But not to Robin." I point to the door. "You need to go."

He grasps my hands and draws me close until I can feel his body heat surrounding me. "Here's what you need to understand. I'm not going anywhere. I love you. I'm not leaving. I'm staying here where I belong."

My heart stalls in my chest. He loves me? Elder Bragg, the man I want to spend the rest of my life with, loves me.

Told you, you love him, Rebel Harmony declares.

No. No. No. No. I can't love him. I don't deserve him. He deserves someone better than me. Someone who can give him everything. Someone who isn't afraid everyone she loves will die.

"How dare you?" I snarl. "How dare you claim to love me to get what you want?"

"I'm not saying I love you because I don't want you to kick me out. I'm saying I love you because I love your stubborn ass and never want to leave."

I push him away. "You don't love me. You want to continue to play house with me. It's not the same thing."

He growls. "Don't you dare tell me how I feel. I know what I feel for you and I won't have you diminish my feelings because you feel unworthy or are scared."

"I am not afraid." I'm freaking terrified.

He runs a finger down the side of my face and it's all I can do to not lean into his touch. "It's okay to be scared. Falling in love is scary. I know I'm scared."

"You have no idea what fear is."

He raises an eyebrow. “I don’t? One of my greatest fears is coming true right now.”

What the hell is he talking about now? “What?”

He places his palm against my cheek. “The woman I love is rejecting me.”

Pain pierces through me at his words. He thinks I’m rejecting him?

Because you are, Rebel Harmony points out.

It’s for his own good.

Whatever helps you sleep at night.

“Listen. It’s not you. It’s me.”

He smiles but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Darling, I know it’s you. What you don’t know is I’m not giving up.” I open my mouth to respond but he places a finger against my lips. “No. You can spout all the shit you want out of guilt or fear but it’s not changing a thing. I love you. I will always love you.”

“You can’t,” I say against his finger.

“I can feel whatever I want to feel.” He kisses my forehead. “I’ll see you later.”

“But you didn’t pack your stuff!” I shout after his retreating figure.

He waves at me in response.

I stare down at the dogs. “He’s not coming back.”

Black Ops barks while Pup Tart and Little Bow Wow cry. I wag my finger at them. “No making me feel bad. I did what needed to be done.”

I walk to the window and watch as Elder drives away. My heart clenches in my chest and a tear flows down my cheek. I swipe it away. I don’t deserve to cry. This is all my fault.

I never should have agreed to the friends with benefits arrangement. Especially considering how irresistible Elder is. But I’ll get over him. Eventually.

Chapter 30

Tell Clementine I'm Robin's favorite grandmother. ~ Text from Daisy to Elder



“We’re here,” Ashlyn announces as she barges inside my house with Soleil, Eden, and Moon.

I swipe at the tears running down my face. “You can’t burst into my house without any warning.”

“I told you we should have knocked,” Eden says.

Moon snorts. “If we knocked, she would have ignored us.”

“Enough,” Soleil orders before handing me a tissue. “We’re not here to bicker amongst ourselves.”

Ashlyn scrunches up her nose. “We’re not?”

Soleil wags a finger at her. “Are you going to behave or am I going to tell Rowan about how you begged Moon to make red velvet pancakes?”

Ashlyn gasps. “You wouldn’t!”

“Try me,” she grumbles before giving Ashlyn her back. “Now. Come on.” She grasps my elbow and leads me to the kitchen table. “Sit.”

“Will someone please tell me why all of my friends invaded my house?” I ask.

“She’s cute,” Eden notes.

Moon shakes her head. “Claiming she doesn’t know why we’re here.”

“Sorry, I’m late,” Daisy announces as she enters the house. “I’ll grab Robin and be on my way.”

“Grab Robin? What’s going on?”

Daisy continues down the hallway toward the nursery. What she doesn’t do is answer. I stand to follow her, but Soleil places a hand on my shoulder and pushes me back down in my chair.

“You’re oddly strong for an artist.”

“Thank the pots,” she says.

“What happened?” Ashlyn asks as she sits across from me.

Moon rolls her eyes. “I thought we agreed on easing into the subject.”

“We did? I agreed to ease into a subject?” Ashlyn points to herself. “Was I at this discussion?”

Eden sits next to me. “The cat’s out of the bag now. Why did you dump Elder?”

I shrug and feign nonchalance. “It wasn’t working out.”

Soleil frowns at me. “Which is why you were crying your eyes out when we arrived.”

“I wasn’t crying my eyes out. It’s literally impossible to cry your eyes out.”

Daisy returns carrying Robin and a diaper bag with my dogs trailing after her. I go to say goodbye to my baby. “Please take me with you,” I whisper to Daisy.

“Tell me why you broke my Elder’s heart and I’ll get rid of your friends for you,” she offers.

I scowl at her. “No fair.”

She smirks. “All’s fair in love and war.”

“And to think I supported you against the Bragg brothers when you started dating Lennon.”

“Thanks for the support,” she says as she leaves. The dogs follow her to the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow with your baby,” she tells them and they lay down at the door to wait.

“I need to feed Billy,” I announce to my friends.

“Dang it!” Moon slaps a ten-dollar bill on the table.

“I knew it,” Ashlyn says as she stuffs the bill in her pocket.

“I was sure she’d use the dogs as her next excuse,” Moon grumbles.

“I’m not making up excuses.”

“You are,” Soleil says. “But it’s okay. We have all night.”

“And all day,” Eden adds. “Congrats! Juniper said you can have tomorrow off.”

I don’t want tomorrow off. I need to keep busy. I don’t need downtime to think about all I’ve lost. All I can never have.

Eden giggles as she points to my face. “This is going to be fun.”

“Fun?” I snarl. “What about my situation spells fun?”

“Hey now.” Soleil wraps an arm around my waist. “Don’t snarl at your friends because you’re heartbroken.”

“Who says I’m heartbroken?”

“I do!” Ashlyn raises her hand.

“I second!” Moon raises her hand.

“I third!” Eden raises her hand.

Soleil’s arm squeezes my waist. “It’s unanimous.” She leads me back to the kitchen table and I slump into a chair.

“You can’t say whether I’m heartbroken. It’s my heart. I say when it’s broken or not.”

“She’s playing the stubborn card. What a surprise,” Eden grumbles.

“And just after her Bragg woman t-shirt arrived, too,” Moon adds.

“I am not a Bragg woman. I will never be a Bragg woman.”

“Except your last name is Bragg,” Ashlyn points out.

“How many times do I have to tell people I didn’t change my last name when I married Elder?”

Soleil claps her hands. “We’re getting off topic here.”

I open my mouth and she slashes her hand at me. “No. You won’t ask what the topic is. You know darn well we’re here to find out what Elder did.”

“Exactly.” Eden nods. “If Elder hurt you, I’m going to have Miller kick his ass.”

Moon motions toward me. “Of course, Elder hurt her. She was bawling when we arrived.”

“I wasn’t bawling.”

No one listens to me.

“But was what Elder did enough to warrant a beating from Miller?” Eden asks.

“Duh. A man makes a woman cry, he should get a beating,” Moon says. “I can’t believe we’re discussing this.”

I slam my hands down on the table. “Elder did nothing except claim to love me!”

“Dammit.” Moon digs another ten-dollar bill out of her pocket. “You’re making me poor.”

“Correction. Your inability to understand our stubborn friend is making you poor,” Ashlyn says as she pockets the money.

“Stop making bets about me,” I hiss at them.

“We have to do something to liven this up. It could be hours before your obstinate ass caves and tells us what the real problem is,” Moon says.

“Hold on!” Soleil shouts. “Elder said he loves you? Why did you kick him out of your house if he loves you?”

Eden raises her hand. “I know!” I glare at her and she smiles. “Harmony’s scared.”

“You’re one to talk. You wouldn’t give Miller a chance because you were afraid of becoming your mother.”

“Like recognizes like.”

I shake my head. “No. You can’t compare your fear of becoming your mother to my guilt over killing my family.”

Soleil clasps my hand. “Killing your family?”

Crap. I wasn’t going to tell them my pathetic story today. Or any other day for that matter.

“This calls for booze.” Moon rummages in my kitchen before returning with a bottle of vodka and five glasses. She pours shots for everyone.

I accept a glass and drink it. I’m going to need some courage for what’s about to come. Because there is no way my friends are going to leave without learning the truth about my past. Not when I let it slip how I killed my family.

“I have no family because they all died and it’s all my fault,” I begin before telling them about my past. How my parents and baby brother Ethan died. How Amy was my only cousin and now she’s gone, too.

“And now you understand why I had to dump Elder,” I say once I’m finished.

Moon raises her hand. “I don’t understand.”

“Did you not listen to me? I killed my family. I don’t deserve Elder.”

Moon scowls. “You didn’t kill your family. They died in a car accident.”

I pound my chest. “A car accident I caused.”

Soleil squeezes my hand. “I hate to agree with Moon, but she’s right. You didn’t cause the accident.”

“But—”

“Nope. I’m not sitting here and listening to you claim responsibility for an accident you didn’t cause. Not happening.”

Moon nods. “Me either.”

“Agreed,” Eden says.

“Agreed?” I scream. “Agreed?”

“Uh oh,” Ashlyn mumbles. “She’s about to explode.”

I pound my fist on the table. “If I hadn’t panicked and screamed at my dad to stop the car, my family would still be alive. My actions caused their deaths. I’m responsible.”

“Wow.” Soleil’s eyes widen. “I didn’t realize you had this much power. You controlled your dad’s driving *and* the driving of another car. Remind me never to let you borrow my car again.”

“You don’t own a car,” I hiss at her. “And stop making light of what happened.”

“What do you expect me to do when you spout bullshit?”

“It’s not bullshit.”

“It’s total bullshit,” Ashlyn says and I glare at her. “I’m an excellent bullshit detector.”

“Yeah, she can spot bullshit a mile away,” Moon says.

“Say we agree with you,” Eden begins and Soleil frowns at her. “We don’t but let’s say we do. What does the accident have to do with Elder?”

“I told you. He deserves better.”

“But he loves you and he wants you.”

“He can’t want me. Everyone I love dies. I had to push Elder away to save him.”

Soleil snorts. “Everyone you love dies? What a crock of shit.”

“Hey! You can’t say my feelings are a crock of shit.”

“I can when they’re complete bullshit.”

I grit my teeth. “They are not complete bullshit.”

“Oh yeah?” She motions to all my friends gathered around the table. “If everyone you love dies, why are we still here?”

“Yeah.” Ashlyn nods in agreement. “You haven’t killed us off.”

“Because you’re like athlete’s foot. I can’t get rid of you.”

“We’re athlete’s foot?” Soleil shakes her head. “Have you met Brody? I can’t get rid of the guy.”

I grab hold of the opportunity to change the subject. “Tell me more.”

“Nope. I need to straighten your shit out first.”

“There’s nothing to straighten out. I took care of it. I got rid of Elder.”

“Except you love him,” Moon sings.

“You want to make babies with him,” Ashlyn adds.

“Our children will be cousins and play together and be the best of friends,” Eden says.

My heartbeat races causing my chest to ache. Children? With Elder? “I can’t,” I wheeze out.

Soleil squeezes my hand. “You can. I bet if we call Elder now he’ll come running.”

“I have him on speed dial.” Ashlyn digs her phone out of her pocket, but I slap it away and it tumbles to the ground.

“You are not phoning Elder. Elder and I are finished.”

“Because you’re being an idiot,” Eden says.

“Did I call you an idiot when you were being an idiot about Miller?”

“I believe you did.”

“It’s not nice.”

She nods. “I know. It sucks when you’re confronted with your fears.”

“With how irrational your fears are,” Soleil corrects.

“My fears aren’t irrational.”

“You’re worried Elder will die because you love him. How is your thinking not irrational?”

“Unless you have a superpower. Did we consider the superhero angle?” Ashlyn asks.

“Superheroes don’t exist,” Moon says.

“I’m not a superhero.” Superheroes don’t kill people. They save people.

Soleil pats my hand. “Will you at least consider your thinking may be irrational?”

“Yes,” I lie.

She frowns at my knee bouncing under the table. “You can’t lie to us to get us off your back.”

“You have to mean it,” Eden adds.

“Fine.” I throw my hands in the air. “I agree to consider my thinking about love is irrational.”

“And you didn’t kill your family,” Soleil adds.

“They’re dead because of me.”

Soleil squeezes my hand. “They’re dead because a car crashed into yours.”

“But—”

“Just promise to consider what we’re saying.”

“You sound like Elder,” I grump.

“He loves you.”

“How can he love a murderer? Why isn’t he running as fast and as far away as me as he can? For that matter, why aren’t all of you running away?”

“I know!” Ashlyn raises her hand. “Because you’re not a murderer.”

I scowl at her.

“You’d be in prison otherwise,” Moon adds. “Trust me. Peace has threatened to throw me in jail tons. I know these things.”

Eden points at me. “She’s speechless. She knows we’re right.”

They are right, Rebel Harmony whispers.

I don’t think so.

At least think about it, she pushes.

Fine, I growl at her.

“If I agree to think about what you said, can I have my baby back?”

Moon slides the bottle of vodka across the table to me. “Nope. We’re drinking and eating and having a girls’ night out.”

“But—”

“Nope. I have a babysitter. You have a babysitter. We’re enjoying a night with our girlfriends without our children,” Ashlyn declares.

Moon stands. “I brought some food.”

I stop arguing. I can’t win anyway. Besides, it would be nice to spend an evening with my friends. Since Robin came into my life, I haven’t had much time for them.

And you should think about what they said, Rebel Harmony adds.

I ignore her and reach for the vodka.

Chapter 31

*If I catch the lot of you peeking into windows again, I'm stealing your binoculars.
~ Text from Peace to the Gossip Gals*



Elder

“They’re here,” Brody says as he rushes to the front door of my house where he’s still couch-surfing because I can’t seem to get rid of him.

“Whatever,” I mumble as I take another drink from the bottle. I knew my brothers would show up sooner or later. I was hoping for later but sooner’s fine, too. I really don’t care.

“I thought we dealt with this already,” Miller grumbles as he enters the living room and sits next to me.

“Dealt with what?”

“Hold on. Hold on. We can’t start asking questions until we have the tequila ready,” Brody says.

Peace groans. “No tequila.”

Brody rolls his eyes. “Get over it already.”

“I’m not the one who ran down Main Street buck ass naked.”

“I thought naked wasn’t a crime in Winter Falls.”

Peace scowls at Brody. “It’s not. But you didn’t stick to running naked through town.”

“What’s the big deal? I wanted to borrow a book.”

“The big deal is the library was closed and you were trying to break in through a locked window with your dick hanging out.”

Brody smirks. "I'm quite proud of the size of my dick."

"Which everyone in town now knows since you shouted about how proud you were while I arrested you."

"You could have given me a warning," Brody pouts. "You're my brother, after all."

"I was planning to give you a warning until you called me a pig and claimed I couldn't catch you."

"You didn't catch me."

"Pretty sure I handcuffed your naked ass."

"Only because I slipped in the mud."

"Still caught you, didn't I?"

"I warned you about letting Brody drink tequila," Riley says. "My twin can't handle his liquor. It's embarrassing."

"I'll show you embarrassing." Brody leaps at Riley.

Peace steps in between the two. "Knock it off."

"Are we going to deal with Elder's fuck up or watch the wonder twins put on a show?" Miller asks.

"Wonder twins activate!" Brody and Riley shout simultaneously while bumping their fists.

"I vote we let the annoying twins do their thing," I say.

"The brother in the hot seat doesn't get a vote," Miller says.

"Why am I in the hot seat?" It's not my fault Harmony got scared and kicked me out of her house.

He grunts. "You know why."

"No. I don't. I didn't do anything wrong."

Unless loving Harmony is wrong. In which case, I don't want to be right. Shit. I sound like some cliché country song. At least I still have my truck and I don't have a dog for anyone to steal.

How much have I had to drink? I glance at the bottle of whiskey I'm holding. How much of this did I drink anyway? The bottle won't stop moving. Guess that answers my question.

"You broke up with the woman you love," Miller says.

I glare at him. "I didn't break up with her. She kicked me out of her house."

"And you let her."

"I didn't 'let her' do anything."

My stubborn Harmony hates to listen to reason. I'll give her a few days to cool off before approaching again. And by approaching, I mean setting up a scenario to show her how much I love her.

Between sips of my whiskey, I Googled grand gestures. I didn't find anything useful, but I will. Because I'm not giving up.

Peace steals the bottle out of my hands while Riley sets a bottle of rum on the table.

"Yuck. I hate rum. Give me my whisky back." I motion toward Peace but he shakes his head.

"It's part of the rules. The liquor used in truth or punch must be one hated by the brother in the hot seat."

"That isn't a rule. How come Peace is making up new rules?"

Miller shrugs. "It makes sense."

"But Peace already had his whole thing with Olivia. He'll never have to drink some foul liquid in truth or punch. Not fair."

"He's a man. He'll screw up sooner or later," Riley says as he sits down next to me.

"Delaying time is over," Brody sings.

I glare at him. "I know where you sleep."

He shrugs. "You suck at revenge pranks."

“But I’m willing to learn.”

He feigns shivering in fright. “I’m so scared.”

“Knock it off, you two,” Peace orders. “My shift starts in an hour. I don’t have all night.”

“And here I thought you wore your uniform to show you’re in charge.”

He smirks at me. “I’m the oldest. I am in charge regardless of what I’m wearing.”

“Unless you’re naked. When we’re naked, I’m in charge,” Brody declares.

“Can we stop talking about being naked? It’s bad enough I caught Brody whacking off in the shower this afternoon.” I don’t have to feign retching. Walking in on your brother playing with his dick is sickening.

Brody shrugs. “It’s not my fault you walked in on me.”

“Yes, it is. This is my house. Find somewhere to live already.”

“I live here.” Brody scrunches his nose. “Do you think he’s too drunk for truth or punch?”

“You’re never too drunk for truth or punch,” Miller rumbles.

“Let’s get this party started.” Riley pours shots of rum and hands me one.

“Truth or punch,” I mutter before taking my shot.

“Why did you break up with Harmony?” Peace asks.

“I didn’t. She broke up with me.”

Riley shakes his head at Peace. “We’ve explained this. You need to ask detailed questions.”

“What reason did Harmony give you for breaking up with you?” Miller asks and I scowl at him.

“Couple privilege.”

Miller rubs his hands as he stands. “Awesome. You refused to answer. It’s punching time, and I’ve been waiting to punch you for a while.”

I hold up my hands. “You can’t punch me if I’m not allowed to answer you.”

He narrows his eyes. “Why are you not allowed to answer?”

“I can’t reveal Harmony’s secrets.”

Miller deflates. He knows I’m right. “Fuck.”

“My turn,” Riley says. “Did you tell Harmony about your fear of raising children?”

I rear back. “What do my fears have to do with anything?”

My fears? Am I still afraid of raising children? Not really. I know Harmony won’t let me fuck it up. Assuming she ever lets me back into her life.

“Answer the question or Miller’s punching you.”

“Now, hold on. Miller can’t punch me. This is your question. Why does everyone suddenly think they can change the rules to truth or punch?”

Riley smiles. “We agreed on this new rule on our way over. You were outvoted.”

“I fucking hate this game,” I grumble.

“Answer the question.”

“I did not tell Harmony about my fear of having children.”

“Does this have anything to do with Harmony kicking you out?” Brody asks.

“No.”

Peace crosses his arms across his chest and studies me. “What are you going to do about Harmony kicking you out?”

I lift up a shot. “Drink.”

Miller smacks my shoulder. “Answer the question properly or I’m punching you.”

“What is your problem? Why do you want to punch me? You’re my twin. You’re supposed to be my supporter.”

Riley shakes his head. “You’re fraternal twins, not identical. Fraternal twins don’t have twin power.”

“Someone shut Riley up before I punch him,” I growl.

Miller stands and Riley runs to hide behind Peace. “I’ll be quiet.” He peeks out from behind Peace. “But you still have to answer the question.”

I slam my shot down on the table. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

Peace frowns. “You don’t know? You love her and you’re letting her go? I thought Brody was the idiot of the family.”

I don’t deny being in love with Harmony. It’d be a waste of time. Besides, I don’t care if the world knows how much I love her. I only care if Harmony believes me. Which she will. Eventually.

“I didn’t say I was letting her go. I said I don’t know what I’m going to do to get her back yet.”

Brody rubs his hands together. “Excellent. I have a few ideas.”

“I am not pranking Harmony. You don’t get a woman to love you by pranking her.”

He grins. “Speak for yourself.”

Riley elbows him. “Soleil isn’t going to fall in love with you after you scared the crap out of her by dressing up as a ghost and standing in front of her window.”

“But I whipped my costume off and rescued her from the ghost.”

“You were the ghost.”

Brody puffs out his chest. “Brilliant plan.”

“One thing’s for sure. I won’t be asking for Brody’s advice,” I say.

Miller grunts in agreement.

“You can ask me,” Peace says. “I know how to do a grand gesture.”

“I’m not asking my brothers for advice. I’ll figure this out by myself.”

“But you’re a Bragg brother. We do everything together,” Brody says.

“We do not. And I’m not wearing matching t-shirts at the monthly business meetings.”

He pouts. “But I already ordered them.”

Miller marches toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Riley asks.

“Hungry.”

“I could eat,” Peace says and follows Miller.

“Is the diner still open?” Brody asks as he joins them.

Eating at the diner isn’t a bad idea. I sway as I try to stand. Yep. Food isn’t a bad idea. Plus, my brothers won’t bother me about my relationship with Harmony in public. Not since this town is full of eavesdroppers who love to gossip.

Eavesdrop? Now there’s an idea. Maybe something Moon says will give me an idea of how I can get Harmony back.

Chapter 32

In my day, we didn't argue about where to put a thermometer. ~ Message from Sage on the Winter Falls Facebook page



I bounce Robin in my arms as I pace the living room. “Come on, baby girl. Stop crying.”

My words do not have the desired effect on Robin. Unless crying louder is a desired effect. It’s certainly not the effect I was hoping for.

“What’s wrong, baby?” And should I take her to a doctor? Shit. Shit. Shit. I don’t have a vehicle since I kicked Elder out.

Elder would know what to do. He’s always calm when Robin’s crying her eyes out. He sings to her and she hangs on to his every word. I need to call Elder.

“Hello,” he mumbles when he picks up the phone.

“Were you sleeping?” I check the clock. Crap. It’s three in the morning. Of course, he was sleeping. Normal people who don’t have babies who won’t stop crying are asleep at three a.m. “Never mind.”

“What is it, Harmony?” he asks before I can hang up. “Are you okay? Is Robin okay?”

“I think she has a fever.”

“Touch her forehead. Is she warm?”

“I can’t tell.”

“Are her cheeks flushed?”

“Of course, her cheeks are flushed. She’s been crying for four hours straight.”

“I’m on my way.”

“You don’t need to—” He hangs up before I can finish telling him he doesn’t need to come over. Before I can lie and tell him we’ll be fine.

“WAAAAAHHHH!”

I cuddle Robin in my arms as I resume pacing the living room. When I notice the lights for Elder’s truck shine in the window, I sprint out the front door toward the truck.

“Let’s go,” I order Elder when I open the passenger door.

“Whoa. Hold on. Mom says we should check Robin’s temperature first.”

“Your mom says? Well, okay then, as long as your mom says it,” I snarl.

“My mom raised five sons and was a teacher.”

I inhale a deep breath. It’s possible I’m acting irrationally. “Okay. How do I test her temperature?”

Elder lifts up a bag. “I’ve got supplies.”

Robin hears his voice and reaches out her arms for him. Elder doesn’t hesitate before hauling her near.

“I’m sorry you’re not feeling well, baby girl,” he whispers to her as he rubs his nose up and down hers. “But don’t you worry. Mommy and I will get you all fixed up.”

“I’m not Robin’s mommy,” I say.

Elder marches toward the house. “Help Robin now. Argue over descriptors later.”

Damn. He’s right. I rush in front of him to open the door. The dogs bark and scamper down the hall to greet us. I think they’re as worried about Robin as I am.

“There’s a thermometer in the bag,” Elder nods toward the bag I grabbed from him.

I dump the contents on the kitchen table. When I spot the thermometer, I snatch it and rip the packaging open.

“How do we do this? I’m not putting a thermometer up Robin’s butt,” I insist.

“Mom says we can do it in her armpit.”

I blow out a breath. “Oh. Okay.”

I follow Elder to the nursery where he lays Robin down on her changing table. He removes her shirt and checks her armpit is dry before motioning for the thermometer. He places it in her armpit and holds her elbow against her chest. Robin cries in response.

“Ten seconds. All you have to do is wait ten seconds and then I’ll cuddle you again. I promise.”

The thermometer beeps and I rush forward. “What does it say?”

Elder frowns. “Ninety-nine.”

“Is ninety-nine degrees a fever? It’s a fever, isn’t it? We should take her to the hospital. I told you we should take her to the hospital!”

I can’t chance anything happening to Robin. I can’t! She’s all I have left. I refuse to lose her.

“Mom said she doesn’t need to go to the hospital unless her temperature is higher than one-hundred and four unless she’s vomiting or has diarrhea or a rash.”

I wring my hands. “She doesn’t have any of those but she’s obviously unhappy. What do we do?”

“We should bathe her in lukewarm water, make sure she has enough fluids, and give her some baby Tylenol.”

“You get the baby Tylenol. I’ll start the bath.”

I hurry to the bathroom and switch on the water. I make sure it’s not too hot or too cold. By the time Elder joins me with Robin, the bathtub is half full.

“She took the Tylenol like a champ.”

I whip off my t-shirt before dropping my underwear.

“W-w-what are you doing?” Elder asks.

“I can’t let her bathe alone.”

“What about the baby bathtub?” He motions to the plastic baby tub in the corner.

“I want to hold her.”

He blows out a breath. “Okay. Get in and I’ll hand her to you.”

I climb into the tub while Elder undresses the baby. As soon as he finishes, I motion for her. “Come here, baby girl. This will make you feel better.”

“I’ll make a bottle while you bathe her.” Elder rushes away.

Robin quiets the second her body hits the water. She does love taking baths.

“You’re going to be a swimmer, aren’t you?”

I stay in the water until it’s cold and then shout for Elder who comes running.

“What is it?” He scans the room. “Everyone okay?”

“Can you take her so I can get out?”

“Naturally.” He grabs a towel from the rack before lifting the baby from my arms. “She seems calmer already. I’ll dress her.”

I climb out of the tub and throw on my t-shirt before following him to the nursery. Elder smiles at me over his shoulder. “Can you grab her bottle?”

I enter the kitchen to find a bottle laying in a bowl of ice. I pick it up and test the temperature on my wrist. It’s good so I return to the nursery where Elder is rocking Robin in the chair while he sings to her.

“What are you singing?” I ask as I hand him the bottle.

He makes sure Robin latches onto the bottle and is drinking before answering. “Rockin’ in the Free World.”

“You and your love of classic Rock.” I study the baby.
“She seems calmer. Her face isn’t as red.”

He places a palm over her forehead. “She doesn’t feel as warm. I think the Tylenol and bath did the trick.”

I blow out a breath. “I hope so.”

He grasps my hand. “You did good.”

I snort. “Good? I panicked and practically jumped into your truck before you parked in my driveway.”

“Panicking is completely normal. I remember the first time one of my brother’s broke a bone – it was Brody by the way – Mom screamed at him before bursting into tears.”

I nod. “I can totally understand her reaction. This parenting stuff is hard.”

“Good thing you have me to help you out in a crisis.”
He winks.

I roll my eyes before settling on the ground at his feet.
“Way to make this night about you.”

“You have to admit. We make a darn good team.”

I swallow my pride – literally, it feels like a lump in my throat – and ask, “Will you stay? Just for the night. I don’t want to make a mistake or miss anything or screw up.”

“You don’t need to ask. Anytime you need me, I’m there.”

Because he loves you, Rebel Harmony sings.

Why aren’t you asleep?

And miss this awkward conversation? Not on your life.

“Thanks.”

“Why don’t you get the bedding for the couch out while little miss finishes her bottle,” he suggests.

I don’t want him sleeping on the couch. It’s way too far away.

“Or you could sleep in bed with me.”

“I don’t want to push you.”

“I don’t mean sex. Just sleep.”

Although I wouldn’t mind having sex with Elder, I don’t want to send mixed messages.

Because asking him to sleep in your bed isn’t sending mixed messages?

Shut it, Rebel. You aren’t helping.

It isn’t my job to help.

“I’ll stay and help you watch over Robin until we’re certain she’s feeling better. And I’ll sleep in bed with you but there’s a catch.”

“Isn’t there always,” I mumble.

“No sex but I get cuddles.”

I blink. He can’t be serious. “Cuddles?”

“Yep. I’m allowed to cuddle you as much as I want.”

“No naked cuddles,” I clarify.

“Agreed.” He hands me Robin’s empty bottle. “I’ll burp her and put her to bed. Maybe she’ll sleep now since her tummy’s full.”

Apparently, Elder is a baby whisperer. Within an hour of his arrival, Robin’s fever is down and she’s ready to fall asleep. Too bad Elder isn’t here every night.

But he could be, Rebel Harmony cries.

He could be, I think as I watch him burp Robin. He could be.

Chapter 33

Can whoever removed the battery from the police car please return it? ~ Message from Peace on the Winter Falls Facebook page



Robin gurgles and I sigh.

“Five more minutes, baby girl.”

The arm around my waist tightens. “She’s okay?” Elder asks.

I glance down at the baby in my arms and she smiles up at me.

“She’s perfect.”

“Thank god. I don’t think I’ve ever been so worried in my life.” He buries his face in my shoulder as he clings to me.

“You were worried?”

He kisses my shoulder. “Of course, I was worried. Our baby girl was sick. It was more terrifying than the look Brody gets in his eyes when he’s about to pull off a prank.”

Our baby girl? I want to snarl at him. Yell at him how Robin isn’t ours. But I’m done lying to myself. To him.

Elder’s been here from day one. Even before we began our sham marriage, he was here for me and Robin. And since we’ve been married? He’s shown me how great a dad he is.

And how great a lover he is, Rebel Harmony adds.

For once, I don’t tell her to shut the hell up. Because she’s right. Elder is a great lover. He’s also kind, considerate—

And the man you love.

Thanks for the reminder.

Thought you needed it.

I was being sarcastic.

Put on your big girl panties and talk to him.

Am I seriously going to follow Rebel Harmony's advice? I must be crazy.

Crazy like a fox.

"C-c-c." I clear my throat and try again. "Can we do this thing?"

"What thing? Spend the night calming a baby with a fever? Pretty sure we showed how we can. I'll order us matching t-shirts with *Baby Whisperers* on them later today."

I elbow him. "No. Us. You and me. And baby."

His body jolts behind me before he locks his muscles down. Shit. He's changed his mind. He doesn't want me anymore.

"Never mind. I understand."

He squeezes my hip. "You understand what?"

I don't answer. Instead, I creep toward the edge of the bed. "I should get little miss changed and ready for the day."

Elder rolls out of bed. "I've got her. I'll put her back to bed." He picks Robin up. "And then you and I are talking."

Talking? I gulp. What have I done? I should have kept my big mouth shut.

And then you would have spent the rest of your life all alone, pining for the man you love.

Which is better than the alternative – being rejected by the man I love.

"She's still out," Elder says as he returns and climbs into bed.

"I thought we were talking," I say as he spins me around until we're facing each other.

"We are."

“In bed?”

He waggles his eyebrows. “I can’t think of a better place to talk about our relationship than in the bed where I first made love to you.”

“Our relationship?”

He wraps an arm around my waist and pulls me near. “Our relationship.”

“But I kicked you out.”

“Because you were scared.”

I glare at him. “And you left.”

He nips my nose. “I told you I’d be back.”

“You’re stubborn.”

“I’m tenacious.” He smiles. “You’re stubborn.”

“What’s the difference?”

“You fight against what you want out of fear and I fight for what I want because I refuse to lose the best thing to ever happen to me in my life.”

“The best thing to ever happen to you?”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “Let me be very clear to avoid any misunderstandings. You and that baby sleeping in the nursery are the two best things to happen to me in my life. I love you and I’m never leaving you.”

My breath freezes in my lungs as fear grips hold of me. “You can’t know that for sure. You can’t predict the future.”

“Let me rephrase. I am never leaving you on purpose. If the unthinkable occurs, if something happens to me, I’ll fight the devil himself to return to you.”

I giggle. “The devil? Not Saint Peter?”

He shrugs. “I’ll fight whoever I need to in order to get back to you and Robin.” He squeezes my hip. “I will never leave you on purpose.”

I inhale a deep breath and admit something I’ve never admitted to before. “I’m scared.”

“I know you are. I can’t blame you after everything you’ve been through. But I’m serious. I’m never leaving you.”

“What if you lose your battle with the devil?”

“You still won’t be alone. You’ll have my brothers, my mom, the mother of my half-brother who thinks she’s my second mother, and every other busybody in this town.”

I gulp. “That’s a lot of people.”

“All of whom love you. As do I. Now, is there maybe something you want to tell me?”

I tap my chin. “I don’t know. Is there?”

He tickles my ribs and I bat him away. He captures my wrists in one hand before poising his other hand over my side. “Are you ready to concede? Or must I continue the tickle torture?”

“What if I can’t concede because I don’t know what you want?”

His brown eyes gaze into mine. “You know exactly what I want to hear.”

I scrunch up my nose. “That I love you. Is that what you want to hear?”

His eyes fall closed and all the tension leaves his body. He hauls me near and buries his face in my neck. “Thank you,” he mumbles against my skin.

“You’re thanking me for loving you?”

He lifts his head. “Thank you for battling your guilt and fears for me. For choosing me.”

My eyes itch with unshed tears. This man just gets me. He understands how difficult it was for me to say those three words and he’s thanking me for saying them.

“I don’t deserve you,” I say as one tear breaks free.

He wipes the tear away. “You deserve the world, darling. I’m going to do everything in my power to prove to you there’s no reason for you to feel guilty. I’m also going to do everything I can to give you the world.”

I'm not ready to discuss ridding myself of my guilt.
"What do you deserve?"

"I don't know what I deserve but I do know I have everything I want here in my arms and sleeping in the nursery across the hall."

"For a goofball, you sure know how to do sweet."

He clears his throat. "I need to tell you one thing before we make this fake marriage real."

I groan. "Please don't tell me you have a wife and family hidden in your basement who aren't allowed to leave the house."

He chuckles. "Um, no. And I'm kind of scared of how specific your fear is."

I shrug. "Late night television is full of scary documentaries."

"No more late night tv for you." He clears his throat. "You remember how I was a bit hot and cold when this previous fake marriage began?"

My brow wrinkles. I don't remember him being hot and cold.

"Until the court case."

Now, I understand. "When you became Mr. Full Court Press Man."

He smirks. "I like the descriptor. Let's keep it."

"Goofball."

"*Your* goofball," he corrects.

"Anyway," I prompt.

"I was afraid of having children."

"Hold on. Hold on. You've never once indicated a fear of children. You've been a great dad from day one." It's one of the reasons I fell in love with him.

"Nevertheless, I tried to pull away from you because of Robin."

I scowl.

“Not because of Robin. Robin’s awesome. The best baby girl in the world. But because of your guardianship of Robin.”

“I need more information.”

“My dad bullied Miller.”

“Your dad bullied Miller? The guy built like a linebacker?”

“And I did nothing about it.” He pauses and I wait him out. There must be more to this story. “I’m Miller’s big brother, his twin, I should have protected him from our dad.”

I connect the dots. “And this idiotic thinking made you believe you’d be an awful dad and shouldn’t have children.”

“I prefer the term misguided thinking.”

“Of all the things you could have said to me, I didn’t expect you to come out with the most stupid, most idiotic, most out of this world excuse ever thought up by a man.”

“Hey now,” he protests.

“It wasn’t your job to protect Miller growing up. It was your dad’s job. And if he was the problem, then it was your mom’s job. Not yours. You were just a kid.”

“I know I—”

I don’t let him finish. I have lots to say on this subject. “And even if it was your job, which it wasn’t, you recognized your mistakes and are aware of them. All of this is irrelevant anyway. You are an awesome dad. You’ve been an awesome dad to Robin since the day Ms. Cross dropped her in my lap. Robin loves you.” I frown. “More than me in fact, which is completely wrong and unfair.”

He places a hand over my mouth. “I know. My idiot brothers pointed all of this out to me already.”

I pry his hand away. “Then, why are we discussing this?”

“Because I might screw up in the future. I need you to tell me when I’m doing something wrong.”

I chuckle. “Don’t worry. I’ll tell you when you’re wrong.”

“Thank you.” He kisses my nose. “We’re agreed then. I’m yours. You’re mine. And the fake in this fake marriage is hereby erased.”

“Agreed.”

Chapter 34

It's not my fault the curtains caught on fire. I'm not a magician. ~ Text from Petal to Peace



Elder

Relief courses through my body. Harmony's mine. She's always been mine, but she's finally agreeing to what I've known since the moment I saw her. She's mine.

There's only one way to celebrate this occasion.

I haul her close until our chests are touching and smash my lips on hers. She sighs and I thrust my tongue into her mouth. There it is. The taste I've been missing. It's only been a few days but fear of never having her again makes it feel as if it's been years since I felt her soft lips against mine.

She moans and throws her leg over my waist. I punch my hips until my hard length hits her center. She rubs herself against me.

I pull away from her lips. "Keep rubbing yourself all over me and I won't last long, darling."

She smirks at me. "Am I finally going to meet the five-second man?"

I growl. "It's been a week since I buried myself in heaven. Don't tease me."

She reaches between us and squeezes me. I groan.

"Fuck it. Five-second man it is."

I yank her hand away before rolling her to her back. I loom over her. "I wanted to go slow this morning. Show you how much I love you."

She nips at my bottom lip. “I know you love me. You can show me how much some other time.”

“Damn, I do love you,” I grumble before melting my lips to hers.

While I reacquaint myself with her lips and mouth, she shoves her panties down her legs – Good. She’s as excited as I am – before wrapping her legs around my hips and rubbing her naked core against my covered cock.

“Take me out,” I order against her lips.

She doesn’t hesitate to do my bidding and pulls my length out of my briefs. I can’t wait to explore how much I can order her around in the bedroom.

“Shit. Damn. Fuck.” I swear up a storm with my cock poised at her entrance.

“What’s wrong?”

“Forgot a condom.”

My cock protests at my words. He wants to sink into Harmony without anything between us.

“I’m on the pill.”

“I know. I’m still not taking any chances.”

She frowns. “Is this about us having children? Are you afraid of me getting pregnant?”

I imagine her belly swollen with my child. I expect panic to grip me but all I feel is mild anxiety. Huh. Harmony can work miracles.

“No.” She raises an eyebrow. “I admit I’m not ready for another child, but using a condom isn’t solely about preventing pregnancy. I want to protect you. I need to make sure I’m clean before I enter you bare.”

“Clean?” She glares at me. “Who have you been with?”

I keep my mouth shut. I know better than to answer her question.

“If you had sex with Love Hill, I’m going to kill you and feed you to my dogs after I starve them for two days.”

“You’re vicious. Good thing I didn’t have sex with Love Hill.”

I kiss her nose before reaching across the bed to the nightstand and opening the drawer. I remove a condom and sheathe myself.

“You okay?” I ask once I’m poised at her entrance with her legs wrapped around me again.

“I’ll get tested, too,” she answers. “It’s only fair.”

“Okay, darling. We’ll both get tested before we throw away the condoms. Can we please proceed now?” My cock is weeping in anticipation.

“Robin.”

I freeze. “Is she awake?”

“No, but she can wake at any moment.”

I smile at Harmony. “This is our life now. We need to make love whenever we can grab a stolen minute in between feedings and changings.”

“Our life?”

“Our life. I love you Harmony Elaine Kingsley Bragg.”

She bristles. “I haven’t agreed to change my name.”

I wink. “But you will.”

“You’re annoying.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I’m annoying? I can show you annoying by teasing you, bringing you to the brink, and then denying you an orgasm.”

Several emotions flicker across her face before she settles for apologetic. “You’re not annoying.” She nearly chokes on the words.

I chuckle. “I am.”

“No. No. No. Really. I didn’t mean it.”

“The measures you’ll go to in order to have an orgasm. I really thought better of you.”

She glares at me. “I don’t need you to have an orgasm.”

“You do if I hide your vibrator.”

She gasps. “You wouldn’t.”

I widen my eyes and feign innocence. “I wouldn’t?”

“Never mind. I don’t need a vibrator. I have two fingers and I know how to use them.”

I groan at the image of Harmony pleasing herself. “I’m watching next time.”

“Only if I can watch you in return.”

“You want to watch me with my cock in my hand?” Her eyes dilate and she nods. “Making myself come?” She nods. “Fuck yeah. We’re doing that soon.”

“In the meantime.” I plunge into her until I’m buried to the hilt in her wet warmth. I place my forehead on hers and inhale a breath before I come.

She squirms underneath me. I pinch her nipple. “Behave.”

“Why?” She gasps out. “When being bad has such good results.”

“Good results?” I twist her nipple. “You mean this?”

She arches her back and her inner walls clench me. “Yeeees.”

I slowly withdraw before thrusting into her again. “Or this?”

“Good. Too,” she pants.

“Or maybe this?” I swivel my hips and her legs tighten around my waist.

“Again,” she demands.

I get to my knees and shift her legs onto my shoulders.

“Or this?” I say as I withdraw and thrust into her a few times.

She reaches above her to grab hold of the headboard. “Not. Sure. Do. It. Again.”

I pump in and out of her a few times until my balls tingle. I stop. I’m not coming until Harmony does.

“Lift up your t-shirt for me,” I demand. “Show me those glorious tits of yours.”

“What, these?” She draws her t-shirt up her body until her breasts are revealed. “You like this?” she asks as she begins to play with them.

I bat her hands away. “Those are mine to play with.”

She arches her back. “Show me what you got.”

I knead her skin until her nipples are hard points and she’s panting and squirming again.

“I like you this way,” I say as I pinch her nipple.

She gasps. “This. Way?”

“Laid out in front of me as my very own private buffet.”

“If I’m a buffet, you should be eating me.”

I thrust into her three times before asking, “Do you want me to stop? I can pull out.”

Please say no. Any other time I’m happy to go down on Harmony. But right now? When my cock is about to explode while I’m buried in her? I don’t want to go anywhere.

Her legs squeeze my neck. “You better not pull out.”

“Or you’ll feed me to your dogs?”

“Billy the goat could use a girlfriend. He seemed to enjoy kissing you.”

“You’ll pay for that comment,” I grumble as I increase my pace until I’m pounding into her.

“Billy looooves you,” she teases.

“You’re in trouble now.”

“Please punish me, Elder.”

I sneak my hand in between us until I find her clit. I rub it while I pinch her nipple and she explodes.

“Elder,” she hisses as she comes.

Her inner muscles squeezing me set off my own climax.

“Harmony.” My rhythm becomes erratic as I ride out the ecstasy with her.

I collapse on top of her. “Damn, I love you, darling.”

“I love you, too.”

“Waah!” Robin wails.

I roll off of Harmony. “Just in time.”

She giggles as I stand. “You’re going to scar Robin for life with your thing hanging out.”

I place my hands on my hips and my cock sways with the motion. “This thing brought you pleasure less than a minute ago.”

She taps her chin. “I think I forgot.”

“Waah!” Robin makes her impatience known.

“You get Robin. I’ll deal with the condom and make you coffee.” I slap her ass. “Get moving.”

“Don’t think you can order me around outside of the bedroom.”

I wink. “We’ll see how it goes.”

She throws a pillow at me and I dodge it. I’m smiling as I walk to the bathroom to handle the condom. This is my future and it looks fucking fantastic.

Chapter 35

*You can come out of the closet now ~ Text
from Brody to Elder*



“What’s wrong?” Elder asks as he walks into the closet in the bedroom. Our bedroom. But not my bedroom back in the house I used to live in.

“Why would anything be wrong?” I ask despite feeling panic trying to choke me.

“You’ve been standing in the closet for ten minutes now.”

I glance around. “It’s a big closet.”

He grasps my hands. “On a scale from one to ten, how high is your panic level at the moment?”

I consider it. “Eleven. Maybe twelve. Or twenty. Yeah, twenty.”

“There’s nothing to panic about. It’s a little celebration with our friends.”

“A celebration of me moving into your house!”

“And of you, me, and Robin becoming a family.”

I scowl at him. “You skipped over the me moving into your house part.”

“Because it’s not my house. It’s *our* house.”

My heart rate increases until I worry my heart is going to jump out of my chest. “This is too fast. We should slow down.”

“We’re married. We love each other. Aren’t we supposed to live together?”

I hate how he's right, but I'm not letting go yet. "What was wrong with my place?"

"Your nearest neighbor doesn't have a car and the next nearest neighbor is a ten-minute bike ride. If I'm not home, you need to have access to a car to go to the hospital if Robin's sick."

I scowl. "Do you have an answer for everything?"

He puffs up his chest. "You can refer to me as the Answer Man from now on."

"Too bad we didn't leave the goofball back at my old place."

He tugs on my hands until I'm in his arms. "You love this goofball."

"You tricked me."

"And I'm not sorry," he mumbles before his lips meet mine.

I push up on my toes and wrap my arms around him to get as close to him as possible. I'd crawl into his skin if I could. In his arms is the one place I feel safe. The one place I don't worry about being enough. The one place my fear disappears in.

"Yoo-hoo! Is anyone home?" Sage shouts.

I pull away from Elder. "She sounds really close."

Sage peeks her head in the closet. "I found them. They were getting it on in the closet."

"The closet?" Feather asks as she joins Sage.

"But they're married," Petal says as she opens the door to reveal the rest of the gossip gals standing in our bedroom.

"They don't need to hide in the closet," Cayenne says.

"I don't know. A closet sounds fun," Clove says.

"When you have a baby, you'll find any quiet spot for a bit of nooky," Ashlyn says as she marches into the bedroom with her daughter Patience on her hip. "Anyone want to babysit Patience?"

I wag my finger at her. “No, they can’t! Because you’ll sneak off to make out with Rowan somewhere in the house. If I catch you again, I’m taking pictures and uploading them on social media.”

She frowns. “One time. We did that one time.”

“Correction. You got caught one time.”

“You’re mean since you fell in love with Elder.” She huffs before whirling around and flouncing away.

Petal sighs. “Project Baby is my favorite.”

Clove rolls her eyes. “You say that with each new project.”

Petal shrugs. “It’s true.”

Elder squeezes my hand. “Ladies, it’s lovely to see you, but I need to go check on the food.”

“Check on the food?” Sage asks.

Clove huffs. “As if anyone other than us needs to check on the food.” She leads the gossip gals out of the bedroom.

“You’re welcome,” Elder says once we’re alone again.

“Welcome for what?”

“Did you not observe how I got rid of the gossip gals?”

“I observed how you didn’t lock the front door allowing them to invade our house and bedroom.”

He smiles. “You said our house.”

I ignore him. “I need to check on Robin. Her nap is nearly over.” I walk toward the nursery with him trailing behind me.

“It’s okay. I understand it’s difficult to be in the presence of a master.”

“A master pain in my ass,” I mutter.

“Still a master,” he sings.

We enter the nursery and Robin immediately gurgles her excitement to see us.

“Are you ready for the party, baby girl?” I ask as I pick her up. She burps and spit-up dribbles down her chin to her dress. “I guess not.”

I lay Robin down on the changing table and begin to undress her.

“You’re a bit of a diva. Having to wear a new outfit for every occasion,” I say as I tickle her. She smiles up at me and my heart clenches. I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy.

I still struggle with guilt about my family, but I’m working through it. I also worry my family is going to disappear, but I’m determined to enjoy my slice of happy in the meantime.

“Here,” Elder hands me an outfit.

“Thanks.” I frown when I notice what the t-shirt says. “I have the world’s best daddy? Really, Elder?”

He shrugs. “I can’t help it if it’s true.”

“Find me another outfit.”

The doorbell rings. “You go greet our guests. I’ll change her.” He nudges me toward the door.

“The gossip gals are here. They can answer the door.”

He raises an eyebrow. “And you’re not worried about what they’re up to in the meantime?”

“Damn you, Elder Bragg.”

I rush off to the front door. Petal is already letting Miller and Eden inside.

“Congratulations!” Eden engulfs me in a hug. “On a scale from one to ten, how freaked out are you at the moment?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me how freaked out I am?”

“Maybe because your eyes are the size of saucers and you keep glancing at the door as if it’s your only hope.”

Miller grunts as he throws an arm around Eden's shoulder.

"Big guy here agrees."

I roll my eyes. "I'm fine."

"Well, I'm not," Moon says as she barges inside with Riley on her heels.

"I said I was sorry. I didn't realize the cookies were for the party."

Moon sets two containers down on the sideboard before wheeling around on him. "You thought I baked three dozen cookies for you?"

Riley shrugs. "I thought it was sweet."

Moon throws her arms in the air. "You're impossible."

Riley shackles her wrist and draws her near. "You didn't show up empty-handed. You brought two cakes and a dozen chocolate chip cookies."

"Mmm. Good." Miller says as he chews on a cookie.

"The Bragg bunch is impossible!" Moon shouts as she knocks the cookie out of his mouth before grabbing her containers and marching off.

"I'm with Moon," Soleil says as she enters.

"I am not impossible," Brody argues as he follows her inside.

"You made me drop my pottery."

Eden and I gasp. You do not mess with Soleil's pottery. Those artworks are her babies.

"It was an accident," Brody claims.

"You blaring music loud enough to wake the dead was an accident?" Soleil snarls at him.

Elder places an arm around my shoulders as he joins us. "What was an accident?"

"Nothing!" Soleil shouts.

Eden wiggles her hands at Elder. "Give me the baby."

Elder tightens his hold on Robin. “No. Get your own baby.”

Miller growls and Eden pats his middle until he calms down. “Yes, your brother is a dickhead but he didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Didn’t mean anything?” I glance between my friend and her boyfriend. “Are you two trying?”

Eden’s cheeks darken as she nods. “No success yet but we’re trying.”

I clap. “Robin will have a cousin to play with.”

Brody frowns as he glances between me and Elder. “This is why you kicked me out. To play perfect family?”

Elder smiles down at me. “We’re not playing. We’re the real deal.”

“And I had to move out to make this happen?”

I roll my eyes. “My place is available.”

He frowns. “I told you I’m allergic to dogs.”

“There’s this apparatus. It’s called a vacuum cleaner. You use it to get rid of things like dog hair. Ever heard of one?”

Elder snorts. “I can say without a doubt he hasn’t heard of a vacuum cleaner before.”

“True,” Soleil agrees.

“Why is everyone ganging up on me?” Brody asks.

Soleil’s phone buzzes before it begins to sing *Call me maybe*.

She points her finger at Brody. “I’m going to kill you in your sleep.”

He laughs in response. “You can’t kill me if you can’t catch me.”

He runs off with Soleil chasing after him.

“Should we save your brother?” I ask Elder as I watch them sprint down the hallway.

“Nah.”

I point to the gossip gals who are hurrying after Soleil and Brody. “Maybe we should save Soleil, though.”

He kisses my forehead. “Forget about them. Today is about us.” He nods toward the kitchen table. “And opening presents.”

“You’re such a goofball.”

He smiles. “And yet you love me.”

“There’s obviously something defective with me.”

“Nope. You’re perfect just the way you are.”

I don’t melt at his words. Not me. My knees are a bit shaky from standing is all.

“I love you, Elder Bragg.”

“And I love you, Mrs. Bragg.”

He kisses me before I can complain about him referring to me as Mrs. Bragg. Robin kicks me in the stomach and I pull away from Elder.

“She prefers not to share me,” he says.

I ignore him to tweak Robin’s nose. “I love you, too, baby girl.”

She smiles up at me and warmth fills me. Having a family is the best thing ever.

Amy, if you’re up there somewhere listening, I promise I have no regrets. Not anymore.

Chapter 36

Brody Bragg is a menace to society. Can I have him locked up? ~ Text from Soleil to Peace



Soleil

I scowl when I walk into the living area and notice the kitchen table is completely covered in papers. I fist my hands on my hips and shout for my new ‘roommate’. “Brody!”

He swaggers down the hallway. “Yes, my liege.” He bows in front of me.

“You do realize liege is a term from feudal society and refers to the unconditional bond between a man and his overlord.”

He wiggles his eyebrows. “Am I the man or the overlord?”

I inhale a deep breath before I launch myself at him. Violence is wrong. Violence is wrong. Maybe if I repeat the words long enough I’ll remember why violence is wrong.

I motion to the table. “Why is there a mess on my kitchen table?”

“One.” He holds up a finger. “It’s *our* kitchen table.” He holds up another finger. “And, two, this is not a mess. This is my work.”

“Can you put your work elsewhere? I eat on my kitchen table.”

“Sure.” He marches toward the door.

“Where are you going? The table is in the opposite direction.”

“Harmony and Elder’s party.”

“Aren’t you going to clean this mess up first?”

He checks his watch. “No time. I do hate to be late.”

I snort. He’s full of shit. He’s never on time. “Liar.”

He clutches his chest. “Ah, you like me.” He motions to the door. “Come along. If you’re nice, I’ll let you accompany me to the party.”

“Accompany you to the party?” I mutter as we walk out the door. “What’s with all the old-fashioned language?”

“I’m working on a feudal fighting game for a client.”

“A feudal fighting game? What’s a feudal fighting game?”

“It’s really cool.” His hands fly into the air as he explains. “It’s a fighting game where strategy trumps fighting techniques. You have tactics such as maintaining unity in morale, misleading troop movements to take opposing armies by surprise, spreading misinformation regarding army size and provisions, and, naturally, there’s raiding.”

“Sounds violent.”

“But it’s not because it’s just a simulation,” he argues.

I shrug. I’m not arguing with Brody about his games again. I know to pick my battles. And a battle about his work is not worth my time.

We arrive at Elder and Harmony’s house where the party is happening. I walk inside and join my friends Moon, Riley, Harmony, Eden, and Miller who are gathered in the living room.

“The Bragg bunch is impossible!” Moon shouts before I can greet anyone.

She is not wrong. “I’m with Moon.”

“I am not impossible,” Brody claims.

He’s completely impossible. “You made me drop my pottery.”

“It was an accident.”

Accident? Does he know what the word means?

“You blaring music loud enough to wake the dead was an accident?” I snarl at him.

Elder arrives with baby Robin in his arms. “What was an accident?”

“Nothing!” I shout.

Eden wiggles her hands at Elder. “Give me the baby.”

Elder tightens his hold on Robin. “No. Get your own baby.”

Miller growls and Eden pats his middle until he calms down. “Yes, your brother is a dickhead but he didn’t mean to be insensitive.”

“Didn’t mean to be insensitive?” Harmony glances between Miller and Eden. “Are you two trying?”

Eden’s cheeks darken as she nods. “No success yet but we’re trying.”

I ignore the ball of jealousy trying to force its way out of my stomach. I refuse to be jealous of my friends.

Harmony claps. “Robin will have a cousin to play with.”

Brody sighs. “This is why you kicked me out. To play perfect family?”

Elder smiles down at Harmony. “We’re not playing. We’re the real deal.”

“And I had to move out to make this happen?” Brody pouts.

Harmony rolls her eyes. “My place is available.”

He frowns. “I told you I’m allergic to dogs.”

“There’s this apparatus. You use it to get rid of things like dog hair. It’s referred to as a vacuum cleaner. Ever heard of one?”

Elder snorts. “I can say without a doubt he hasn’t heard of a vacuum cleaner before.”

“True,” I agree since Brody hasn’t offered once to help clean up since he moved into my place.

“Why is everyone ganging up on me?” Brody asks.

My phone buzzes before it begins to sing *Call me maybe*. A song I cannot stand. A song Brody knows I cannot stand. I point my finger at him. “I’m going to kill you in your sleep.”

He laughs. “You can’t kill me if you can’t catch me.” He runs off and I give chase.

“Where are you going?” I ask as he heads down the hallway. “This is a dead end.”

He opens a door and rushes in. I push my way inside before he can shut the door.

“I’m serious, Brody. You have to stop with all of these pranks,” I say as I prowl after him.

“What’s the big deal? It’s just a song.”

“A song you know I hate.”

His eyes sparkle with mirth as he backs up.

“Where are you going to flee to now?” I open my arms wide to indicate the room we’re in. It’s the nursery. There’s nowhere to hide in here.

He straightens his back. “Who says I’m fleeing?”

I snort. “Everyone who saw you run down the hallway with me chasing after you.”

He smirks. “Got you to chase me, didn’t I?”

I narrow my eyes on him. “You want me to chase you? What are you up to now?”

Brody and his stupid pranks. He’s going to give me a heart attack one of these days. He actually dressed up as a ghost and stood outside of my living room window going boo. I nearly peed my pants out of fright.

“This.” He shackles my wrist and whirls me around until my back is plastered against the wall and he’s looming over me.

“What are you doing?” I scan the room. “Is a skeleton going to pop out from underneath Robin’s cot?”

“No skeletons but I do have some bones I’d like to discuss.”

He punches his hips and his hard length hits my belly. Sparks ignite in my stomach and travel down to my core.

I gasp. “What are you doing?”

He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’m making my move.”

“Making your move?” I narrow my eyes on him. “Is this some kind of dare? Are your brothers behind this?”

He scowls. “My brothers have nothing to do with this.”

“I don’t get it.”

He sighs. “What’s there to get? You’re a beautiful woman. I’m attracted to you.”

“I’m also old enough to be your mother.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re six years older than me.”

“Only in biological years.”

“Are there other years than biological years?”

“Yes.” I nod. “Maturity years.”

“I’m mature. I’m an adult.”

“An adult who thinks it’s funny to make someone shit their pants in fright.”

He chuckles. “Come on. It was hilarious when the air horn went off and Elder lost control of his bladder.”

“This is exactly what I mean. You’re a child.”

He punches his hips against my stomach again and those darn sparks ignite again. “I am not a child,” he grits out.

“Found them!” Sage shouts as the door bangs open.

“Oh my.” Feather sighs.

“Yeah,” Petal squeals. “This is going to be my new favorite project.”

“What are we going to name this one?” Clove asks.

“Project Opposites obviously.” Cayenne motions toward us.

I push Brody away and make my way toward the door.

“Good luck with your little project,” I say as I push past the gossip gals.

They won’t be getting any help from me. Brody is way too young and immature for me. I have enough trouble making sure my friends are taken care of. I don’t need another person to mother. And I certainly don’t want a significant other who needs mothering.

“It’s a challenge. I do love a challenge,” Sage says.

“Challenge accepted!” Brody shouts.

Great. I think I just waved a flag at a bull. A bull who’s living in my house. Never mind. Bullfighting can’t be that hard. I know how to knit. I’ll have a red cape knitted in no time. See if Brody dares to come near me then.

Chapter 37

Llamas never learn. ~ Text from Harmony to Elder



August

“Lucy,” I warn.

She huffs.

“I’m serious. I need to get home to Robin.”

The llama is not impressed. I can’t blame her. Between Juniper and Maverick jet-setting around the world and me having a family now, she’s not getting as much attention as she’s used to. We should have never spoiled her, to begin with.

“I have some juicy watermelon straight from the farm.”

Her ears perk up at the word watermelon and she makes her way toward me. I grasp her harness and pat her side. “Good llama. Let’s go get you some watermelon.”

I turn around and startle when I discover Elder standing in the field.

“Phew. I thought she was going to escape.”

At the word ‘escape’, Lucy pulls on her harness. I rub her neck. “Shh... There will be no escaping today.”

“I’ll take her.” Elder holds out his hand for the harness.

My brow furrows. “Why? And what are you doing here?”

He grins. “I have a surprise for you.”

“What is it?”

He chuckles. “The definition of surprise is you don’t actually know what it is.”

“You’re not going to tell me?” I ask as we walk back to Lucy’s paddock.

“It would ruin the surprise.”

I can’t say I’m surprised. Pun intended. Elder is always surprising me. Sometimes I’ll come home and his mom will have the baby and we’ll go out on a date. Other times he’ll cook dinner before I get home. He’s sweet and I’m glad I gave him a chance.

The moments when guilt threatens to choke me until I flee are becoming less and less. As is the fear something will happen to Elder and Robin. I’m a work in progress. But the work is decreasing while the progress is increasing.

We secure Lucy in the paddock and Elder steers me toward the barn. “We’re going to the barn? What are we doing? A picnic?”

“Even better,” he says.

Eden exits the barn and waves me over. “What’s Eden doing here?”

He kisses my nose. “See you in an hour.”

“See you where?” I shout after him. He doesn’t respond.

“What’s going on?” I ask Eden when I reach her.

She grasps my hand and tugs me inside the barn and down the hallway to the office.

“Surprise!” she shouts when she opens the door.

“Surprise!” Moon, Soleil, and Ashlyn repeat.

“What is everyone doing here?”

“Getting you ready,” Ashlyn says.

“Ready for what?”

Moon bounces on her feet. “Your wedding.”

“My wedding? I’m already married.”

“Elder wants to give you a real wedding,” Eden explains.

Tears well in my eyes. “A real wedding?”

“Here.” Soleil hands me a tissue. “I knew she would cry.”

“I’m not crying. You’re crying!”

“We’re all going to be crying if we don’t get her ready for her wedding on time,” Moon says.

“Speak for yourself,” Ashlyn responds.

“No!” Soleil yells at them. “We don’t have time for the Moon and Ashlyn show. Today is Harmony’s day.”

I raise my hand. “There’s only one problem with this scenario.” I motion toward my dirty jeans and scuffed up boots. “I don’t want to get married in this outfit.”

Soleil pushes me toward the bathroom. “Take a shower. We’ve got you covered.”

They do. Forty-five minutes later I exit the office looking like a bride.

“Why am I nervous? I’m already married to Elder. This is ridiculous.”

“This is the dream wedding you always deserved,” Soleil says causing my eyes to well up.

I slap her. “Don’t you dare make me cry.”

“If she cries, I’m murdering everybody,” Ashlyn growls. “It took me fifteen minutes to get her makeup perfect.”

“What are you talking about? I did her makeup,” Moon says.

“And I supervised.”

“If you mean ‘annoyed the hell out of me until I wanted to stab you in the eye with a mascara wand’, then yes you supervised.”

Ashlyn smiles. “Told you I supervised.”

We reach the end of the hallway. “What happened to the barn?”

“I did,” Eden says as she walks over. “You like it?”

I throw my arms around her. “Like it? I love it. Thank you.”

“Is she crying? She better not be crying.” Moon drags me away from Eden to check my face. “Good. I don’t have to kill anyone.”

Someone chuckles and I whirl around to see who it is. Elder’s older brother smiles at me before offering me his arm.

“You ready to do this for real this time?” Damon asks.

I roll my eyes. “It was real the first time.”

“I knew it was, but you didn’t.”

Before I can answer, a guitar begins to play. I search the room until my gaze lands on Lennon at the front of the room strumming his guitar. He begins to sing the lyrics to *Marry Me* and tears well in my eyes once again.

Soleil hands me a tissue. “Try to not ruin your make-up until Elder sees you at least.”

Damon leads me to the back of the room and everyone stands. I’ve only got eyes for one person. Elder standing at the aisle with our baby in his arms. He smiles at me and my heart warms. My legs carry me toward him without any conscious thought on my part.

“Hold on,” Damon says as he hurries to catch up.

“Hurry up,” I tell him.

He chuckles as he laces my arm through his. “There’s no rush. You have the rest of your lives together.”

I ignore him as we reach Elder and Robin. Damon holds out his hands for the baby but Elder tightens his hold. “No. Robin should be here. She’s part of our family.”

And here I thought I couldn’t love him more. Wrong. Each and every time he shows how much he loves Robin, my love for him grows.

Damon shrugs before slinking away and Ashlyn's mother moves to stand in front of us. I guess Mrs. West is officiating the ceremony.

"What do you think of your surprise?" Elder asks before she can begin.

"I love it. And I love you."

"Hold on," Mrs. West interrupts. "We're not to the love part yet."

"Can we skip to the vows and love part?" Elder asks.

She nods. "I understand the bride and groom have written their own vows."

We have? My eyes widen. I didn't write any vows. Probably because I didn't know about this wedding until an hour ago.

"Don't worry," Elder whispers. "You can do the standard old vows."

He clears his throat and grasps my hand. "Before you, I never believed I could have it all. A wife, a child, a family."

"Bonehead," Miller mutters from the crowd.

"You showed me I was wrong. I vow to always be there for you. When you need a friend, I'll be the best friend you can imagine. When you need care, I'll support you. When guilt threatens to drown you, I'll be your life jacket. When your fears become too much, I'll stand there holding your hand until you conquer them. I vow to be this family's protector and your confidante. I will never let a secret slip to the gossip gals."

"Hey now!" Sage shouts. "Why is he singling us out?"

"When you're tired, I vow to get up at three a.m. for feedings and changings. I love you. I will love you for every day of my life. And I thank you for becoming my wife and giving me the gift of this daughter."

I swipe at the tears running down my cheeks.

"How am I supposed to top that?"

Elder winks. “Don’t worry. I’ll let you top me later tonight.”

I giggle. “Goofball.”

“Your goofball. Until death do us part.”

I shake my head before inhaling a deep breath. “Thank you for showing me I was wrong. For showing me I’m not to blame for what happened to my family. That I can love someone without them leaving me. Thank you for not leaving.”

“Never,” he growls.

“I vow to always be grateful for you. Even when you’re driving me nuts with your surprises. I vow to love you until my dying days. And, finally, I vow to laugh at your corny jokes even when they aren’t funny.”

He gasps. “My jokes are funny.”

I shrug. “I love you anyway.”

“And I love you, Mrs. Harmony Bragg.” I open my mouth to fight him on the name. “No. Your name is Harmony Bragg from now on. I’m giving you my last name so you know you have a family. No matter what, you have a family.”

And here I thought I couldn’t love him more.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He leans close to kiss me before whispering against my lips. “Thank you, darling.”



Thanks for reading!

Next up in the Bragg Brothers series is Soleil and Brody in *Bragg’s Match*. Soleil has no interest in having a boyfriend who acts like a child. Brody’s out to prove he’s not a child. Exercise your one click finger here to pre-order [Bragg’s Match](#). Or swipe to the next page to read the first chapter now.

Don’t wait to wait? No problem. You can get **early access** to the *Bragg’s Match* by [joining my subscription service](#).

Can't get enough of Elder and Harmony? Want to find out how Elder surprises Harmony next? It's a big one! (And he might mess it up a bit.) Subscribe to my newsletter and all is revealed in a bonus chapter. [Yes! I want my bonus.](#)

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Thank you for reading *Perfect Bragg*. Word-of-mouth is crucial in the cutthroat world of publishing. Seriously, it's totally cutthroat. Too bad there's no swashbuckling. That sounds like fun. Spoiler alert – I have no idea what swashbuckling is. But seriously, it would be a huge help if you could leave a review of *Perfect Bragg*. It doesn't have to be more than a sentence, maybe two. Just follow this [LINK](#).

An Excerpt from Bragg's Match

Chapter 1

Soleil – a woman who's too dang tired to deal with the shenanigans of a man-child



I yawn as I shuffle to the kitchen. What a long freaking day. My back aches from sitting behind my pottery wheel for ten straight hours. I stop in front of the refrigerator and raise my hands in the air to stretch out my muscles before I open the door.

“AAAAH!”

I scream at all of the tiny creatures in the fridge staring back at me before I slam the door closed and lean against it to trap whatever's in there inside.

The front door of the house flies open and Brody freaking Bragg sprints inside. Brody is a new resident in my hometown of Winter Falls. He moved here a few months ago with his brothers.

Since three of his brothers have since found love with three of my friends, Brody and I have been hanging out together as the two unattached friends. I thought it was better than being a third-wheel, but now I'm not too sure.

“What's going on?” He doesn't even bother to attempt to hide his smirk.

My body switches from scared out of my mind to irritated in a flash. Brody may be a friend but he's also a prankster who can't be trusted. “What did you do?”

He bats his eyelashes. “What are you talking about?”

I clench my jaw and wave my hand toward the fridge. At least I know there aren't any creatures in there. Just another Brody prank. "You know exactly what I mean."

He smiles. "It's my welcoming gift to you."

"Welcoming gift? Why would you give me a welcoming gift? What are you talking about?"

"I'm your new roomie." He takes a bow.

I cross my arms over my chest. "Roomie? You aren't my roommate."

"Sure, I am." He motions toward the suitcases and boxes near the front door.

"What the hell?" I stomp toward the stuff. "What makes you think you can move in here without discussing it with me first?"

"Crap," he mutters as he runs a hand through his lush hair.

No, not lush hair. Nothing about Brody is lush or beautiful or sexy. Not his sparkling blue eyes I want to drown in. Not his perfect smile with the barest hint of a dimple on his left cheek. Not his broad shoulders that appear strong enough to carry the weight of the world on them.

Okay, fine. He's hot. He's also a man-child. And I'm way too old to be interested in him. No matter what my body thinks. My mind knows better. I don't need another person to look after. I've got enough on my plate as it is.

"Explain." I motion toward the suitcases.

"I think I've been pranked," he mutters.

I slap my hand over my mouth before my laughter can escape. Brody – the prankster to end all pranksters – got pranked? This is precious.

"What happened?" I ask once I manage to get my humor under control.

"My brother Elder kicked me out of his house. He said you have room for me."

I can't blame Elder for kicking him out of his house since his wife, Harmony, and her baby niece just moved in with him. Those two deserve their happily ever after considering all the heartbreak my friend Harmony has suffered in her life.

I wish I could find my happily ever after but I've resigned myself to be the best aunt this world has ever seen of the children my friends have.

"Elder didn't discuss you staying here with me." And I will be having words with him.

"I'm not any happier about this than you are. I don't understand why I couldn't stay at Elder's. I sleep on the sofa. I'm not using up any space they need."

I raise an eyebrow. "You want to live with your brother and his family?"

His nose wrinkles. "No, but where else am I supposed to live?"

I cross my arms over my chest. "You could stay at Harmony's place. It's empty now. And I know she offered."

"I'm allergic to dogs."

"You have three brothers. Why can't you live with one of them?"

"Correction. I have four brothers and a half-brother. All of whom are avoiding me."

All of whom are smarter than me. Note to self: Lock my doors from now on.

"How about this? You could – and I understand this is a novel concept for you – find a place of your own?"

His lip curls. "A place of my own?"

"It's simple. You search for a rental house. You sign a lease. You pay your rent. You have a place to live."

He does a mock shiver. "Sounds horrible."

"This is why I don't want you to live here. You're immature and childish."

He scowls. "I'm not a child. I'm thirty-years old."

“And yet you’re couch surfing. Real mature.”

He smirks. “But I’m done couch surfing now. Rumor has it you have a spare bedroom.”

“And you thought putting googly eyes on everything in my refrigerator would be the best way to appeal to me?”

He chuckles. “Got you.”

Got me? Is he out of his mind?

“Do you think I want to live with someone who scares the crap out of me on a regular basis?”

He rolls his eyes. “You can’t still be mad about the ghost.”

“I can’t still be mad about the ghost?” I lean forward and hiss at him. “I can be mad about whatever I want to be mad about.”

“But I saved you.”

“After you scared me half to death dressing up as a ghost and prancing around in front of my living room window.”

“Admit it. You thought my ghost was sexy.”

“Are you crazy?” He opens his mouth to answer but I throw up a hand to stop him. “No. Don’t answer. I don’t want to hear it.” I blow out a breath. “It’s been a long ass day. I don’t have the energy to deal with whatever this is right now.”

He frowns. “Sit down. Put your feet up. I’ll get you something to drink and you can relax.”

“I was trying to get something to drink when I opened the fridge to discover it was full of creatures.”

He sighs. “I guess you won’t be thanking me for my ‘thank you for letting me live here’ present.”

“If this is how you thank people, I want nothing to do with it.”

“Understood. No googly eyes on items in the fridge for as long as I’m living here.”

I narrow my eyes on him. “I never said you could live here.”

“But where else am I going to live?” He pouts.

“Why is this my problem?” I mutter.

I don’t know why I’m surprised. I’m the one who’s always taking care of everyone’s problems. Naturally, his brother and my friend Harmony sent him to me. They knew I’d take care of him. The way I always take care of everyone.

But the last thing I need at the moment is another person to take care of. I’m busy as hell getting ready for the Litha festival in July, which is less than a month away.

This is my busiest season. My small town of Winter Falls attracts tourists from all over during the summer with its festivals. In addition to teaching pottery classes to the tourists, I sell an absolute ton of pottery. I need to make certain I have enough stock available to sell.

And it’s not as if I can purchase stock online. No, each piece of pottery I sell is one-hundred percent unique. Between creating the piece, decorating it, firing the clay, glazing, and the glaze fire, I need at least three and a half weeks to create each piece.

Brody grasps my hands and I come out of my reverie. “How can I help you, Soleil?”

His thumbs rub against my inner wrists. My skin warms and goosebumps threaten to break out. Oh no. This can’t be happening. I can’t be attracted to Brody.

I yank my hands away. “You can help by not pulling stupid pranks to scare the crap out of me.”

He shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels with a huge smile on his face. “You admit my pranks rock.”

“I didn’t say—” I cut myself off. I’m not discussing his stupid pranks. “I’m serious. I don’t have time for this.” I check my watch. “I need to get a few hours of sleep before I get back to work.”

“Say no more. I will detain you no longer. Kindly show me where the bedroom I’ll be occupying is and I won’t bother you any longer.”

I frown. “I love how you assume you’re going to stay here.”

He clutches his chest. “Ah. You love me. I care for you too, Soleil.”

“Dork.”

I consider my options. I can argue with Brody about him staying here. But I don’t have time for his shenanigans. Or I can find him another place to stay. Unfortunately, I can’t think of anyone who has room for him right now.

Damn. It appears I have no choice.

“Come on. I’ll show you to your room.”

“Awesome! You won’t regret it.”

“I already regret it.”

He ignores me. “I’ll be the best roommate you can imagine. I don’t have parties. Well, except for when my brothers come over for poker night. But don’t worry. We won’t bother you. I’ll plan it on a night when you’re out with your girls. And I’ll—”

I hold up a hand. I already know he’s going to be a terrible roommate. No matter how much he claims to the contrary.

“This is your room.” I open the door to my spare bedroom and usher him inside.

He bounces on his toes. “I get a bed. Awesome! Elder, my least favorite brother, didn’t give me a bed.”

“I need to get some sleep. Try to keep it down,” I say as I make my way down the hall.

“Where’s your bedroom?”

“I have my own bathroom,” I say as I open the door to my bedroom. “You can use the bathroom in the hallway.”

“Aw, shucks. Does this mean there’s no chance of me bumping into a skimpy robe wearing Soleil in the hallway?”

His words conjure up thoughts of him sauntering through the hallway with a towel wrapped around his waist. I wonder how those broad shoulders look without a shirt. I wonder...

I cut those thoughts off. There will be no fantasizing about Brody. I have no interest in a man-child who still couch surfs instead of finding his own place to live.

“Sleep tight, roomie. Don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

“Whatever,” I murmur as I shut my bedroom door behind me.

[Pre-Order *Bragg's Match* now!](#)

Thanks!

First and foremost, thanks to my friends and family who allow me to bounce ideas off of them at the most random and sometimes inappropriate of times and locations. There is a point to my questions – I promise! A special thanks to all my acquaintances who inspire me with their stories and funny antics. Names have been changed to protect the innocent.

The hubby deserves special mention for designing my book covers, being a beta reader, and just being all-around Mr. Supportive. Sometimes I worry he's going to figure out that my characters feel more genuine to me than real life, but he still puts up with me after some twenty-odd years, so I guess he isn't totally turned off by me not being entirely normal.

And then there's my editor. Thanks, Carol for continuing to make time for me when you have a gazillion other things going on in your life.

I also want to throw a general *thank you* out into the digital universe to thank all the book bloggers who have helped me promote my books and especially those who take the time to read and review one or more of my books. You can't believe how thankful I am there are bloggers out there who not only read my emails begging them for a review but also actually take the time to answer. Thank you!!!

Of course, I can't forget to thank you, the reader, for buying the book and reading it. I would be extremely honored and thankful if you could write a review — even if it's just a line or two. You can do that [here](#).

If you want to keep up with what I'm writing next and maybe get some good deals on books, too, sign up for my newsletter [here](#). Or you can just follow me on social media, where I'll probably say lots of inappropriate things thinking I'm being hilarious.

About the Author

D.E. Haggerty is actually just plain old Dena, but she thinks using initials makes her sound like one of the cool kids. She was born and raised in the U.S. but has spent the majority of her adult life abroad living in cool-sounding places like Istanbul, Heidelberg, and The Hague. She has job hopped from military policewoman to lawyer to B&B owner. She finally jumped off the job hopping bandwagon a few years ago when she decided to turn her addiction to romance novels into a career. If anyone has ideas on how to turn a love of wine into a job, she's all ears.

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