



STATION 07: CREW 5

SHELTER

for
Poppy

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NICOLE FLOCKTON

SHELTER FOR POPPY
(POLICE AND FIRE:
OPERATION ALPHA)

STATION 7: CREW 5

BOOK SIX



NICOLE FLOCKTON



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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Police and Fire: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

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

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

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

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

After almost losing her life Poppy Brown has started over and has found some peace with her past actions. Guilt, however, lingers and she holds part of herself back to protect those around her, even if it means ignoring the advances of a man she's finding it harder and harder to resist.

Firefighter and single dad, Carson 'Slick' Killian is doing his best to bring up his young daughter while dealing with his former in-laws who are determined to force a career change on him. When they start talking about suitable women he could date, he's had enough. There's only one woman he's interested in and she keeps pushing him away, until she shows up at his house and agrees to be his fake girlfriend.

Poppy can't believe she's agreed to Carson's plan, but fighting the pull of her attraction toward him is impossible. Spending time with him has her believing that all the dreams she thought unattainable, could now be possible.

However, a ghost from Poppy's past doesn't want her to have a future and will stop at nothing to get his revenge.

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CHAPTER 1



CARSON ‘SLICK’ KILLIAN SMOOTHED THE FINE, DARK BROWN strands of his eight-year-old daughter’s hair off her sweaty forehead. She moaned and turned her face toward him, her blue eyes dull and sad. He hated seeing Jess so sick. He would give anything to trade places with her.

“I’m here, baby, always. Daddy’s here.” He leaned forward and kissed his lips against her cheek. He closed his eyes, saying a silent prayer to whoever was listening that Jess’s fever would break, and in the morning she’d be back to her normal, happy self.

A whisper of fabric brushing together caught his attention, and he looked up, spying Dahlia, Johnno’s fiancée, standing in the doorway. “Do you need anything before I go?”

She’d come over the minute she’d heard his daughter was sick. He wouldn’t be surprised if tomorrow the rest of his team’s partners showed up on his doorstep with offers to help look after Jess or bring over food so he didn’t have to worry about cooking while his little girl was sick.

“Nah, I’m good for the moment. Thanks again for stopping by.”

Dahlia smiled and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. “Of course. We all love Jess. If she’s not well when you go back on shift, we’ll work out a schedule of who’s available to look after her.”

Slick shook his head. “Thanks, but that’s not necessary. I’m sure Mary-Sue will be over the minute she finds out Jess

is sick.”

“Maybe we can combat that by having a plan in place.”

“Daddy?”

Slick noted the green tinge to his daughter’s face. “Yeah, baby?”

“I think I’m going to throw up.”

He was already moving, picking up the bucket he’d placed by her bed and notching it under her chin by the time Jess rolled over and lost the contents of her stomach.

He heard, more than saw Dahlia leave the room. He couldn’t blame her. Dealing with vomit wasn’t his favorite part of being a parent.

After a couple more heaves, Jess flopped back on her bed, tears leaking out of the corner of her eyes. “I hate throwing up.”

“I know, baby, I know. It’s not fun. Let me get rid of this, and I’ll bring you back a cool cloth to wash your face.”

She nodded, and her eyes drifted shut.

Slick waited a couple more minutes to make sure she didn’t have another vomiting spell before he got up and headed to the bathroom.

He was making his way back to the bedroom when Dahlia met him, a glass of pale red liquid in her hand.

“I got Jess a glass of that electrolyte drink you’ve got in the fridge. Do you think she can keep it down?”

Having someone to share the burden of a sick child was great and, once again, Slick was thankful that Dahlia had offered. However, he couldn’t take advantage of Johnno’s woman. Or any of the other women who’d volunteer to help him.

“Thanks, and I hope so. I was going to get her some after I wiped her face.”

Dahlia shrugged and smiled. “Now you don’t have to.”

Together, they walked back to his daughter's room, and he swept the cloth gently over her forehead and cheeks before encouraging her to take a few sips of the drink. He held his breath, hoping it wouldn't come straight back up again.

It didn't. Her eyelids drifted down, and she sighed out a breath before falling asleep. Her skin didn't feel as warm as it had a few minutes ago. Fingers crossed the fever had broken, and his precious girl was on the backside of the bug that had caused her so much distress.

Dahlia still hovered, even though she said she was going to leave fifteen minutes ago.

Jess's slumber was deep and calm, so Slick took a small break to fix himself a sandwich and say goodbye to Dahlia before continuing his bedside vigil.

"Thanks again, Dahlia. You'll make a great mom one day."

His eyes widened when her hand drifted to her stomach. "I hope so," she said shyly.

"Are you?"

Dahlia smiled big. "Yep, thirteen weeks along now."

Slick hugged her, even more grateful that she'd come to his aid. "Congratulations. Johnno hasn't said anything."

"We were waiting until I passed my first trimester. I had some early bleeding, so we didn't want to say anything until we knew for sure that things were safe."

"And are they?" Slick recalled Debbie's pregnancy. It was smooth, and she hadn't had any issues—unlike their marriage. He wasn't going to go there. Deb was gone, and he was now a single dad to the most gorgeous girl on the planet.

"Yep, I'm sure, come your next shift, Johnno will be telling everyone."

Slick was happy for them but also a little jealous. He wanted to find love again. With all his teammates finding their happily ever after, he wanted it, too. His bad marriage to Deb hadn't soured him on it.

He would happily marry again—if he could find the right woman. A woman who loved his daughter as much as she loved him. He and Jess were a team, and if Jess didn't like the woman he was seeing, then no matter how he felt, Jess's feelings outweighed his own.

"I'll make sure I act surprised. He's happy about the baby?" Slick recalled Johnno had been instrumental in helping raise his younger siblings, putting his dream to be a firefighter on hold until his youngest sister was in high school. Not to mention making him have to be a parent figure before he was ready for it.

"Very happy. I mean, it happened sooner than we wanted or planned, but yeah, he can't wait to hold our child." Dahlia's voice softened as they talked about her fiancée.

"You guys going to get hitched before the baby is born?"

A blush stole over her cheeks. "Umm, we eloped to Vegas a month ago." She held up her left hand, nestled against her engagement ring was a second ring, cleverly designed to complement the other one so it looked like it was one ring instead of two.

"Damn, you guys have been keeping secrets from us. The girls aren't going to be happy."

Dahlia's lips twisted into a wry smile. "Tell me about it. We're going to have everyone over for dinner soon. Obviously, everyone will know about the baby, but we'll then break the news about our wedding."

"Guess I'm lucky to be in on the secret."

She shrugged. "Timing. I figured you needed something good to think about to combat your worry."

Slick laughed. "Ain't that the truth?"

His buddy's wife gave him a quick hug. "You're a good guy, Slick. I know there's a special woman out there just for you."

Slick returned the hug but didn't respond. Even with him being open to marrying again, he was beginning to give up

hope that there was a woman out there for him. The one woman he *did* want to get to know didn't seem to want to know him.

Although that wasn't true, when she'd first met him at Dahlia's art show, she'd seemed keen. They'd talked and laughed, commiserating over the loser who'd brought her to the show and then had slipped out while Poppy wasn't looking. Secretly, Slick had been glad that Poppy had been dumped. He wouldn't have had the chance to chat with her if he'd still been hanging around.

Slick had been all prepared to ask if she'd like to go for a drink when something had changed between them. She'd shut down right in front of him and excused herself from his presence.

Now, whenever he saw Poppy Brown, she put a wall up between them, and it frustrated the hell out of him.

What the hell he'd said or done for her to react the way she had?

"Drive home carefully, and don't worry, as I said, your secrets are safe with me."

"I know. I hadn't planned to say anything, but—" Dahlia shrugged. "You looked like you needed something to cheer you up."

Slick chuckled and opened the front door for her. "Looking after a sick kid isn't a joy but it's what you sign up for when you commit to being a parent. But, yes, it did cheer me up."

She patted his arm as she walked out. "Call if you need anything."

"Will do."

As he closed the door, he leaned against it and stretched his neck. It was going to be a long night, but he wouldn't change anything. Jess was his life, and things could've been much different if Deb had lived.

He didn't want to think ill of Deb, but they would've eventually divorced. Their relationship wasn't healthy, and

Jess's presence wouldn't have mended it.

If Deb was still alive, he could guarantee he wouldn't see Jess at all. His daughter would've been kept from him, and he would've become a bitter person.

Slick banished those thoughts. Things had turned out the way they were supposed to, and if there was a new relationship for him in the cards, then he would wait for it to come to him.

* * *

POPPY QUICKLY REACHED OVER and turned the volume down on the song playing from the car radio. She wouldn't ever be able to listen to that song and not think of the last time she'd heard it.

The time when a handsome man had asked her to dance.

Dammit, she'd promised herself after that night that she'd stop thinking about Carson 'Slick' Killian. It was hard, though, when her group of girlfriends were all paired up with the guys on his team.

What she should do was walk away from the girls. She'd survived without them before. She could do it again. Poppy didn't want to. Having friends to hang out with was something she treasured. She'd made some really bad decisions in her life. Starting over again in San Antonio had been hard, but it had also been rewarding.

She'd work out a way that she could do both—keep her friends and somehow avoid Slick and his precious daughter, Jess.

As she pulled into her apartment complex, her phone started dingling with incoming messages. Likely from the group chat she had with the girls. She'd check it once she got inside.

Her car bay was darker than normal, and Poppy spied the bulb had gone out in the light in front of where she always

parked. She'd have to tell the building management about it, but they'd likely take three weeks or longer to fix it.

After what had happened to her in Tarpley, she'd become extra cautious of her surroundings. It was surprising how many bad people there were in the world. The traumas her group of friends had gone through were testament to that.

Her phone rang as she got out of the car. Her automatic response was to answer it, but she was standing in the dark, and taking the call would be a distraction that would leave her open should anyone be lurking in the shadows.

God, Poppy hated feeling and thinking this way, but it was better to be careful than not. Whoever it was could wait until she was inside her home.

The moment she closed her front door and engaged the locks, she relaxed. Behind her closed doors, she had a modicum of safety.

Her phone started ringing again as she placed her bag on the hook by her front door.

Two calls in the space of a couple of minutes. What was going on?

Fishing through her bag, she grabbed her phone but missed the call. Yep, the group chat was blowing up, and Dahlia had tried to contact her twice.

Poppy pressed Dahlia's contact, and the other woman answered on the first ring. "Poppy! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. I was just getting out of the car when you rang. What's up? Is everything okay? I noticed there are a lot of messages too. Is someone hurt?" She hadn't wanted to allow herself to think one of the guys had been hurt on shift, but they were firefighters. Their job was dangerous.

"The guys are fine. Sorry to give you a bit of a fright. But Slick's daughter is sick, and we're arranging a roster to go sit with her if she's still sick when he has to go back on shift. Can we add you?"

Poppy's blood froze at the thought of having to be alone with Jess. She'd seen the little girl at various parties she'd attended with the group but hadn't really had any one-on-one time with her.

After what happened with Finn, and how she'd failed miserably at being a parent, she avoided being alone with children as much as possible. It wasn't that she didn't like them; it was more that she didn't trust herself around them.

Yes, she was older now and not as selfish as she had been when she'd first been tasked with looking after Finn. That time had left a delible mark on her. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt Jess, and in turn, hurt Slick.

"Umm, I don't think that's a good idea," Poppy said eventually. "I'm not—I'm not that great with kids. It's probably better you don't include me. I'm sorry."

God, did she sound as heartless as she thought she did?

She hated herself for it because if she needed help, they'd all be there for her.

Her shoulders slumped, and she waited for Dahlia to hang up. To remove her from the group chat. She'd let someone down again. She was better off being alone. That way she couldn't disappoint anyone.

"I don't believe that," Dahlia said quietly.

"Don't believe what?"

"That you're not great with kids. Everyone says that when they haven't had much exposure to little ones."

If only that was the truth, but it was more. So much more.

If she told Dahlia what she'd done to Finn. How she discarded him because he hadn't fitted in with her world at the time.

Or how she'd put the guy she was seeing needs above her nephew's; Dahlia would keep Jess well away from her.

"It's not that, at all. It's just...it doesn't matter. I can cook something for them, but that's it."

Dahlia sighed, and Poppy bet she was trying to decide whether to question her further or to let it go and accept what she'd offered.

“Okay, I'll add that to my list. I won't push you to do something you don't want to do.”

Poppy blew out a breath, grateful she didn't have to answer questions she wasn't comfortable with. Although, she imagined she'd have to face it soon.

Dahlia may have let her get away with it this time, but it would come up in the future.

“Great. Do we drop the meals off at the station?” It seemed the most logical place to make deliveries, then everything could be taken to Slick's place all at once.

“No. Food deliveries go directly to Slick's place. Do you have his address?”

Dammit, Poppy would have to face him. She couldn't back out now. Unless she timed it when he was at the station and one of the other girls was at his place.

Yes, that was a good idea and a good plan.

“I'm not sure. Probably a good idea to send it again.”

Poppy didn't have it. Every time there was a get-together at his house, she'd come up with the excuse that she had a client who needed an urgent design job. She hadn't taken note of his address.

No one had questioned her about it, and she was glad, but they had many. If she kept avoiding going to Slick's place, there would be no way she could keep avoiding the questions.

The rub of it all—Slick represented a safe haven for her.

Poppy couldn't explain it, except that when they first met, she'd enjoyed his company a lot. Had been wanting to get to know him better.

Slick was so different from the guys she'd dated in the past. He was a firefighter, and they were good people—Brodie had shown her that. Granted, Brodie was a volunteer

firefighter and, as a billionaire because of an app he sold while in college, he had enough money that he didn't need to work, but he volunteered because he wanted to give back to the community of Tarpley that had welcomed him as one of their own. He and Cerise were great parents to Finn.

If only things were different, and Jess wasn't in the picture.

No, that wasn't fair.

Jess was a beautiful little girl, the light of Slick's eyes. She wouldn't wish that on him. It was better that she step away, which was what she had done.

"I'll send it via text and email." Dahlia's voice snagged her attention.

"Okay."

"Promise you won't delete it."

What the heck?

Her friend's demand shouldn't have surprised her. As an artist, Dahlia was more observant than the average person.

"Why would I do that?" Did Poppy sound calm, or had her voice pitched a little higher than normal?

"Because I get a feeling there's more going on here. I'm here if you want to talk. I promise I won't make any judgments."

The urge to tell Dahlia everything was compelling.

Would it be easier if she did? Would it ease her guilt?

Those were questions she didn't have the answers to. Luckily, Finn had forgiven her, and so had Cerise. They didn't have to, considering the guy she'd been seeing at the time had wanted to not only kill her, but kill Finn too.

Poppy didn't deserve their forgiveness, but she was grateful for it. She had a good relationship with her nephew and saw him at least once every two months.

"Maybe one day," she finally whispered into the phone.

“Okay, well, I’ve got to get to calling a few more people. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Thanks, Dahlia. Bye.”

Poppy disconnected the call and threw her phone down. She’d come to San Antonio to start afresh, and it had worked out well. Her graphic design business had taken off, and the one time she’d dipped her toe into the dating pool, the guy had dumped her and she’d found herself enfolded into a group of women who were all attached to firefighters.

Funny how life has a way of making you face the things you would rather avoid.

Like a hunky man with an adorable daughter.

CHAPTER 2



EXHAUSTION NIPPED AT SLICK'S HEELS AS HE HEADED FOR HIS front door. He wasn't expecting anyone. He shouldn't be at home, he should've been at work, but Chief Blaise had taken one look at him, noted the dark rings under his eyes, and sent him away with the instructions not to return until his next shift.

It was a miracle he hadn't succumbed to Jess's bug, but he wasn't going to tempt fate. There was still time for him to catch it.

Right this moment, he'd love to join Jess on the couch and sleep for hours, but if Slick did that, then he wouldn't sleep when night came. If he made it past eight p.m., it would be a miracle.

He pulled the door open and stilled.

Poppy Brown was on his doorstep.

The last person Slick expected to see. Her gorgeous green eyes widened in surprise, and she took a tiny step back, like she hadn't been expecting *him* to answer the door.

"Slick, yo-you're home."

Way to state the obvious, was on the tip of his tongue, but he swallowed the words down. "I am. Were you expecting someone else?"

Of course she was.

She thought Calla would be here.

He was grateful his teammates' women had all volunteered to sit with Jess while he was at work. Of course, Mary-Sue and Randy could help, but he'd convinced them that staying away from Jess was better for them. Both of them weren't the healthiest of people, and he'd tried hard to convince them it would be in their best interest to keep their distance. The bug was nasty, and he hadn't wanted them to get sick.

For once, they'd listened. Slick was glad they had but also didn't trust it. He wouldn't put it past them to use this as an opportunity to highlight just how bad his job was and how that made him not the best person to be raising his daughter.

Which was a complete mistake, because if his job wasn't flexible, he wouldn't be able to spend the time he did with Jess. It frustrated the hell out of him they couldn't see that.

"Slick? Are you listening?"

Geez, he'd been so in his head that Poppy's voice had gone right over his head. "Sorry, it's been a hectic few days."

She nodded but chewed her bottom lip, and he wanted to reach out and pry the flesh away so that it didn't get bruised. "Umm, I brought over some enchiladas."

Poppy held out a foil dish as though it had a bad smell. Which totally wasn't true. He caught the aroma of tomatoes and cheese, and his stomach grumbled.

The polite thing to do would be to take the dish and let her leave, but he'd been waiting for this moment. Waiting for a chance to get Poppy alone for the longest time.

Slick stepped back and waved an arm in a welcoming gesture. "Please, come in."

Poppy's hesitation was slight, but not slight enough that he didn't catch it. "Oh no, it's fine. I just came to drop the dish off."

It had been a long shot, but he'd had to try. "Sure. Okay."

"Daddy, who's at the door? You've been there a long time." Jess came sliding up beside him, and he immediately

hooked an arm around her shoulders and pulled her tight against him.

God, he loved his daughter so much.

“Poppy just dropped by with some food for us.”

“Ohh, thanks, Miss. Poppy. You have to come in so we can give you some tea in appreciation of your nice gesture.”

Where the hell did that come from?

Slick had never heard his daughter say those words before. Or anything like it. He flicked his gaze up to Poppy’s, and anything he was about to say got lodged in his throat.

Her eyes sparkled with mirth she was trying hard to keep hidden. Her lips twitched, and he wanted her to laugh. Wanted to hear how she sounded when she wasn’t so reserved.

As if aware of what she was doing, in a blink of his eye, the mirth disappeared, and Poppy was back to biting her bottom lip.

“Thank you for asking so nicely, Jess, but I can’t. I’m sorry.” At least she’d kept her voice soft and not harsh so as to upset his daughter, but he didn’t miss Jess’s sigh of disappointment.

“Are you sure you can’t stay?” His daughter injected that pleading tone she knew usually worked in her getting her way with Deb’s parents.

It didn’t work so much on him because, well, he was used to it. All he had to do was raise his eyebrows, and Jess knew she couldn’t put anything past him.

For once, he wasn’t going to be doing that; Slick wanted Poppy to stay as much as his daughter did.

Maybe he could entice her a little as well.

“Jess is right, *both* of us would like it if you could stay.”

Poppy’s gaze dropped to the ground.

What was going through her mind? What was she afraid of?

Instinct told him fear was driving her, as much as he didn't understand the why.

After what seemed like forever, but was maybe half a minute, she lifted her head. "I guess I could stay for a little while."

A blast of triumph flowed through Slick, and he squeezed Jess's shoulder. "Wonderful. Come on in."

"Yay!" Jess pulled away from him and clapped her hands. His daughter was well on the way to recovery.

The little girl dashed down the hall while Slick was more sedate and stepped to the side to let Poppy pass him.

"Thanks," she murmured as she crossed the threshold, ensuring that there was at least a foot between them, which was difficult, as his entryway wasn't that wide.

He closed the door and found her still waiting for him. Slick didn't understand her hesitation, but he wasn't going to question her. She was inside his house, and for that, he was grateful.

"Let me take that dish from you." Without waiting for her to contradict him, he took possession of the foil dish, his fingers brushing against hers.

A spark ignited at the brief touch. A spark that Slick accepted because he'd known he'd been drawn to her from the second he laid eyes on her.

Would she accept it too? Or would she imagine it was static electricity?

* * *

WHY ON EARTH did I say I'd come in?

The thought pounded her brain as Poppy tried to ignore the tingle coursing through her bloodstream. A featherlight touch from him, and her body was reacting as if he'd hauled her close and kissed her.

Geez, she needed to get her wayward mind under control. Where were these thoughts coming from?

More to the point, where was this reaction coming from?

Lingering static electricity.

Poppy mentally scoffed at her inner voice, but at the moment, she'd take that excuse rather than examine what was really going on inside of her.

Following Slick to the kitchen, she paused, noting the walls of the hallway had pictures of Jess at various ages. Some with Slick. Some with an older couple and one when she looked like a newborn and Slick was younger and had his arm around a woman with dark hair whose smile, while wide, didn't quite reach her eyes.

Poppy wanted to look at the picture a bit longer. Clearly, it was taken just after Jess's birth, and the woman was Slick's deceased wife.

Why didn't she look happy?

Had she not wanted to be a mother, either?

Poppy shoved the thought away. Just because she'd decided that motherhood wasn't for her, didn't mean every other woman in the world felt the same way. There could be a million reasons why her smile didn't reach her eyes. She could be tired.

None of that matters. I don't need to know.

That was right, she didn't. She was there to drop food off. The fact she'd done that and was now inside the house was a different story.

Then again, if Calla had been here, like Poppy had assumed, then there was every chance Poppy would've come in anyway.

“Poppy? Is everything okay?”

Her eyes drifted shut at hearing Slick's inquiry. He was so close. If she leaned to the left, she'd probably hit his shoulder. The urge to do so was high.

What would it be like to have those strong arms wrap around her and hold her tight against his side? Like he had with Jess.

Not going to happen.

Now wasn't the time to dissect her confusing reactions. Poppy needed to come up with a reason she was still loitering in the hallway, and the truth seemed like the best way to deal with it.

"Sorry." She forced a smile out, noting that he no longer held the dish. How long had she been staring at the wall? "I'm good. Just admiring the photos of Jess and you. Is this your late wife?"

What the heck? Why did she ask that?

Too late to take it back as it was out there.

"That's Deb and me, just after Jess was born." There was no emotion in his voice. It was flat as though he didn't want to talk about her.

Why was she surprised at that?

Poppy found it difficult to talk about her brother and his wife. Not only because of their untimely death but also because of what she'd done. They'd be looking down on her in disappointment.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked."

Slick scraped a hand down his face. The fine lines around his mouth and eyes were etched a little deeper. The dark circles under his eyes highlighted his tiredness. She should've stuck to her resolve not to get close to the man and say she couldn't stay. However, the sweetness in Jess's voice had tugged at heartstrings Poppy was unaware still existed inside of her.

"It's fine. I was over the moon at having a daughter. Deb not so much. I think she wanted a boy. A son for me. I didn't care, though. I just wanted a healthy baby, and I got that."

"And now you're alone."

Wow, could I not say anything more heartless?

“Oh please, forget I even said that.” Poppy lowered her head. “I don’t know where that came from.”

A warm hand landed on her shoulder. Comforting. Forgiving. Emotions she didn’t deserve. “No, it’s okay. It’s the truth.”

“Look, I think I should go. This isn’t a good idea.” Poppy shook his hand off and retreated down the hall.

“No! Please don’t go. Stay.” Slick reached out a hand.

It would be so easy to place one of her hands in his, but she kept them firmly to her side.

“I keep saying the wrong thing. Why would you want me to stay?”

The last few minutes were ones Poppy wanted to forget. It seemed whenever she got around children, she said and did the wrong thing. Once again, reinforcing that keeping her distance from Slick and Jess had been the best thing to do.

Although it wasn’t fair to blame Jess, the little girl hadn’t done anything but look cute and ask her in the most proper way ever to have tea with them.

“Because I want you to.”

For a second, Slick’s words didn’t make any sense to her, but then the meaning of them sunk in. He was answering her question.

Poppy met his gaze and her heart stuttered. His expression so open to her, there was no artifice lurking in his silvery gray eyes. In the past, her former boyfriends had never been able to look her in the eye. Their gazes had always seemed to dart from left to right. That should’ve been a sign to her that things weren’t right. Then again, she was lost in her grief for her brother, her new responsibility, and the alcohol she’d used to numb the pain.

How could she deny him when he’d been nothing but nice to her?

When she'd been the one to ask the inappropriate questions and make unwarranted comments.

Then there was Jess.

Movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention, and she spied the little girl looking at the two of them. Her face was a little paler than it had been when she'd come up to Slick at the front door.

"Are you okay, Jess?" she asked, not even thinking about it, just acting on the natural concern that had flared up inside of her.

The little girl lifted one tiny shoulder.

In a flash, Slick was crouched in front of her, the back of his hand resting against her forehead. "Does your stomach hurt again?"

"Not really. But it's rumbling. I think I'm hungry."

Slick didn't move from where he squatted in front of his daughter. His entire focus was on Jess.

What would it feel like to have that attention on her?

Poppy let the thought linger before slamming the door on it.

Not happening.

"Maybe I *should* go," she murmured.

"No." Twin voices commanded her, and she took a step back in surprise.

They both wanted her to stay.

Why?

It wouldn't be difficult to figure out why Slick wanted her to stay. Whenever they were at the same place or event, he always found his way by her side.

The last time had been the fireman's ball a couple of months ago. Saying no when he'd asked her to dance had been hard. For once she'd wanted to let herself give into the simmering attraction she felt around the man, but then Poppy

remembered her past. Remembered his daughter and put the walls back up.

“Umm, okay. I’ll stay.”

Slick straightened, keeping one hand lightly resting on Jess’s head. “Sorry, that did come out harsh, but I don’t want you to go.”

Was he trying to say something more to her?

Or was she reading something into his words that wasn’t there?

“It’s fine.”

It really was. If Poppy was going to be completely truthful with herself, she did want to stay with Slick. Wanted to get to know him better—even though it could turn out to be the worst thing she could possibly do.

“How about you and Jess go into the living room while I fix some snacks and drinks?” Slick asked.

Before she could ask if he needed any help, a little hand tugged on hers, and she had no option but to follow Jess into the living room.

The area was neat, with a couch covered in blankets facing a large, flat-screen TV mounted on the wall. A large window took up one wall, and the view was of the backyard.

There was a cozy feel to the room, as if this was the heart and soul of the house. For Poppy, it wasn’t hard to imagine Slick cuddling up to Jess on the couch. No way would he ever turn his back on his daughter.

“Sit, Miss. Poppy.” Jess patted the spot on the couch next to her.

Poppy would prefer to sit on one of the matching lounge chairs, but she complied with the little girl’s wishes and plopped down next to her.

Jess picked up the remote and pointed it at the TV.

Poppy expected a kids’ show to fill the screen, but instead, a faux fireplace appeared, and she picked up her tablet and

began to play a game on it.

It wasn't anything like the video games Finn used to play with one of her exes, one of the good guys she'd pushed away.

God, she'd been so awful back then. So selfish and only thinking of herself. She'd hurt Garrett and Finn. At the time, she hadn't cared. All she'd wanted was Garrett's attention on her and only her.

Stop it.

Living in the past wasn't doing her any favors. Yet Poppy couldn't seem to let it go. The guilt of what she'd done ate away at her, affecting how she acted around people—especially people like Slick who had children.

“What are you playing?” she asked when the silence stretched between her and Jess. Not that it seemed to bother the little girl. She was engrossed in watching the screen.

“It's a game that helps my spelling. Daddy says that even though I'm sick, I still need to keep learning. I'll do a math game later.”

Poppy stared at Jess, amazed that she seemed fine having to do some learning while sick. Then again, things were so different now than when she'd grown up. Studying had always been a chore for her, but if she'd had the game that Jess was playing to help her, it wouldn't have been so hard.

The rattle of cups had her looking up to find Slick approaching with a tray in his hands. He looked like he'd done this a few times.

Had he done it for another woman recently?

What if he had?

Poppy had no claim over him, yet a flash of an emotion she didn't want to name as jealousy flared through her. She really needed to get herself under control.

“Here we are. I've got some peppermint tea because that's good for unsettled stomachs. I also have some chocolate chip cookies that Calla made, along with some dry crackers for you, Jess.”

“Awww, why can’t I have a cookie? Why do I have to have the crackers?”

“Because you’ve been sick.”

“It’s not fair,” Jess whined.

No way was she getting involved with the disagreement between father and daughter. Would Slick give in? Although he didn’t seem the type of father that would taunt his daughter by bringing something he didn’t think she would be able to eat.

Slick placed the tray carefully on the coffee table.

“If your stomach feels better after you’ve had a couple of crackers, you can have half a cookie. What do you say?” He booped Jess on the nose, and Poppy couldn’t stop the smile curving her lips at the way Jess launched off the couch and threw her arms around her father.

“Okay, Daddy. Thank you.”

Slick’s eyes closed as he hugged his daughter tightly, the love he felt for her plain for Poppy to see.

He really was a good father. It was clear he would do anything for his daughter.

Would he do that for his partner if he had one? Or did his heart still belong to his deceased wife?

CHAPTER 3



TORTURE.

That was the only word that could adequately describe what Slick experienced. So close to Poppy, but it still felt like there was a canyon between them.

When he'd looked up at her when he was hugging Jess, he'd seen such sadness in her eyes. As though her heart was breaking. In that moment, he'd wanted to reach out and pull her into the hug as well, but he didn't think she'd appreciate it.

"Can I get you another cup of tea?" Slick asked, wanting a reason for her not to leave, even though she'd been there almost two hours.

Jess had fallen asleep after she'd eaten her half a cookie and showed no signs that her sickness would be returning.

"No, I think I should go. I've been here a lot longer than I thought I would be."

There was a finality to her tone, and he wouldn't be able to convince her to stay.

The doorbell rang before he could ask her not to go just yet.

Poppy stood quickly, as if whoever was at the door was the lifeline she'd been waiting for.

"Wait here," he commanded.

Her eyebrows rose at his tone, but he didn't care.

After everything that everyone on his team had gone through lately, he wasn't taking any chances. His home was safe, but he'd found that didn't stop danger from making its presence known. "I'm not expecting anyone."

"You weren't expecting me. And I wasn't expecting you to be home," Poppy grumbled as he headed for the door.

He bit back a grin. He liked that hint of sass and wouldn't mind if she showed it around him a bit more often.

Why did she hide it?

Opening the door, the joy faded in an instant. "Randy. Mary-Sue, I wasn't expecting you."

Slick mentally rolled his eyes at saying what Poppy had breathed out only seconds ago.

"I didn't think we'd have to call to arrange an appointment to see our granddaughter," Mary-Sue sniffed.

Slick gripped the door a little tighter. Over the last year, every time Mary-Sue spoke to him, her tone got sharper and sharper. Bitterness colored her words, and he wished he could pinpoint exactly when things had changed.

When had they gone from being doting grandparents to being grandparents who kept threatening him with a custody battle? A battle he knew for a fact their deceased daughter Debbie would be far from happy with. The reasonably good relationship between them all had started to crumble.

"She's been sick, Mary-Sue, with a horrible bug. I didn't want you or Randy to get it." Slick kept his tone even and reasonable, even though annoyance simmered below the surface.

"All the more reason for me to see she's okay. Isn't that right, Randy?" She gave her husband a pointed look.

"That's right. We want to see Jess."

Initially, Slick thought Mary-Sue was the one driving the desire to become Jess's guardians, and Randy was going along with her to keep the peace.

Over time, he'd worked out that his former father-in-law was encouraging Mary-Sue to push for it to go to court. Debbie would be so upset with her parents. Or maybe she wouldn't be too surprised with what they were doing. After all, her relationship with her parents hadn't been wonderful before or during their marriage.

There was no point in trying to argue with them. The advice he'd gotten from a family lawyer when they first started muttering about wanting custody of Jess, was to try to placate and be amiable with his in-laws and maybe, just maybe, things wouldn't escalate.

So that was what Slick always did. He accommodated them as much as he could, but they were really digging their heels in with his job and he was at his wit's end of how to keep doing what he loved and keep his daughter with him.

"Sure, come on in." He stepped aside, like he had a couple of hours ago to let Poppy in, only this time his in-laws didn't move.

Mary-Sue's lips pursed as though she sucked on a lemon. "Who is that?" She raised her arm and pointed over his shoulder.

Poppy.

Damn, he didn't want her to see this.

Although, she could help you solve a bit of your problem.

Nope. Nope. Nope.

He wasn't going to follow that little trail his inner voice set in front of him. Yet...

"Hi, I'm Poppy. A friend of Slick's. You are?" Poppy stepped up beside him and held out her hand toward his former in-laws.

Where the hell did this woman come from and what has she done with Poppy?

Her acting confident and poised was the last thing he expected, especially after the way she'd been skittish around him all afternoon.

“We are Debbie’s parents, and Jess’s grandparents.” Mary-Sue’s haughty tone was in full flight.

The way she spoke, it was as though he was still married to Debbie—which Poppy was well aware wasn’t the case.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

Slick had to keep his eyes trained on his in-laws and not Poppy, because if he looked at her, Mary-Sue and Randy would see the disbelief at her reaction to them on his face, and know that something wasn’t right.

Without giving it too much thought, he brought his arm up and slung it around Poppy’s shoulder, her body tensing beneath his hold.

He prayed that the two people still standing on his front porch didn’t see the action.

Mary-Sue’s gaze zeroed in on where his arm was. This was the first time since Debbie’s death that they’d seen him with a woman by his side. Sure, there was nothing going on between him and Poppy, but *they* didn’t know that. For the time being, if it had them backing off from their threats, then he’d go with it.

“How long have you two known each other?” Randy demanded.

Okay, so having this conversation in his entryway wasn’t a good idea. “Let’s talk about this inside, shall we?” Slick said, hoping this time they’d come in like he’d asked them to do five minutes ago.

With a huff, Mary-Sue strode through the door and headed straight for the living room, Randy trailing behind her.

Slick had perhaps thirty seconds of peace before they’d come searching for him if he didn’t follow them directly into the room. They probably wouldn’t care that Jess was still sleeping. They’d wake her up.

“What’s going on?” Poppy asked as she shifted away from his side, his arm dropping immediately.

Am I going to ask her to do this?

The idea was totally ludicrous. He couldn't guess why he was thinking it, but Deb's parents had been making a lot of noise recently about him going on a date with a friend's daughter.

Why they wanted him to do that when they were also actively saying he wasn't a great father was beyond him. So far, he'd resisted their attempts at matchmaking.

Slick reached out and took hold of Poppy's hands. Instantly, electricity spiked through him, and the urge to pull her close, sink his fingers into her honey gold tresses and bury his face between her neck and shoulders almost overwhelmed him.

He wanted to breathe out. Let his troubles go for just a moment, and he believed holding Poppy would give him that.

"I need your help. Will you help me until they leave?" Slick tried not to beg, but he couldn't keep it out of his voice.

Her eyes widened, her tongue darted out to swipe across her plump bottom lip.

Did she know how enticing that made her lips look?

He doubted it. There was an air of innocence around Poppy, and there was no way she even saw in herself.

There was also a lot of sadness, and Slick wished he knew what caused her so much grief.

"How?"

"How what?" he asked, not sure what she meant.

"How do you want me to help you?" Poppy tugged on her hands, and he reluctantly released them.

Time was running out. Mary-Sue or Randy were going to come looking for him. He could hear Jess was now awake. As he'd suspected, his in-laws had woken her.

"I don't know if you know everything that's going on with me and my former in-laws, and I don't really have time to go into all the details. Just know that they believe my job is too dangerous for me to be a father and want me to get a regular

nine-to-five. Now they've also added trying to set me up with a friend's daughter. Their actions are confusing, to say the least, but I can't lose my daughter. I don't want to lose my job. Will you act as my girlfriend until they leave?" He blurted it all out because he had no other choice and inwardly he cringed at his request.

"What? You want me to be your girlfriend?" The disbelief in her voice wasn't hard to miss.

"Yes. I just need..." He shoved his hands in his pockets and dropped his head back so he was gazing at the ceiling. Slick wished he didn't have to do this. He really did, but he was just over it all. Having to walk on eggshells and jump through hoops for people his former wife had never had the best relationship with wasn't fun—he was tired of it all. "Please. I wouldn't ask this but..." He didn't know what else to say. If she said no, it wasn't like it would be the end of the world. Like always, he'd cope with this visit, and he'd face whatever other arrows they would shoot at him.

Slick had been a single father for the last eight years, and before that, he'd been essentially alone, as things with Deb had gone off track fairly early in their marriage.

Now, he didn't want to be alone anymore.

* * *

EVERYTHING IN POPPY was yelling at her to run. To get as far away from Slick and his daughter as fast as possible.

The very idea that she could "play" his girlfriend in front of Jess's grandparents was a terrible plan. There was no way they wouldn't see through the ruse, but looking at Slick, the way tiredness etched the lines around his face deeper than she'd seen them. The way his shoulders hunched a little. The way the resignation in his voice reached into her soul, she was considering it.

This is the worst idea ever. The sensible thing would be to say sorry, no.

“Yes.”

Wait! That wasn't what I meant to say.

Yet, now that it was out there, a weird sense of calmness settled in the pit of her belly.

“Did you say yes?”

If things were different, Poppy would laugh at the disbelief and surprise in his voice.

“I did.”

Before she had a chance to say any more, Slick closed the small distance between them and wrapped her up in his arms.

His face nestled between her shoulder and neck, and of their own volition, her arms crept up and around his broad shoulders.

Her eyes drifted shut, and she gave herself over to the embrace. It'd been a long time since she'd been hugged like this. As though she was the very reason they were able to breathe. As though she was a lifeline they needed to cling to, to be able to cope with life. As though she was special.

“Carson? What's going on?” Mary-Sue's high-pitched voice broke the spell and Poppy went to move away, but Slick tightened his hold.

“Not yet,” he whispered. Shivers rippled down her spine, and she didn't want him to let her go either.

How long they stood there for, she didn't know. It could've been mere seconds, but it felt like hours.

Looked like Slick needed the hug as much as she did.

He loosened his arms around her and looked down at her.

Their gazes met.

There were slivers of silver in his gray depths. Her hand came up and cupped his cheek, another action she had no control over.

If possible, the silver became more pronounced, and he lowered his head to brush his lips against hers. A soft, barely

there kiss, but it ignited a fire inside of Poppy.

What have I done?

CHAPTER 4



THE QUESTION STILL REVERBERATED AROUND HER MIND A HALF hour after she'd thought it as she sat on the couch squashed between Slick and Jess.

Mary-Sue and Randy sat upright in the matching lounge chairs on either side of the coffee table.

Jess hadn't batted an eyelid when Poppy and Slick walked into the room hand-in-hand. The little girl had responded as if this was normal, and she'd seen the two of them together all the time. The way she acted, no one would've guessed that for her, and for Slick and Poppy, this was the first time they'd even held hands.

The tension in the room was thick, but Jess was oblivious to it all.

Poppy was glad she was unaware. Jess was innocent and didn't need to know that things between the adults weren't relaxed. She needed to be protected from the negative energy radiating from her grandparents.

The thoughts brought her up short. They were almost... caring.

Maybe the situation was the reason for the way she was thinking. There was no way Poppy could change that quickly in terms of the natural mothering instinct that many people were born with. It hadn't been there with Finn, and it still probably wasn't there now.

Yes, the whole situation was the reason for the way she was thinking. It was all part of the act. One to convince Slick's

in-laws that they were interested in each other. That it was serious enough to display their affection in front of the little girl.

“Poppy, what is that you do for work?” Randy asked when the conversation had stalled for longer than a few seconds.

“I’m a graphic designer.”

“Hmm. I see.” Nothing could hide the censure in his voice. As though he didn’t believe her career choice was a good and noble one.

Not surprising, considering the couple had a big problem with Slick’s career—which *was* noble and good. From what she’d heard when the girls had been chatting about the team and Slick’s name had come up, Jess’s grandparents wanted Slick to take on a boring job. One that would keep him safe, reiterating what he’d told her when he asked her to fake being in a relationship together.

Over the last couple of years, Poppy had dealt with many facets of customer service with her clients. She was going to treat Randy like one of the minimal condescending ones she’d had to provide a service to.

“I have my own company. I’ve designed for many of the restaurants along the River Walk. I’m currently working with a national gym chain to update their branding and merchandise.”

When she’d gotten the contract for Rylo Gyms, she’d been over the moon. She hadn’t thought her pitch had gone well, but they’d called her not thirty minutes after she’d closed down the video conference call to offer her the contract.

It was a huge job, and Poppy was determined to make them not regret hiring her.

“Hey, that’s wonderful.” Slick squeezed her hand.

“You didn’t know this, Carson? Surely she would’ve talked to you about it. Seeing as you’re clearly in a *relationship*.” The suspicion in Mary-Sue’s voice was plain for everyone in the room to hear.

Slick's fingers tightened around hers, and she found herself squeezing back. After everything she'd gone through with Finn, lying wasn't her favorite pastime, but sometimes needs required it.

"I told Slick about it, but I only got confirmation that my pitch was successful two days ago." That part was true. "He's been so focused on looking after Jess, that now is the first chance I've had to tell him about it. It's one of the reasons I came over."

Beside her, Poppy caught Slick's sharp inhalation of breath. Her defense of him must've surprised him.

Had no one ever bothered to side with him?

Hadn't Debbie when they'd been married?

Not that any of that mattered now. All that mattered was making sure Randy and Mary-Sue believed she and Slick were in a relationship.

Mary-Sue's attention narrowed in on the two of them, and Poppy lifted her chin and met her gaze head-on.

Prior to almost losing her life, she never would've had the strength or confidence to hold the other woman's stare. In the past, Poppy would've looked away. However, facing mortality had a way of making her deal with things differently.

"I've also done campaigns for Tiana's Tacos. The Good Tire Store." None of that was a lie, either. Those contracts had been what had also helped start her business off.

She was damn good at her job, and she wasn't going to let Mary-Sue devalue her career choice.

"Well, Jessica, why don't you come over here and sit with us? You're probably watching too much television with being sick. You should be reading. Or doing schoolwork." Mary-Sue turned her attention off Poppy and squarely placed it on Slick. "I'm assuming you've been to the school and collected her work so she doesn't get too far behind?"

Then censure in the other woman's tone grated on Poppy's nerves. Did this woman not have any idea how much Slick

loved his daughter? Did she not see the fatigue in every aspect of the man's face and demeanor?

"Yes, Mary-Sue, I've gotten her worksheets emailed to me and have printed them out, and Jess will tackle them later. Today is the first day she's actually been awake for longer than an hour," Slick responded wearily, and the irrational urge to hug him overwhelmed Poppy.

She had to remember this was all a ruse. They weren't a couple. Weren't ever going to be one.

Slick stood abruptly, and because he still had hold of her hand, she found her body moving in tandem with his, as if they'd done this same motion on numerous occasions.

"I think it's time you left. Thank you for visiting Jess."

Standing close to Slick, Poppy didn't miss the anger vibrating through him. Again, the urge to soothe him swept over her.

She needed to leave, too. Put some distance between her and Slick before things got too confusing.

"There's no need to be rude, Carson. You know I'm only asking these questions because this is what Debbie would want us to do. She would want us to make sure that her daughter is getting all the care and education she needs."

Poppy was aware Jess was in the room watching the interplay between her grandparents and father.

The little girl didn't need to see this. Leaning into Slick was as natural as breathing, and Poppy didn't examine that too closely. The tightening of his fingers around hers was the only indication she had that Slick appreciated what she'd done.

She hoped he wouldn't mind what she was about to say next.

"I don't know why you don't understand that everything Slick does, he does for his daughter. If you looked closely, you'd see that he hasn't slept much the whole time Jess has been sick. If that's not a loving father, then I don't know what is."

Her words surprised her as much as she was sure they surprised Slick. They'd certainly caused Mary-Sue to be taken aback.

She sniffed and gathered up her purse. "I don't know why you think you can talk to me that way, but I don't appreciate it." Mary-Sue spared a look in Slick's direction. "I think you need to talk to your *friend* here so she knows just who we are and what we stand for. Come on, Randy, let's go."

Without as much as a goodbye to their granddaughter, Slick's former in-laws marched out of the room, the slamming of the front door echoing down the hallway.

Immediately, Poppy pulled her hand from Slick's and put some space between them. Being close to him was confusing her and making her act in a way she wasn't used to acting.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "I appreciate the support."

"It's fine. Umm, I should go too." Poppy bent down and picked up her purse, slinging it over her shoulder. "Thank you for the tea and cookies."

"Do you have to go, Miss Poppy? I thought we could do a puzzle together."

The sound of Jess's voice tugged on strings in her soul. Ones she had no place feeling. She needed to put distance between her and Slick and his little girl. No way was she going to give Jess the idea that she and her father were really in a relationship. Poppy only hoped that the next time Jess saw her grandparents, she wouldn't say anything about her or the fact that she and Slick had pretended to be a couple.

"I'm sorry, Jess. I need to go and do some work." Not exactly a lie. It *was* a workday for her. Every day was a workday with her own business. Sometimes she took weekends off, but the fact that Poppy didn't really have a huge group of friends in San Antonio to do things with on the weekend meant she tended to work as much as she could.

Jess's shoulders slumped a little. "Oh okay. Maybe another time?"

There was no mistaking the hope in that question. She hated being the one to break the little girl's heart, but she definitely didn't want Jess to think that there was truth in her and Slick's relationship act.

Yet, she couldn't outright say no. "Maybe."

"Why don't you start that math game, Jess, while I see Poppy out?"

For half a second, Poppy thought that maybe Jess would argue with her father, but instead, she rushed up to Poppy and hugged her around the waist.

"Thanks for having tea. Please come again."

Poppy stiffened but patted Jess's shoulders. Her insides warred with how to react to the hug the child was giving her.

Getting close to Slick and his daughter wasn't going to happen, no matter how intrigued she was with Jess's almost formal speech. She couldn't deny it was sweet and as she caught Slick's eyes, clearly a surprise to him too.

"Bye, Jess. I had a lovely time having tea with you."

Poppy purposely didn't say she'd like to come again, because for her sanity, it was best that she stayed far away.

Even though it was going to be difficult.

* * *

SLICK WATCHED the interaction between Poppy and Jess. The second his daughter had hugged Poppy, she'd gone stiff, as if she found Jess's touch awful.

Why?

One thing he didn't understand was why she seemed to almost dislike being close to Jess, yet Poppy had stood up to Mary-Sue when his mother-in-law had disparaged his parenting skills.

She was a conundrum he wanted to solve.

As they walked to his front door, Slick itched to reach out and take her hand. It'd been a sweet torture having her sitting so close to him. Her thigh resting against his. Her small hand enclosed in his large one. The way she'd leaned into him when Mary-Sue spewed her awful words had him wishing that it wasn't an act. That they were actually in a relationship.

Would Poppy consider going out with him if he asked her?

There was only one way to find out. "Thanks again for the food. For staying and for supporting me with my in-laws. I know that lying to them isn't the smartest thing to do, but..." He paused. Baring his soul to Poppy about the frustrations he was feeling with Deb's parents wasn't the way to get her to go out with him. "Anyway, I wanted to know if you'd like to go out for a meal sometime."

It was as though everything had shut down within Poppy. Her eyes dulled and instead of looking at him, she was back to staring at a spot over his shoulder. Her fingers tightened their hold on her purse, and, like when Jess had hugged her, her spine stiffened to a straight rod. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Annoyance flared in him, but Slick tamped it down. Getting angry wasn't going to help anything at all. "Why?"

That was the thousand-dollar question. After everything they'd done that afternoon, the way she'd stood by him, her quick rejection didn't make sense.

He hadn't imagined that spark that flared inside of him every single time he touched her. At the time, she may have thought she'd hidden it from him, but he'd seen the way she reacted to it.

"Your life is complicated, Slick. And I'm just not cut out for relationships. It's better for all of us if we keep our distance. Trust me, you'll be glad I said no. Bye." Poppy opened the door and was out before he had a chance to process everything she said.

All he could do was watch her leave. There was no point running after her. Jess needed him. As much as Poppy

believed Slick would be happy that she'd said no, he disagreed.

No way had he imagined their connection. From the first moment they'd met at Dahlia's art show, he'd sensed something was there between them.

His life might be in a bit of upheaval at the moment. He might have a custody battle in the future, but he wasn't going to give up. It may have only been for a couple of hours, and a little white lie to get his in-laws off his back, but they made a good team.

Slick planned to show Poppy just how right a relationship between them would be.

CHAPTER 5



WALKING INTO THE STATION WAS LIKE COMING HOME. SLICK closed his eyes and let the joy of being back on the job wash over him.

God, he'd missed being there. It'd only been just over a week when he'd walked away from the shift before Jess had gotten sick.

"You good, man?"

Taco and his crew were just getting off shift, and Slick's team was about to start their next two-day rotation. "Never better. How's things with you? How's Koryn?"

"All good. And she's great. Looking forward to getting home to her."

It hit Slick then that out of his crew and Taco's, he was the only single man. Funny how he'd been one of the first ones married. Life had a way of turning things on its head. He had a Jess, and he wouldn't change anything about his life.

"I bet. I'd better get inside. I'm sure the others will be wondering if I still want this job or not." Slick joked, but if his in-laws had their way, he wouldn't have the job he loved. He wouldn't have the camaraderie—the brotherhood—with all the guys at the station.

"I'm pretty sure they'll be glad to see you. Chief Blaise got a floater in to help while you were out." Taco closed their distance. "Just between you and me, the guy was a little hot-headed."

“I’m back now, and if all goes well, and Jess doesn’t get sick again, I won’t leave the guys in the lurch, forcing us to get this guy to cover for me again.”

“You didn’t leave them in the lurch, you did what any good father would do. Anyway, I’m out.” Taco lifted his hand and jogged toward his truck.

Slick headed into the common room, Taco’s words swirling around his head. Did Blaise know that the guy who helped them out wasn’t great?

Had his team mentioned it to him, or did they just deal with the guy?

“Slick, my man! Glad to have you back.” Axe came up in the locker room and slapped him on the shoulder. “How’s my girl, Jess? She better?”

Slick stowed his stuff. “Yeah, she is. Back to her usual happy, high-energy self.” Logically he’d understood that all Jess had was a nasty bug, but in the darkest hours when she wasn’t keeping anything down, his mind wandered to worst-case scenarios that she’d picked up something far more serious. Or it was a symptom of a life-changing disease. Worrying as a parent would never go away. It was as sure as the sun rising in the east.

“Good to hear. I know the girls had a roster for food. I’m guessing your freezer is stocked to the gills?”

Slick laughed. “It is, and I really appreciate them for doing that.”

His mind drifted to the enchiladas that Poppy had made. They’d been delicious, and he’d wished that she’d come around again with more food, but out of all the women, she’d been the only one who’d only come by once.

“We all look out for each other. All you have to do is ask, and we’ll be there for you. For anything.” Axe held Slick’s gaze, confirming his team would stand by him if things went to shit with Deb’s parents. His whole team was aware of the continued custody and job threats.

“I know. How about you keep me updated on what’s been happening? Taco mentioned my fill-in was interesting.”

“Dude, that’s an understatement.”

The TV was playing some hunting show as he wandered into the common room and saw most of his team there.

“Did you miss me?” Slick asked.

“Nah, the station was quiet without you,” Johnno said with a smile.

Slick chugged some water from his bottle. “Not what I heard. A little birdie told me my replacement was exceptional.” He caught Axe’s eye, and his friend shook his head, his shoulders shuddering a little with mirth.

“If you mean exceptional as a tosser, then you’d be right,” Mick piped up. “The guy ignored the directives given at just about every incident we went to. Spider had to get in his face a few times to tell him to listen to instructions. He was a nightmare.”

“I have no idea what was wrong with him,” Spider said. “He was just...it’s really hard to put into words what he was. How he got through the fire academy is pretty amazing. Unless he’s changed since his academy days. There were so many times we had to save his ass. Anyway, he’s not our problem anymore, and Blaise knows we don’t want him on our crew again if we’re one man down. I think the other guys in the station wouldn’t want him to be a fill-in either, especially after we told them what he did.”

Slick nodded. “Sounds like a real gem. Glad Blaise was open to hearing all your concerns.”

“You know the chief. He always listens, and as he was at a couple of the fires we were at, he saw first-hand what the Freddy was like,” Tornado commented. “I wouldn’t be surprised if he didn’t write a couple of reprimands for his file. I know he spoke to the chief at the station he normally works at. Not sure what was discussed. But anyway, he’s not coming here again anytime soon.”

“Good to know. Any other news I need to know about with you guys?” Slick didn’t look at Johnno. He was sure Dahlia would’ve told her husband that she’d told Slick they were not only expecting a baby but also married.

“I’ve got some news,” Spider piped up.

Normally one of the guys would’ve said something corny like “*Has Calla seen the light and dumped you for me?*” but considering Slick didn’t have a partner and he’d never said anything like that in the past, he wasn’t going to start now.

Damn, I am the odd one out.

He’d known that, but sometimes, like now, it hit him harder than he expected. Especially after he’d discovered what it was like to hold Poppy’s hand. As well as have her in his arms.

The hug they’d shared had been unexpected but wonderful.

“Is there a reason for the dramatic pause?” Johnno tossed a wadded-up piece of paper in Spider’s direction. He flicked it away as if was nothing.

“Calla and I are going to be...” Again, he paused, and the group groaned. “Cat parents. We’ve rescued two four-month-old kittens. Brothers. We pick them up in a week.”

For a second, silence fell over the group.

Slick had assumed Spider was about to announce that he and Calla were going to have a baby, but cat parents? That was unexpected. “Congrats, man, but don’t let Jess see them. She’ll start to hound me for a kitten of her own.”

Spider laughed. “I know what y’all were expecting, but while we’re trying, it’s not happening yet. Calla needed some cheering up, so I found the shelter and we visited it the other day. Fell in love with these two boys, and there you are.”

Slick caught Johnno looking away for a second before returning his attention to the group.

Knowing that Dahlia was pregnant and that it hadn’t quite been planned, Slick suspected Johnno was feeling a little bad that he and Dahlia had what Calla and Spider were trying so

hard to have. However, once the news broke, Slick didn't think that Calla or Spider would be upset for their friends.

Conversation milled around, and Slick headed for the kitchen, where Johnno had disappeared to. "You good?" he asked.

His buddy turned from his inspection of the fridge. Closing it, he looked over Slick's shoulder, as if wanting to see if anyone had followed him into the room. "Dahlia told me she let our news slip." He kept his tone low.

"She did. I'm happy for you guys. It's great news."

Johnno sighed and shoved his hands in his pants pockets. "It is, and we're so happy, it's just..."

"I know. But it will happen for them, and you know that they're going to be over-the-moon happy for you guys. If not a little annoyed that you both snuck off to Vegas to get hitched."

Johnno laughed. "Dahlia doesn't have a huge family, and mine is over-the-top loud. It was just easier to go do it by ourselves. Make it just about us and not everyone else."

"I get it. I wanted a quiet wedding, but Deb's parents didn't agree, and it became so much bigger than either one of us wanted." Slick recalled how both he and Deb had smiled through the day, but he could say now he hadn't been blissfully in love and happy like his crew mates were with their partners. His marriage had been doomed from the start.

Quickly, he pushed those away. Nothing good came of going over what he should've done in the past. If he hadn't married Deb, he wouldn't have Jess, and she was the best thing that came out of his and Deb's relationship. He didn't regret her. Slick never could.

"How are things with Deb's parents? Are they still making noises about you getting a better job and them getting custody of Jess?"

Since their visit when Jess had been sick, they'd been auspiciously pleasant. Even when he'd dropped Jess to them before his shift, they'd been nice.

It worried him.

“Not recently, but after they visited the other day, I think they’re planning something.”

Johnno leaned back against the counter. “Why do you say that?”

Slick took a moment, debating how much he should admit. He trusted that his friend wouldn’t make a big deal out of it. Nor would he blab it to the rest of the guys without asking first. “Poppy was there when they arrived.”

His buddy’s eyes widened. “Poppy—as in the Poppy who always gives you the cold shoulder?”

Slick couldn’t deny that was true. “Yeah, and be nice,” he admonished his teammate.

Johnno held up his hands in mock-surrender. “Sorry. I like Poppy. She and Dahlia always chat. Dahlia’s painting one of her brand designs for the front office of the business.”

This was news to Slick. Then again, he wasn’t privy to everything that went on in Poppy’s life. No matter how much he might like to be. Even more now after her visit and how they’d connected. Regardless of the fact that Poppy would probably deny it, they had.

“That’s awesome for both of them.”

“It is. So, Poppy was there when your former in-laws turned up. Was it awkward?”

The tones sounded before Slick could explain what he’d asked of Poppy. “Saved by the bell,” he winked.

Johnno laughed again. “For the moment.”

They rushed to the turnout coats and gear, ready to them to pull on.

Adrenaline spiked through Slick.

God, he loved his job. He’d do everything he could to keep not only his job and Jess, but find a way to keep Poppy close.

CHAPTER 6



POPPY GROANED AS SHE STOOD BACK AND LOOKED AT THE design she'd created on her computer. Something was off, and she couldn't put her finger on why it wasn't working.

Everything she'd done was as per the client's specifications, and her initial sketch, but now that it was a completed design it lacked that spark that drew the eye of the public and made them stop scrolling or walking and backtrack so they could take a closer look.

Dammit, why couldn't she pinpoint exactly what was wrong? Sighing in frustration, Poppy saved it and closed it down. Maybe a walk would clear the clouds in her mind. Getting out of the house could be what she needed to get the creative juices flowing.

She grabbed her phone and glanced at the screen, stopping when she saw the text message from Cerise, her nephew's adoptive mother.

CERISE:

Hey Poppy, when you get a chance, can you call me? Thanks. Cx

Like always, whenever she had contact from Cerise, or Finn, a cloak of guilt shrouded her like a dark cloud.

Would she ever not feel guilty about what she'd done to a little boy whose care she'd been entrusted with?

Never.

No matter how Poppy put it, she'd let down her brother. Although Finn was living his best life, and he kept reassuring her that he didn't blame her for what she'd done. He understood that she was dealing with a lot.

She didn't deserve Finn's forgiveness. He had every reason to cut her out of his life, and yet he hadn't. He was so mature for such a young boy.

Cerise and Brodie loved him deeply, and he'd thrived under their care.

Stepping out into the backyard, she made her way over to the bench under the large magnolia tree. Quickly, before she could talk herself out of it, she pulled up her contacts and called her nephew's adoptive mother.

"Poppy! Hi, thanks for calling me back." Cerise's bubbly voice sounded down the line. She was always happy, and that was such a good thing for Finn.

"No worries, it sounded urgent. Is everything okay? Is Finn all right?" Even though she'd given up her guardianship rights to Finn, didn't mean she'd stopped caring for him.

He was her last link to her brother. A brother she'd adored. His and his wife's death had been a shock, and she'd been sucked into the bowels of grief, tortured that her life choices had been ones whose consequences had stretched its spindly fingers to wrap around Cerise and Finn.

A shudder rippled through her at how close she'd come to joining her brother in the afterlife. How her actions had hurt innocent people.

"Finn's great. He's excited, actually. That's the reason I'm calling."

"Oh really? Did he win a robotics competition?" she asked.

Her nephew loved all things robotics. He had Paul's mathematical brain, although it had taken Finn a while to accept that he really did like math. Paul had loved all things numbers and had created a good career out of it—until it had

been cut short. Poppy had the artistic brain, and she was more than okay with that.

“He did, but that’s not the reason I’m calling. Brodie and his college friends get together every year. An annual boys’ trip. Well, this year, they’re wanting to do a couple’s trip, and I know it’s a big ask and if you don’t feel comfortable, I’ll totally understand, but Finn really wants to come stay with you while we’re away.”

Poppy’s blood stilled in her veins. Her mind froze, and she was glad she was sitting because otherwise, her legs would’ve collapsed under her. Her breaths came out in short, shallow gasps. Panic settled over her, and she closed her eyes, willing herself to calm down. It was impossible. “I’ll have to call you back.”

She didn’t give Cerise a chance to say anything before she disconnected the call. Black dots appeared in the periphery of her vision, and she closed her eyes. Her fingers dug into her thighs, anchoring her to the present with the pinch of pain the action caused.

Breathe in, count to ten, then breathe out, counting to ten again.

It was a technique one of her therapists had given her after Ed’s attack on her, Finn, and Cerise. Only the voice encouraging her to breathe didn’t sound like her therapist. It sounded like Slick’s deep tone.

Warmth settled into her bones. Poppy became aware of the buzz of the insects. The sound of traffic from the busy road a couple of streets behind her. The tingle in her fingertips, as though they were waking up from a slumber. Her breathing had calmed and her heart rate returned to normal.

Feeling more in control, she opened her eyes. The black dots were all gone, and the vivid green of the magnolia tree’s low-hanging branches filled her vision now.

Taking a few more controlled breaths gave her a command over her mind.

She mulled over Cerise's question. Well, request more like it. Poppy tried to be objective as she gauged her reaction. Only a slight uptick in her heartbeat indicated that she was a little freaked out. It was a much better reaction than when Cerise had first mentioned it.

God, what must Cerise think of me?

Poppy let the idea of having Finn stay with her settle into her consciousness. A lot of time had passed since she'd been responsible for him. She'd grown up, but yet the very idea that she'd be in charge of his welfare sent arrows of fear darting through her.

After Ed had drugged her to the point that she'd almost died, she'd focused on herself. Getting her business up and running. Making better choices and cutting addictive substances like alcohol and weed from her life.

She was healthier physically now than she had been when Paul and Gina had died. Also, her mental health was better, not a hundred percent—considering she'd just had a minor panic attack only a few minutes ago—but better than it had been when she'd been responsible for Finn.

Poppy's phone rang, and she glanced down to see Cerise was calling her.

Was this the first time Cerise had called since Poppy had hung up? Or had she been so lost in her head that she hadn't heard the other times she called?

Didn't matter if it was the third or first call, she could answer it now.

"Hey, Cerise, sorry about before. I had a bit of a freak-out." Honesty was probably for the best.

"Oh, Poppy, I'm so sorry, too. The last thing I wanted to do was cause you any discomfort."

Cerise was such a good person, Finn was so lucky she was his mom now. From the moment Poppy had given up her rights to Finn, Cerise and Brodie had done everything possible to include her.

Even at the wedding, she'd been part of the ceremony, and they'd all lit a candle together as a symbol of familial commitment.

Poppy had visited them in Tarpley, even though going back there had been tough. She'd done it, and now it wasn't so bad. Although it'd been a while since she'd seen them because of her work.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Cerise. And as for looking after Finn." She took a deep breath, not believing she was about to say the words out loud, but she needed this as much as Finn did too. "I'd love to have him stay with me. How long will you and Brodie be away?"

Silence greeted her announcement, and Poppy wasn't entirely surprised by it, considering how she first reacted.

"Are you sure? I can always see if Nadia and Buff can take him. He loves being with them, Jett, and Scarlett."

At the mention of Nadia's children, an image of a little girl with a big smile flashed across her mind.

Jess.

As much as Poppy hadn't wanted to think about it, she couldn't deny that even though she'd only been around the girl for a short time, it had been good. Thinking of Jess conjured up her handsome father, Slick. How wonderful it'd been to be by his side. To support him.

They'd agreed to her being his fake girlfriend for the duration of his in-laws' visit. However, a part of her...

Stop. Don't go there.

While Slick wasn't an option, she was being presented with a chance to atone for her past sins. Perhaps this was a sign Poppy needed to open her heart to Finn again. To do it right this time.

Maybe if things go well with Finn, you and Slick could...

Nope, not thinking about that.

"Poppy? Are you still there?"

So caught up in her own chaos that she'd forgotten she was in the middle of a conversation. Yet, getting lost in her thoughts had clarified a lot for her, too.

"No, it's fine. They've got their hands full, and well, I'm his aunt. It's time I lived up to that role more than I have been."

Yes, it felt right to say that.

To say she needed to stand up and be present more in Finn's life. Poppy may not have him full-time like her brother had wanted her to, but she'd done the best thing for him and his life was wonderful.

"Oh, Finn is going to be so excited. He's missed seeing you," Cerise finished quietly.

"I've missed him, too." Again the words weren't a lie. She *had* missed him.

Had spending a few hours with Slick and his daughter really changed her that much? Maybe. Maybe not. Whatever. It was happening, and she was okay with it all.

"I've got other news too," Cerise said.

"Oh, yeah?" Poppy hoped it was that Cerise was pregnant. They'd been trying since they married but had also suffered a couple of miscarriages, too.

"I'm pregnant!"

"Yes! That's fantastic news. I'm so happy for you both. And for Finn. I bet he's excited." Her nephew had been sad when Cerise had lost her babies.

"He is. And well, I'm almost six months now. I've been keeping it quiet because I've been so afraid, but it's hard to hide a growing belly now."

"I'm sure." Poppy smiled.

"Yeah, I didn't want to say anything because, you know. Anyway, all is good, and the baby is healthy and thriving. So this is a little vacation just for Brodie and me before the baby comes and life gets even more hectic."

“You mean more hectic than running a ranch and looking after an eleven-year-old boy?”

Cerise laughed. “Don’t forget the two cats and one dog we have, as well. Life is a little wild sometimes, but it’s all good.”

“And sparkly?” she asked, recalling the woman’s love of all things glitter.

“Definitely sparkly. Okay, I need to go, but before I do... We’re leaving on Monday, so we’ll be heading your way the day after tomorrow with Finn. Is that going to be okay?”

“That will be fine.”

They ended the call and Poppy considered all she needed to get fixed up. She needed to clean out the spare room. There was a bed in there, but she needed to change the linens. Perhaps she should get a new mattress. The one on the bed was old and...yes that’s what she’d do.

It was a lot to do alone, but she’d manage.

You’re not alone now, Poppy. You’ve got us.

Her inner voice sounded a lot like Dahlia, and it was right—she wasn’t alone now. She had a group of friends who wouldn’t think twice about helping her out.

Friends who included Slick and Jess.

No matter how hard she tried, Poppy’s thoughts always returned to the handsome firefighter.

Maybe Jess and Finn could be friends.

Now she was getting ahead of herself. First things first. Get Finn’s room ready, and then she’d worry about everything else.

CHAPTER 7



THE RINGING OF HIS CELL PHONE PENETRATED THE SLUMBER Slick had just fallen into. He groaned, not wanting to answer it, but Jess was at school and the call could be from them. With eyes half open, he snatched his phone off his side table. “Hello,” he mumbled.

“Carson. Did I wake you?”

Damn, I should’ve let the call go to voicemail.

He’d seen Mary-Sue less than an hour ago after he’d collected Jess’s overnight bag. She and Randy hadn’t said much, just handed it over and closed the door in his face.

If she needed to talk to him, she could’ve done it then instead of waiting until he got home and in bed. They were well aware Slick usually tried to nap for an hour or two after he got off shift. He didn’t like sleeping for hours because then his sleep patterns would be all out of whack.

“Yeah, but that’s okay. What can I help you with?”

If his politeness shocked Mary-Sue, she wasn’t letting on.

“I wanted to invite you, Jess, and your *girlfriend* over for dinner tomorrow night. When I asked Jess about her, she said she hasn’t seen her since the day we visited.”

Slick didn’t miss the emphasis his former mother-in-law had put on the word girlfriend. As sure as pigs didn’t fly, this was a test. A test Mary-Sue was hoping he’d fail.

He could just hear her tell her lawyer that he was bringing strange women around to his house and parading them in front

of his daughter, therefore creating more of an unstable homelife for their granddaughter.

The fact that it was only a few days ago that Poppy was at his place and not three weeks didn't even register with Mary-Sue.

No way was Slick going to let his former mother-in-law believe that he and Poppy were not an item. Of course, he'd have to talk to Poppy and hope and pray that she'd go along to this dinner with him.

“Carson! Did you fall asleep?”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “No, I didn't. I'll speak to Poppy and get back to you.”

“Fine. I'll expect a call back soon.” She hung up before he could say anything else.

Slick fell back on the bed and groaned. He so didn't have the head space to deal with Mary-Sue and her antics, but he couldn't antagonize her—no matter how tempting it was.

Sleep wasn't going to be happening for him, so he headed to the kitchen and his coffee maker. Once he had his first cup, he'd be able to face the day and the prospect of contacting Poppy to ask if she could continue the favor he'd asked of her.

Slick leaned against the counter and closed his eyes, remembering the feel of Poppy's hand in his. The softness of her skin. The way she'd fit perfectly in his arms when they hugged. The sweet smell of mint coming from her hair.

Having her in his arms may have felt like heaven, but had it felt the same way for her?

It wasn't like Poppy had wanted to pull away from him. In fact, for a brief moment, she'd melted against him.

The coffee machine finished brewing, and he grabbed his favorite mug to pour some of God's elixir into it. Bringing the cup to his nose, he inhaled deeply. The caffeine aroma teased his nostrils, and his mouth watered, anticipating the first sip.

Heaven.

Whoever didn't like coffee was missing out, as far as Slick was concerned. Now that he'd had his shot of caffeine, he reached for his cell and opened his contacts to find Poppy's number when it hit him—he didn't have her number. "Dammit."

As much as he didn't want to involve any of their friends in his and Poppy's business, Slick would need to call one of the women to get her number. He'd have to prepare himself for twenty questions from whomever he called to get her details. It was really only a little inconvenience. He wanted her number, after all.

Dahlia seemed a good bet to give him details without her asking a million questions. At least he hoped so.

Only one way to find out.

Slick lifted the phone to his ear and waited for the call to connect. He didn't have to wait long.

"Hey, Slick, what can I do for you?"

There were voices in the background, and he worried that he'd interrupted something. "Have I caught you at a bad time? You sound like you're out."

"Not a bad time, and yes, I'm out. I'm with Poppy."

What were the odds that the person's number he wanted to get was with the person he called to get it?

"Okay, umm, that's why I wanted to call. I wanted to get in touch with Poppy." Slick tried to keep his voice casual, but he wasn't confident he'd succeeded.

"Really?"

He imagined that if Dahlia were standing in front of him, her eyebrows would be almost reaching her hairline in question.

"Yeah, umm, would it be possible to ask her if I could have her number?"

Please don't ask any questions.

"Oh, yeah, sure. Hang on."

Her muffled voice sounded in his ear—he figured she'd covered the speaker so he couldn't hear her ask the question. Maybe it was just as well she did that, so he didn't have to hear Poppy's rejection.

Although would she do that?

Slick couldn't read Poppy at all. Something was holding her back from spending time with him. Did he sound arrogant, maybe—but he couldn't help remembering their first meeting. How they'd had a great conversation, and, in a flash, it'd shut down and her attitude toward him changed.

He should ask her about it.

Then again, he didn't want to scare her away.

“Slick?” Dahlia came back.

He turned his attention to what she was about to say. Tension swirled inside of him.

What was she going to say?

“I'm here,” he croaked, then cringed at himself.

“Poppy said it was fine to give you her number. I'll text it to you.”

“Great, thanks.” Slick disconnected the call and closed his eyes, relief spreading through him.

Poppy was going to give him his number.

What if she only said that because Dahlia was standing with her?

What if she really didn't want him to have her number?

Slick shut down his thoughts. Poppy had stood him up in the middle of the Fireman's Ball a couple of months ago when he asked her to dance. If she didn't want him to have her number, she would've said no to Dahlia.

A second later, his phone dinged. He quickly saved Poppy's details.

Would she be okay with him ringing her now, or should he leave it until later, when she wasn't with Dahlia?

Dammit, when had everything become so complicated? Or was *he* the one who was complicating things?

He suspected the latter.

Slick had come this far. He touched her number on the screen and waited for the call to connect.

If Poppy didn't answer, he'd wait and see if she called him back. If not, then, well, he'd deal with that when, and if, it happened.

* * *

POPPY JUMPED when her phone started buzzing in her hand. She'd been expecting the call, but now that it was happening, nerves slammed into her like a bug into a windshield.

Dahlia was standing next to her, pretending to be studying the sheet sets, but Poppy suspected she was watching to see if she'd take the call.

When Dahlia had asked if she could give Slick Poppy's number, her immediate response had been *no*. However, she had a feeling there had to be a major reason for him to ask for her number now when he hadn't tried before.

So she'd said yes.

Now he was calling her.

Before Poppy could second guess herself, she accepted the call. "Hi, Slick."

"Poppy." Her name came out with a long sigh, like he hadn't expected her to take his call.

Not surprising, considering her track record with him when he'd asked her something.

"Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yes...maybe...could be better."

Poppy chuckled.

Dahlia had moved away to give them some privacy.

She appreciated her friend's courteous action. "Well, that's quite the list there."

"Yeah." Slick paused. "Look, I'm not sure how to ask this."

A combination of dread and intrigue flowed through her. Poppy picked up on the fatigue in Slick's voice.

Dahlia had told her that Johnno had just come off shift, so she was more than happy to help her get things for Finn. She said it would give her partner the chance to rest in the quiet.

Poppy assumed Slick would've done the same, but the fact he was calling suggested differently. "Just ask."

The worst I can say is no, which I probably will.

The unbidden thought entered her mind, and she was instantly ashamed. It wasn't Slick's fault she kept saying no. It was *her* issue. Well, by saying yes to looking after Finn, Poppy was starting to take a chance on herself.

Perhaps it was time to take a chance with Slick. The memory of his touch always sprang into her mind when she least expected it.

A memory that wasn't unpleasant at all.

"You recall the favor I asked when you were over when Jess was sick?"

How could she *not* remember?

"Yes, of course." Poppy's heart skipped, and she rushed her words. "What about it?"

"Mary-Sue has invited us over for dinner tomorrow night. She specifically asked if you would come because Jess said she hadn't seen you since that day at my house."

And she's suspicious that it's all fake.

Slick didn't say the words, but Poppy picked up on it. There was a tiredness to his tone. A weariness suggesting that he was fed-up with them. It didn't matter that it was true. It *had* been an act for his former in-laws.

She didn't need a law degree to understand, with his former wife's parents threatening to take Jess from Slick if he didn't change jobs, then they would use anything else they could to prove that he was an unfit parent.

"She may not have said it, but I'm guessing Mary-Sue doesn't believe we're a couple, does she?" Poppy asked.

"That's my guess. And she's right, we aren't."

He spoke what she'd been thinking. As much as she wanted to help, she needed to consider Finn. As far as her nephew knew, she was single and hadn't dated in a while.

Again, the truth.

What would happen when Finn arrived, and suddenly she had a boyfriend on the scene? One who needed her attention. It wouldn't be fair to the boy. He'd be immediately transported back to the time when she'd pushed his needs aside for her own. To the time when she'd put him in a home for boys because she hadn't wanted to deal with him.

Stop. It's in the past. Finn is a happy boy with two loving parents. You're in the role that suits you—aunt.

As much as her thoughts were encouraging and supportive, guilt still sat deep in Poppy's soul.

Finn's needs were more important than hers this visit.

If she and Slick were going to do this, he needed to know a little about her. Her past and the mistakes she'd made. Mistakes that had almost cost her life, and the lives of Finn and Cerise.

Memories from long ago threatened to reappear, but Poppy jammed them down hard. They were always there. A constant reminder, but she'd grown and learned.

She was a better person.

Explaining all of this wasn't a conversation she could have over the phone. She needed to do it in person. Ensure Slick understood her reasons for saying no were valid. That she couldn't continue with the act of them being a couple, even knowing that it had the capacity to hurt Slick and Jess.

“Are you going to be home all day?” Poppy asked.

“Yeah, why?”

“Can I come over so we can talk?”

“Umm, sure. What time?” If Slick was suspicious about her sudden request, he didn’t let on.

“I can be there in two hours. I need to finish what I’m doing with Dahlia.”

No way was she going to forget about the reason she was at the store with her friend. Poppy was there to finish getting things for Finn.

“That works.”

Poppy disconnected the call and slid her phone back into the front pocket of her purse.

“Everything okay?” Dahlia returned to her, holding a sheet set.

Pasting a smile on her face, Poppy gave a small head toss, shaking off the bad memories . “It is. I like those. They’re a great color.”

If she made a comment about the sheets, she prayed that Dahlia wouldn’t ask why Slick called her.

“They are. What did Slick want?”

Okay, so maybe she’d been a bit too hopeful that Dahlia wouldn’t question her, but she should’ve known better.

Had Slick mentioned to the guys on his team that they’d played the part of partners for his in-laws’ sake? Probably the latter. The fewer people who knew, the better.

The thought of lying to her friend didn’t sit well. How much of the truth could Poppy say without revealing everything?

“He wanted to ask me to do something for him. I’m going over to his place after we finish here.”

Dahlia’s eyebrows rose until they almost reached her hairline. “Really? That’s very interesting. So, you want these

sheets, then? I saw a comforter set that will match this nicely, too. It's just over here."

Poppy gaped and stared at her friend's retreating figure.

Why hadn't she asked more questions?

What did she mean by *interesting*?

She shrugged it off, taking the win that she wouldn't be questioned or interrogated. Although maybe Dahlia was giving her a false sense of security, and when Poppy least expected it, the questions would start flying.

Even though it would be difficult if that happened, a flash of happiness flared to life in Poppy. It had been a long time, if ever, that she had friends who genuinely cared for her. Who wanted to know what was going on with her life. If she had to suffer through a little questioning, then so be it. It was better than being alone and having no friends.

CHAPTER 8



SLICK PACED THE HALLWAY, WAITING FOR THE KNOCK ON THE door. Poppy had said it would be a couple of hours, and it was closer to three now.

Had something happened to her on her way to his place?

She hadn't got into an accident, had she?

Thoughts of Debbie and the car accident that'd taken her life swirled inside his head. The numbness had consumed Slick as he'd held their tiny daughter as the police told him that his wife had been in an accident and hadn't survived.

It'd taken him a few moments to fully comprehend what the officers were saying. When it had sunk in, for a fleeting second, there had been a sense of relief that he was free from a difficult marriage. It may have only been a flash of emotion, but guilt still ate at Slick that he'd felt that way.

In the beginning, he'd loved Deb and had envisioned a long and happy life with her. Somewhere between her parents and the reality that marriage hadn't been the escape that Deb had hoped it would be, the cracks had started. Jess had been a patch job that wouldn't have lasted in the long term.

He stopped pacing and leaned against the wall, tiredness seeping into him—not only physical but also mental. The battle with Mary-Sue and Randy was taking its toll.

Was that what they wanted? For him to just give in and hand over his child to her grandparents?

Why were they doing this? What could they possibly hope to achieve? They should enjoy their life. Going off and doing things with their friends, like the vacation they'd been on a few months ago.

Seeing Jess should be a once-a-week or every two weeks event. As it was, they saw her more than that because they looked after her while he worked.

Why wasn't that enough for them?

At their age, how would they cope with an active child? One who had dance classes regularly. Jess's goal was to make it onto the competition team, and if she did that, then she'd be attending competitions nearly every weekend. It would be difficult for him, but he'd make it work. There were people who would help him out.

A knock at the door pulled Slick from the storm brewing in his mind. Relief also swept through him. Even though he couldn't confirm it until he opened the door, Poppy stood on the opposite side of the front door.

Taking a second to shake off his fatigue, Slick strode to the front door.

She was dressed casually in jeans and a short-sleeved green top, and Poppy was the breath of fresh air he needed.

"Hey, you made it." His smile was automatic.

"I did." The corners of her mouth lifted into a sweet smile that sucker-punched him, and he inhaled quickly.

Everything in Slick wanted to haul her close and bury his head in that crook between her neck and shoulders. Have her arms enclose him and hold him tight like he wanted to do to her.

Except he didn't do any of that. He stood to the side. "Come in. I'm glad you're here."

"Thanks."

As Popped passed him, the soft scent of vanilla teased his senses, tempting him to forget about the real reason for her being there.

She wanted to talk.

Her tone had been serious during their brief call. The way she'd quickly agreed that they weren't in a relationship.

When she'd asked to come over, he'd been surprised but happy that she'd wanted to see him.

"Can I get you anything to drink or eat?" Slick asked as he entered the living room where she stood.

"No. I'm fine." Poppy was clutching the strap of her purse tightly.

Was that a tremor in her voice, or had he imagined it?

Was she nervous?

"Sit." He pointed to the couch they'd sat on together the last time she was at his house.

Slick wanted to sit next to her. Let their legs rub gently next to each other, but he chose the armchair instead. Perhaps putting space between them was a good idea.

The silence stretched between them, and nerves jumped up from his gut. He was anxious to know what she wanted to say.

Maybe he should start it. After all, he'd called her to ask her to dinner.

"About Mary-Sue's invitation. I know it's a lot to ask, but I'd really appreciate it if you could come with us."

Smooth, Slick. Definitely not living up to your nickname.

He mentally shushed that voice. It might not have been the smoothest move, but it got the conversation started.

"I don't know if that's a good idea. If they're already suspicious, how is continuing to deceive them a good thing?"

Closing his eyes, he sank farther into the chair. Poppy's point was a valid one. In fact, it was extremely reasonable and on-point. Continuing the deception wouldn't end well.

But what if it does?

What if a true relationship could form between them?

Slick liked her a lot. More than any other woman he'd encountered since Deb's death—and there'd been many who'd thrown themselves at him. Was he drawn to her because she hadn't been like those women?

No. Not at all.

From their first conversation at Dahlia's art show, he'd been drawn to her and hadn't been able to forget her.

“Slick? Are you okay?”

He opened his eyes, aware that some time had passed since she'd asked her question. “I'm fine. A little tired. Mary-Sue's call woke me just as I'd fallen asleep after coming off shift.”

“Oh, you should've said something when I asked if I could come over.”

It looked as if Poppy was about to leave—which made no sense since she'd wanted to talk to him.

“It's fine. Seriously. I try to only nap for a couple of hours so I can get my body back into a normal sleep pattern coming off shift. I do it so I can spend time with Jess when she gets home from school. Although I'll probably crash after I put her to bed tonight.” He smiled, hoping to reassure her he was fine with her being there.

Poppy studied him. Too bad he couldn't read her thoughts because she definitely seemed to be mulling over everything he'd said.

“Okay.”

She tapped her fingers on her purse, as if summoning up the courage to say more.

Silently, Slick urged her to do it. To say what was on her mind. To let her know that whatever she said he wouldn't judge, and she was in a safe place. He didn't know why he thought the last two, but he did. “What is it, Poppy? Talk to me.” He pitched his voice low, so she would know he wasn't a threat to her.

“I can't have dinner with you because my nephew is arriving tomorrow, and it's important I put him first. He has to

have my full attention.”

Slick tried to read between the lines to figure out exactly what Poppy was saying, but his tired mind couldn't grasp the hidden message. Depending on the age of Poppy's nephew, he could be good company for Jess.

“I'm not sure I understand. I don't think Mary-Sue and Randy would mind if your nephew joined us. How old is he?”

Poppy sighed. “That's a little presumptuous to think they'd be okay with an extra guest. As it is, they don't believe we're in a relationship. I don't want to put Finn in any uncomfortable situations—and that would be one.”

How could he argue with that reasoning?

He couldn't. Again, she was making valid points.

“Okay, you're right. I'll let them know you won't be joining us.” Slick couldn't wait for the hundreds of questions he'd get from Mary-Sue, demanding why Poppy wasn't there. Or coming out and saying that she knew it was fake from the beginning and why had he tried to trick them?

How had life gotten so complicated?

It had gotten complicated because of Mary-Sue and Randy's sudden desire to be full-time parents to his daughter. Deb wouldn't want that for Jess. Deb would want her parents to not have any influence over Jess. She hadn't enjoyed the best life living with them. They'd been strict and hadn't given Debbie the chance to enjoy high school or any other activities. Whatever Mary-Sue and Randy said was the law, and that was it.

It was no wonder Debbie had rebelled the minute she'd met him and decided marriage was the only thing for them. Slick had been smitten at the time and had agreed. Hindsight for both had been an eye-opener, but they'd tried. Fate had different ideas for their lives.

“I'm sorry, Slick. It's just, well...”

He waited for Poppy to continue. Whatever she was about to say was important. His gut shouted it. “Whatever you say, I

won't judge."

* * *

I WON'T JUDGE.

The words circled Poppy's mind like a hawk circling its prey. He said it now, but once he knew the truth, there was no way he'd feel the same way about her. Whatever interest he had in her would disintegrate in a flash.

She stood and went to the window, looking out at the street. Maybe if she avoided looking at Slick, it'd be easier to say what she needed to say. "Finn is my brother's son. My brother and his wife were wonderful parents." Her voice broke a little, but she swallowed and cleared her throat. "They were killed in a boating accident when Finn was six. I was given guardianship. I didn't know what I was doing. I was young. Grieving. And in charge of a boy whose entire world had been turned upside down."

Slick was on the edge of the chair, leaning forward with his hands clasped loosely between his legs. "I'm sorry for your loss, Poppy. I know how hard it is to have your world disrupted."

Yes, he would. Everything he'd ever thought he wanted had died when his wife had died. Yet he'd held it together and Jess was such a bright, happy child. Slick hadn't failed his daughter like she'd failed her brother's son.

"I wasn't cut out to be a parent. I made so many mistakes."

Behind her, fabric rustled, and she tensed when Slick's hands landed on her shoulders. "You shouldn't be so hard on yourself. All parents make mistakes. Hell, I know I made a heap. I'm still making them."

He was only trying to make her feel better, but Poppy wished he wouldn't. She deserved the pain and humiliation coursing through her. Her actions had had the potential to scar an innocent child.

Slick hadn't done what she'd done. He'd stood up and had become the parent he was always meant to be.

“You didn't put Jess into a girls' home every time you got a new girlfriend, did you?” She didn't give him a chance to respond. “But I did. Every time I got a new boyfriend, I took Finn down to the boys' home and dumped him there with a bag full of clothes and walked away. I left him there so I could be with my new boyfriend. So that his attention was on *me* and not Finn. And then if that's not bad enough, when we broke up, I'd drag Finn back to me until the next guy came along, even though Finn was staying with Cerise, a wonderful foster mom who could give him more than I ever could. She wanted to, in fact, but I needed my nephew back. I needed to look like I was being responsible. Then I'd meet someone else, and I'd rinse and repeat until—”

She swallowed down the sob, but tears trickled down her face. She didn't try to brush them away. They were part of the trauma and guilt she lived with every single day. “Until,” Poppy continued, “I met a guy who played on my insecurities. Who picked up on my dependence on alcohol. Who found out that Finn was going to get an inheritance and decided he wanted it for himself.”

Poppy was unable to face Slick when she talked about the moment when everything came to a head. “I was so stupid. So needy for affection that I didn't care what Ed did to me or said. He seemed so nice. It was all an act. One day he drugged me enough to almost kill me and put me in the hospital. He then tracked down Finn and Cerise and kidnapped them, intent on killing them too.”

Remembering that time was so hard. She didn't do it often now, not after she'd worked through it with her therapist. That part of her life was one she wanted to forget.

“You don't have to go on.” Slick's quiet words should've provided comfort.

The perfect excuse not to continue, but now that she'd started, Poppy wanted to finish. Wanted Slick to know that she

wasn't a good person. She wasn't who he would want around her daughter regularly.

It didn't matter that Cerise and Brodie trusted her to do the right thing by Finn this time. That they believed in her and her ability to look after their son. It was only for a couple of weeks and then Finn would go back to his parents, and she'd be alone.

Just how she wanted it.

Poppy faced Slick, holding her head up in the expectation that she would see disgust in his eyes. A reaction she totally deserved. Except there wasn't disgust.

There was compassion and...understanding?

No, she didn't deserve the understanding. She had to have misinterpreted his look.

"I've started now. I need to finish." She licked her dry lips. "Cerise is a much stronger person than me. She decided she wasn't going to let Ed win and end their lives. She didn't care for her safety. Her only thought was Finn. She grabbed the steering wheel and caused an accident. Ed died, and she was hurt but Finn wasn't. When I recovered enough and Cerise and Brodie approached me with a plan to adopt Finn, I signed my guardianship rights over, and they're his parents now. They're doing a much better job than I would've done. I just hope my brother can forgive me for how I shucked my responsibilities for many misguided ideas of love. For almost getting their son killed." Poppy jammed a fist in her mouth to stop the sobs from coming, but it was useless. The dam had burst. Shame and guilt swamped her, and she welcomed them. As hard as it had been to blurt it all out, it was out there now.

Whatever happened now—well, she would deal with it all. Like she dealt with everything after that incident.

CHAPTER 9



A GAMUT OF EMOTIONS SURGED THROUGH SLICK—SORROW, surprise, compassion, and understanding.

Poppy's revelation hadn't been what he'd expected at all, but he understood her a little better now. Understood why she'd avoided him and Jess.

Had he been shocked by it?

Hell, yes.

If her ex had succeeded, Poppy wouldn't be standing in his living room. His heart skipped.

Most people would judge her for what she'd done. For how she'd treated her nephew. Grief affected people in different ways. Also age as well. Some people could be parents at a young age, and others not until their late thirties. No one's journey to parenthood was the right one. Everyone had to do it their way.

Had he been ready when Jess had been born? In a way, yes. He and Deb had discussed kids, even with their marriage not being in the best place. He'd had nine months to get his head around being responsible for someone other than himself and Deb.

Yes, he'd been thrown in the deep end with Deb's death, but he'd coped and he'd had a support system with his teammates. And as much as it bothered him, he also had Deb's parents. They'd helped, and he wished they'd go back to what they'd been all those years ago.

Her heart-wrenching sobs pierced him in the gut, and he moved without thought, gathering Poppy in his arms.

As expected, she resisted him, remaining stiff in his arms, but he wouldn't give up. Whatever it took, he would make sure she knew he was on her side.

"It's okay, Poppet." He murmured over and over, the nickname tripping easily off his tongue. Was she even hearing him? "I've got you."

Slowly, her sobs quietened down to hiccups before stopping altogether.

Now that he had her in his arms, he didn't want to let her go. He wanted to always keep her close. Keep her safe.

"I'm sorry," Poppy said and shifted in his embrace.

Regardless of Slick's desires, he dropped his arms. No way would he keep her somewhere she didn't want to be.

Only she didn't take much of a step away. In fact, her fingers brushed against his hand.

"You have nothing to be sorry about. Thank you for sharing that with me. I know that had to be hard for you. I promise you, what you said won't leave this room," Slick said.

Her gaze met his, and something shifted inside of him. The thought that he might find love again hadn't left him, but it hadn't been something he'd actively sought until he'd seen Poppy that first time.

"Thank you. Now do you see why it would be wrong for me to go to dinner with you? To continue the charade that we are a couple. I can't do that to Finn. I don't want to bring up bad memories for him."

Everything Poppy said made sense, yet there had to be a way where they could both get what they wanted.

Slowly, he brushed his knuckles against the soft flesh of her cheek. Automatically, her face turned into the caress. Whether she did it consciously or not, he was going to take it as a sign that she wasn't totally immune to him.

“Poppy,” Slick breathed her name, as if she was a goddess.

To him, she was.

Her gaze met his again, and there, in the green depths, was something he’d seen once before. The night they first met. Before everything had changed.

Attraction.

Her mind may be telling her that they were better off apart, but her body was saying something completely different.

His attention dropped to her lips. Their plumpness tempted him to taste them. To make them even fuller after his kiss.

“Slick.” His name was quiet, but he heard the yearning.

One kiss.

Slick needed to taste her once. To know what it was like to have her lips pressed against his. To have her body crushed against his.

Would she let him if he asked?

He’d never know unless he asked. Poppy had said no before, and if she said it again, he’d live.

Slick shuffled a little so that the distance she’d created was halved. He curled his hand around the back of her neck. “May I have a kiss?”

In all his dating life, he’d never asked to kiss a woman. There’d been a mutual consent given. Debbie had been the one to make the first move on their first date.

This time though, it was important that he asked Poppy. That he didn’t take liberties that weren’t his to take.

Poppy’s tongue darted out, teasing the corner of her mouth, before disappearing again.

The action was innocent, but his blood heated in his veins and his cock shifted behind the soft fabric of his sweatpants.

If Poppy looked down, there’d be no way she wouldn’t be able to see the way his body responded to her.

“I should say no,” she whispered.

His heart dropped. Her response wasn't anything Slick hadn't expected, yet it hurt more than he'd thought it would.

"But, Carson, yes. I want you to kiss me."

Her hand landed on his chest, right over his heart, and the organ stuttered, maybe stopped.

Carson.

Mary-Sue and Randy were part of a handful of people who called him by his given name.

Hearing it fall from Poppy's lips was the sweetest sound he'd heard since Jess's first cry as she entered the world.

Then the rest of what she'd said penetrated his mind, and elation fell over him. He framed her face.

"Those are the sweetest words." Slick lowered his head and brushed his lips gently against hers.

Once.

Twice.

Desire flamed to life, and the third time he touched her lips, he kept them there. His eyes drifted shut, and everything settled inside of him. All thoughts of Mary-Sue and dinner and what he was going to do dissipated out of him. The only thing that mattered was the woman in his arms.

Her hands tentatively moved across his back. Slick angled his mouth to deepen the kiss, and Poppy opened beneath him. A sigh rippled through him as the tip of her tongue touched his.

God, how he wanted her.

Wanted to keep her by his side. Help her through the guilt she felt over what she'd done to her nephew. She might not have come out and said it, but he'd heard it in every word she spoke.

He couldn't get enough of her. He could stand all day in his living room and kiss Poppy. Nothing mattered but this moment. This single perfect memory he wouldn't forget.

Reluctantly, Slick pulled away and rested his cheek against hers.

Her soft breaths puffed gently against his flesh.

Nothing about them was fake. The kiss wasn't. The way her arms cradled him and his held her.

It was real.

Tangible.

Right.

What would he say if he wanted to make their relationship real? Yes, they'd only faked it for one afternoon, but even then, nothing about how they spoke to each other. How they interacted was fake.

Could Slick ask her if she wanted this as much as he did?

No way could he ignore what she'd told him. The timing could be better, he couldn't deny that. Maybe they could help each other.

Perhaps, if Finn saw that Slick had Jess, things would be different for him. That it wouldn't lead to bad memories.

He had to ask. Like with the kiss, he had nothing to lose. If she said no, he'd respect it. He'd have the kiss and maybe when Finn was gone, things could be different.

Slick hooked a finger under her chin and lifted it gently. His wish had come true. Her lips were fuller and plumper from his kiss. The tension in her body had seeped out.

"I don't want a fake relationship with you, Poppy. I want a real one."

* * *

I WANT A REAL ONE.

Poppy heard the words, but she couldn't seem to process the meaning of them. The second Slick's lips touched hers,

she'd been lost. All thoughts, fears, and shame had been swept away in a cloud of dust.

Everything about his kiss had been so right. He'd been perfect with her, holding her while she sobbed in his arms. He'd kept his word and hadn't judged her. Hadn't condemned her for what she'd done with Finn.

She didn't deserve his easy acceptance of her words, but she'd take it.

“Poppy? Did you hear me?”

How long had she been lost in her head?

Long enough for Slick to question her. To ask if she'd heard him.

Words still weren't possible though, so Poppy nodded instead. She had heard him. Loud and clear, and that was what had put her into this state of...shock.

Slick's large, warm hand closed around hers and tugged her gently.

She followed, trusting that he wouldn't lead her to danger. He wasn't that type of guy.

“Sit.” He pushed gently on her shoulders, and her body accepted the command and sank into the softness of the couch. “I'll be right back,” he murmured and brushed his lips against her forehead.

The touch was gentle and caring. The action warmed her soul.

In the past, Poppy had craved the attention her boyfriends had given. Had needed it almost as much as the wine she'd begun to consume on a regular basis. Nothing had mattered more than being the center of that person's attention.

With Slick, the need wasn't there. It wasn't as if she didn't want his attention, because she did, but she didn't need it in the way she had before.

In the past, she wouldn't have been able to let her boyfriend leave the room. She would've followed him.

Would've asked him what he was doing. After going through extensive therapy, she'd learned it stemmed from being abandoned by the one person who had loved her for who she was—her brother. He'd been her rock after their parents had died when she'd been a teenager.

“Here, drink this.”

Poppy looked up into Slick's handsome face and smiled. The action was as natural as breathing. He made her happy, and she'd denied herself that happiness because of her past.

One kiss hadn't changed how she felt, but it shifted her perception of things—as ridiculous as it sounded. There was no explanation she could come up with that would make sense right this moment, but it would come.

“Thank you.” She took the mug and wrapped her hands around the warm ceramic.

Inhaling deeply, she caught the sweet fragrance of peppermint tea. A favorite of hers. The first sip brushed away the lingering fog that had encased her after the kiss.

I don't want a fake relationship with you, Poppy. I want a real one.

Slick's declaration boomed in her mind as if he said it again. “Did you mean it?” she asked.

He sat beside her, his thigh brushing against hers.

How she wanted to lean into him. Have his arms wrapped around her and hold her securely against his chest.

Everything about being in his house. On his couch was like a dream. A wonderful dream Poppy never imagined she could have.

Yet, here she was—living it.

“I did.”

It didn't surprise her that he knew exactly what she'd been talking about.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Slick’s eyebrows were drawn tight, and a frown marred his handsome face.

If she was reading a book and came across this type of dialogue, she’d be yelling at the characters, telling them to stop the one- and two-word answers.

Somehow their conversation wasn’t awkward.

“Why do you want a real relationship with me? Why do you want me around your daughter when I told you what I did with my nephew?” Poppy gripped the mug tighter, as though it were a lifeline and she was drowning.

Slick shifted and placed his hand on her knee. “Because I don’t believe you’d ever do that again.”

Why did he have such faith in her, when he’d only known her for such a short time? He had to be saying that just to make her feel better about herself.

Slick’s not like that, and you know it.

Poppy ignored her conscience. While it might think it was right, trusting herself still didn’t come easy to her. “You can’t mean that.”

“I do. And I’ll tell you why.” Slick reached out, prised the mug from her tight grip, and placed it on the coffee table next to his own. Then he took her hands in his.

Poppy had no option but to meet his gaze, even though she didn’t want to.

Fear at seeing judgment in his gray depths welled inside of her.

“I know we haven’t known each other long,” he said, a slight curve to his lips. “And we haven’t spent a lot of time together, but I know you’re a good person. That you’re different from the person you were when your brother died. You’re older, and almost losing your life can change your perception of how you look at things.”

Nothing he said was a lie. In fact, he’d hit the nail on the head. Everything within Poppy had changed when she’d woken in the hospital bed and found out what Ed had done.

“It did,” she confirmed.

“But do you know why I think you’re a good person?”

“Why?”

“Because even though you knew it was the opposite of what your brother wanted, you put his son’s needs first. You gave Finn the home you knew he needed. You gave him to people you knew who cared for and loved him. And I’m guessing, if you’re looking after him, they didn’t keep him from you.”

This man’s insight was amazing. “No, Cerise and Brodie have always included me in anything to do with Finn. I didn’t deserve it, but they all forgave me for the trauma my decisions put them through.”

“If you could see yourself the way I see you... The way I’m sure Cerise, Brodie, and Finn see you, you’d see how capable you are.” Slick touched her cheek again.

The simple gesture was becoming one of her favorite things about him.

“The day you came over when Jess was sick, you didn’t flinch away from her. Or say you didn’t want to get close in case you caught what she had. You sat with her and listened as she chattered away. Most of all, you supported me when Mary-Sue was being less than friendly toward me. You agreed to my spur-of-the-moment scheme without batting an eyelid. You are a remarkable person, Poppy Brown. And I want to get to know you better. To spend time with you and meet your wonderful nephew. Will you let me, no, will you let us,” he paused, staring at her intently as though willing her to believe him. “Me and Jess be part of your life?”

Words evaporated for Poppy.

Slick’s absolute belief in her seemed too good to be true.

Her cautious side was telling her not to believe him. That he didn’t mean the words he’d said. How many times had the guy she was seeing say things they didn’t mean?

So many times.

With determination, Poppy pushed that side away—Slick was different. He wasn't like the men she'd dated when she'd been young and naïve.

From the first moment she'd met Slick, she'd been drawn to him. Had wanted to get to know him. Fear had made her keep her distance. A fear that wasn't unwarranted. Her track record wasn't stellar. Yet Slick hadn't forced himself on her. He'd accepted it every time she'd told him no.

Unusual circumstances had brought them to this point. Now Poppy had the chance to find out if the attraction she'd felt that first time she'd met him. An attraction that hadn't gone away. It had simply lay waiting for the right moment to come to the forefront of her life.

The time had come for her to explore that attraction.

Slick made a good point too; she was different now than when she'd first had her world turned upside down and found herself a mother with no time to prepare for it.

This time, there wasn't any doubt that she'd put Finn first while he was visiting her. Anything he wanted would take second place to her needs. If Poppy couldn't work until after Finn went to bed, then that was what she'd do.

Then there was the fact that she had a good support system behind her now too. Friends she could call on. Friends who would drop everything when she asked, like Dahlia had done today.

She also had the man standing in front of her. This generous man who had faith in her. A faith she was slowly beginning to believe in.

“Yes, Slick. I'd very much like it if you and Jess were part of my life.”

CHAPTER 10



YES.

She'd said yes. He hadn't imagined the word. She'd granted him a chance, and he was going to grab at it with both hands.

Slick pulled Poppy into his arms, brushing his thumb across her cheek. "I'm so glad," he whispered as he lowered his head and kissed her.

A sigh of delight rippled through him as her arms wrapped around his shoulders, her fingers teasing the back of his neck.

He adjusted his stance so he could deepen the kiss.

Magic.

Having Poppy in his arms. Her lips under his were pure magic.

Heat and desire swirled through Slick. His dick hardened against her belly. His sweatpants would do nothing to hide it from her. The softening of her body was a sign she wasn't turned off by his body's reaction to her closeness.

As much as he wanted to take what they'd started further, he wouldn't pressure her. Too much was at stake for him to rush Poppy to the next step in their relationship.

Reluctantly, he pulled away from her but couldn't help hugging her closer. "I promise you won't regret saying yes. I know Jess is going to be so happy to see you more often."

Poppy tensed in his arms at the mention of his daughter, and Slick worried he'd pushed her too far, but then she relaxed, and so did he.

Another couple of seconds passed where they didn't say anything, just held each other before she pulled away from him.

He dropped his arms, giving her the space she wanted, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do.

She worried her bottom lip and his previously mellow muscles tightened, waiting to see what she was going to say next.

"I don't want to give Jess false hope, Slick. She's vulnerable, and I know she loves you and wants you to be happy. You have to be doubly sure this is what you want."

Slick's heart melted at the concern she had for his daughter. He was well aware it was coming from her past—what she'd done to her nephew. The fact Poppy was putting his daughter's needs above her own showed him how different she was from the woman she'd been with her nephew.

If only she could see that for herself. See herself as the strong, mature woman he saw.

He'd show her. Whatever it took, he would show her the person she was now. The woman she was. A woman he was proud to know.

"Jess is the most important thing in my world. I would do anything for her, and I know she would love you being part of our lives. She has talked about you since you came over that day. She said she liked the way you told off Mary-Sue and Randy when they were here."

A small smile stretched Poppy's lips, and a sparkle returned to her eyes. "She did, did she?"

Slick chuckled. "She did." He sobered. "She sees a lot more than she lets on. I've tried to protect her from the fights I've had with Deb's parents recently, particularly about their insistence that I change jobs. And their threats of suing for custody of her. But I guess she was aware of it all anyway."

Just thinking about what his in-laws wanted had his gut churning in fear. He didn't want to lose his daughter. Nor did he want to change his career because he couldn't think of anything he'd rather do than be a firefighter.

It was who he was. His identity.

A soft touch on his cheek pulled him back from the abyss he was teetering on the edge of.

“The fact they can't see how much you love your daughter is a crime, Slick. It's in everything you do. It's what kept me away from you.”

Slick canted his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

Poppy sighed and wrapped her arms around herself again, an action he was beginning to recognize as her way of protecting herself. “I told you what I did with Finn. How I acted. That night at Dahlia's opening. We were getting on so well, and then you spoke about Jess and I heard it. The love and dedication you have for her. After what I'd done to Finn, I couldn't let myself get close to anyone with a child. What if I did it again? What if I became so consumed by my relationship that I forced you to neglect your child? Or what if I influenced her in a bad way? I believed in my soul I wasn't a good role model for a child.”

His immediate response was to negate everything she'd said, but he clamped those words down. Saying them would mean he'd disregarded her feelings. That he was invalidating the way she felt. He wouldn't do that to her. “How do you feel now?” he asked instead.

A wry smile crossed Poppy's features, this one not quite reaching her eyes. “Scared. I volunteered to look after Finn, but I'm still scared I'm going to mess it up. Cerise and Brodie have been so wonderful to Finn. Have given him so much. But also, they've never stopped believing in me. I don't deserve their understanding of why I did the things I did, but I have it.”

“They sound like wonderful people. I'd like to meet them.” Slick also wanted to thank them for not turning their backs on Poppy, which they could've easily done.

“They are, and I’d like that too.”

Cogs moved in his mind. “You said Finn is arriving tomorrow, right?”

Poppy nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, what if Jess and I are there when they drop Finn off? Would that be okay?”

She turned away from him, and he tried not to take that as a bad sign. That she thought his idea was a terrible one. When she turned back, though, the uncertainty that had marred her features was missing. In its place were resolve and determination. “I’d like that. And I think what I’ll do is call them and explain that you and I are dating so it’s not a shock to Finn.”

Slick resisted the urge to sweep her up in his arms again. To tell her she was so different from the girl she’d told him about. Instead, he reached for her hands and gave them a squeeze. “I think that’s a brilliant idea.”

“And you can tell Mary-Sue and Randy that Finn and I will be delighted to join them for dinner.”

Joy and another emotion he couldn’t quite describe swarmed through him, and he lifted both her hands to his lips, placing a soft kiss on each one. “Thank you.”

* * *

NERVES BUBBLED in Poppy’s belly, and she focused her attention on the passing scenery. In the back of the truck, Finn and Jess chatted as if they’d known each other for years and not hours.

The video call she’d made to Cerise, Brodie, and Finn had gone well. Everyone had been happy to hear she was seeing someone. Cerise’s eyes had sparkled mischievously when Poppy had mentioned that Slick was a firefighter.

Glancing over her shoulder at the two kids, tears welled in her eyes again. Finn looked so much like Paul; she’d cried

when he'd gotten out of Brodie's car. He'd rushed over and had given her the biggest hug, wanting to know what was wrong.

Poppy had told him she was just so happy to see him, and it was true. Even with everything she'd done, she loved Finn.

"You okay?" Slick's warm voice washed over her like a warm shower on a cold winter's day.

"Yeah. Finn and Jess are getting on well, aren't they?" The last thing she wanted to talk about was herself and her reaction to seeing Finn again in person. But she'd been glad that Slick and Jess were there.

Slick and Brodie had talked, and Cerise had stood watching it all unfold, tears in her eyes. She blamed it on the sun, but Poppy knew it was a combination of her pregnancy hormones and the fact that Finn and Poppy were together again. Cerise had made it very clear that Finn was always going to be a part of Poppy's life, and vice versa.

She was extremely grateful that her nephew had found happiness with Cerise and Brodie.

"They are. Jess has always been outgoing, and it seems Finn is the same way."

"He is. He was always chatty and happy. I'm glad my past didn't affect him emotionally."

There were so many roads Finn's life could've ventured down. Fortunately, he'd landed with a couple who loved him unconditionally and put his needs first. If he'd been fostered by another person, or had stayed with her, then things could've been very different.

"Stop it," Slick commanded, his voice stern, but low so the kids in the back didn't hear him.

"Stop what?"

"Thinking about how bad things could've been. The mistakes you made. Yes, they happened, I'm not going to deny that, but they're in the past and you've learned and grown and

moved forward. Like Finn has. I'm not saying forget about it, but maybe it's time to close the door on it."

His words weren't any different from the ones Poppy had often lectured herself to do. In some ways, she had put it behind her. Taking a chance on a relationship with Slick was a big step forward.

"I know. And I'm trying. I will falter sometimes, I know it. But I won't let it take me down. Let it hold me back now from experiencing all the joy life has to offer." She looked again over her shoulder, and this time her gaze connected with Finn's.

He smiled big, and the love shining in his eyes for her wasn't hard to miss.

"I'm excited about what's to come," Poppy admitted.

Slick squeezed her hand again, and she was grateful he was beside her. That it was *him* walking this path with her.

"You may not be so excited when we get to Mary-Sue's and Randy's place."

Poppy was under no illusions that tonight was going to be an easy evening. The small exposure she'd had with Slick's in-laws had been an eye-opener. "I'm ready for whatever they want to throw at me. Hopefully, it won't be a lot of grenades, and if they do anything to hurt you, Jess, or Finn, for that matter, I'm not going to stay quiet."

This instinct and need to protect Slick wasn't something she was used to. When they'd been faking their relationship that day when Jess was sick, when his in-laws had been rude, it had been as natural as breathing to stand up for Slick. To let them know he wasn't alone. That he had someone by his side.

"Same. I won't let them denigrate you either, and if they do, we're leaving. I don't care what they say or threaten. I won't let them hurt my daughter or you."

A sharp note had pierced Slick's tone. A tone she hadn't heard before, but Poppy couldn't deny that it made her feel protected and...cherished.

“We’re a team. Together, we’ve got this.” She placed her hand on his thigh and squeezed it.

His larger, warm hand covered hers. “We are indeed.”

Two hours later, it was like an alternate reality, where Mary-Sue and Randy hadn’t threatened Slick with a custody battle.

The older couple had been nothing but polite and friendly from the moment they’d all walked through the door. They’d welcomed her with lovely smiles and hugs, as if this wasn’t the second time they’d met. They’d even seemed happy to meet Finn.

Numerous times over dinner, she’d caught Slick’s eyes, and he’d worn the same bemused expression she had to be wearing, too.

Now they sat in the living room, while Mary-Sue showed Jess and Finn a photo album full of pictures of Debbie. By the way Jess was acting, this wasn’t the first time she’d seen it. She’d already commented to Finn which ones were her favorite.

“Is this real?” Poppy whispered to Slick, who sat beside her, his arm around her shoulders. The weight was comforting, along with the heat from his body. He was like a walking radiator, and even though it didn’t get too cold that often in San Antonio, with the way the air conditioning was cranked up indoors, she was grateful for it.

“I don’t know. This makes no sense. When Mary-Sue phoned me, she was her usual hostile self.”

“Maybe it’s because Finn is here? They decided to be on their best behavior.” Poppy shrugged under Slick’s muscled arm.

“I don’t know, but I think I’d like to head out soon. I’ve got work tomorrow afternoon.”

A shaft of disappointment shot through her at the thought of not being able to spend the last day of the weekend with Slick. She wouldn’t impose on his time with Jess, no matter

how much she wanted to be near him. It wasn't just them in this relationship, Jess's needs came before her own.

It would take some time getting used to his shifts, and that for two days at a time, communication with Slick would be sparse. But she was determined to control her needy tendencies.

"I'm ready to go when you are. I'm sure Finn wouldn't mind it. He didn't get a chance to settle in the room I prepared for him."

"I think he'll love it. You went to a lot of trouble for him."

Poppy had sent Slick some photos to see if he thought it was a room an almost teenage boy might enjoy. He'd said it was wonderful.

"Thanks, but I couldn't have done most of it without Dahlia and the other girls. They helped out a lot."

He pressed a kiss on her cheek, and she melted into his touch. "See? You're not alone."

Poppy turned so she could look at him. Their noses practically touched, and as their gazes met, she lost herself in the depths of his gray eyes.

Dark stubble highlighted his cheek and chin, and she wanted to rub her hand over it. Her eyes dropped to his mouth, and unconsciously her tongue darted out to swipe across her bottom lip. If she leaned forward a fraction, she could taste him.

"You don't know how much I want to ravish you right now, but we have an audience and I'm not sure anyone of them would appreciate it," Slick murmured.

Crap, we're not alone.

Poppy shifted, putting some distance between them. She looked across the room, to where Mary-Sue sat, her lips a thin line of disapproval.

Any trace of friendliness had disappeared from her face. Fortunately, Jess had taken Finn to the other side of the room to show him a drawing that was hanging on the wall.

“Is that appropriate behavior in front of the children, Carson?” Mary-Sue hissed and shook her head in disgust.

Anger shot up from Poppy’s gut. No way was she going to let this woman spoil the connection she and Slick were building. If they’d been alone, she would not have been able to keep her hands to herself. She’d have jumped into Slick’s lap and plastered herself against him from lips to chest. “I’m sorry if you don’t know real affection anymore, Mary-Sue, but I happen to care a lot for Slick, as well as Jess.”

Wait! Is this true?

Yes. She did care for both Slick *and* Jess. She wouldn’t be there if she didn’t.

Mary-Sue sniffed. “Tonight, you do, but I’m sure the moment you leave this house, you won’t see Carson or Jessica for days. Just like last time. I don’t know what game the two of you are playing, but you won’t succeed.”

Beside her, Slick got more and more tense with every word spoken. If she was angry, he was *furious*. “Poppy, how about you take the kids outside? Ask Jess to show Finn the treehouse. I need to speak to Mary-Sue.”

“Of course.” She jumped up and rushed over to the kids, although their attention was no longer on the picture on the wall.

Two sets of young eyes were glued to the situation between the adults.

“Is everything okay, Aunt Poppy?” Finn asked as he moved close to her side, as if he were going to protect her from whatever was about to happen.

She leaned down and brushed her lips across the top of his head. “It’s fine. Jess, your dad said there’s a treehouse outside. Do you want to show me and Finn?”

For the first time since she’d met the young girl, uncertainty flashed over her face. Her hands were clasped tightly in front of her, and she glanced at her father.

“It’s all good, Jess. Go show Finn where you think the fairies hide.” Slick kept his voice calm and caring, but Poppy could see the vein pumping at the side of his head.

“Okay, Daddy. Come on.” Jess grabbed one of her hands and one of Finn’s and led them outside.

Poppy was torn between following the kids and remaining by Slick’s side. However, he had asked her to take the children away from the situation, and that was what she would do. Even if everything in her wanted to stay with the man who was creeping into her heart.

CHAPTER 11



SLICK WAITED FOR THE DOOR TO SHUT BEHIND POPPY BEFORE he stood, anger coursing through him like lava spewing from a volcano. “I’m not sure what you’re hoping to achieve, Mary-Sue, but being rude and condescending to Poppy is not the way to go about it. Unless you want to drive a wedge between us, which won’t work.”

At least he hoped it wouldn’t.

Once again, Poppy had stood up to Mary-Sue, but how many more times would she be happy to do that, before she decided it was too much like hard work?

Before she decided that being away from him and Jess was the best thing for her.

“I have nothing but Jessica’s best interests at heart. You fail to see that time and time again. You remain stubborn about keeping your dangerous job when there are much better, *safer* jobs out there. Ones where you don’t work long shifts and are tired all the time.”

Every time Mary-Sue rolled out this same argument, he was tired of it. Slick wanted to get to the bottom of the problem.

The real issue.

Would Mary-Sue reveal it?

“I’ve told you time and time again, firefighting is all I know. It’s all I’ve ever wanted to do. And even though you don’t think it is, it’s flexible. I’m able to make sure I’m there

for Jess when she has a dance recital. Or something special at school. How many have those special events have I missed, Mary-Sue? How many?” He practically yelled the last question, and he took a deep breath to control his anger.

Nothing good would come of him completely losing control. If he did, it would be something else his in-laws could use against him.

“None.”

Dammit, the last thing Slick had expected was for her to acknowledge the truth. “That’s right. *None*. And how many could I potentially miss if I’m in a job I don’t like? A job where the boss isn’t as understanding about family needs as my current one. My team is my family. You’ve seen them come to as many events of Jess’s as they could. What type of job do you want me to get?”

“Well, you could get a teaching job. Then you could teach at Jess’s school. Spend all the holidays with her and not shove her off to camps.”

He shook his head. “How many camps have I sent Jess to since she started school? Two, and both of them were dance camps that *you* said I should send her to. Camps, I might add, that she loved. Also, how the hell am I going to get a job as a teacher when I don’t have any teaching qualifications at all?”

“Randy has a friend who runs a small, private Christian school. They’re always looking for people to teach. They have all curriculums and lesson plans created, so all you’d have to do is follow the instructions. In fact, I think you should send Jess there.”

For a moment, Slick was lost for words, unable to believe what his former mother-in-law had just sprouted. This was all too much, and he’d had enough. “That’s the most absurd idea ever, Mary-Sue. If you think I’d even contemplate sending my daughter to a school that doesn’t worry if their teachers have a degree in education or not, you are much mistaken.” The anger he’d been keeping at bay whenever he was with his in-laws broke through the tenuous wall he’d built around it. “To even *think* I want to be a teacher is absurd. My life and job is as a

firefighter. Debbie knew that when we married. She knew that when we got pregnant. I'm not going to twist myself to please you and Randy anymore."

"What exactly are you saying, Carson?" Mary-Sue asked, her tone sharp.

He didn't care anymore. Didn't care that what he was about to do could lead to the very thing he'd been trying to avoid. "I'm saying, I'm done. I'm done trying to play nice with you. There was a reason you and Debbie were at odds for so much of her life—you don't listen to what other people want. You don't consider their needs. All that is important to you is what you want." Slick took a deep breath, grateful that Jess wasn't anywhere near to hear what he was going to say next. "Until you can accept that my life and career are my own, that *I* am Jess's father and will do what's right for my daughter, then you won't be seeing us. I will make alternative arrangements for Jess to be cared for while I'm working." Without waiting for a response, he strode out of the room and into the backyard.

The moment he slid the door open, Poppy's head turned in his direction. As if she could read the look on his face, which was probably as obvious as the tree he stood under.

She rushed over to him. "Are you okay?" Her hand landed on his forearm, the touch soothing the raging beast that he'd unleashed on Mary-Sue.

Slick tugged her close and buried his face in her neck. Her arms tightened around him, and he sank into her embrace. He held her tight against him, adjusting his breathing so their chests were rising and lowering in time. "I am now." He really was. Being with Poppy grounded him in a way he needed at that moment.

Slowly, with every intake of air, the anger cooled, only to be replaced by sadness. Sadness that it had come to this. Sadness that Jess wouldn't see her grandparents for a while.

Sadness that he hadn't been able to keep his word to Deb. Although she hadn't gotten along with her parents, he'd made a silent vow as he'd stood by the graveside as they lowered her

casket to the ground. He'd do whatever was necessary to ensure that their daughter had a better relationship with her grandparents than Deb had had with her parents.

It was a promise Slick was destined never to keep, considering that Mary-Sue and Randy hadn't changed. Things Deb had told him, he could see now. The controlling ways. How they always wanted everything their way.

Maybe his words would be the wake-up call they needed to see they couldn't have their way anymore. That he wouldn't stand for his daughter to be treated like a pawn in their game of chess.

Pulling back, he looked up and saw Jess and Finn were watching them. Finn's eyes were guarded, as if he wasn't sure what was going to happen next.

Jess, on the other hand, was beaming. She may have only known Poppy for a short time, but it seemed his daughter was a fan. He couldn't blame her; Slick was a huge fan of Poppy.

"Time to go, guys," he said.

Both the kids made their way toward them, and when they were close enough, Slick took hold of Poppy's hand, and they walked into the house.

Part of him wanted to leave and never speak again to his former in-laws. But he couldn't do that to Jess, not until he explained the new situation to her—which wouldn't be fun.

Stilted goodbyes were exchanged, and the moment they walked out onto the porch, the front door slammed behind them.

Slick allowed himself a moment to relax. Deep down, he knew the battle wasn't over. All he hoped was that he would have time to regroup and shore up his defense before the next bomb was lobbed in his direction.

* * *

POPPY DARTED A LOOK AT SLICK.

His fingers curled around the steering wheel as though it was a buoy, and he was clinging to it in rough waters.

What'd happened while she and the kids were outside?

The question was on the tip of her tongue, but she kept it swallowed down, knowing that what happened wasn't good. Slick probably wouldn't want to discuss it in front of the kids.

"Seeing as it's Saturday, would you both like to come back to our place for ice cream?" Poppy asked, hoping they'd say yes and perhaps she could get Slick alone so he could explain what had gone on.

"I'd love that. Can we please, Daddy?" Jess begged from the backseat, and she mentally sent the girl a high-five.

"I like that idea, Aunt Poppy. I can show Jess my new video game that Dad got me. And it's not a violent one, Mr. Killian, I promise," her nephew cosigned the little girl's plea.

Poppy's heart melted at Finn's words. He was such a gentle soul, and so thoughtful.

"That sounds good, and thank you Finn for letting me know the game would be appropriate for Jess. And it's Slick, none of this Mr. Killian stuff. Although I do appreciate your manners."

"Thank you, si-umm Slick," Finn said.

The rest of the ride back to her place passed in pleasant conversation, and Poppy was very glad she'd extended the invitation. Until she had, the atmosphere in the truck had been rather uncomfortable.

Once the kids were settled with their bowls of ice cream, heads bent over something on Finn's tablet, instead of the video game, Poppy took hold of Slick's hand.

"We're going to sit outside and eat ice cream, guys. Will that be okay?" she asked.

Finn's head popped up. "Sure. Once we've finished our ice cream, I'll show Jess my game. It's all good, Aunt Poppy."

For a moment she'd been worried that Finn might think she was abandoning him with wanting to be alone with Slick, but it was as though the boy sensed something was wrong with Slick, and he recognized she was helping him. Which she totally was.

"Thanks, Finn. If you need anything, come and get me. Okay?" The desire to let her nephew know he was important to her was high—even if he understood why Poppy wanted to be alone with Slick.

"Will do."

Satisfied that they were indeed okay, she picked up her bowl and glanced at Slick. "You good?"

The corners of his lips lifted into a soft smile, but it didn't reach his eyes. Tension rode his shoulders, and his fingers clenched the bowl tightly. "Yeah."

They made their way outside; the evening was cool but pleasant.

She sat at the small table she'd set up in the corner of the patio.

Slick sat opposite her; his gaze trained on her small garden.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Poppy broke the silence that'd grown between them, as they ate their ice cream.

Slick placed his spoon in the bowl and sat back, the chair creaking at the action. Everything in her wanted to reach out and soothe the frown lines marring his forehead. How bad had it gotten while she and the kids had been outside looking at the treehouse in Mary-Sue's backyard?

"I don't really know where to start. I"—he scraped a hand down his face—"I may have fucked everything up, but in a way, I don't care. For too long, they've held the custody threat over my head. Tried to make me conform to their way of thinking, and tonight, I had enough."

"We haven't known each other long, but even I know Jess's welfare is your first priority. You'd do anything for her."

You're a good father, regardless of what they say."

"Thanks. I know this is going to sound arrogant, but I know I'm a good dad. Jess is my world, and I'd do anything for that girl. Yes, my job is stressful. Dangerous. And sometimes not conducive to a young child, but it's all I know. I can't sit in an office. Or be in a classroom like they want me to."

Poppy shifted her chair so she was sitting beside him, not opposite him. She hooked her arm around his and laid her head on his shoulder. She felt the shudder ripple through him, and a second later, Slick rested against hers.

"I'm so tired, Poppy. So tired of the fighting. I told Mary-Sue I was done. That I wasn't going to even consider the teaching job she all but had lined up for me. I told her I didn't want them around Jess, and that I'd plan from now on for Jess to be looked after while I'm at work."

Poppy processed everything. She had no idea what the teaching job he was talking about was, but she couldn't imagine him stuck in a classroom. He'd lose the essential part that made him *him*. He'd wither away to nothing if he couldn't be a firefighter.

"That's a lot. How did she take it?"

Slick shrugged. "I don't know. I walked out and got you. But you had to have noticed how tense the goodbye was. How she hugged Jess for an extra-long time."

Poppy had noticed those things but hadn't known if the extra-long hug wasn't the normal way Mary-Sue said goodbye to Jess. "What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I start my next shift tomorrow afternoon." Slick got up and paced around her small patio. "Have I been too hasty? Have I made the biggest mistake by cutting off my one-and-only reliable babysitting resource?"

Poppy stepped in front of him so he had no option but to stop his pacing to keep from running into her. "We'll work it out. You know the girls will rally around and work something out for you. And"—she took a deep breath, unable to believe

what she was about to say next—“I’ll look after Jess for the next couple of days for you.”

Shock crossed Slick’s face, his gray eyes widening. “You’d do that? For me?”

“Yes. I’ll have Finn, and I’m sure he wouldn’t mind Jess hanging around.”

He shook his head. “I can’t ask you to do that. Your visit with Finn is important. You should be focusing all your attention on him, not having to share it with my daughter.”

Finn *was* her priority, but Poppy also wanted to help this man whose non-judgment of her and what she’d done meant the world to her.

“I want to do this, Slick. Plus, it will give you time to make other arrangements. Let me help you out.”

His hands framed her face, and he looked intently at her.

Poppy lifted her chin a fraction, meeting his gaze and hoping he saw the sincerity she felt in her soul. Not to mention the care and desire that was beginning to grow within her for this man.

“You’re a special woman, Poppy Brown. Thank you,” he whispered the words before lowering his head and capturing her lips.

Poppy melted into the kiss. Her hands clutched at his shirt. She’d wanted to taste him all night. Wanted to be close to him. Their tongues danced together, and his hands trailed down her back, slipping between the hem of her top and the waistband of her jeans. She shivered at the touch and ached for more. Ached for his hands to trace every dip and curve of her body. Ached to know what it would be like to have him fill her.

It’d been a long time since she’d felt this type of attraction—if ever—if she were being truthful. Her past liaisons had been because she’d been needy. Had needed and wanted to feel important. Had wanted to think Poppy was important in the person’s life, when in fact she’d been a mere itch they’d needed to scratch.

This craving she had for Slick consumed her. Had from the second she'd laid eyes on him, but one she'd made herself ignore.

Now she didn't have to ignore it. Didn't have to deprive herself of what it felt like to be held in his arms.

Poppy pressed herself closer, crushing her breasts against his chest. The feel of his hard length against her belly emboldened her to go up on tiptoe and deepen the kiss. How she wanted to pull his shirt free and kiss her way down his chest. See if he had the six-pack his hard chest suggested he had.

Slick pressed kisses along her jaw until he reached her ear. When he nipped the flesh below her ear lobe, she moaned loudly. "You make me forget that I've got my daughter inside. I want you so much, Poppy."

His words pulled her back to the present. To the fact that they were standing in her backyard, with two children inside.

The fact Slick was experiencing the same desire and madness that she felt was the only consolation that they couldn't take it any further. Yet.

"I should be annoyed that you remained sensible enough to remember that, when all I wanted to do was lose myself in you."

His rumble of laughter sent shivers of awareness down her spine. "Trust me, I wish I could lose myself in you too, but we should go. It's getting late, and I have a lot to do."

Poppy sighed and dropped her arms from his warm body. A shaft of shame swept over her at how quickly she'd forgotten Finn was inside.

Hadn't she promised she would put him first?

How was kissing Slick, almost tearing his clothes off on her patio, putting him first?

"Hey." Slick hooked a finger under her chin and lifted it so that she had to look at him. Only this time, she couldn't meet his gaze. "Poppy, it's okay. Just because we lost ourselves in

the kiss doesn't mean you're a bad person. That you'd forgotten Finn. You're not that person anymore. And I was so lost in you that Jess slipped my mind, too."

His words should make her feel better, and they did, a fraction. "I guess so. But maybe we should keep kissing to a minimum while Finn is here."

"If that's what you want, then that's what we'll do." Slick kissed the tip of her nose. "But that doesn't mean I'll not be wanting to ravish you every time I see you."

Heat suffused her cheeks, and Poppy wished her hair wasn't up in a ponytail so she could duck her head and it could cover her face.

"Come on, let's get inside." He grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the door.

The old Poppy would wish he was dragging her inside to make love, but the new Poppy was grateful he was understanding and that come tomorrow, he wouldn't ignore her. Or think she didn't exist.

Tomorrow, she'd see him because she was going to be looking after his daughter for the next couple of days. Her stomach dropped. She'd gone from not wanting to be close to anyone with a child to offering to babysit one and look after her nephew.

As they crossed the threshold, she said a silent prayer that nothing bad would happen while she had both Finn and Jess.

CHAPTER 12



SLICK STUDIED THE NOTEPAD IN FRONT OF HIM. LISTED WERE the names of all the people he assumed would help him out. Not only did he have the partners of the guys on his crew, but he also had the women Moose's team were partnered with. He wouldn't call on all of them. Quite a few had jobs and he didn't want to take advantage of his friends, but he was in a desperate place.

Once again, he questioned his actions in cutting Mary-Sue off. Sure, it left him in a bind, but he'd made his point known.

"You trying to solve the world's problems?" Spider sat down at the table.

"Nah, just trying to work out a schedule to have Jess looked after while I work."

His crewmate's eyebrows rose. "Mary-Sue and Randy going on vacation again?"

Slick wasn't surprised by Spider's comment. The last time he'd done this was when his in-laws had gone on their cruise. Then it'd only been two weeks and was easy to call on his friends for their help. This was going to be more permanent.

"Not quite. I had an argument with Mary-Sue yesterday." He quickly explained how things had unfolded.

Spider whistled low. "Sheesh, that's a lot. But when Calla and I come back from our trip away, you know she'll be more than happy to help you out with Jess. Along with all the other women too."

“I know. I just don’t want to impose on everyone.”

“You wouldn’t be, but I get it. We’ve got your back should things go to shit with your in-laws.”

“Appreciate it, man.”

Spider nodded and pushed away from the table, leaving him to his thoughts.

Perhaps Slick should look at hiring someone who would do the job instead of using his friends. As quickly as he thought it, he disregarded it. The cost alone would be something he couldn’t handle. Nor did he like the idea of a total stranger staying at his house while he wasn’t there.

However, he didn’t want to shunt Jess around like she was a piece of luggage. It wouldn’t be fair to the girl that every couple of nights she’d be at someone else’s house.

Then there were school vacations. At least when she was in school, Jess only needed to be looked after before and after classes, not the whole day.

His head throbbed, and he tossed the pen down. Once again, regrets at his hasty decision filling him. Right this second, Slick was tempted to pick up the phone and call Mary-Sue to apologize and beg her to continue caring for Jess. He could just imagine the satisfaction on the woman’s face knowing that she was right, and he couldn’t cope with looking after his daughter.

If his parents were alive, things would be different. They would’ve supported him, no questions asked. Nor would they have demanded he change his job. Unfortunately, they’d been gone for years. They’d never met their granddaughter, and they’d never met their daughter-in-law, either. Slick had been alone for a long time before he’d met Deb. His lack of family support had never bothered him in the past until now—when he needed it the most.

“Hey, you’re Slick, right?”

He looked up to find a guy he’d never seen before, taking the seat Spider had recently vacated. He wore the same

uniform as Slick did, but he'd never seen the guy around the station before.

"Who's asking?" Normally, he wasn't short with a fellow firefighter, but there was an aura around the guy that didn't sit well with Slick.

He couldn't put his finger on it. Couldn't even describe it. He just got weird vibes from the dude.

"Name's Freddy Williams. I filled in when you were out recently. I've been assigned here to work this shift."

Slick remembered the guys telling him about this dude, how bad he was, and the fact they didn't think Chief Blaise would ever let him back into the station again.

Guess things changed.

Wait, he said "assigned."

What the heck did that mean? Had he been sent to Station 7 by powers higher than Blaise? Anything was possible, and Slick didn't have the brain space to figure it all out. It was what it was.

"Good to meet you." He closed the notepad. He wouldn't work on his dilemma in front of a guy he didn't know.

"Thanks. It's good to be back. This station is an... interesting place to be."

While he seemed affable, Slick's earlier feeling that something was off about the guy was increasing. If Freddy's last time there was any indication, his teammates would not be happy to see him.

His phone buzzed, and Poppy's face filled the screen on his phone.

Slick immediately snatched it up, grateful he wouldn't need to make further conversation with Freddy. However, he couldn't prevent the sliver of worry slithering through him.

Why was she calling?

"Poppy? What's wrong?"

Slick walked away from the table, not caring that he was basically being rude to Freddy. He'd only left Jess with Poppy four hours ago.

Had something happened?

Was she sick again?

“Hey Slick, nothing's wrong. I didn't mean to worry you.”

He leaned against the wall in the hallway to the bunk rooms, relief cooling the anxiety that'd flared to life when he'd seen Poppy calling him. “No, it's fine. I'm a little jumpy. Sorry.”

“Then I'm even sorrier that I worried you for no reason. I wanted to let you know Jess went to sleep with no worries at all. She and Finn helped me make dinner, and it was a lot of fun. Then they played a couple of card games before she had a bath and got ready for bed. She's happy and safe here, Carson,” she finished softly.

Fuck, he loved it when she used his given name. He didn't care what she called him, but just hearing a name that only his parents had ever called him slip from her lips was ambrosia.

Slick loved it even more that Poppy had taken the time to call him and let him know things were okay, even when he hadn't realized he needed this confirmation.

“I know she is. Thank you for calling and letting me know.”

“I wasn't sure if I should. You know, you could've been on a call, but I thought if you were, I'd leave a message. I just wanted to reassure you that Jess is happy here with me. She and Finn get on really well. I know this is all new, especially me looking after her when I haven't done it before.”

Everything in Slick wished he was at Poppy's place right then. Sharing with her what she'd told him they'd done that evening. Watched as she and Finn played together.

“Thank you for letting me know. It means a lot. And I want you to know that I had no hesitation at all in leaving Jess with you. I know you'd keep her safe.”

The station tones blared to life before he could say anymore. Silently, Slick cursed that he had to cut the conversation short. "I've got to go," he said as he raced toward the locker room, noting that Freddy had been hovering at the top of the hallway where he'd been talking. "We've got a call."

"Okay. Be safe."

"Always." He disconnected the call and tossed the notebook on the table as he rushed past and got into his gear before climbing into the truck.

Determinedly, he pushed thoughts of Poppy and Jess from his mind. His focus needed to be on the upcoming call. He couldn't put himself or his team in danger with his inattention.

* * *

FREDDY WILLIAMS TAPPED his little finger on his right hand on his left thigh twenty times, before moving to his ring finger. The action was soothing for him.

He'd found her.

His friend, Gregor, had been right when he said he'd seen her hanging around with the guys from Station 7.

He'd spent the last few years planning his revenge. Wanting to get back at the woman who'd ruined his brother's life with her neediness.

Of course, his brother had been stupid and thought he'd found a meal ticket. It was easier to forgive him because they were blood and had shared so much together.

Freddy listened to the chatter going on around him. He'd hated working with these guys last time he'd had to fill in. They were all so *perfect*. All they talked about were their women and their love for them. It was sickening. He'd been glad he'd only had to work with them once.

However, now here he was back with them. He was pissed too. Fucking Station Chief Blaise had reprimanded him, *him*,

for his behavior during that time.

The guy was an asshole. So what if he hadn't listened and gone where he wasn't supposed to? He'd gotten the job done and wasn't that the most important thing?

At least he was only for this one shift. Fuck knew why he was with this group again, but it had worked in his favor.

After all his searching, Poppy Brown had been dropped in his lap.

Whatever it took, he'd get into Slick's phone and get her details. The next step of his plan was going to be ready to put into action soon. Freddy couldn't wait to get started on it.

CHAPTER 13



POPPY FINISHED LOADING THE LAST PLATE INTO THE dishwasher and started it. She wiped down the sink and folded the tea towel over the oven door handle. Her kitchen was shining, and every surface was clear of clutter.

Just the way she liked it—now.

Prior to her move to San Antonio, she hadn't cared about how her house looked. What state it was in. It hadn't been unusual for her to have dishes piling up in the sink until it got to the stage where she had to rinse a plate just to use it.

God, she'd been such a mess then. Poppy had exposed Finn to that chaos too.

Thinking about her nephew brought a smile to her face. It'd been so fun having him stay with her. So different. She didn't deserve his unquestionable love, but she'd take it. Treasure it.

Never again would she take it for granted or abuse it.

“Oh, I was coming to see if I could help you clean up before I went to bed.” Finn strolled into the kitchen, smiling.

He really was the best, and he'd thrived living with Cerise and Brodie. He was going to make an amazing big brother when Cerise had her baby.

“Thanks, sweetie. I've got it all done. I'm a bit better at keeping house now.” Poppy inwardly winced.

Why on earth did she have to bring the past up?

Remind Finn of that terrible time her actions had caused in his life.

“Have you heard from Cerise and Brodie?” she asked, determined to change the subject as she walked to her living room, Finn following behind.

“Yeah, Mom called to remind me to brush my teeth.” He rolled his eyes, but he was grinning. “Like I need a reminder to do that. I’ve been brushing my own teeth for years.”

Poppy laughed, recalling that he had, indeed, brushed his teeth without being reminded, because...well it was the last thing she ever thought of getting him to do. “Are they having a good time?” She sat on the couch and was pleased when Finn sat next to her.

“Yeah, they are. They needed to get away. Mom’s been sad because of all the times the babies didn’t work out. Dad was as well.”

“And you? Were you sad?” she asked gently.

He sighed. “Yeah, I was. I can’t wait to be a big brother, and I was so excited every time they told me Mom was pregnant. I didn’t like how sad it made them feel the most, though. They’re the best parents and I’m really lucky they’re mine. That they wanted me.”

Poppy closed her eyes, willing the tears threatening at the back of her eyes to stay where they were.

Was Finn sending a hidden message? Not saying the words—*unlike you*.

No. Finn wasn’t like that. There’d been no malice or ill intent when Finn had said that Cerise and Brodie wanted him. He was just a boy thanking his lucky stars, and she was glad that he had the parents he had now.

A small hand landed on her knee, and she flicked her eyes open. Finn had scooted closer to her.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

God, this kid. He was way wiser than a boy his age should be. He’d had heartache and so much upheaval at a young age

that he shouldn't be this put together. He should be angry or at least rebelling.

"I won't lie and say that I wasn't a little sad, but I'm also very happy that you have the parents that you do. I know your biological parents would be happy that you're with Cerise and Brodie."

Finn nodded. "I know they are."

Poppy smiled, happy that her nephew felt that way but wasn't quite sure how to respond. "That's good."

"And they're not mad at you, either, Aunt Poppy. Daddy told me to tell you the next time I saw you he understands."

Was he talking about Brodie or Paul?

There was no way her dead brother could've possibly spoken to Finn. As far as she knew, Cerise and Brodie hadn't taken Finn to a psychic. Plus, Finn had always called Brodie *Dad*. She'd never heard him call him *Daddy*.

She wasn't going to question him or make fun of him. If he believed it, then she believed it as well—maybe.

"I'm glad he's not mad at me."

What else could she say?

"I know it sounds weird, but I have dreams where Mommy and Daddy from heaven come to me. They hug me and we talk. I dreamed about them the first night I was here. That's when he told me he wasn't mad at you, and he was glad that we were spending time together again. He said I needed to show you that you're stronger than you think and he's proud of you. He gave me a kiss on the cheek, and he and Mommy walked up the stairs again. Before they disappeared, they said that the baby Cerise was having was going to be healthy and happy."

Tears streamed down Poppy's cheeks; she couldn't hold them back even if she wanted to.

Finn's little speech sounded more like it'd come from a mature adult, not an eleven-year-old boy. There was no

doubting what he'd said. That he'd had a spiritual visit from her brother—his father.

She'd heard people talking about loved ones coming to them in their dreams, but she'd never experienced it. It seemed Finn did regularly.

Did Cerise and Brodie know about these dreams?

Had he told them?

It didn't matter; Finn had just given her a precious gift. One she was going to treasure. "Thank you for sharing that. It means a lot to me." Poppy pulled Finn in for a hug. His thin arms hugged her tightly, and she closed her eyes, savoring the moment. So very grateful that Cerise and Brodie had asked her to look after her nephew.

Talking to him over the phone wasn't the same as having him right beside her.

She loosened her grip and leaned back, dropping a kiss on his cheek. "The next time you see your daddy, you tell him I love him, and I miss him very much. Tell him I'm sorry for letting him down, but I'm glad he forgives me." Poppy stroked Finn's hair. "I'm sorry for letting you down too, Finn."

"I'll tell them for sure. And it was hard what I went through before Mom and Dad adopted me, but I don't hate you. I could never hate you. You're my family."

Poppy swallowed hard to stop another sob from erupting. Again, Finn's maturity blew her mind. She was so grateful for him.

An idea formed. An idea she never would've expected. Now that it had, she liked it, liked it a lot.

Taking a deep breath, she asked her nephew a question. "Do you think, maybe in the summer, you would like to come and stay with me for a couple of weeks? That is, if it's okay with your mom and dad, of course."

Finn smiled so big she thought his cheeks were going to split. "I would love that. And I know Mom and Dad won't mind."

She hugged him again. “Awesome. When they come and pick you up, we’ll ask them, okay?”

“Or we could ask them when they phone next. I don’t think I can wait that long.” His excitement was infectious. Happiness that he couldn’t wait to ask his parents chased away her sadness.

“We’ll see.” Poppy looked at her watch. “Now, mister, I think it’s time you went to bed. I’ve got to get Jess to school tomorrow, and you’ve got your own schoolwork to do, too.”

“Aww, I thought we could go out for a milkshake after we dropped Jess at school.” He batted his eyelids in the way kids did when they were hoping to get their way.

Her shoulders shook as she chuckled at his cheekiness. “We’ll see, but you need to do your schoolwork.”

“I will. I promise.” Finn kissed her cheek. “Night, Aunt Poppy. I love you.”

She ruffled his dark locks. “Love you too, buddy. Sweet dreams.”

With a nod, her nephew rushed from the room, as if he was eager to get to sleep so morning would arrive and they could get that milkshake.

Laughing to herself, Poppy picked up her phone, the desire to tell Slick everything Finn had said flowing within her.

She pulled his contact details up and called him. A flash of disappointment hit her when the call went to voicemail. Then she remembered he’d been called out when they’d talked earlier.

Leaving a message wasn’t what she wanted to do, but she didn’t have a choice. “Slick, the most amazing thing just happened.” She quickly recalled everything Finn had told her and how excited he was at the possibility of staying with her over the summer. “Anyway, I just wanted to share that with you. Hope your shift is going well and...be safe, okay?”

Poppy ended the call and sat back on the couch, closing her eyes. “If you’re nearby, Paul, thank you for the gift you

gave. I'm so sad you're not here to see the wonderful person your son is growing up to be."

The fear she'd had that she would mess up with Finn was fading with every moment she spent with him.

For the first time in a long time, Poppy believed her life was on the road it had always meant to be on.

CHAPTER 14



WEARINESS DOGGED SLICK AS HE MADE HIS WAY TO HIS CAR. The last forty-eight hours had been chaotic, busy, and annoying.

Footsteps fell behind Slick, and Freddy jogged toward him. He mentally groaned. Unlike the last time he was with the team, he'd been the perfect firefighter. Following instructions. Doing what he was told.

The other guys on the team had been gobsmacked with the change in his attitude. That didn't mean they wanted him as a regular replacement.

In fact, Spider had already spoken to Blaise about it. The chief hadn't been happy with Freddy's appearance, but the matter had been out of his hands.

"Heading home, Slick, or off to get some breakfast somewhere?" Freddy asked when he caught up with Slick.

"Home. Got things to do."

No way was he going to elaborate on what those things were—it wasn't any of Freddy's business. Of course, if it was one of the other guys on the team, he would've been more than happy to tell him what was going on.

"That's too bad. I was going to see if you wanted to join me to grab some food."

That was the last thing Slick wanted to do. "Thanks for the invite, man, but I can't."

All he wanted to do was get home to Poppy's so he could see her and his daughter. Man, he'd missed them both. He'd also been thrilled to receive Poppy's message about her conversation with Finn. The fact that they were mending their relationship warmed his heart.

Even though she'd had her doubts about her abilities, he'd known that things would be different with Finn this time around. It didn't matter that Slick hadn't known her at the time. He knew her now.

"That's too bad, man. Maybe some other time." Freddy's voice pulled him from his thoughts. He'd forgotten that they'd been talking.

Damn, he was more tired than he thought. Then again, he was thinking about Poppy, but he was getting used to her ever-presence in his head now.

"I'll see ya, Freddy." He gave the man a wave and got in his truck, not acknowledging the offer of getting food another time. No way was he going to take the man up on that.

Pulling out of the parking lot, he noticed Freddy was still standing where he left him, his face screwed up in a look of disgust. A shiver of apprehension spiraled through Slick, but he shook it off.

If he never saw the guy again, he wouldn't be too upset.

The drive to Poppy's passed without any drama, and when he pulled into her driveway, he smiled at the sight that greeted him.

Jess and Finn were kicking a pink soccer ball to each other on the front lawn. Poppy was lounging on a chair on her porch, but she stood the moment he pulled in.

"Daddy!" Jess's screech of happiness reached him through his closed window and, in a flash, his fatigue disappeared—like it always did when he saw his daughter.

He only got two seconds to brace before the flying tornado that was his daughter hit him.

Clutching her close, Slick inhaled, smelling the sweet strawberry scent of her shampoo. Leaving her was hard, but coming back to her was sweet.

“Hey princess, did you have fun with Poppy and Finn?” he asked as he lowered her to the ground. Finn had moved to Poppy’s side, and she had her hand resting on his shoulder. Their togetherness and happiness were easy to see.

“I did. We did lots of things. Finn is so cool. And he helped me with my homework and made it fun to do.” She crooked her finger, like she wanted to whisper something to him.

Slick squatted down, his muscles protesting the movement. They’d done a couple of training drills, and his body was letting him know he wasn’t getting any younger. “What did you want to say?”

“I’m going to marry Finn,” she whispered.

“Is that right?” Slick bit back a grin. It was sweet that his girl had a crush on Poppy’s nephew. She was only eight, way too young to be thinking that she’d marry the boy. There was plenty of time for that. Plenty of time for heartbreak, too.

He shut those thoughts down pretty quick. He didn’t want to think about Jess.

“Yep, but don’t say anything,” she stage-whispered.

Mimicking zipping his lips, Slick stood and ruffled her hair. “I won’t.”

They joined Poppy, and Finn stood. How he wanted to haul her close and bury his head between her neck and shoulder. Feel her arms and unique scent surround him. But he was aware of the audience they had, not to mention the fact that some of Poppy’s neighbors could be watching them.

“Hi,” he said instead.

“Hi, yourself.” Her smile was shy and unsure.

Like the need to hold her, the need to kiss away her uncertainty threatened to push his good intentions away.

“Hi, Slick, did you have a good shift?” Finn held his hand out in greeting, and Slick took it, giving it a quick shake, amused at the grown-up action from the tween.

“I did. It was busy, which always makes things go quicker.”

“And means you didn’t get much sleep, I bet,” Poppy commented.

Slick shrugged. “Pretty much.”

She nodded and then pointed to her house. “How about we go inside, and I can get you a drink or something?”

Obviously, he’d have to go inside to collect all of Jess’s things, but the invite warmed his heart. “A drink sounds good.”

“Great.” Poppy started for the house, pausing and looking over her shoulder. “I made a Shephard’s Pie you can take home. I figured you probably wouldn’t feel like cooking.”

Her assumption was accurate. Slick never liked cooking after coming off shift, but he did it. And he was grateful he wouldn’t have to do it tonight.

“Sounds perfect.”

“I helped Poppy with the potatoes, Daddy.” Jess clenched her fist and then demonstrated what he assumed was her mashing the vegetable.

He chuckled and loved seeing her so joyful. Whenever he picked her up from Mary-Sue’s place, she was happy, but never like this. It was clear his daughter had enjoyed her time with Poppy and her nephew.

As they walked through the front door, Slick allowed himself a moment of fantasy. A fantasy where he and Poppy were married and they were a family, and this was how he was greeted every time he returned home from a shift.

It was way too soon to be having any fantasies like that, but now that he’d pictured it, he couldn’t unsee it.

He wanted it.

Wanted to become a family unit with him, Jess, and Poppy. With Finn visiting as often as possible—and maybe a baby or two of their own.

Of course, Poppy may not feel this way, but she kept looking in his direction and licking her lips, as though sending a private message that she wanted him to kiss her.

Slick wanted too very much.

Now all he had to do was work out a way to prolong this visit and steal that kiss he so desperately wanted.

* * *

LAUGHTER DRIFTED DOWN to where Poppy sat with Slick on her back patio. The children were inside playing a game of snap.

“I’m betting Finn is going to have bruised hands with the way my daughter is yelling out SNAP! every five seconds.”

“I have to give it to her. She’s very passionate about the games she plays. We had a very intense game of Go Fish.” Poppy lifted her glass to her lips.

“I’m not sure where she got it, but my daughter is competitive.”

They slipped into a companionable silence, and she liked it. Liked sitting with Slick in her garden while Finn and Jess played inside. There was a sense of normalcy about it, as if they did this regularly. As if they were a couple, and Jess and Finn were their kids.

The thought pulled her up short.

From the moment Poppy had realized she wasn’t in any position to be a mother to Finn; she’d believed she was incapable of it—especially after what she’d done to the poor boy. Yet the last two days, looking after not only her nephew, but Slick’s daughter, had felt natural.

Nothing had been a burden. Nothing had scared her. It helped that Jess, even at her young age, was independent. Finn

was such a well-mannered boy and always helped out. When she'd commented on it, he'd told her that even though Brodie could afford to employ a houseful of staff, from cleaners to a chef, he and Cerise did everything themselves. Finn had told her he had chores and got a monthly allowance for doing them. He also said he saved a portion of it and spent the rest.

The time with both the kids had given Poppy the confidence that maybe she could be a good mother.

At other times, the thought scared her. The onus of being responsible for another human.

“You're deep in thought, Poppet. Everything okay?”

This gentle soul beside her had to be exhausted and didn't need to hear about her insecurities. However, the fact Slick noticed that she was lost in thought. That he wanted to know what was wrong warmed her soul. And his use of a nickname. She liked it—a lot.

It would be easy to tell him that nothing was wrong. That everything was okay, but before he'd gone on shift, they'd decided that they were going to make a go of this relationship. Doing that meant sharing what was troubling her.

“I was just thinking about how the last two days were better than I expected. That looking after both Finn and Jess, while not without some issues, wasn't as scary as I thought it would be.” Poppy spared him a glance. He was watching her intently. “After my first attempt at being a mother to Finn, I didn't know if I would fall back into that pattern. Where everything was overwhelming. I'm sure Finn being older and helping the way he did made it a little easier.”

Slick took her hand in his. “Don't underestimate yourself. I know I didn't know you back then, but I know you now. I know the strong, smart woman you are. You've started your own business. Have got some amazing big contracts. The past is that, the past. You've learned and grown from it. That's the most important thing to take from that time. Someone may not have learned the way you did.”

Poppy allowed Slick's words to sink in. He was right; she had grown and changed. What was an even bigger component of her growth was that she'd acknowledged her fear—the worry that she didn't have it in her to be a good parent. She'd faced it and had successfully looked after two children. Granted, it was only for two days, but it was a start. A start she never thought she'd ever consider.

“Thank you. That means a lot, and you're right. I shouldn't keep comparing myself to the person who I was. There was so much going on at the time that messed me up.”

“You're not the first person to have messed up something, and you won't be the last. All I know is what I see and hear,” he said dryly when victory shouts from inside reached them. “Jess and Finn are happy, and I'm so grateful that you helped me out when I needed it. You could've easily said no, but you opened your home and your heart to my daughter, and saying thank you isn't enough.”

Poppy's heart stuttered a little when Slick mentioned her opening her heart to Jess—it was true. In the short time they'd spent together, she'd grown to care for that little girl. Her heart was full of love for her nephew, too. “You don't need to thank me. I'm glad I could help. In fact—” She licked her lips, surprised, but not really, at what she was about to say next. It felt right. It felt like what she was supposed to do. “I know you may not have secured childcare for Jess, but I wanted to offer to have her again. She and Finn get on so well, and I don't think he'll mind if she comes over again. But it's up to you. Take your time off to think about it.”

Silence greeted her offer.

Had she overstepped, made assumptions she shouldn't have?

“Slick?” Poppy asked when the silence between them stretched until it was as tight as a violin string.

Embarrassment swept over her, and she wished she could take back everything she'd said.

How had she misread the situation?

She thought Slick would be happy with her offer. That he'd leap at it. Instead, he seemed to be trying to work out a way to let her down gently.

She pushed away from the table, her chair scraping loudly over the deck. "Forget I said anything. I'm going to go see if Jess is ready to go. I'm sure you're anxious to get home."

How she managed to say the words without letting the tears building up inside of her fall, she couldn't guess. She did, and for that, she was grateful.

Poppy had taken two steps before her hand was snagged and tugged until she fell against Slick's warm chest. His arms closed around her and held her in place. She should fight to get free, but this was where she wanted to be.

"Poppet, I'm sorry." His lips brushed her cheek. "I don't know why it was so hard to say thank you, and yes, I'd love for Jess to stay with you. See, I just said them. But a few moments ago, I couldn't."

Could she believe him?

Did Slick really want her to look after Jess, or was he just saying the words because he thought she needed to hear them?

No, he meant them.

If she knew anything about Slick, it was that he didn't lie. He didn't say things just because he thought someone needed to hear them. Everything he said, he said with conviction and truth.

Poppy leaned back in his hold so she was looking at him. She needed to make sure she hadn't misjudged him. The worry that she hadn't made yet another mistake with a man overtook her earlier embarrassment. "Is this what you really want? Jess to stay here? You aren't taking me up on my offer because you upset me?"

Slick held her gaze, unwavering, letting her look into his soul. "I meant them. I meant them with my whole heart. Jess was happier than I've seen her for months. I haven't heard her laugh as freely as she has been the whole time I've been here. I can't think of a better place for her to stay. Thank you for

offering. Thank you for being you.” His head lowered, and she met him halfway, their lips crashing together.

She moaned against the onslaught, but she didn’t want him to stop. This was what she’d been wanting from the moment she’d seen his car pull into her driveway. Poppy had wanted to rush off the porch and kiss him when he’d stepped onto her driveway.

By the time the kiss broke, they were breathing heavily. Her hands were under his shirt, touching the expanse of his strong back.

“Now do you believe me?” he asked.

“I do.”

Freddy watched from the shadows as Slick’s truck reversed out of Poppy’s driveway. It had taken some careful driving, but he’d followed the guy until he’d reached his destination. Freddy had almost lost him a couple of times in his effort not to be caught tailing him, but it had been worth it in the end. Following him had been such a better plan than trying to get into his phone to get Poppy’s details.

He’d found out where the woman lived, and now he could put his plan into action.

Soon, he would avenge his brother’s death.

CHAPTER 15



THE SUN WAS JUST PEEKING OVER THE HORIZON AS SLICK walked out of the truck bay, coffee in his hand. He should be sleeping like the rest of the crew. They'd returned a couple of hours ago from an intense car accident scene where they'd been unable to save the driver of the car but had rescued two other victims from the other vehicle.

Normally, he could shake off when they lost someone, but for whatever reason, this time was different. When he'd laid down and closed his eyes, all he'd been able to see was the young male driver, his head lolling to the side. There'd been nothing they could've done to save him, but it didn't make it easier to cope with knowing a young life had been cut short. That a family was now mourning and wishing they'd been dealt a different hand.

Was it because the kid had only been a few years older than Finn? Was that the reason why it was hitting him so hard?

Over the past week and a half, he'd spent a bit of time getting to know Poppy's nephew. Not only through Jess's constant chatter about him but also from the times Slick had gone over there, even when he hadn't been working.

They'd tossed a baseball around the backyard while Poppy had to attend to her work. The four of them had gone out for dinner a couple of times.

Finn would be picked up the day after tomorrow, and Poppy was going to be sad to see him go. Slick had loved

seeing the way Poppy had blossomed, like her namesake, over the time she'd spent with her nephew and his daughter.

He'd known she would be amazing with the kids, and he'd been right. Finn had told him one time they'd been hanging out that he was glad he was getting to know his aunt now.

“You good, Slick?”

He glanced over his shoulder and spied Axe, heading toward him, also nursing a mug. “Yeah, just couldn't sleep.”

“I tried, but I guess I'm too wired after the last call. Rose texted me to say she'd received the 9-1-1 call and asked if I was okay.”

Slick smiled at that. It had to be hard for the two of them to be in first responder jobs. Each one stressful in different ways. However, they were making it work. “How's she doing?”

“She's good. Her brother phoned her the other day, so that made her extremely happy.”

“WE THINK SO. He doesn't give much away about his location when he calls. Or what he's doing. Rose wishes he'd come back here, but I don't think that'll happen. He's running from his demons, and until he stops long enough to deal with them, I think he's going to be a nomad for a while longer.”

“Understandable. From what you told me, there's a lot of shit he saw that he didn't change. I imagine he's carrying guilt as large as the Grand Canyon.”

Axe nodded and placed his mug on the ground. “You're not wrong. And Rose gets that. She just wishes he was closer. But they're also working on mending their own relationship, so the distance isn't that bad of a thing.”

“Well, she's got you now.”

“Not sure if she'd consider that a good thing, especially when I come back to the cabin with all my smelly fishing gear. She gives me a look and then points to the laundry.” He chuckled, and Slick imagined he wasn't too upset with that.

“Can’t say I blame her. I’ve been there and spent time fishing with you. I have to say it was a good idea to get a washer and dryer in the place.”

“That’s one of the reasons I did. *I* don’t like smelling that way.” Axe bent and grabbed his mug again. “What’s the deal with you and Poppy? Rose said the girls have all been chatting up a storm about Jess spending time with her while you’ve been working.”

Slick was surprised it’d taken this long for someone to ask him about Poppy. As Axe had said, the women’s group chat had been busy with conversation. Poppy had mentioned it in passing when he noted that her phone kept chiming with messages. He hadn’t felt it was his place to question what they were discussing, but he wasn’t clueless enough to realize that they would’ve been one of the main topics of conversation.

How much should he tell Axe?

How much had Poppy shared with the women about their relationship?

Everything was still so new between them. Slick couldn’t deny that this last week and a half had been the best days of his life so far. Finn and Jess got on like a house on fire. Her crush was obvious, and Finn didn’t seem to mind. In fact, Slick suspected that Finn liked his daughter, too.

When it was just him and Poppy, they’d shared some hot make-out sessions. If it weren’t for the two children in the house, Slick would’ve taken the next step and moved them to the bedroom. He suspected that Poppy wouldn’t mind if he had. When the time was right, though, they would sleep together, and he couldn’t wait for that to happen.

“Poppy and I are good. We’re getting to know each other. She and Jess are becoming fast friends, and her nephew, Finn, is a great kid. I’m grateful that she’s opened her house to Jess while I’ve been working. Particularly after what happened with Mary-Sue and Randy.”

“That’s great. You do seem happier than you have in a long time. I’m glad that things worked out with you two.”

Slick held up his hand. “Slow down there. We’re not getting married or anything.”

“Yet.” Axe winked, and Slick shook his head at his friend.

“Whatever.”

Getting married to Poppy wouldn’t be a bad thing. He had to be honest with himself and admit that he’d let himself think about their future and where it was headed. Every hour that he spent with Poppy, he was falling further under her spell. A spell she’d cast the first night he’d clapped eyes on her.

They stood there for a few beats as the sun rose steadily in the sky. It was going to be a warm one, but they only had to work for a couple of more hours before they’d be off for the next two days.

Two days when he could spend as much time as possible with Poppy.

“Speaking of your in-laws,” Axe said. “What’s the deal with them? Have they said or done anything since you walked out?”

Every time his phone rang or he checked his mailbox, he worried that this time it would be a letter or phone call from a law firm, confirming that his in-laws were suing for custody.

So far, nothing had happened, and he couldn’t shake the feeling that it was imminent.

“Haven’t heard a word from them.”

“And it’s troubling you?” Axe seemed to have heard the thoughts running through his mind right now.

“Yeah, because they’ve been too quiet. Jess even asked me about them the other day. Asked if she’d see them again.”

His buddy whistled low. “How did you handle that one?”

“I’ve been nothing but honest with her from the night I walked out. I let her know that I wasn’t pleased with the way they were treating me and that they were asking me to do things that I wasn’t happy doing. I know she doesn’t fully understand everything, and that’s because I didn’t go into all

the details of what they'd been saying and doing the last few months. She's sad she's not seeing them, but..." Slick paused and gazed up at the clear blue sky, finding comfort in the brightness of the color. "I also think she's happy, too. Kids always seem to pick up on things, no matter how hard we try to be normal. Plus, it helps that she adores Poppy and Finn, too."

"Are we going to have to have a word with this Finn boy? He needs to understand that Jess has five uncles, in addition to her dad, who will protect her and look out for her."

Mirth overtook him, and he laughed at the fierce look on his friend's face. He loved his team, and they would have his back and his daughter's back—always. "I don't think we need to go that far yet. But it's good to know she has her uncles looking out for her."

"Damn straight she does. Jess is as much ours as she is yours."

Axe's fierce offer for protection was only one of the reasons Slick would never consider another career other than the one he had. The brotherhood amongst his team was strong. When Johnno and Dahlia had their baby, he would protect him or her as fiercely as he protected Jess.

The crunch of tires had them both looking up, and they spied a gray truck pulling into the station.

"What the fuck is he doing back?" Axe muttered.

Slick squinted and made out that it was Freddy in the driver's seat. He waved at them, and Slick returned the gesture. "No idea. As far as I know, the next shift doesn't need a replacement. I was talking to the chief earlier, and he said everyone on Team 7 was turning up for their shift."

"Guess we're about to find out," his crewmate muttered as Freddy walked toward them with a white pastry box in his hand.

"Hey fellas, quiet shift?" His affable attitude didn't sit well with Slick. There was something off about him, and with the way Axe was tensing up, he was feeling the same way.

“What brings you here?” he asked, avoiding answering his question about their shift.

“Brought some kolaches and donuts for y’all.” He held up the box as if it was the Lombardi trophy—a trophy that hadn’t resided in Texas for a very long time.

“Thanks, that’s good of you,” Axe responded.

Slick picked up on the extra politeness that he was striving for.

Freddy studied them for a few seconds before nodding. “I’ll just take them inside. I’m sure everyone will be happy to see me and these goodies.”

He walked off, and Slick and Axe remained where they were. Once he got out of earshot, Slick turned to his friend. “I don’t know what it is about that guy, but I don’t trust him. I’m going to be avoiding eating one of those even though I’d love a kolache right now.”

Axe laughed. “Same, dude, same. And yeah, I still can’t believe he came and worked that one night with us. Blaise was pissed that he was there, but as it came from the higher ups, he couldn’t do anything about it.”

“We should get Beth to look into the guy,” Slick mused. “All it would take would be a quiet word to Sledge, and in an hour or so we’d have a complete background check on the guy.”

“Tempting, but I don’t think we should do that. Now, if anyone ends up sick after eating what he’s brought to the station, then I say we do it.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Slick’s stomach grumbled with the talk of food. “I’m going to grab something to eat, maybe an apple,” he finished with a laugh.

Even though he said that it was too soon to speak to Sledge about Freddy, he couldn’t deny that he was very tempted to. Very tempted indeed.

CHAPTER 16



“DO YOU HAVE EVERYTHING?” HOW POPPY GOT THE WORDS out around the ball in her throat was a wonder.

In a few hours, Finn would be getting picked up by his parents, and she didn't want him to leave. The past two weeks had been wonderful. She and Finn had forged a new relationship, and the way he got on well with Slick was wonderful, too. Not to mention the patience he had with Jess when she wouldn't leave him alone.

Jess had an obvious crush on Finn. The girl practically hung off every word he said. Her nephew was wonderful with her. Helping all the time with her homework and more than happy to play games with her. Poppy suspected that her nephew was fond of Jess as well.

“I think so, but if I've forgotten anything, you'll have to bring it to me in Tarpley,” he finished with a big grin.

Her stomach dropped at the mention of the place that caused her pain, but she pushed away the bad thoughts. Perhaps it was time to go there to make new memories. Better memories than the ones she had.

“I guess I'll have to.” Poppy ruffled his hair, noting that she had to reach a little higher than when he'd first arrived. “I swear you've grown a couple of inches since you've been here.”

Finn lifted his shoulder. “Maybe. I guess Mom will tell me when she sees me. I've missed her and Dad so much.”

Poppy pulled him in for a hug, sighing when Finn returned it tightly. “I bet they missed you a ton, too. Even though you spoke every day, it’s not quite the same, is it?”

“No, and well, would it be okay if I called you every day now, Aunt Poppy, instead of what we used to do?”

The ball in her throat got a little bigger, and her vision became blurry. How many times has she cried over the last two weeks because of something Finn had done or said?

A lot.

They were happy tears. Not sad or angry ones.

“I would love that, Finn. And I would love to come and see you in Tarpley.” And surprisingly she meant it.

“Great. I know the perfect horse you can ride too. Merry is sweet and gentle. You’ll like her.”

Inwardly, she shuddered at the thought of getting on a horse. She’d never been on one her whole life. Not that she had any reason to be scared, it just—it freaked her out a little. “Umm, not sure about that, Finn.”

Her nephew stood back and looked at her, a serious look furrowing his forehead. “Don’t be scared. I’ll make sure nothing happens to you. I promise.”

Poppy’s heart melted a little further at the gentleness and insight her nephew was showing. Not to mention, a little guilt that such a young boy knew instinctively he would make sure she was safe when she hadn’t been able to promise him that when it had been her responsibility.

Stop it. That’s in the past.

“I know you will.”

Finn offered a satisfied nod, as if the subject were now closed. He dashed over to the window. “Ohhh, Slick and Jess are here” He turned back to her, a big smile on his face. “Did you know they were coming?”

“No, I didn’t.” She was surprised, considering when Slick had picked up Jess the previous day, both of them had said

their goodbyes to Finn.

Secretly, she was glad that they were there. It meant that when she said her goodbyes to Finn, she wouldn't be alone.

Was that the reason Slick and Jess had come?

Had he known that Finn leaving would upset her more than she'd told him it would?

More than likely. They might have only really got to know each other well over the last couple of weeks, but Slick seemed to be attuned to her feelings, more than *she* was on occasion.

Finn rushed over to the door and opened it. "Hey!"

Jess rushed in and gave him a quick hug before she darted to where Poppy stood and repeated the action.

Poppy's arms closed around the young girl, the strawberry scent from her shampoo teasing her nostrils. "Hey Jess, what are you guys doing here?" she asked as her gaze connected with Slick's.

Faint purplish smudges marred his eyes—he was still tired. How he was able to keep up with a precocious eight-year-old with his job was amazing. Yet, he did it, and his body seemed to adjust easily to the changes from working for two days straight.

Slick joined Poppy.

Jess was chattering with Finn, so it was as though they were enclosed in their own little bubble of privacy.

"You doing okay?" He leaned down and brushed his lips gently across hers.

This was the first time he'd kissed her in front of the children, although it wasn't a kiss *kiss*, but it still had the power to stoke a desire for life inside of her.

"I am now." God, how true those words were. "Thank you for coming."

"No place, I'd rather be. I know today is going to be hard for you, and I didn't want you to be alone." Slick's smile was

soft and genuine.

With every little gesture, Poppy was falling more and more for the man standing before her. She could deny it, but what was the point?

Her heart was expanding with love for not only her nephew and Jess, but also for Slick. It might've frightened her a few months ago, but now, it didn't.

Now it felt as natural as breathing.

Although she wasn't about to say it out loud.

Poppy had no idea how Slick felt for her, but him being there spoke volumes.

“You're too good for me, Carson.”

“I could say the same about you.” His fingers trailed down her neck, the skin prickling to life beneath the gentle touch.

They stood there, lost in their own little world, just looking at each other, not saying anything, but saying a million things at the same time.

How she wanted to lose herself in him. To let go of her fears and worries and insecurities and just feel. Feel like she was the most desirable woman in the world. Feel like Slick was hers and hers alone.

Poppy gasped, breaking the connection.

She stumbled back a couple of steps and turned so she was facing the wall.

How could she let herself have that thought?

It was like she'd gone back to the time where she didn't want anyone to have what she had—namely her current boyfriend.

“Poppet? What's wrong?” Slick's warm hand landed on her shoulder, but she shook it off. If she allowed him to touch her, she'd fall back into the person she'd been when Finn had first arrived.

Selfish.

Inconsiderate.

Demanding.

Her eyes drifted shut, and she took a deep breath. She couldn't do that. Couldn't be that person again.

Over the past few years, and particularly the last two weeks, Poppy had made so much progress in being a better person, but all it had taken was one act of kindness and the person she'd thought she'd left far behind returned.

Even not facing him and having her eyes closed, she could feel Slick. Feel his steady presence behind her.

“Don't shut me out now. Talk to me. I promise no judgment.”

She was vaguely aware that the kids' voices were faint, as though they'd gone into another room.

Turning back, she opened her eyes and confirmed that it was just her and Slick standing in her living room.

His eyes were dark with concern, but there was no censure lurking in their depths.

How did she deserve this man?

He hadn't taken her brushing his touch off as offensive, like some men could.

“I'm scared,” she blurted out.

“Of what?”

Poppy laced her fingers together and stared at the floor. “Of turning back into who I was.”

“Why do you think that will happen?”

Could she tell him exactly what had gone through her mind?

Would he understand? Or would he judge her, regardless of saying that he wouldn't? He would find that he didn't want anything to do with her if she became so possessive of him. Make him choose between her and Jess.

No, I couldn't do that.

There was that battle within her. The same one that'd given her the courage to move and start over again. The same that would now give her the strength she needed to lay it all on the line with Slick to let whatever happened happen.

Poppy lifted her head, but she couldn't look into his gray eyes. Didn't want to see the disappointment when she bared her insecurities. Fixing her attention on the landscape picture Dahlia had painted, she started. "When we were looking at each other a few minutes ago, all I thought about was how much I wanted you to be mine. And no one else's. That I was the only thing you wanted, and no one else mattered. That's how I felt when I had a boyfriend and I had Finn. I just wanted them all to myself. I thought I'd changed. But I haven't." She shook her head, the words a tortured whisper.

A second later, she was enfolded in Slick's warm embrace. She couldn't pull herself away from him, even if she wanted to. Being in his arms. Having him hold her when she'd just confessed that she wanted him all to herself was more than she expected.

More than she deserved.

Yet, there she was, in Slick's arms.

"There's a big difference between then and now that you're missing." He rubbed her back in a soothing motion. His chest rumbled as he spoke beneath her ear.

"What's that?" she whispered, her head spinning in selfishness and confusion.

Slick took a step away, and she mourned the loss of the closeness they'd shared. He kept his hands on her waist, and she rested hers on his chest, needing the connection. Needing the reassurance that he was still there and hadn't run in the opposite direction to her.

"You acknowledged what you thought. You stopped yourself from acting on it. I may not have known the younger Poppy, but from what you've told me, she would've ignored that thought and done what she wanted to do. You didn't. You

put distance between us because you wanted to protect me. Protect Jess. Look at me, Poppet.”

Her mind whirled with what he'd said, and it took a few seconds for his request to register.

This was what was different about her past relationships and what was growing between her and Slick. Whenever he had something important to say, he made sure he had her attention.

A sweet smile broke out when she'd acquiesced to his demand. “What I'm about to say, I want you to start believing. Can you do that?”

Poppy would listen. “I'll try.”

Slick didn't say anything, just continued to look at her, as though he was memorizing every little aspect of her features. “You've changed. You're not that person anymore. You're a new and improved version of the Poppy you once were. I believe that. And you should too.”

Was he right?

Had she changed?

He'd seen something in her reaction that she hadn't seen. When the possessive thought she'd pushed him away. Afraid that she was turning into her old self.

Dammit, he is right. Old me wouldn't even have known I was being possessive. Old me would've just kept going on the way I normally did.

“You're beginning to believe it, aren't you?” Slick's voice was light with happiness and that positive emotion was transferring to her.

“I am. I truly am.”

“That's my girl.” He leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers. The kiss was soft and sweet and full of promise. When he broke away, he rested his forehead against hers. “I want so badly to take this further, but we can't because I just heard car doors.”

Poppy jumped back. “Oh my God. Cerise!”

“Hey, it’s okay. You’ve got this.”

With him by her side, she believed that she did.

CHAPTER 17



“I’M NOT SURE WHAT YOU’VE DONE TO POPPY, BUT I SAY KEEP it up. I’ve never seen her this confident or happy.”

Slick looked over at Brodie, Cerise’s husband. The guy was a billionaire, but he didn’t look it at all. He didn’t wear his wealth like some people did. He was also down-to-earth and happy to help when Jess had dropped her drink. While he and Poppy had been reassuring her that it was an accident and they weren’t mad, he’d rushed inside and got a cloth and dustpan and broom to clean the mess.

“It’s all her, trust me.” As much as he’d like to take credit for Poppy’s confidence, it was all down to the woman chatting with Cerise.

“I get that, but there’s an extra shine to her smile now. Less tension in her.”

Slick supposed Brodie had a point; Poppy had become more comfortable around Finn the more she spent with him. “She was nervous to have Finn, which, considering what she went through in the past, is understandable.”

Brodie’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “She told you about that?”

“Of course. Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I know she was embarrassed. We know she carries around a lot of guilt for what happened with Finn and Cerise. Hell, she almost lost her life. How can we blame her for what Ed did? She wasn’t a part of it. Poppy was as much a victim as Cerise and Finn were.”

Slick shouldn't be surprised at Brodie's insight or compassion; he'd seen it in Finn and had known his adoptive parents were a major reason for that. It was clear the other couple were grateful that they had Finn in their life, and in a way, they wouldn't have him if it wasn't for Poppy and her willingness to do the right thing by her nephew.

"She was, and she still has some demons to work through, but she'll get there."

"With you by her side," Brodie responded shrewdly.

Slick may have only recently met the man, but considering how much he wanted Poppy in his life, it would be important to her for him to get on well with Brodie and Cerise—he wasn't going to lie to the man. "I hope so." Slick caught Poppy's eye and winked, pleased when he caught the sight of her cheeks blooming with color. "She's pretty special."

"She is. And I'm glad she has you. Although hearing that you had a daughter was a surprise. After what she went through, Poppy had mentioned that she didn't think she was made for motherhood—no matter how many times Sparkles and I told her she was."

Slick chuckled, recalling how right Brodie was. "Let's just say it was a bit of a stumbling block, but she's been wonderful with Jess, and my daughter adores her. I'm so grateful that she volunteered to look after Jess over the past couple of weeks while my normal arrangements got turned upside down."

"Jess is a sweetheart, and Finn clearly enjoys being with her." Brodie canted his head to the small backyard where Finn and Jess were kicking a soccer ball to each other.

"Feeling is very mutual, trust me."

"What is mutual?" Cerise asked as she slid onto her husband's knee. He noted that Brodie put his arm around her waist, anchoring her to him, his hand resting on her belly.

Poppy had mentioned that Cerise was pregnant and that she'd suffered some losses prior to this pregnancy.

"Jess and Finn and how they like spending time with each other," Slick said, and looked up at Poppy as she hovered by

his side.

What he wanted to do was pull her down onto his lap so that he could hold her close, but he didn't know how she'd react to it in front of the other couple. So, he patted his leg and happiness suffused him when she sat on him.

Opposite them, Cerise and Brodie smiled big, and he caught the flash of glitter that lined Cerise's eyes. Now the nickname *Sparkles* made sense.

"It is kind of cute," Cerise commented. "He's getting so big, and I know I only have him for a little while longer."

"Yeah, they do, but I have a feeling that Finn won't be the type to go to college and then forget about his parents. His love for both of you is obvious when he talks about you," Poppy said quietly.

"He already told me he wants you to come visit, and you know we'd love to have you." Cerise smiled at Poppy.

This was the first he'd heard of any visit, but Slick was glad that Finn wanted to see more of Poppy. She may not know it, but Poppy needed her nephew as much as he needed her. She was Finn's connection to his real parents. Finn was Poppy's connection to her brother. To her family.

"You and Jess are more than welcome to come as well," Brodie offered.

Slick nodded, liking the idea of the three of them visiting Finn. "Thanks."

A few minutes later, the other couple stood and called Finn to let him know it was time to leave.

Goodbyes were said and tears were shed, along with promises made of emails, video calls, and future visits.

As they waved them off, Slick couldn't help but feel that sense of rightness about it all. That this would be a regular occurrence between them all. Whether it be where they were now in San Antonio, or if it was them driving away from Tarpley. He liked the idea of it all a lot.

* * *

POPPY'S EMOTIONS were tighter than the rope a tightrope walker traversed. She'd gone through the wringer in a few hours, and she didn't know what to feel next.

It'd been so hard to say goodbye to Finn. Harder than she ever thought it would be. The boy had clung to her and whispered that he loved her, and she'd had to swallow back the tears when she returned the sentiment.

Finn had given Jess a long hug too.

She'd been glad that Slick had got on well with Brodie and Cerise. When she and Cerise had been talking, she'd told Poppy that Slick was a good one, and that she should hang on to him. That he had the same values that Brodie had, and it was clear that Slick cared for her.

Poppy hadn't known if she could believe that, but then she'd looked up at Slick and had found him watching her. He'd winked, and she'd blushed like a schoolgirl. Cerise had nudged her foot with her own as if to say *told you so*.

As sad as it was to say goodbye to her nephew, she had no worries that he wasn't in the right place. Their relationship had changed with him coming to spend time with her and for that, she couldn't be happier.

"You wanna play cards, Poppy?" Jess plonked down on the couch next to her.

She glanced around the room, not spying Slick. When had he left the room? "Where's your dad?"

Jess shrugged. "I think he went to order pizza or something. So cards?" She held up the pack and stared at Poppy with her puppy dog eyes, and she couldn't resist the little girl.

"Sure."

"Yay!" Jess scrambled off the chair and pushed the coffee table a little closer to the couch so that she could sit on the

ground on one side and Poppy could remain where she was seated. A move that they'd done a lot over the last couple of weeks.

There had been no discussion on if she was still going to look after Jess while Slick worked, now that Finn was back with his parents. As much as it would be different, not having Finn there, Poppy wouldn't mind continuing to look after her, a thought she never believed she'd have. She wanted to do it even more now that her relationship with Slick had taken another step in the right direction, especially after the small meltdown she'd had.

He'd been patient and hadn't run. He'd made her see what she hadn't seen for herself. As much as the strength of her feelings for him scared her, she didn't want to run from them.

“What game are you two playing?”

There he was, the man who took up so much of her thoughts. Lounging against the doorframe, it looked as if Slick belonged in her house. As if this was a normal Saturday afternoon. Considering the amount of time he'd spent there recently; it wasn't a silly thought.

“Go Fish, Daddy. Do you want to play too?” Before he could answer, Jess had collected the cards she'd already laid out and started dealing them again.

“Don't think you have much choice,” Poppy murmured as he sat down beside her.

“Doesn't look like it. Not that I mind.” Slick leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Can't think of a better place I'd rather be.”

Her heart fluttered in her chest, and warmth stole through her. Was this what it could be like with the two of them?

The thought didn't scare her like it would've a few months ago. In fact, it was what she wanted.

Over the next couple of hours, they played cards, only stopping when the pizza arrived.

“I think it’s time we went home,” Slick said, after Jess yawned for the third time in less than a minute.

“I don’t want to, Daddy. Can’t we stay? Have a slumber party? Poppy is going to be lonely without Finn here. She needs us.”

The little girl was so earnest in her declaration, that the final piece of fear that had been clinging to Poppy fell away.

How could she not love this girl?

How could she not open her heart to her and let her in?

How could she *not* let Slick in?

Did he want this?

Jess was his life; he wouldn’t make decisions rashly.

Except he had when he asked me to be his fake girlfriend.

It might have been for one afternoon, but it had morphed into more and she wasn’t upset by what had transpired between them.

“We don’t have any spare clothes to be able to stay the night, Jess,” Slick said gently, and Poppy wasn’t convinced he hadn’t done it to let, not only his daughter down lightly, but also her.

Even so, disappointment flowed through her like water gushing out of a tap. No way was she going to let him see how much his words had affected her. “Your Dad’s right, Jess. You don’t want to sleep in the clothes you’ve been wearing all day and then leave in them too. Maybe we can have a slumber party another night?”

“Oh, we will because I’ll be coming here when Daddy goes back on shift.”

Poppy’s mouth dropped open in shock at Jess’s declaration and glanced over at Slick. Had they discussed this, or was he as surprised as her?

The wide-eyed look on his handsome face suggested he hadn’t been expecting Jess’s comment either.

“I was thinking you might want to spend time with Dahlia or Calla next time,” Slick suggested.

Jess’s happy demeanor disappeared in a flash. “Why? I like staying here. I don’t want to have to go all over the place. I want to stay here. I want you and Poppy to get married.”

The little girl ran out of the room, a door slamming a few seconds later.

Silence descended over her and Slick.

What did she say to that?

It wasn’t as if Poppy had put the idea of marriage in Jess’s mind and hoped the girl would run with it. The last thing she was, was manipulative.

Selfish—yes, in the past. No way would she make Slick do something he didn’t want to.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know where that came from,” he said quietly.

Not wanting him to think she expected that from him, she placed her hand on his thigh and squeezed. “It’s okay. We’ve spent today together, and she saw Cerise and Brodie and Finn, and—” Poppy shrugged, not certain where she was heading with this line of conversation. “Yeah, it’s okay.”

Slick didn’t look convinced, and she waited to see if he would question her further. Ask her to elaborate.

“You’re right. But still, I’m sorry. I’ll go talk to her, and then we’ll head out.”

At least he didn’t question her, but she didn’t want them to leave. Not like this.

“I know I don’t need to say this, with you being her dad and living with her, but don’t rush her out of the house.” As bold as Jess’s declaration had been, it nudged the door slightly open to what Poppy had been thinking about earlier. “If it’s easier for you, and for Jess, I won’t mind continuing to look after her for you. I work from home, so you know I have the flexibility to be able to take her and pick her up from school. If

I need to I can work on some things while she's sleeping. That's the beauty of being self-employed."

"I can't ask you to do that."

"You didn't. I offered." She smoothed her thumb across his furrowed brow in an attempt to alleviate the stress she could tell he was feeling. "We haven't really had a chance to talk about what's going on with Mary-Sue and Randy, if they've even contacted you. Even though Jess hasn't said or shown anything to me, it has to be hard on her. If me looking after her while you work gives you and her a sense of normalcy, then I'm happy to help out."

Sometimes Poppy couldn't believe how far she'd come in terms of welcoming a child into her heart—and she'd done that with Jess.

And Slick, too.

Yes, and Slick too. They hadn't even gone on a date, just the two of them, but they'd spent some time together alone when the kids had been busy outside or in another room. Being with him was as natural as breathing. Not only that, but he *saw* her. He'd heard what she'd done to Finn, and he was still sitting beside her.

Poppy wanted him to come to her every time he finished a shift. She wanted him to sleep in her bed while she worked and looked after Jess.

She plain wanted him.

"I don't deserve you," Slick murmured as he cupped the back of her head and encouraged her to lean toward him—which she gladly did.

"I don't deserve you, either," she whispered. "But I'm glad that for whatever reason, you're sitting beside me."

He sighed against her mouth before he closed the distance and touched his lips. She welcomed the caress. Wanted more from him but was aware that Jess was in the other room and could come out at any moment. The last thing Poppy wanted was to be caught in a compromising position with Slick in

front of his daughter. Not when they were still navigating their way around each other.

No way was Poppy going to push him away. She was going to keep him close. As though he was having the same thoughts as her, Slick wound an arm around her waist, lifting her so that she was straddling him.

The new position allowed her to press her chest against his. To slide her fingers through his hair and keep him close. The weight of his hands on her back comforted and aroused her at the same time.

Eventually, they needed to breathe, and she rested her head on his shoulder, inhaling his spicy scent. Contentment filled her until it was flowing out of her.

“Thank you.” Slick nipped at her earlobe and a shiver of desire rattled through her.

“You’re welcome.” There was no need to ask him what he was thanking her for.

Right here in Slick’s arms was where Poppy was supposed to be. Where she belonged.

CHAPTER 18



FREDDY WHEELED HIS SHOPPING CART AROUND THE GROCERY store, throwing random things in. He was trailing Poppy. Had been for the last three days, and the stupid bitch hadn't even noticed he'd been following her.

He was waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Before he did, Freddy wanted to make sure he knew everything that she did, so he wouldn't be surprised.

The added bonus had been she now seemed to be looking after Slick's brat all the time. It was like fate was giving him a chance to re-create what Ed had done. Only Ed hadn't been able to complete it.

If he could've got that other bitch who'd caused his brother's death, he would've. Maybe he could go stalk her after he'd gotten rid of Poppy. Get rid of the other kid as well.

That was a good idea. One that filled him with pleasure. Who knew revenge could be so sweet? Then again, weren't there sayings about that shit? Or something like it?

Whatever, he didn't care what it was. Only that he was close.

So close.

Freddy had to be patient. Three days wasn't enough to get a solid plan in place. It wouldn't hurt, though, to accidentally run into her.

She was a bit of a looker. He wouldn't mind tapping that before he got rid of her.

He'd get rid of the kid first. Wouldn't want extra eyes on him when he was giving Poppy everything she deserved. He'd work it out as he went along. The main plan was to kidnap them.

Changing direction, he headed down the aisle at a quick pace and turned into the next one, hoping...there she was.

He paused in front of the section of cake mixes. Like hell he was going to make a cake, but Poppy didn't need to know that.

Freddy waited until she went to go past him. "Hey, excuse me, miss, can you help me?"

He pasted a smile on and was pleased when Poppy stopped. "Umm, sure. What do you need?"

God, this is so easy.

"I'm making a cake for a friend, and I don't know which brand is best. It's my first time. I want to surprise her. Show her I, you know..." He looked down, as if embarrassed by what he was going to do.

Poppy looked at him, and he waited to see if there was anything to suggest she recognized him as being related to Ed. He and his brother had the same eyes and nose.

There was nothing. No gasp of surprise. No hint of recognition at all.

Anger welled in him, consuming him in a red haze.

How could she not remember Ed?

Freddy wanted to reach out and take her now. Make her pay for how easily she'd forgotten his brother. He willed the temptation down. There was time for that—later.

Poppy smiled and nodded. "Oh, that's so nice. I'm sure she'll love it. Use that brand. The chocolate cake is always so tasty and moist."

Freddy grabbed the box Poppy was pointing at. "Thank you, miss. You've helped me a lot."

“You’re welcome, and I know your friend is going to love you doing that for her.” Poppy smiled, and Freddy wanted to punch it right off her fucking face.

She’d killed his brother, and she was going to pay.

CHAPTER 19



SLICK PULLED HIS TRUCK INTO POPPY'S DRIVE AND TURNED the engine off. He could've easily gone back to his house to sleep. In fact, he should've, because he was bone tired, but the need to see her overrode his need to sleep.

For the past month, she'd been looking after Jess while he worked, a system that was working out really well for them. It was getting harder and harder to keep his feelings for her locked down.

He hadn't talked about what he was feeling, and neither had Poppy, but the kisses they shared were getting more and more intense. It was hard to keep his hands to himself.

Just thinking about her had his body hardening. Slick jumped out of the car, grabbed his duffle, and strode to the front door.

She wouldn't be expecting him, but he didn't think she'd mind him dropping in. One thing he was grateful for was that she worked from home. That her hours were flexible because, right this minute, he wanted her in a way that made thinking almost impossible.

Slick rapped his knuckles on the door. He could use the doorbell, but he'd always done this, and at least she would know it was him at the door and not anyone else.

The door opened, and Poppy's face lit up. "Slick! What are you doing here?"

She was wearing a pair of skinny jeans that accentuated her legs perfectly. The shirt she wore was black. It had a deep

vee which hinted at the beautiful breasts he was anxious to see and taste.

Her hair was caught up in a messy knot at the top of her, with little wispy bits escaping out and framing her face.

Poppy was luscious. Beautiful and all his.

Instead of answering, Slick stepped into the foyer, causing her to move to the side. Dropping his duffle back, he kicked the door shut and then reached for her.

She came willingly, her arms going around his neck.

“I need you.”

That was the only warning he gave her before he captured her lips in a hard kiss.

Could he have been a bit more articulate?

Sure.

Could he have taken his time instead of jumping her?

Absolutely, but the way Poppy was kissing him back, grabbing at his shirt, suggested she was okay with his approach.

Not breaking the kiss, Slick squatted and lifted her into his arms, and her legs immediately went around his waist.

The fact she was as much into this as he was had desire zinging through him like a ball in a pinball machine.

Having been at her house numerous times, he knew his way around and found her bedroom easily.

Once inside, he lowered her gently on the bed, breaking the kiss.

Her hair was now half up and half down. Her lips plumper, and she looked decidedly rumped and sexy.

“God, you’re gorgeous,” Slick whispered as he lay down beside her, and ran his hand down her body.

“You’re pretty handsome, too,” Poppy responded, her hands finding the hem of his shirt and pushing it up.

He took over and with a quick movement, had his shirt off, and it was floating to the ground.

Poppy's eyes widened at the sight of his bare chest, and he barely stopped himself from puffing it out.

Slick knew he looked good. He prided himself on keeping in shape, not only because he needed it for his job but also because he wanted to remain healthy for Jess.

Needing to taste her again, he pulled her against him and kissed her. This one was not as hard and fast as the kiss they'd shared only a few moments ago.

He groaned as she ran hands over his front and back.

Fuck, he loved the way her hands felt on his flesh. He wanted that, too.

Reaching between them, he found the buttons of her shirt and began popping them open one-handed, admiring every inch of flesh he exposed. When he released the last one, Poppy sat up and, like he had done, removed her top, leaving her in her lilac-colored bra.

Would her panties match as well?

God, he hoped so.

"I can't believe this is happening," she whispered. "I didn't expect this when I opened the door."

Slick stilled. Had he pushed too much?

Was this what she wanted or not?

No way would he do something she didn't want to.

"Do you want to stop?" Slick asked. If she wanted to, he'd sit back and put his shirt on, no matter how much it would kill him.

Immediately, she sat up and placed her hands on his bare chest. "God, no. I want this. I want you, Carson. So very much."

It was the use of his given name that almost undid him. "I don't want to do anything you don't want."

“Then don’t stop because I want this. I want you inside me. Your hands all over me. Touching me. Me touching you. I want it all.”

His cock was so hard, it was almost painful. The images her words created matched the ones he had. “Then I will give you all you want.” Slick slid off the bed and removed the rest of his clothes, until he stood in front of her naked as the day he was born.

Poppy’s tongue darted out to swipe across her bottom lip and she reached for her jeans’ button.

He watched as she slowly threaded the metal circular disk through the slit in the fabric. The sound of her zipper being drawn down filled the room. It seemed to boom in his mind, but that wasn’t possible. It was just all if his sense were heightened.

She wiggled the denim down, and he was rewarded with a flash of lilac. “Matching,” he murmured.

“Yes. I don’t normally wear matching sets, but today I wanted to. I guess I knew something, huh?” she teased.

“Oh yeah, Poppet, you did.”

Slick climbed back on the bed at her feet and started kissing his way up, inhaling the sweet scent of roses on her skin. That was from her lotion; he’d seen a tube of matching hand cream in the kitchen.

He reached the juncture of her thighs and closed his eyes for a moment. This close to her pussy, he was a hairbreadth away from losing his load.

Not happening.

When he got himself under some sort of control, he hooked his fingers beneath the thin elastic straps and slid her panties down. They joined the rest of their clothes on the ground.

“So fucking beautiful.” He positioned himself between her legs, eager to feast on her.

Not wanting to dive in like a madman, even though that was how he felt, he blew softly on her intimate flesh.

Her hips lifted, and she moaned in surprise.

Pleased at her reaction he did it again, only this time after he blew he covered her mound with his mouth.

“God, yes,” Poppy cried above him, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

He loved how responsive she was. Heck, he loved *her*.

Holy shit, I love her. This feels so right.

He'd known from the second he'd met her she was special. Poppy, his *Poppet*, was his person. The one who'd been made for him.

He would show her how precious she was to him. How much he adored her.

Slick licked her wet folds. She tasted like honey, and he couldn't get enough of her. He spent the next few minutes worshiping her and paying attention to what she liked. She ground her hips against his mouth, and he inserted one finger and sucked on her clit.

“Carson!” His name was a long moan, and he'd never tire of hearing it come out of her mouth.

Slick added another finger and began to slide in and out of her. Her sex clenched around his fingers, and he could tell she was close. He increased the pressure of his mouth against her, and his fingers. That was all that it took to send her over the edge.

Her cries of completion filled the room, and he slowed his assault until her body stopped quivering. Kissing his way up her belly, he realized that her bra was still on.

“Hmm, how did I forget this?” Slick traced the scalloped edge of the lace, her nipples hard and pushing against the delicate fabric. “I'll have to remedy this.”

Nuzzling the warm skin beneath her breasts, he reached beneath her and unclipped her bra. Together they got it off,

and he had his first look at her breasts.

“Exquisite.” He palmed them both, squeezing and pulling at her tight buds.

“I need you inside me, Slick. Now.”

“Carson,” he immediately responded.

“What?” Poppy asked, confusion coloring her voice, contradictory to the completion in her beautiful, flushed face.

“When it’s us in the bedroom, I’m Carson to you. Not Slick.”

He didn’t know why it was important that she use his given name, it just *was*.

“Okay, *Carson*.” She pulled him down for a kiss, and he gave himself over to being connected this way.

As much as he desired to bury himself deep inside her, he wanted to draw it out. Wanted to make this first time last. Wanted to never forget to the moment they became one.

His body heated as her hands roamed down his back toward his ass. Her fingers dug into his glutes, and she gave a tiny push as if telling him that she was more than ready for him to possess her.

Slick grabbed his cock and froze—he was bare. “Shit,” he muttered against her cheek.

“What?” Beneath him, Poppy squirmed a little as though she wanted to get away from him.

Crap, he didn’t want Poppy to think he was having second thoughts, but with the way she was reacting, it was clear that thought was flowing through her. He gripped her a little tighter, letting her know that he still wanted her.

“Protection. I almost forgot.” He pressed a kiss against her neck. “Don’t move.” He slid from the bed, taking a moment to admire the way her hair was spread across her pillows. Her lips were rosy, red from their kisses, and her nipples were erect, as if begging for him to touch them.

Slick's mouth watered, ready to answer the call but first, protection. He grabbed up his pants and pulled his wallet out. A few moments later, he had the condom rolled on, and he was back on the bed beside her. "You are so beautiful. Do you know that?" he asked as he fulfilled his fantasy of sucking her nipple.

Her moan ratcheted up his attraction for her. "Please, Carson. Don't make me wait any longer."

He released her nipple with a pop. "Your wish is my command." Slick shifted so he was over her, his cock resting against her entrance. This was the moment he'd been working up to, and he wasn't going to rush it. Taking her hand in his, he guided it to his aching flesh. He blew out a breath and groaned softly when her fingers encased him. His cock jumped in her hand. If he reacted this way with just her hand, what was going to happen when her inner muscles clenched him?

Only one way to find out.

With his hand still on hers, he moved until his tip was just inside of her.

Poppy whimpered, and that was all he needed to slide into her.

Slick took his time, and his eyes almost rolled to the back of his head when he was finally balls-deep in her.

Words couldn't describe how amazing it felt to be inside of her.

Her body under his. Her arms wrapped around his shoulders. Nothing existed in this moment except the two of them.

Slick began to move, pulling out and then thrusting in.

Poppy met him stroke for stroke. Her sighs got louder and louder.

He loved hearing her sounds of pleasure.

Slick groaned when her muscles clenched him tight, and his balls tingled. No way was he going to come without her coming again. Sliding his hand down her side and across her

belly, he found her clit and pressed his thumb down on the small nub in a circular motion.

Her hips bucked, and he used his other hand to keep her steady as he pumped in and out harder than he had been before.

“Let go, Poppet, I’ll catch you.” Slick increased the pressure, and her scream of pleasure filled the room. Two thrusts later, he was joining her over the edge, calling out her name.

His body shook with the force of his release, and he collapsed on her, rolling so that they were side by side.

I love you.

The words whispered through his mind, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to stop from blurting them out loud.

The last thing Slick wanted was to scare her away. Nor did he want to think he was just saying it because they’d just made love.

Poppy snuggled into his side, contentment falling over him like a soft blanket. Nothing had ever felt this perfect.

He had to move, but he wanted to savor having her close to him. Savor the sensation of finally feeling like he had finally found his person.

Savor that at the moment, life was pretty damn good.

CHAPTER 20



THE SOUND OF A PHONE RINGING PENETRATED POPPY'S afterglow. Making love with Slick was like nothing she'd ever experienced before. His touch had been gentle, but hard at the same time. He'd made sure she reached her release before he did—something she hadn't had in the past.

"That's not my phone," she mumbled into his chest.

"It's mine. I need to get it, but I don't want to move." As if to prove his point, he pulled her a little tighter against him.

God, she loved it when he hugged her like this. Enveloped her in his strong arms and his spicy scent.

The phone stopped. "There you go. You don't need to move now."

Beneath her ear, Slick's chest vibrated with his laugh. "This is true, but it could be the school wanting me."

A second later, his phone started ringing again, and Poppy pushed gently against his chest. "Looks like it's important."

"Yeah." The lightness in his tone disappeared, and a tendril of worry drew inside of her. She hoped it wasn't the school and Jess was okay. She'd been fine when she'd dropped her off that morning.

Slick dropped a kiss on her cheek before he climbed out of bed.

Poppy took a moment to admire his muscular back and tight ass. Her man was impressive, dressed or undressed.

Her man.

She liked the way that sounded. Seconds after they'd both climaxed, she'd almost blurted out that she loved him.

When had she fallen completely for him?

Poppy couldn't put her finger on it. All she knew was that Slick had filled an empty place in her heart. He'd given her a type of courage she didn't think she was capable of—the courage to love.

After what had happened with Finn and her past boyfriends, she'd believed that she was broken inside. That the capacity to deeply love like all her friends had been missing forever.

Now that she knew what deep, abiding love felt like, those feelings she'd thought were love for the men she'd seen in the past were nothing but a need to be seen. She didn't like the person she'd been back then, but she liked who she was now.

"I can't believe you're doing this." Slick's voice floated down the hallway, the anger obvious.

Immediately, Poppy threw back the covers and grabbed her silky robe from the back of the door. Whatever was going on, she was going to stand by Slick to let him know he wasn't alone. That whatever was going on, they'd face it together.

"Fine. I'll be there shortly."

He ended the call when she walked into her living room. The muscles in his shoulders bunched with tension. He was gripping his phone so tightly she could see the whites of his knuckles.

Poppy rushed over to him and plastered herself against his back, her arms encircling him in a tight, and she hoped reassuring, embrace. "What can I do to help?" she asked.

Being practically glued to the man, she felt the tension leaching out of him. The taut muscles of his back loosened against her chest.

"You're doing it." Slick turned and wrapped his arms around her, dropping his head against her shoulder.

They stood there for minutes, just holding each other.

Did he even realize he was naked?

Thank goodness her drapes were shut to keep out the morning sun, otherwise they'd be giving her street quite the display.

The thought made her giggle, a totally inappropriate reaction considering something heavy was going on in Slick's life.

"Why are you giggling?"

Slick didn't sound offended, so that was good.

"I was just thinking what the neighbors would be thinking if my curtains were open."

He chuckled. "Yeah, it would be interesting." He pulled back until he was looking at her.

She met his gaze easily.

"I have to go. That was Mary-Sue on the phone. She demanded I go to her place, as there are things she wants to talk about."

In all the time they'd spent together over the last month, there'd been no contact from Mary-Sue and Randy. She and Slick had discussed it a couple of times. He'd made his point, and hopefully, Mary-Sue would decide the custody battle was pointless and go back to being Jess's grandparents, instead of trying to be her parents.

The longer the silence had gone on, the more he'd been convinced that was what was going to happen. Although he was surprised they hadn't tried to see Jess. Poppy had agreed but also wondered if they weren't biding their time to strike again—today looked like that day.

"What time are we leaving?" she asked.

"We? You want to come?"

Clearly, she'd surprised him. "Of course, I am. No way am I letting you go alone."

Besides, if Poppy was there, she could also be a witness, should it be required at a later date—which she hoped wouldn't happen. Her wish was that Jess's grandparents had decided to be that—her grandparents.

Things had changed. She was looking after Jess now, and the little girl loved coming over. They baked cookies—not very successfully, but they had fun. They gave each other mani/pedis—all things a little girl should be able to do. Things she didn't do with her grandparents—or so she'd told Poppy one day while they'd been out the back blowing bubbles.

“I don't deserve you,” Slick whispered against her neck as he hugged her again.

“Same, but you've got me, and I've got you. Now go have a shower, and I'll fix you a coffee. I'll drive over and you can have a nap. I know you must be tired.”

A sliver of guilt that she hadn't let him sleep when he should've pierced her, but she pulled it out. Slick had been the one to instigate their lovemaking, and she didn't regret it for a second.

“Being tired is totally worth it,” he said, as if he could read her mind. “I loved being in your arms.”

His lips found hers and, while she didn't say the words, she poured all the love in her heart into the kiss.

She clutched at his back, and he held her tight, as if he needed her strength, which she would gladly give him.

They pulled apart, and she patted his chest. “Go. We don't want to be too long and give Mary-Sue another reason to be annoyed with us.”

“I think she was annoyed the day Deb brought me home,” he said sardonically.

“It's her loss if she can't see how wonderful you are.” Poppy gave him another kiss before going to the kitchen to fix his coffee.

Slick needed her now, even if he didn't think it, and she wasn't going to let him down.

* * *

SLICK'S eyes popped open the moment the car stopped. He hadn't meant to fall asleep, but the motion of the car—and the fact that he hadn't had to concentrate on driving—had lulled him into a light nap.

“You okay?” Poppy asked, her hand landing on his thigh.

God, he loved this woman, and he planned to tell her when this confrontation was over. His earlier worries about saying the words had disappeared the instant she told him she was going to drive him to his in-laws. Her support given without him having to ask for it was more than he ever expected.

How could he *not* love her?

Poppy made his life so much brighter. What he felt for her was a hundred times deeper than what he'd felt for Deb.

Did that make him a bad person?

No, it didn't. The truth of the matter was—Debbie hadn't been his person, whereas Poppy was. The way she was with Jess also cemented his feelings.

While they may not have had much interaction in the beginning, from the moment he'd asked Poppy to be his fake girlfriend for an afternoon, a relationship between the two of them had formed, and it continued to grow—a fact that made him immensely happy.

“I think I am.” Slick glanced at the house, wondering what was waiting for him behind the closed door. The last thing Mary-Sue would expect would be for him to arrive with Poppy. “Let's get this over with.”

Poppy nodded and squeezed his hand. “No matter what happens, we'll face it together.”

Slick kissed the back of Poppy's hand, wishing they didn't have to be there, and were back at her place, in her bed, enjoying each other over and over. “Together. I like the sound of that.”

“Me too.” Poppy ducked her head, but he caught the blush coloring her cheeks.

They exited the vehicle and headed for the front door, but before they reached it, Slick placed a hand on her forearm, halting her progress.

For whatever reason, he didn’t want to knock on the door. He had no idea what he was going to face behind it. What Mary-Sue and Randy wanted this time from him.

“Slick?” She looked at him, questions lighting her green eyes.

“I wish I didn’t have to do this. Nothing good is going to come of it.”

How had it come to this?

They’d been each other’s support after Debbie died and he had to adjust to being a single father of a tiny baby. Everything indicated that the relationship was solid, and that they were a team.

He had no idea when it changed. It just had. Slick had to accept it, even though he didn’t like it. The most important person in this whole situation was his daughter.

She was his priority, and he’d make sure her needs were met—even if that meant that the relationship ties between them and Debbie’s parents was severed.

“I know you don’t want this. It’s not fair to you or Jess. Or even Debbie’s parents.” Poppy smiled and leaned against him. “Maybe they’ve had a change of heart, and that’s what they want to tell you.” There was no conviction in her voice that would be the outcome.

He didn’t think that was the reason for the call, either. “I guess we won’t find out unless we go inside.”

“There is that. Not sure they’re going to come out to us.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek, and he was grateful she was here with him. “It’s going to be okay. Whatever happens.”

“Yes, it will be.”

In Slick's job, he faced a hungry, fiery beast often. He went in knowing that danger lurked, but he faced it head on. That was what he was going to do now.

The door opened before he even had a chance to depress the doorbell. "I didn't think you were ever going to come inside. Did you know you arrived over ten minutes ago?" Mary-Sue scolded them at that same time as stepping back to allow them to enter. "What is *she* doing here?"

So, it started, even before she closed the door behind them.

"I'm here because Slick has just come off a long shift, and I didn't want him to drive by himself, seeing as he hasn't had much sleep," Poppy said, her voice strong, and he was so proud of her.

Mary-Sue gave them a pointed look before sniffing as if they were yesterday's garbage. "Come into the living room." She marched off down the short hallway without seeing if they'd follow, just assuming they would.

Slick was aware it was a power play, but he wasn't going to fall for it. He'd been around Mary-Sue for long enough.

"Guess we've been told," Poppy joked beside him.

"We have. Come on, she's probably wondering why we haven't followed her like she expects us to."

"Well, I mean we sort of have to, don't we? It's not like we could have a conversation with us here in the hallway and her in the living room," Poppy teased.

He loved that they could do this with each other. Yes, it was a serious situation, but the fact that Poppy was joking with him made it tolerable.

"We could try. Do you think she'd be up for it?" Slick asked. The delay was probably pushing the limits of Mary-Sue's patience.

"Sadly, no."

Together, they closed the short distance to the room Mary-Sue had disappeared into. As he'd expected, she was standing by her chair, arms crossed and a look of frustration on her

face. If she thought that she was going to be able to dictate how he acted, then she could think again.

He noted that Randy wasn't in attendance—which was strange. Did the man know what was happening, or was Mary-Sue acting on her own?

“Where's Randy?” Slick asked.

“He's out, but he'll be back soon.”

Clearly, she wasn't worried about her husband and his lack of presence in the room.

“Fair enough. So, what did you want to discuss, Mary-Sue?”

She sat, and he and Poppy followed suit. He noted that Poppy was sitting as close as possible, their thighs brushing and her hand clasped between both of his on his lap.

If Mary-Sue couldn't tell that they were together and a united front, then she was more clueless than he thought possible.

“I wanted to discuss this situation with Jessica. We haven't seen her for weeks, and that's unacceptable.”

Slick sighed. He hoped she wasn't about to say that they were moving forward with the custody case. One of the things he'd wanted to come out of this distance was her acceptance that he wasn't budging. That he wasn't going to bend to her will. “You've had plenty of opportunities to call and speak to Jess. Or even ask to see her.”

“I shouldn't have to do that with my granddaughter, especially after everything I've done for you and her. Looking after her while you worked. Randy and I sacrificed a lot to help you out.”

“I don't deny that, and you know that I'm extremely grateful for everything you've done. You've made it easier for me, but then you started to push for things that were unreasonable.”

Mary-Sue crossed her arms. “I don't think asking for you to change to an occupation that was safer than the one you

currently do was unreasonable. A regular nine to five, five days a week job is perfectly suited for a single dad. The shift work that you do is getting impossible to deal with. The constant back and forth. It's not good for Jessica—that's the reason for pushing you to change jobs.”

There was nothing unreasonable about Mary-Sue's reasoning. He could even understand it. Slick was also aware that as Jess got older, there were things he needed to change about his job. He'd looked into that, but he wasn't planning on doing anything until she'd moved to middle school.

Should he have spoken to Mary-Sue about them, or at least mentioned them when the threat of custody first came up?

Sure, if they'd approached him in a reasonable way about it all, he would've explained what he'd planned to do. When they'd come in guns-blazing and making all sorts of threats, all thoughts of sharing disappeared.

“Did you think that perhaps instead of threatening me with a custody battle or demanding I change jobs, things may have turned out differently?”

“No, I don't. I did what I had to do to for the safety of my granddaughter. It was nothing that Debbie wouldn't have done herself. She told me she was concerned about your job. How dangerous it was and that you needed to change because of Jess.”

This was the first time she'd brought up Debbie having concerns about his job. Could he believe Mary-Sue?

Possibly, considering that his job had been part of their marital problems. He'd already acknowledged that his marriage wouldn't have lasted the distance if Debbie hadn't died. They were both putting on a front that they were happy, but deep down, the cracks were getting wider and wider.

Debbie had died, though, and things had changed. Slick's job gave him the ability to spend time with Jess, full days that he wouldn't have got had been working a nine-to-five job.

“I think that the past should be left there in the past,” Poppy said when the silence between him and Mary-Sue

lengthened. “It can’t be changed; believe me, I know it can’t. What needs to be the focus now is Jess and her happiness. Would she be happy if you forced Slick to change jobs? Or if you took her father away from her? She’s already lost her mom. Why would you take away her remaining parent who loves her beyond comprehension?”

Mary-Sue straightened in her chair. “How dare you inject yourself into a conversation that doesn’t concern you?”

“Mary-Sue,” Slick warned. He wasn’t going to sit by and let her turn her ire onto Poppy.

“It’s okay,” Poppy said quietly. “Mary-Sue, I dare because I love Slick.”

CHAPTER 21



POPPY'S WORDS HUNG IN THE AIR, AND SHE CURSED HERSELF for letting her mouth run off like it had. Blurting out that she loved Slick hadn't been how she'd wanted him to find out how she felt. She wanted to say it to his face, but she'd gotten so annoyed at Mary-Sue so she'd just said what was in her heart.

Beside her, Slick tensed, and she could feel him watching her. Slowly she turned her head and faced him. His eyes were bright with happiness, and he wore a sweet smile.

"You love me?" he asked, as if he couldn't quite believe she'd said it out loud.

"I do." Poppy nodded, aware that Mary-Sue was watching this interaction with interest.

Would she use it in her war against Slick, or would she back off knowing that Slick had someone who would be there beside him?

Someone who would look after his daughter as if she was her own.

"I love you and Jess."

His eyes closed, and his shoulders sagged a little. Was he happy that she confirmed what she said?

Or was he sad that she loved him and Jess, and he didn't love her at all?

She didn't want to believe the latter. The happiness she'd seen in his eyes couldn't be faked.

When Slick opened his eyes a second later, her fears disappeared. There wasn't sadness, only...love? "I love you too, Poppy. So much."

"Well, now isn't that sweet. But I'm not buying this little act that you two are playing," Mary-Sue scoffed, the look on her face as if something stank in the room.

"It's no act," Poppy said, but not taking her eyes from Slick. "Feel free to believe what you want."

As if her words fired him to life, Slick stood, bringing her with him. "Poppy's right, it's not an act, and it makes me sad that you feel that way, Mary-Sue. You know where to find us if you want to see Jess. As I said before, I'm not going to keep her away from you. When you're ready to be the grandparents she knows and loves, then we will welcome you back."

With those words, the man she loved tugged her toward the front door, and she gladly followed. The last place she wanted to be was in Mary-Sue's house. Her bitterness toward their happiness wasn't something Poppy needed to be around.

They were well on the way back to her place when she broke the silence. "You doing okay?"

How many times had she asked him that same thing today?

A few, but she would always ask him. His welfare meant everything to her.

He meant everything to her.

"I'm more than okay. I'm on top of the world."

She laughed. "Well, all right then." Poppy indicated to make a safe entry onto the freeway. "I know saying I love you in front of Mary-Sue's wasn't the most romantic way to do it, but I don't regret it."

"I agree it wasn't the best place or time, but I'm glad you said it. You were amazing, by the way. And thank you for what you said there."

She glanced quickly at him before returning her attention to the road. "I told you I would have your back. She needed to know that regardless of what her daughter may or may not

have said to her, she didn't have any right to force you into doing something that wouldn't only make you unhappy, but Jess as well. I don't think she knows the connection you and Jess have. How in tune you are with each other."

"Mary-Sue only sees what she wants to see. I do know, though, that Debbie was concerned about my job and us having a baby, but we had been talking about it before she died."

"Do you still miss her?" Poppy asked, as she took the exit off the freeway. As much as it stung a little that Slick had loved and married another woman, she didn't begrudge him or Debbie the happiness that they'd shared.

"I'm sad that she's not going to see our daughter grow up, but no, I don't miss her. Not now. She'll always hold a special place in my heart because she's Jess's mom. But we were having problems, and even though, as I said, we were working through them, we were destined never to make it. She wasn't my person."

Slick said the last so quietly she wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly.

Poppy knew for sure that Slick was her person.

Was she his person?

"Am I?"

Dammit, am I a masochist or something?

What if he says I'm not?

"Yes, Poppet, you are my person."

Tears welled in her eyes, and she brushed them away. She couldn't drive if she was crying, and she wanted to get them home safely. Wanted to drag this man to her bedroom and have her wicked way with him again. Something she believed he wouldn't have a problem with at all.

She depressed her foot down a little more on the accelerator.

* * *

SLICK LOOKED DOWN at the woman sleeping in his arms. He'd woken a few minutes ago, his stomach grumbling. He looked at the clock and saw that he would have to leave soon to pick up Jess from school.

The second he and Poppy had walked through her front door, she'd been on him. Tearing at his clothes while her mouth ravaged his. He'd been all in, wanting her as much as she wanted him.

They hadn't even made it to the bedroom. He'd taken her hard and fast against her entry hallway. It had been the best sex he'd ever had.

Once they'd caught their breath, they retreated to her room where he worshipped her body, and she worshipped his before they came together again, their eyes never leaving each other as they rocked to an explosive climax.

"You're thinking too loud," Poppy mumbled, snuggling in closer, her hand sliding farther over his chest.

He covered it with one of his own, loving the freedom they had to touch each now that they'd professed their love for each other. "I was thinking about how much I love you." Slick dropped a kiss on her nose.

"I love you, too." She rose up on one arm, clutching the sheet to her chest with the other. "I never thought I'd say those words. Never thought I'd feel the way I do now. Never believed I was capable of the love I have for you and Jess. Thank you for giving me that."

God, her honesty slayed him.

After what she'd been through with her brother's death, getting custody of Finn, the mistakes she'd made, and her almost death, her being so open and raw with him, meant more than he could express.

"I didn't give you anything. You found it within yourself. You took the leap, and I'm so glad you took it with me." Slick

pulled her toward him so she fell on his chest. He wrapped an arm around her, anchoring her to his chest. “We’re a team now. All three of us.”

“I love the sound of that.” Poppy glanced at the clock beside her bed and gasped, tossing the covers aside. “We need to get Jess.”

He laughed and lay back on the bed, crossing his arms behind his head, enjoying watching his Poppy rush around the room.

“What are you laughing at?” she grumbled as she clutched clean clothes to her chest. “Shouldn’t you be getting ready?”

Slick slid out of the bed, loving hearing the small moan that she emitted. “I was enjoying the show.”

“Whatever. You can use the bathroom down the hallway,” she said primly before disappearing behind the closed door.

Gathering up his clothes that had been strewn around the entry to Poppy’s house, he allowed his mind to wander to what Jess was going to do when she saw him and Poppy waiting for her.

Ever since Poppy had started looking after his daughter, when he was off shift, he picked her up alone. There had been no reason for Poppy to join him. Now, though, he hoped that she’d come with him all the time. That was, if her work permitted it. He didn’t want to demand she put him and Jess first before her work. He understood it was as important to her as his was important to him.

“You ready?” Poppy asked as she finished buttoning up her pale green shirt.

“You take my breath away,” Slick whispered as he closed the distance between them and brought his lips down on hers.

He’d never tire of kissing her. Holding her. Letting her know how special she was to him.

When he released her, they were both puffing, and he was hard again. Not a good look when he was about to pick his daughter up.

“Not sure that was a good idea.” Poppy palmed his cock. “You’d better hope that goes down by the time Jess sees us.”

Slick groaned, wishing that he could drag her back to the bedroom. “Not if you keep doing that.”

She laughed. “Let’s get going. We don’t want to be late. And I know a back way to get to the school, avoiding the busy roads that are starting to build up at this time of day.”

Slick waved her forward. “Lead the way wherever you go, I’ll gladly follow.”

* * *

FREDDY WATCHED as Slick and Poppy pulled away from her house. He’d seen the way they’d laughed together as they’d made their way to Slick’s truck. He’d wanted to jump out of the car and wipe away their happiness.

It made him sick that Poppy was so happy.

He wished his brother had finished her off when he’d had the chance. Ed hadn’t, and well, Freddy supposed in a small way, he was glad. With her still alive, he could exact the revenge he had been planning for years.

Soon he’d make it happen. Soon he would get the vengeance that’d driven him for so long. If there was a little collateral damage, then so be it.

CHAPTER 22



POPPY HAD BEEN FLOATING ON A CLOUD FOR THE PAST WEEK. Jess had been over the moon when she'd seen them both together the day they'd picked her up from school. The young girl had picked up on the change between Poppy and Slick and hadn't seemed to mind at all. In fact, Poppy had all but moved in with Slick and Jess.

As much as she loved her house, it made more sense for her to transfer her stuff to Slick's. There was a room where she could set up as an office, and she found that her creativity had seemed to have gone up a notch.

The designs she'd come up with for the big gym chain had been innovative, and the company had been rapt with the concepts. Now she was moving forward with incorporating the changes she'd made to their website and all their social media sites, as well as the signage for the physical buildings.

Poppy couldn't wait to see them on the gyms when she went past them. Word had gotten out about her work, and she'd been asked to submit proposals for two other major fitness chains. If she got even one of them, it would be amazing. If she got both, then her business would be well and truly in the black.

"Poppy, can we go to the park?" Jess appeared in her doorway.

School was out for a teacher professional day and Slick was at work, so it was the two of them.

Poppy had to admit she loved spending time with Jess. The little girl had wormed her way into heart, much like her father had. She wasn't sorry she'd taken the leap into a relationship with Slick. Her love for her firefighter grew and expanded every day.

“Give me twenty minutes to finish this design, and then we can. Why don't you pack some snacks and drinks so we can have a little picnic?”

Jess jumped up and down, clapping her hands. “Yes! And don't worry, I'll make sure the snacks are healthy.”

She laughed as the child pounded down the hallway, her footsteps echoing around the house. Her happiness was contagious. Poppy focused her attention back on the computer screen and the design she was coming up with.

It needed a few more tweaks, then it would be ready to be incorporated in her proposal. She'd give it one more read through when she came back from the park and then send it off.

Excitement bubbled inside of her; everything was going so well in her life. A small part of her cautioned her to be careful, that whenever Poppy thought things were good in her life, it would fall apart.

She ignored the voice because she was different. Her life was different now. The bad stuff that'd happened to her was because of her selfish actions. Nowadays, she wasn't selfish. Poppy put other people's needs before her. She'd learned her lesson.

* * *

THE SUN BEAT down on her and Jess as they swung to see who could go the highest. Poppy's stomach dipped with each swing back.

“I'm going higher!” Jess squealed with laughter.

“You are but be careful. You don't want to go so high that you take off. Your dad and I will be really sad if you flew off

into space.”

“You’re silly. I can’t go into space. I don’t have a rocket or a space suit.”

Poppy noted that Jess slowed her swinging so she wasn’t going so high. They swung for a few more minutes before both of them slid their feet in the dirt to bring them to a stop.

“What do you want to do next, Jess? Go to the slide or sit over there under the big tree and have a drink and some snacks?”

Poppy was hoping for the latter. She could do with a little break. They’d been on the go ever since they arrived at the park an hour ago.

“Let me think.” The little girl tapped her chin, and Poppy bit back a grin.

Jess was mimicking what she’d seen her father do many times over when she asked him something. Poppy made a mental note to text Slick and let him know. He’d get a kick out of it.

“I think I want to eat.”

“I agree. Come on, let’s go.” Poppy picked up the cooler bag and blanket she’d placed by the swings. It’d been a pain to carry it around the park, but she didn’t want to leave it somewhere where it could get taken. Although she didn’t think that would happen, she just wanted to be careful.

Once they reached the tree, she spread out the blanket, looking around, noting that there were only a couple of moms with their kids in the vicinity. The park had been busy when they’d arrived, but she guessed that some of the kids needed their naps so a few of the moms had gone home. Poppy leaned against the tree trunk, munching on an apple, while Jess ate a banana. “You having fun, Jess?”

“Oh yes, I am. Thank you for taking me to the park, Poppy.”

Her heart tumbled over at the sweet girl and her politeness. Slick had done a fantastic job bringing her up, and she was sad

that Mary-Sue and Randy were being so stubborn that they were missing out on seeing their precious granddaughter.

Slick had explained to Jess that things still weren't going well with her grandparents. He hadn't told her everything, but just enough to let her know that she wasn't at fault and that he hoped the issues would be resolved soon.

Poppy did too but didn't think it was likely, considering how bullish Slick's former in-laws were being. She couldn't understand their reasonings or attitude, and it wasn't her place to interfere. What she did was give Slick, and Jess, all her love and support.

“Oh hey, you're the lady from the grocery store.”

She turned to the left, where the voice was coming from, and found a man who looked vaguely familiar. His comment about the grocery store triggered why she thought she recognized him. “I remember you. You asked me what cake was best because you were going to make a cake for your friend. How did it go? Did they like it?”

In the blink of an eye, his pleasant features turned ugly. His top lip lifted in a sneer. Disdain and hatred flared in his eyes. The look so familiar she could've sworn she'd seen it before, but couldn't recall where. Fear swirled in Poppy's stomach, and her flight instinct was kicking in. She wanted to grab Jess and run.

“Stupid, Poppy. I don't know what my brother saw in you.”

In her peripheral vision she was aware of Jess sliding a little closer as Poppy tried to make sense of what the man said.

His brother!

He knows my name.

How?

I didn't give it to him that day in the grocery story.

Her brain whirled with endless questions, but the most important was—who the hell was he talking about?

She studied Freddy to try to find anything familiar about him—she couldn't see anything, but her body hummed with fear so she couldn't think clearly.

Even though she dated a lot of men during that period after her brother's death, she couldn't recall who had siblings and who hadn't. If they did, she hadn't met or even asked if they had sibling because she hadn't cared. Hadn't been interested in finding out much about them because all she'd wanted was them.

Perhaps he was confusing her with someone else.

“I don't know who you're talking about. I'm sorry.” She clutched Jess's hand.

How was she going to get them out of this?

Poppy didn't care about the blanket and cooler bag; she was more than happy to leave them behind in her escape.

Glancing around the park, she noticed that the remaining moms who'd been near the slides had gone.

It was just them now.

Is this why he'd come up?

Because they'd been alone.

“Of course, you don't remember. Why would I expect anything different?” He reached into his jacket and pulled out a gun, pointing it directly at her.

Jess let out a whimper, and Poppy shoved the girl behind her. She would do anything to protect the little girl.

“What do you want?” she asked, sounding braver than she felt.

Was there a way she could keep his attention on her so Jess could escape?

“For you to pay.” The man waved the gun.

Poppy quickly dismissed the idea of letting Jess run off. The second she moved, he'd shoot her, and Poppy couldn't live with the idea that anything would happen to the little girl.

She wracked her brain trying to see if she could make the connection between the man standing in front of her and any of her past boyfriends. She couldn't deny that there was something familiar about him. The way he tilted his head. The sneer on his face. She *had* seen them on someone before.

Why couldn't she remember?

"Then take me but leave her alone." Poppy indicated to the girl behind her, not wanting to say Jess's name. No way did she want him to tarnish her name by saying out loud. She didn't care about herself, but Slick's daughter was another story.

"Oh no, it's going to be so much fun to take both you and Jess."

Poppy inhaled deeply—he knew Jess's name.

Had he heard her saying the girl's name while they'd been playing?

It was possible, but she hadn't seen him when she'd scanned the park. A single man in a park full of families would stand out. Would be noticed.

Had he been hiding behind this tree the whole time?

No, that seemed too farfetched.

"Why? Why do you need to punish an innocent child when she's done nothing to you?"

"Because it's like fucking karma."

As if those words unlocked the hidden part of her brain, the familiarity of the man pointing a gun at them formed into a picture of another man.

A man who'd professed to love her. A man who'd plied her with alcohol and then drugged her. A man who'd kidnapped Finn and Cerise.

"Ed!" she gasped. "You're Ed's brother."

"Ding. Ding. Ding. Give the girl a medal. I'm Freddy. But it's a little too late, bitch. Now get up or I shoot her."

Poppy scrambled to her feet and grabbed Jess at the same time, still keeping at her back. “Please, just take me. Not Jess. You’re angry at *me*. I understand.” She didn’t, but right this second, she was going to say whatever she thought Ed’s brother needed to hear. “I’m sorry. Please, just leave Jess alone.”

“Not happening. Now move.”

Again, he waved the gun around. At least it wasn’t pointing at Jess. Poppy could be grateful for that.

Fear froze her to the spot. Her legs were not following her brain’s instructions to move. It was as though her feet had planted roots into the ground, keeping her there.

Freddy lifted the gun and pointed it directly at Jess’s head, releasing the safety. “Move or she gets it.”

Poppy held up her hands, her heart thumping so hard she was sure she was going to break a rib. “We’re coming.”

Gathering Jess close, who was crying now, Poppy couldn’t blame the little girl. She wanted to sob her heart out, but she couldn’t.

Wouldn’t.

Showing any weakness in front of Freddy wouldn’t do her any favors. All she could hope was that someone in one of the nearby houses had seen what was going on in the park and was calling the authorities.

Would it be too much to hope that there could be cameras on a couple of houses?

That they were trained on the park and therefore were recording what was happening right now?

There was no way Poppy could leave a message that she’d been kidnapped. Her phone was tucked into the side pocket of the cooler bag—which was sitting under the tree.

Why hadn’t she thought to put it in her pocket?

There was no point beating herself up about it. It was what it was, and that was that.

Freddy stopped beside a beat-up sedan. Looking through the window, she could see the back seat was torn and bits of the cushioning were sticking up. He opened the door. “Get in.”

It was the last thing Poppy wanted to do, but she also knew that if she didn’t, he could seriously hurt her. Or Jess.

She directed the little girl in the backseat, and she got in behind her. They didn’t even have a chance to put their seatbelts on before Freddy peeled away from the curb.

She wanted to sit in the middle and keep Jess safe, but there wasn’t a seatbelt visible, and the way Freddy was driving, Poppy didn’t want to take the risk that he’d have an accident and she’d be flung through the windshield.

Freddy weaved in and out of traffic as they traveled down the interstate. Poppy looked around, trying to commit the buildings whizzing past to memory so when they stopped, she might be able to get her and Jess to a safe space and then call the authorities to come and get them.

Where were they heading?

Considering the way he was acting and the state of his car, it wasn’t going to be somewhere nice and comfortable.

Eventually he took an exit and after driving for another few miles and stopped at what appeared to have been a park at one time—if the rusted swing set and slide were any indication. Remnants of houses surrounded the park, suggesting that at one time this had been a populated area.

They’d driven through a small town that had a general store and a gas station. Both had seen better days, but the lights had been on, indicating they weren’t abandoned. There were also a couple of houses just before and after the town.

If someone wanted to commit a crime and get away with it, then this was a good place for it.

“Now for the fun part.” Freddy grinned at them. He went to the back of the car, popping the trunk.

Poppy didn’t like this at all.

“I’m scared, Poppy,” Jess whispered.

She pulled the girl into a hug. "I am too, but I'm not going to let anything happen to you." A risky idea formed, but it was a risk she was willing to take. "I'm going to distract Freddy and when I do, I want you to make a run for it. Don't look back. Just run as fast as you can away from here. If you head back down this road, you'll see the town we passed through. You can get help there."

"No. He's going to shoot me."

"I'll make sure he doesn't. You can do this, Jess. I know you can. You need to run." Poppy glanced over her shoulder, expecting Freddy to appear any second. The car jolted as he moved stuff in the trunk, and she could make out some muttering from him.

Time was running out. If she didn't make Jess go now, then things wouldn't end well for either of them. She was willing to give up her life, but she wasn't going to let Jess not live hers.

"Please, Jess. Go now."

Tears rolled down the little girl's face. Fear was evident in her eyes. "I can't. My legs feel wobbly."

Poppy used precious seconds to give her another hug and pressed a kiss on her cheek. "You can. I believe in you. I love you, Jess. Don't ever forget that. All you have to do is open that door quietly, slide out, and then run. Keep as close as you can to the trees. They'll hide you. I'll do the rest." At least she hoped they would. She lifted her chin, displaying a confidence she didn't really feel but needed to show Jess. "You're so brave. I know you can do it. Now get to safety."

As if her words were all she needed to hear, the child nodded and slid over to the other passenger door.

Poppy glanced over her shoulder again. Freddy was still busy doing whatever it was he was doing.

It was now or never.

She gave a nod, and Jess opened the door while Poppy did the same.

To get through this, all she had to do was concentrate on making sure that Freddy didn't notice that Jess had also exited the car.

Jess hesitated, but Poppy smiled encouragingly, and the little girl took off. Mentally, she counted to five before she rounded the car, hoping it was enough time for Jess to put some distance between them. "What are you doing, Freddy?"

He jolted upright, cracking his head against the top of the hood. "Fuck, what are you doing out of the car?"

The more she kept her attention on him, the less chance he had of finding out that Jess was missing.

Poppy sidled up to Freddy and tiptoed her fingers up his arm. "You know, maybe we could come to some arrangement. Ed was okay in bed, but I'd bet you'd be better."

A glimmer of interest flickered in Freddy's eyes, and she swallowed down the bile in her throat at the thought of even kissing the man in front of her.

She also noticed that he'd placed the gun on the floor of the trunk. If she could get to it, then she could shoot him and get away herself. Not kill him—she didn't want to go to prison, even though it would be self-defense—just maim him.

Concentrating so hard on getting the gun, she didn't see Freddy move until it was too late, and his arm was around her waist and his lips crashed down on hers.

Nausea churned in her stomach. His kiss was sloppy, and Poppy kept her lips plastered shut.

As revolting as it was, it gave her the distraction she needed to attempt to get the gun. She bent, as though she was allowing him better access to kiss her, and she went for his firearm.

Her fingers closed around it, and a shot of victory burst through her. All she had to do was get a better hold and fire it.

"What are you doing?" Freddy yanked her upright, but she didn't lose her grip on the weapon.

Wrenching herself away from him, Poppy stumbled back, fumbling with the gun, almost losing it.

Freddy's eyes widened when he saw what she held. At least he wasn't paying attention to the car and the fact that Jess wasn't in it. Instead of lunging for her, as Poppy fully expected him to, he started to laugh. Laugh as if it was the biggest joke in the world.

"Do you even know how to fire that? You're holding it like it's a piece of dirty laundry."

How was she holding it?

It felt right. Poppy looked at her hands, adjusting her grip around the handle, her finger close to the trigger. All she had to do was pull it, and it would be over. Yet she was frozen, unable to follow through.

Her momentary loss of focus was all Freddy needed to make his move. His hands closed around her wrists, digging in painfully. A small cry of pain erupted out of her. No way could she relinquish her hold on the gun. If she did, she was dead.

Poppy twisted around, hoping the movement would shake him off, and she could then get a shot off. If she wanted to survive, she was going to have to do it. She was going to have to shoot Freddy. All her move did was bring him closer to her.

"I don't even know why you're trying to beat me." Freddy breathed into her ear, his voice sinister and unyielding. "You know I'm going to win, and when I do, I'm going to make you pay for what you're doing. I'm going to fuck you and make that bitch girl watch. Then I'm going to shoot her, and you can watch her bleed out before I shoot you. Then my revenge will be complete."

"In your dreams." Poppy wasn't going to let him win. "I will die before I let you lay a finger on me or Jess."

Poppy tugged harder, but her fingers slipped down the handle until all she was grabbing onto was air.

"No!" The cry wrenched from her as Freddy laughed again.

“Let the fun begin. I told you what’s going to happen, and I’m going to fucking enjoy every single minute of it. Now let’s get that other sniveling bitch and get the party started.”

Grabbing her arm, he yanked her toward the car, and Poppy fought against the hold, her feet sliding on the loose gravel as she tried to stop his forward progression.

Please let me have given Jess enough time to get away.

Freddy roared when he saw the empty car. “Where is she?”

She kept her mouth shut. With his free hand, he slapped her hard, and her neck snapped to the side. Her skin stung from the contact, but she bit down on her cry.

“You fucking bitch. I’m going to find her, and then I’m going to fuck with her and torture her until she can’t walk. Think. Or scream. And you won’t be able to do anything because you’re going to be dead.” Freddy raised his arm, pointing the gun at her. “You should’ve let me have my way.”

Not giving herself any time to question what she was about to do, she ran at him, pushing him as the percussion of a bullet releasing filled her ears, at the same time as pain exploded in her lower belly.

Poppy staggered back and fell to the ground. Warm sticky liquid coated her fingers. She was aware of the car starting and stones being kicked in her direction as it pulled away. Awareness of the pain in her body seeped in, and she fought to get air down. Every breath hurt, but at least she’d given Jess a chance and prayed she’d made it to safety. “Love you, Slick. I’m sorry,” she murmured as her eyes drifted closed, and blackness surrounded her.

CHAPTER 23



THE GUYS WERE JOKING AROUND, GIVING JOHNNO A HARD TIME about becoming a father. He made the announcement when they arrived on shift—hours ago. Also dropping the bomb that they'd eloped in Vegas. Their buddy had also explained that they had planned to have everyone around for a grill out, but Dahlia had been rocked with some severe morning sickness and hadn't been up to hosting them the last few weeks.

Even though he'd know the secret, Slick acted surprised like he said he would so his teammates didn't know that he'd known about the wedding and baby. It would be a long time before they let up on Johnno. Until the next drama happened. Or they got called out.

The day had been quiet so far. Which was a nice change, but it made him restless. Slick didn't like sitting around. Even doing the chores that needed to be done hadn't appeased his restlessness.

He glanced at his phone, surprised that he hadn't received a text message from Poppy, apart from the one earlier saying that she and Jess were heading to the park. He guessed they were having a good time, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't right.

"You good, mate?" Mick sat next to him.

"Yeah."

"Sure, you are, and I've wrestled a croc. What's up?"

Slick smiled at Mick's attempt at humor and then sighed. "It's probably nothing."

“Nothing is always something,” his buddy countered. “Especially around here.”

“It’s been a few hours since Poppy texted me that she and Jess were going to the park. They should be home by now.”

“Maybe they met up with some friends and lost track of time. You know Jess, she loves to play and run around.”

Nothing Mick said wasn’t true. Jess always made friends wherever she went, and it was always difficult to make her leave the park. “You could be right.”

“But you’re not convinced.”

“Nope.”

Slick stood and glanced around at the group. Each of the men in the room had experienced bad feelings when their women had been in danger—except Spider. He’d been the one who’d been targeted by Calla’s abusive ex.

There’d been nothing weird surrounding Poppy, and as angry as Mary-Sue and Randy were right at this moment, there was no way they would put Jess in danger. Perhaps it was nothing, yet he really couldn’t get on board that was the case. “I’m going out to get some fresh air,” he said to Mick.

Slick had only taken two steps when he saw Sheriff Hayden Yates entering the common room.

His senses went on high alert, Hayden dropping in on them wasn’t the norm—unless she’d been at an accident scene they’d worked and wanted to verify something with them.

“Hayden, what’s up?” Mick strode over to her and gave her a hug.

“Mick, good to see you.” Hayden’s gaze found Slick’s and stayed there.

Dread balled in his stomach.

Memories of the night the police had come knocking on his door to inform him that Debbie had been in a serious accident and had sadly passed away, came storming back.

He almost staggered at the force of the emotions he'd felt that night. "What?" Slick demanded, striding over to her.

"We got a call about an hour ago from an officer in Macdona area advising he'd been called to a house where the homeowner advised a girl had pounded on his door. When he opened it, she said she'd been kidnapped along with another woman."

He swayed, and he grabbed onto the wall. A hand landed on his shoulder and turned to see Mick standing beside him, along with the rest of his team. "Jess?" he whispered.

"I'm sorry, Slick, yes it was her," Hayden confirmed.

"And Poppy?"

Where was Poppy? Why had it only been Jess that had made it to the house?

Hayden looked away, and he would've collapsed to the floor if Mick hadn't been there to keep him upright.

"Please tell me she's okay," he whispered.

"I can't tell you that. I don't have any news on Poppy. We sent a car that was in the vicinity of Macdona to pick Jess up. The information the local officer gave me was that Jess and Poppy had been kidnapped by someone named Freddy, and Jess was going to take them to the place where Freddy stopped his car."

"Wait! Did you say *Freddy* kidnapped them?"

No way was it the Freddy that Slick was thinking of. It couldn't be. What were the odds?

"Do you know him?" Hayden asked, pulling out her notebook.

Slick shook his head, not believing it was possible, but he and the rest of the team hadn't had a good feeling about Freddy. "We had a guy who filled in for me a few weeks ago and then came with us on another shift. His name was Freddy. Chief Blaise will be able to give you the details of where he lived and if he is on duty today. He was brash and hotheaded. He's never met Poppy, and I don't know the connection

between them or why he would go after them. It has to be someone else.”

As he said the words out loud, he didn't believe them. For whatever reason Freddy had taken Jess and Poppy, and while Jess was safe, no one knew if Poppy was.

“I'll follow up with Blaise,” Hayden said as her cell phone rang. “Give me a minute.” She answered the phone as she strode out of the common room.

Slick wanted to chase after her so he could find out who was calling. Find out if Poppy was okay. Find out how long it would be before he got to see the two people he loved more than life.

“This is fucked up if it's Freddy,” Axe said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the men.

“It can't be the guy. Why would he target Slick? If he went after anyone, it would have to be Blaise because he reprimanded him,” Spider countered.

“Tell me something I don't know.” Slick ran his fingers through his head, needing Hayden to walk back into the room with a smile on her face. A smile that would tell him that Poppy was okay.

“I know Hayden said she was going to talk to Chief, but I'm going to go give him a heads up. He needs to know what's going on,” Mick stated, and before anyone could stop him, he was striding toward the chief's office.

Hayden walked in, and the second Slick saw her grim expression, his heart slid to his toes.

“What's happened?” he demanded.

“I'm sorry, Slick, but Poppy's been shot. She's lost a lot of blood. They're going to life flight her to the hospital.”

Slick could see Hayden's mouth moving, but he couldn't hear anything over the roaring of his blood.

All he'd heard was *I'm sorry*, and his world had collapsed in on itself.

He couldn't lose Poppy. He needed her in his life. Needed her in Jess's life. He wanted to have kids with her—if she wanted that. He wanted to show her that she'd make a wonderful mother. There was still so much he wanted to share with her.

She had to be all right.

“Slick!” Axe's voice pulled him from the abyss, and he shook his head, clearing his mind.

“What?”

“Hayden said she'd drive you to the hospital. Didn't you hear?”

Hospital?

“No. I—I—I, fuck.” Slick took a deep breath and took a second to center himself. “I didn't hear what she said.”

“I get that.” Axe squeezed his shoulder sympathetically and quickly gave a rundown of what he'd missed from Hayden. “We're all here for you and Jess, you know that, right?”

Slick hated the way Axe was talking, as if it was too late. As if Poppy was already gone, but he wouldn't believe that. He had to believe that the life flight would get her to the hospital on time and everything would be okay.

It had to be okay.

“Yeah, I do.” He nodded, and maybe if he kept saying it, it would be true.

“Come on, Slick, we should get going.” Hayden came up to him, her expression serious. “I've got some officers looking into Freddy Williams. Blaise gave us his information. Jess is also on her way to the hospital. She looks fine, but we want her checked out anyway, like I'm sure you would, too.”

Slick's heart stuttered at the thought of his baby girl being hurt as well. It was bad enough that his Poppy was hurt.

“Right. Let's go.” He looked around the room. His team were all there, faces serious.

He wasn't alone in this.

He had his team and their women to support him and Jess.

Axe thrust his phone at him. "You'll need this. Keep us posted. If we could, we'd get in the truck and follow you."

"Yeah, I know." And Slick did. They were on duty, and if a call came and they were all standing around the hospital to support him, it wouldn't turn out well for all of them.

"We'll let our girls know what's happening." Spider came up and gave his bicep a squeeze of support. "When our shift's over, we'll be there."

Slick gave a quick nod and followed Hayden out of the station. Whatever he was about to face, he'd do it because he wasn't going to lose Poppy—his soulmate.

A spark of guilt flashed through him, but he quickly extinguished it. Debbie wasn't his soulmate, and while her death hurt, it didn't have the potential to cripple him like losing Poppy could do.

* * *

THE LAST FEW hours had passed in a blur for Slick. The drive to the hospital was made in double quick time as Hayden had her sirens blaring. Slick appreciated the swiftness with which she got them to the hospital. The waiting was interminable.

The low buzz of conversation reached him. Dahlia, Calla, Holly, Rose, and Tory were all huddled together. He appreciated their presence. They didn't have to be there, and he'd said as much, but they'd all given him a fierce look and Calla told him in no uncertain terms that they weren't moving. They loved him, Jess, and Poppy, and until they knew for sure she was okay, they were staying.

"Daddy, how much longer?" Jess whispered beside him.

"I'm not sure, sweetheart." Slick pressed a kiss on the top of her head, and she snuggled into his side.

Having his daughter next to him provided comfort, but the waiting room wasn't the right place for her. When she'd told him how far she'd run. What Poppy had made her do. How she didn't want to leave Poppy, but she didn't want to stay either. His heart had broken at what his daughter had had to go through.

Physically she was fine, apart from blisters on her feet from her trek from where the car had been to the first house she'd come across. Mentally, though, probably not.

Slick would watch her, but if she needed help from a therapist to work through the trauma, he would make it happen. Fortunately, the homeowner hadn't thought Jess was telling tall tales and had believed her. For that he was totally grateful.

When everything had settled down and Poppy was up and about, because he wouldn't let himself think about anything other than her making a full recovery, he was going to take a trip to that man's house and thank him for believing his daughter.

Jess stirred beside him, and he made a decision. She wouldn't like it, but waiting here wasn't good for her.

He caught Dahlia's eye and canted his head to Jess. As if she understood his silent request, she nodded and came over and sat next to them. "Wait here with Dahlia, Jess. I'm just going to make a call."

"Okay, Daddy."

"Thanks," he whispered to Dahlia and walked into the hallway. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cell phone.

This was one call he didn't expect to make, but he needed to do it. Scrolling through his contacts, he pulled up the name and pressed the phone icon. It rang in his ear, and for a moment he thought maybe the call would go to voicemail.

"Carson. This is a surprise." Mary-Sue's tone was short and sharp. Perhaps this wasn't the best idea, but he'd committed himself now and he couldn't hang up.

“I was hoping you’d come and get Jess.” Slick didn’t have time for *hellos* and *how are yous*. “Can you watch her for a few hours for me?”

“What about your *girlfriend*? Why can’t she watch her?”

Again, he questioned his sanity, but he pushed forward. “She’s currently in surgery after being shot. She and Jess were taken from the park today. Poppy risked her life to save Jess. I know things aren’t great between us, but Jess needs her grandma. Will you come and get her, please?” Slick’s voice broke on the last word, and he pinched the skin at the top of his nose to stop the tears from falling.

Silence greeted his request, and he was beginning to think that Mary-Sue wasn’t going to say anything and just end the call.

“Which hospital are you at?” she asked quietly.

He relayed the information, relief sweeping through him. Even with everything going on between him and his in-laws, their love for Jess wasn’t in question. It was because they loved her so deeply that they wanted to do what was right by her.

Slick had understood that. Just their method of doing it could be a little better. “Thank you, Mary-Sue. I’ll see you soon.”

“You will.”

The call ended, and Slick leaned against the wall of the corridor. The hustle and bustle of the hospital went on around him, but all he could think of was the woman in the surgery.

“Please, Poppet, don’t die on me. *Fight*.” Straightening up, he headed back into the waiting room.

“Everything okay, Daddy?” Jess asked when he sat next to her.

“Yeah, your grandma’s going to come and get you and take you back to her place.”

“But I wanna stay here with you and find out about Poppy. I can’t leave her.” Jess started to cry, and he pulled her into his

embrace.

“I know, sweetheart, but I think it will be better for you. I need to know that you’re safe and you will be with your grandma. Will you do this for me, please?” Slick wanted to keep Jess by his side, but he also didn’t want her to see him fall apart if Poppy didn’t make it—and he would, for sure.

“Okay, Daddy,” she said quietly, her tears slowing down.

Twenty minutes later, Mary-Sue and Randy hurried into the waiting room.

“Grandma!” Jess ran over to the other woman.

Slick waited to see what Mary-Sue would do. It’d been weeks since they’d seen each other. He relaxed when Mary-Sue went down on her haunches and caught up Jess in a tight hug. She looked up and caught Slick’s eyes, nodding.

He nodded back. Things would need to be discussed between them, but he hoped that any talk of custody and job change wouldn’t be the main topic. For the moment, though, his daughter was going to be taken care of, and that was all that mattered.

Before he could go up and thank Mary-Sue for coming, the door opened, and a man in scrubs walked in.

“Are you the family of Poppy Brown?” he asked.

Slick step forward. “Yes.”

How ironic. He wanted Jess to be safely away when the doctor arrived with news, but fate had a different idea.

“Right.” The doctor fell silent, and Slick worried that he wouldn’t get any information from him.

“Poppy’s brother died a few years ago. She has a nephew, but he lives a couple of hours away with his adopted parents. She has no other living relatives, but she has me. Please tell me what’s going on?” Slick begged.

As if his plea worked, the doctor nodded. “Ms. Brown lost a lot of blood and there were a couple of tense moments

during surgery, but she made it through. She's in recovery, and I believe she'll be all right."

Slick froze to the spot, not quite believing what he was hearing—Poppy was going to be okay. He was aware of the sound of crying behind him. Aware that Mary-Sue was holding a crying Jess.

"Thank you," he whispered, unable to say anything else.

"You're welcome. She'll be in recovery for a while to monitor her as she wakes from the anesthesia. We'll transfer to the ICU after that. I'll send a nurse to come and get you, and you can see her."

Slick nodded, and something splashed his hand. He raised it to his cheeks and found that they were wet. As wet as everyone else's in the room. A second later, he was enfolded in a hug by Dahlia, and he cried out his relief.

Poppy was going to be okay.

He could breathe again.

CHAPTER 24



SOUNDS PENETRATED THE DARKNESS THAT ENVELOPED POPPY. Soft whispers. The rustle of fabric. The scrape of a chair. The rhythmic beep of—an alarm clock?

Warmth also engulfed her hand. She flexed her fingers.

“Poppy?”

Was that Slick?

It sounded like him, but why wasn’t he in bed beside her?

Poppy shifted and a shaft of pain bloomed in her lower belly. A groan erupted out of her. “Ow,” she whimpered.

Fingers trailed a soft journey over her forehead, and she turned head toward the touch, still keeping her eyes closed. She couldn’t seem to open them.

“It’s okay, Poppet. Sleep. I’ll be watching over you, and I’ll be here when you wake.”

Poppy smiled. At least she thought she did. The words were so sweet, and it was Slick. She trusted what he said. That when she woke up, he’d still be there.

The next time she floated toward consciousness, her brain didn’t feel so foggy. Maybe this time she’d be able to open her eyes. With a concentrated effort, Poppy willed her brain to obey her message, and a second later, her eyelids began to flutter open.

“There she is.”

She turned her head toward the voice.

Slick's smiling face greeted her.

"There you are," she croaked out, the dryness of her throat making itself known.

"Let me get you some water." He let go of her hand, and she mourned the loss of the warm touch. "Here you go. Just one or two small sips. No more." He rested a straw against her lips, and she followed his instructions.

The liquid hit the spot. "What happened? Everything foggy. I'm in hospital. Belly hurts. Why?"

As much as she tried to get a clear picture in her mind, everything was out of focus.

"You and Jess were taken by Freddy Williams."

The mention of Freddy was all the camera lens in her mind needed for it to be adjusted and everything fell into place.

The park.

Freddy.

Telling Jess to run.

Her being shot.

Freddy leaving.

"Jess! Is she okay?" Poppy tried to move, but Slick's large hand landed on her thigh. She needed to thank the girl for saving her life.

"Whoa, steady there. Jess is fine. She's with Mary-Sue at the moment. Has been since the day you were brought here."

There was a bit to unpack there, but she would ask that later. "What happened to Freddy? Where is he? How long have I been here?" Poppy's lucidity surprised her, considering only a few minutes ago, she'd been out of it, and her mind had resembled a pea soup type of fog.

"It's been three and a half days since you've been shot. You were in surgery for a long time, but you didn't lose any organs and should make a full recovery." Slick shifted his chair a little closer, before pressing a kiss on the top of the

hand he held in his. “Freddy is in jail. Jess’s description of his car was pretty good, and Beth used her mad computer skills to hack into a couple of cameras by the park where he took you from and located Freddy’s vehicle. That enabled her to give the license plate to Hayden Yates, a local sheriff, and they located him the day after your surgery. He still had the gun on him, which was all the evidence the cops needed. He won’t be seeing the light of day for a very long time.”

The words swam a little in her mind, but Poppy was able to latch onto the main points—Freddy was no longer a threat. She was glad he was behind bars, and if she never saw him again, it would be too soon.

She supposed she’d have to face him in court, if it got that far, but she’d do it and make sure he never saw got out to hurt anyone else. “I still don’t get how he found me or why he went after me. Although maybe it does make sense. Ed, his brother, had murderous tendencies, and they share DNA. But I’m just glad that Jess is okay. She wasn’t hurt, was she?”

Slick shook his head. “She’s fine. Mary-Sue says she’s been having some nightmares, but I’ll get her to see a therapist to talk things over. As for finding you, I think it was pure chance. He filled in for me that time Jess was sick and came on another shift with us. You called, and I’m guessing he saw your picture flash up on my phone.”

“I can’t believe that. But still doesn’t explain how he found out which grocery store I go to. Or the park Jess and I were at.”

“Grocery store?”

“Yeah. It was a few weeks ago, he asked my opinion on a cake he was making. But I guess it was all a lie just to speak to me. He must’ve followed me somehow and found out where I lived and shopped.”

“No, he must’ve followed me to your place. That’s the only thing that makes sense. I wish I could see the fucker and tell him what I think of him.”

“No. I need you. Jess needs you. Freddy will get what’s coming to him.”

Slick took a breath and brushed his thumb across her cheek. “I can’t thank you enough for looking after her. Jess said that while she was afraid, she knew she was safe with you, and you would protect her.”

The same protective instinct that drove Poppy to put her life on the line for Jess surged to life within her. “I wasn’t going to let him hurt her. I didn’t care what happened to me. I couldn’t let Freddy take Jess from you. I knew if anything happened to her, your world would end.”

“It almost ended when I heard you’d been shot.” Again, Slick pressed a kiss to her hand. “You are my everything, Poppy. I can’t imagine my life without you in it. I had to for a few hours, and I was a wreck. It’s not something I want to go through again. I love you.”

Tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes at his declaration. Her heart swelled with joy and hope of a future she didn’t imagine she deserved—but now knew she did. “I love you, too. I’m so glad you and Jess are in my life. It’s so much fuller now.”

“Glad enough to marry me?” Slick asked.

“Pardon?”

Was she dreaming?

Had he just proposed?

Slick laughed and leaned over to press his lips softly against her cheek. “Poppy, my darling. My life. Will you marry me and make a family with me and Jess?”

Jess!

No way could she say yes until she knew Jess was okay with it. Then again, would’ve Slick asked if Jess wasn’t keen on the idea?

“Jess is fine with it,” he said, as if he could read her mind. “So, what do you say?”

Joy and acceptance spilled through her. There was no fear about being a mother to Jess. Jess and her father had helped her understand that she was a good person. Not to mention a good mother.

“I say yes.”

Slick beamed. “Thank goodness. I’d climb up there and hug you, but I don’t want to hurt you.”

She didn’t care. A little discomfort would be worth it to have her man by her side. “That’s a risk I’m willing to take. I need you to hold me, Slick.”

“Don’t let it be said I don’t give my fiancée everything she wants.”

Slick stood, and with careful movements, squeezed onto the bed next to her. It was a tight fit, but Poppy wouldn’t have it any other way. After everything she’d been through, she never wanted to let this man go.

“I love you, Carson Killian.”

“And I love you, the future Mrs. Killian.”

“I like the sound of that.” She yawned, and her eyes grew heavy. She didn’t want to fall asleep, but she didn’t think she could stop herself.

“Sleep, Poppet. I’ve got you.”

Like before, the words were reassuring, and she slipped into a slumber where she dreamed of a future with Slick, Jess, and two other children, all playing with Cerise, Brodie Finn, and their kids.

Fear wasn’t a part of her life anymore—only love.

EPILOGUE



TWO YEARS LATER

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’re making me do this again. Didn’t we do this recently?” Poppy puffed out as another contraction hit her.

Slick wiped her brow and kissed her cheek. “We did, and then you got frisky one night, and well, here we are.”

Poppy glared, but there was no heat in it. Her second pregnancy had been an accident. They’d be over the moon when little Sawyer had joined their family, nine months to the day after they’d said “I Do.” Jess loved being a big sister, and she was even more excited that they were having another baby.

“Tell me we are going to be okay? We’re going to have two kids under two,” she asked her husband for the hundredth time since the two pink lines showed up on the pregnancy test.

“We’re going to be fine. My job transfer has come through. I’m going to be working at the academy helping train the newbies. No more shift work. I’ll be able to help you more.”

Poppy chewed her bottom lip. When Slick had come home after one shift two months ago and told her he was thinking of looking for a different job, she’d been worried that he would regret the decision. Would come to resent her because she’d forced his hand.

She hadn’t said a word, but he could read her, and sometimes he had the uncanny knack of knowing what she

was thinking without her even saying a word. Slick had reassured her that he was fine and was ready to step back from first line work.

“I know, but still, it’s a big change.”

He rested his forehead against hers. “Poppy, I want this. I want to be able to help you. I know a regular hour job will be better for us at this time in our lives. I’ll still have the flexibility that I currently have as well. You’re not making me do something that I don’t want to do. The time is right now. It’s all going to work out.”

“If you’re sure. Ohhhh.” Another contraction hit, and she blew through this one, with Slick coaching her through it.

Poppy collapsed on the bed, and, Rachael, her midwife, looked over at her with a smile. Rachael had also been her midwife when she’d given birth to Sawyer.

“You’re fully dilated. If you feel the need to push on the next one, do it,” she encouraged with a smile.

Poppy nodded. “This is it,” she said to Slick.

“It is. And it’s going to be awesome.”

Thirty minutes later, Poppy was settled in her room and cradled their beautiful daughter. “She’s perfect.”

“As beautiful as her mom.” Slick brushed his fingers against the baby’s cheek. “We need to come up with a name now.”

Poppy nodded. “I have an idea for one.” She had no idea how he’d take it, but she believed her husband would be open to the names.

“Hit me with it.”

“How about Paula Debbie, after my brother and...” She didn’t need to finish it off, Slick knew exactly who she was talking about.”

His gray eyes glistened with unshed tears. “I love it. I think it’s perfect. Jess is going to love it, too.”

“And Mary-Sue and Randy?”

It'd taken a while, but the relationship with Slick's former in-laws was healthy now. After Mary-Sue and Randy had heard the lengths Poppy had gone to, to keep Jess safe, they'd realized that Poppy truly loved Jess and Slick. They'd backed down on the custody battle they'd been threatening Slick and had returned to their roles as grandparents to Jess. Randy had even walked Poppy down the aisle when she and Slick married.

The arrival of Sawyer had helped as well. They'd fallen in love with the little guy and, in their eyes, he was their grandson as well. Poppy expected the same to happen when they saw this new addition.

"I think they'll love it." Slick's voice was thick with emotion.

Poppy's heart melted and she smiled at her husband. "I love you, Carson Killian."

"I love you too, Poppy Killian." They shared a sweet kiss before baby Paula began to fuss.

"I'll let you feed her, and I'll go out and tell everyone. They're going to be over the moon."

"They will." Slick gave her another peck before he disappeared out of the room.

God, she was so lucky.

As Slick had promised, their life wasn't perfect. They had ups and downs, but it was pretty close to being perfect. Freddy had been put away for a long time and Poppy rested easy, knowing that her new family wasn't going to be threatened.

"Knock knock. Can we come in?" Cerise popped her head around the open door.

"Of course."

Brodie, Cerise, Finn, and Primrose all joined her.

Poppy laughed when she saw that mother and daughter were wearing matching glitter tops.

"Nice tops, Cerise."

Cerise laughed. “We think so, don’t we, Primmy?”

“Yes! Gwitter sparkle,” Primmy said.

“Yes, it does, sweetheart, and I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Brodie kissed his wife and then daughter, while Finn rolled his eyes.

“Are you going to dress Paula in sparkles, Aunt Poppy?” Finn asked as he came over to the bed and kissed her cheek.

Poppy’s heart exploded when he tapped Paula’s nose. “I’m not sure. So far, Jess has resisted your mom’s glitter attempts. I may not be so lucky this time.”

“I won’t pressure you, but life is better with sparkles,” Cerise said.

“I guess it is.”

The door opened again, and this time, the rest of Slick’s team and their partners all piled in. The room was packed to the gills, but Poppy welcomed it—she loved her extended family.

Slick squeezed his way through with Jess, who was excited to meet her little sister.

Sawyer was currently being held by Rose. She and Axe hadn’t gotten married. After what she’d been through, marriage had lost its appeal with her and Axe was okay with that. They also didn’t have kids—yet, but Poppy suspected it might be on the cards soon.

Behind them stood Johnno and Dahlia. Their son was with Johnno’s sister, as they didn’t want to be chasing a toddler around the hospital halls. Next to them Spider, Calla, Tornado, and Holly stood. Both men had their hands over their wives’ expanding bellies. It had been a joyous day for all of them when Spider and Calla had announced their second IVF transfer had been successful. At the same time, Tornado had said Holly was expecting. Mick had started a wager that both babies would be born on the same day.

“While we’ve got everyone here,” Mick all but shouted over the buzz of conversation going on in the room.

Poppy looked up and saw Tory standing close to him, looking up at him with adoring eyes. It was a look she recognized as she knew she looked at Slick that way all the time.

“You’re pregnant!” Everyone said at the same time.

Mick and Tory laughed. “No!” they said in unison.

“But,” Tory started, before ducking her head a little. There were times like this when her shyness popped up again. They all waited, not saying anything until she was ready. She took a deep breath and then lifted her head. “We’re going to Australia for a year. Mick is taking a leave of absence from the fire station, and I’m taking one from the hospital. We’re going to see his homeland. But we’re going to miss you all like crazy.”

No one said anything for a beat before they all erupted with excited calls of “congratulations.”

The team dynamics were changing, what with Slick transferring and now Mick leaving for a while. Not to mention all the babies. The one thing that wouldn’t change would be the love they all had for each other.

They were family, and nothing was going to change that.

Two hours later, it was just Poppy, Slick, and Paula in the room.

She was exhausted, the high of having the baby and everyone visiting dying off. “You ready for this next chapter?” she asked her husband.

“With you by my side? Always.”

Poppy snuggled into his side and sighed. “Me too.”

* * *

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Alliez Security

[Keeping Astrid](#) (Jan 2024)

Guardian Seals

[Protecting Lily](#)

[Protecting Maria](#)

[Guarding Erin](#)

[Guarding Suzie](#)

[Guarding Brielle](#)

[Guarding Antonia](#)

[Guarding Faith](#)

[Guarding Amberley](#)

Special Forces Operation Alpha World

[Rescuing Samantha](#)

Tarpley Volunteer Fire Department Series

[Fighting for Nadia](#)

[Shelter for Cerise](#)

The Billionaires

[The Victor](#)

[The Hunter](#)

[The Warrior](#)

[The Protector](#)

[The Reminder](#)

[The Loner](#)

[The Recluse](#)

Welcome to Bunya Junction

[Home to the Outback](#)

[Runaway to the Outback](#)

[Doctor in the Outback](#)

Reunion in the Outback

Danger in the Outback (April 2024)

Lovers Unmasked Series

[Masquerade](#)

[Rescuing Dawn](#)

[Seducing Phoebe](#)

Lovers Unmasked Boxed Set

The Prentice Brothers of Sweet Ridge

[One Hot Texas Summer](#)

[Falling for the Texan](#)

[A Merry Texan Christmas](#)

Sweet Texas Secrets

[Sweet Texas Fire](#)

Man's Best Friend

[Blind Date Bet](#)

[Next Door Knight](#)

[The Matchmaker's Match](#)

The Elite

[Fighting to Win](#)

[Fighting to Dream](#)

[Fighting for Love](#)

[Fighting for Redemption](#)

Emerald Springs Legacy Series

[Daniel's Decision](#)

[Emerald Springs Legacy Collection](#)

Novellas

[Swipe for Mr. Right](#)

[Wrong Time for Mr. Right](#)

[Fighting Their Attraction](#)

[Tangled Vines](#)

Christmas in Ghost Gum Valley.

Trapped by Cupid

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Saying goodbye to a series that has consumed so much of your life is hard. This is the second series I've had to say goodbye to this year. Thank you all so much for climbing on board with the Station 7: Crew 5 team. It's been so much fun to write these books.

I will say that there might be a side character from this series who will play an integral part of my Alliez Security series.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Nicole Flockton writes sexy contemporary romances that sparkle and seduce you one kiss at a time. Nicole likes nothing better than taking characters and creating unique situations where they fight to find their true love.

When she's not busy writing she's looking after her very own hero – her wonderfully supportive husband, as well as her two fabulous kids and various fur babies. Her kindle is never far from her reach. She's a tiara wearing certified chocoholic, Cinderella lover, major BTS fan, sports lover and a glitter aficionado.

You can visit Nicole at her website www.nicoleflockton.com



There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

You can also visit our Amazon page at:

<http://www.amazon.com/author/operationalalpha>

Special Forces: Operation Alpha World

Christie Adams: [Charity's Heart](#)

Linzi Baxter: [Dangerous Rescue](#)

Misha Blake: [Flash](#)

Anna Blakely: [Rescuing Gracelynn](#)

Julia Bright: [Saving Lorelei](#)

Cara Carnes: [Protecting Mari](#)

Kendra Mei Chailyn: [Beast](#)

Melissa Kay Clarke: [Rescuing Annabeth](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Samantha A. Cole: [Handling Haven](#)

KaLyn Cooper: [Spring Unveiled](#)

Jordan Dane: [Redemption for Avery](#)

Tarina Deaton: [Found in the Lost](#)

D.M. Earl: [Claire's Guardian](#)

Riley Edwards: [Protecting Olivia](#)

Dorothy Ewels: [Knight's Queen](#)

Lila Ferrari: [Protecting Joy](#)

Nicole Flockton: [Protecting Maria](#)

Hope Ford: [Rescuing Karina](#)

Amy Gamet: [Guarded by the SEAL](#)

Desiree Holt: [Protecting Maddie](#)

Danielle Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Jesse Jacobson: [Protecting Honor](#)

Rayne Lewis: Justice for Mary
Ireland Lorelei: The Detective
Kristin Lynn: Worth the Risk
Callie Love & Ann Omasta: Hawaii Hottie
JM Madden: Rescuing Olivia
A.M. Mahler: Griffin
Ellie Masters: Sybil's Protector
Trish McCallan: Hero Under Fire
Naomi McKay: Twist
Rachel McNeely: The SEAL's Surprise Baby
KD Michaels: Saving Laura
Olivia Michaels: Protecting Harper
Annie Miller: Securing Willow
MJ Nightingale: Protecting Beauty
C.K. O'Connor: Delaney's Bodyguard
Melinda Owens: Betraying Katie
Victoria Paige: Reclaiming Izabel
Danielle Pays: Defending Sarina
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
Lainey Reese: Protecting New York
KeKe Renée: Protecting Bria
Taryn Rivers: Savage Cove
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: Extracting Mateo
Ariana Rose: Chasing Paige
Deanna L. Rowley: Saving Veronica
Angela Rush: Charlotte
Rose Smith: Saving Satin
Tyler Anne Snell: Cowboy Heat

Lynne St. James: SEAL's Spitfire

E.M. Shue: Discovering Tyler

Bella Stone: Rexar

Jen Talty: Burning Desire

Reina Torres, Rescuing Hi'ilani

LJ Vickery: Circus Comes to Town

R. C. Wynne: Shadows Renewed

Delta Team Three Series

Lori Ryan: Nori's Delta

Becca Jameson: Destiny's Delta

Lynne St James, Gwen's Delta

Elle James: Ivy's Delta

Riley Edwards: Hope's Delta

Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World

Freya Barker: Burning for Autumn

B.P. Beth: Scott

Jane Blythe: Salvaging Marigold

Julia Bright, Justice for Amber

Gia Cobie: Saved from Revenge

Hadley Finn: Exton

Emily Gray: Shelter for Allegra

Danielle M. Haas: Crossroads of Betrayal

Deandra Hall: Shelter for Sharla

Jenna Harte: Dead But Not Forgotten

Amber Kuhlman: Protecting Paisley

Reina Torres: Justice for Sloane

Aubree Valentine, Justice for Danielle

Maddie Wade: Finding English

Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, Fighting for Elena

Deandra Hall, Fighting for Carly.

Haven Rose, Fighting for Calliope

MJ Nightingale, Fighting for Jemma

TL Reeve, Fighting for Brittney.

Nicole Flockton, Fighting for Nadia

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

Finding Monica

Finding Carly

Finding Ashlyn

Finding Jodelle

Eagle Point Search & Rescue

Searching for Lilly

Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (Oct 2024)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

SEAL of Protection: Alliance Series

Protecting Remi (July 2024)

Protecting Wren (Nov 2024)

Protecting Josie (TBA)

Protecting Maggie (TBA)

Protecting Addison (TBA)

Protecting Kelli (TBA)

Protecting Bree (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley

Shielding Devyn

Shielding Ember

Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

Securing Caite (FREE!)

Securing Brenae (novella)

Securing Sidney

Securing Piper

Securing Zoey

Securing Avery

Securing Kalee

Securing Jane

Delta Force Heroes Series

Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)

Rescuing Aimee (novella)

Rescuing Emily

Rescuing Harley

Marrying Emily (novella)

Rescuing Kassie

Rescuing Bryn

Rescuing Casey

Rescuing Sadie (novella)

Rescuing Wendy

Rescuing Mary

Rescuing Macie (novella)

Rescuing Annie

Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series

Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)

Justice for Mickie

Justice for Corrie

Justice for Laine (novella)

Shelter for Elizabeth

Justice for Boone

Shelter for Adeline

Shelter for Sophie

Justice for Erin

Justice for Milena

Shelter for Blythe

Justice for Hope

Shelter for Quinn

Shelter for Koren

Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

Protecting Caroline (FREE!)

Protecting Alabama

Protecting Fiona

Marrying Caroline (novella)

Protecting Summer

Protecting Cheyenne

Protecting Jessyka

Protecting Julie (novella)

Protecting Melody

Protecting the Future

Protecting Kiera (novella)

Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)

Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal
Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

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