

Where
Foxes
say
Goodnight



SAM BURNS

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Content Warning: this book is intended for adult audiences only, and contains graphic violence, a secondary character with cancer and mentions of someone dying of cancer, mentions of drug addiction leading to death, descriptions of abusive relationships, assault, trauma, and graphic sex.

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About Sam Burns

*For my husband. I may not be a real fox, but goodnight, love.
And for Nadia. You asked for a grandmother, so here she is. I
hope she doesn't disappoint. Like Max, you're worth those
thrown collector plates. Demand nothing less.*

I spent about a week working on the speech, all totaled, but after I made my way backstage, I had no idea if I'd used it. The crumpled, sweaty note card was in my hand, so maybe. I knew I had mentioned my grandmother, which was the only thing that really mattered.

All I could remember of the moments between the envelope opening and walking backstage afterward was the shock, the bright lights, and everyone—*absolutely everyone*—staring at me.

Me!

Like I was *somebody*.

Max Blazek, the guy who was wasting his life. Who had a useless degree in writing and a job that made most people ask, “yeah, but what do you do for a living?”

Screenwriter. It was laughable, right? Nobody made a living writing. We were all working day jobs at McDonalds while we toiled in obscurity forever, writing our painfully autobiographical hundred-and-twenty-page epics that shockingly, no one wanted to watch in a theater, let alone spend millions to make into a movie to begin with.

I couldn't stop staring at the statue, so shiny and gold and ... me. I'd won. Over people who'd been doing the job for decades. People who were legends in the industry. My own little autobiographical screenplay, written about a newly-widowed woman struggling to raise her grandson after her

drug-addicted daughter abandoned them both, had been declared the best original screenplay of the year.

A firm hand came down on my shoulder, startling me away from my aimless staring at the statuette, and I looked up into the face of William Janssen, another old hand in the industry. He hadn't had a screenplay in contention this year, so at least I didn't have to worry he was annoyed that some upstart had squeezed him out. He gave me a smile, and there was something like wistful empathy in his gaze. "Congrats, kid. Welcome to the club. This is where the real work starts."

The real work? Wasn't that what I'd spent the last ten years doing? Getting my degree and then working a series of awful retail jobs while trying to sell my screenplay? Trying to stay true to my vision while having basically no power over the actual making of the movie?

He was right, though, a niggling part of me knew. The empty document on my computer at home told me so every time I opened it and tried to start the next project, and the pit in my stomach over its emptiness seemed to yawn wider with every day that no words magically appeared in it.

I wasn't finished just because this movie had done well. Jobs didn't work like that. You didn't get to do a few years of work and be done forever, unless maybe you were an enormously successful athlete. The fact that this movie had been my first mostly meant that it was even more pressure for the second one to be incredible. If I had a flop for a second screenplay, it could easily be game over, and I'd never make another dime writing movies.

Terrifying didn't even cover it.

"Thank you, sir," I managed to squeak out, trying not to hyperventilate. Will Janssen had congratulated me, and I was standing there with my mouth hanging open, thinking about work. "It's, um ... thank you. I know I don't—"

Didn't know what to say, clearly. What did one say to a legend who was congratulating them? 'Thank you' seemed so pale and pathetic, and we wrote words for a living. I was

supposed to be the word guy, so why was I completely tongue-tied?

For some reason, my pathetic inability made him grin. “You’re okay, kid. You’ll get there. You’re good at this, and now everybody knows it. You just gotta get back to work and keep moving forward. Always moving forward.”

You’re good at this.

“Thank you.” My words were even breathier as I repeated them, but he couldn’t possibly know what his comment meant to me. Or maybe, given the way he wrapped an arm around my shoulders, smiled, and led me out of the wings back to where I was supposed to be, he knew exactly what I was going through. He’d been the new guy once, decades earlier.

I retook my seat in a daze during the break, and watched the rest of the ceremony without really taking it in. *Life After Anna* won two more awards—my movie!—and I wondered if once I really processed what was happening, I’d have a heart attack and just keel over.

Unfortunately, Harry hadn’t even been up for best supporting actor as the boy’s in-over-his-head father, who had chosen to move on with his life and start over instead of taking his son. It hadn’t been the most flattering role, but people had won awards for worse ones.

Harry had been miffed by what he’d considered a snub, but I wasn’t sure he’d really been in contention at all. He was sitting at the next table, looking stiff and uncomfortable, and while I wanted to talk to him, I didn’t know what I could possibly say.

You didn’t tell the super hot actor you were dating that you didn’t think your movie was his best work. Harry was gorgeous and talented and ... well, his ego was fragile.

I got it. I was a writer. Mine was too. So I’d commiserated as we lay in bed the night before and he vented about how he’d been overlooked. It had taken everything in me not to pull out the speech I’d been working on since the nomination announcement, and instead listen to him complain about how

the whole system was broken and the people who deserved to win never did anyway. After all, if the people who deserved to win never did, what did it say about my nomination?

Even more now, there I was, little gold statue in my hands.

Did I deserve it?

Hell, I didn't even know what that meant, to "deserve" an award. I'd won, though. Me. Little Max the nobody, on his very first screenplay. It was going to take a while for that to really sink in, no matter how long I stared at the statue in front of me.



EVERYONE CONGRATULATED ME, from the lead who'd played my grandmother in the movie to the driver as I was shoed into a limo with other members of the cast and crew.

I did a lot of nodding in return, since once again, I, the words guy, couldn't figure out what to say.

The actors who had played my characters were riding as much of a high as I was, passing around glasses of champagne, because maybe we hadn't won best picture, but we'd been nominated, and how often did a person get to say that in their life? Harry had gotten into the other car, as he often did. Couldn't have anyone noticing how much time we spent together, after all.

The costume designer across from me, holding her own little gold statuette, looked as gobsmacked as I was. She glanced up from it and met my eye, then made a face, half smile half grimace and all confusion. She didn't know what to do any more than I did. It was all incomprehensible. I could barely move, let alone speak or smile or, fuck, even think a coherent thought.

The afterparty we ended up at was in our director Tony's penthouse, and the place went quiet as we walked inside. Tony greeted me with the biggest grin and open arms. "Our man of the hour!"

The two dozen or so people in the central room, glasses of champagne already in their hands, actually cheered. Surreal didn't cover it anymore.

Tony pulled me in next to him, an arm around my shoulders, and started dragging me around introducing me to people. "Everyone wants to know what else you've got for them," he told me, between introducing me to random people whose names I was sure I should know. "You've got to get moving on what's next, capitalize on this. I've already grabbed another project, but you keep me up to date on what you're doing, yeah?"

"I don't know, Tony," an amused feminine voice interjected. "Maybe he wants to trade up next time."

Amelia Barber. Oh my god, it was Amelia Barber. Biggest, hottest director in Hollywood. Her last movie was still raking in millions in the box office every week, and people were talking about her like she walked on water. She held out her hand to shake mine, and kindly didn't comment about how mine was suddenly trembling and sweaty.

"It's an honor, Ms. Barber."

Before I could gather my wits and gush about her movies, she waved me off. "Amelia. And I came here to bother Tony to introduce us, just so there's no mistake here." She handed me a card, expression professional and serious. "Call me when you have something new. I want it."

Just like that. No "maybe I'll read it," or "I'll add it to the slush pile of unsolicited crap I get sent." Flat out, she wanted it. I had to force myself to stop breathing for a moment, to keep from hyperventilating.

Tony gave her a faux scowl. "Sure, just cut the rest of us off at the knees, I see how it is." He didn't actually seem bothered, but that made sense. My movie had been, frankly, a departure from Tony's usual comedies. He didn't want my next work. But he was a good guy, and he knew how to network to the fullest. This was a pass-off. Give the writer to someone powerful in exchange for clout and maybe the favor being remembered.

I was being handed around.

But ... who cared? I was being handed to the biggest name in the fucking world, and she wanted me to call her.

I didn't even stop to think about my pathetic alcohol tolerance when someone handed me another glass of champagne. This was the best night of my life, and I was damned well going to enjoy it.

"I'd be happy to send you my next one as soon as it's done," I promised. I did not think about the empty document on my computer back home. The fact that I'd been staring blankly at a screen for weeks, unable to even come up with an idea, let alone write a whole screenplay.

I'd made the oldest mistake in the book, and written my one personal story as my first screenplay. I didn't have another one. Oh gods, what if I never had another story? My stomach rebelled against me, threatening to turn inside out and eat me whole.

No. No, this was my night, and I was damned well going to enjoy it.

"Harry!" Tony called, sounding positively joyous and rushing off to welcome the newcomer. Harrison Grant.

Gorgeous, six feet tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed, and the sexual fantasy of every teenager in the country who liked men. And for the last year, Harry had been in my bed more nights than not. I still had to work to keep my eyes off him whenever he was in the room, to avoid giving myself away. Giving us away.

Amelia sighed and I turned to look at her, expecting the usual reaction to his ridiculous good looks. But she didn't have the expression I expected on her previously so-kind face. It wasn't that look everyone gave him, either love-struck or envious depending on whether they wanted to date him or be him.

No, she looked like she'd just bitten into a peach only to find that it was mealy. She turned back to me, forcefully reviving her smile. "I actually just came here tonight to give

you my card. I'm completely serious. The movie was incredible, and I think together we could have done it even better. So next time, we should." She glanced at Tony and Harry hugging it out, then back to me. "Now I'm going to slip out the back before I get any more notice. Congratulations on your win. I'm looking forward to hearing from you."

"You will," I promised. "The second it's done, I'll send it. And—and thank you. Thank you so much. I'd love to work with you."

Her smile brightened, more genuine than before at my honest words, and then she was gone.

I felt like I'd been hit by a hurricane, the emotions that were refusing to coalesce in my head roiling all over the place. Amelia Barber wanted to work with *me*. Wanted my next screenplay. The screenplay that didn't exist. Should I throw a party, cry into my pillow, or scream and throw myself into Tony's pool?

"Where did she go?" a familiar voice behind me asked a moment later in a somewhat unfamiliar tone: annoyed—almost petulant.

I turned to find Harry there. "I think she had to leave. Another engagement, I'm sure. People want her everywhere."

He scowled and glared around the room, even ducking his head and looking around a waiter with a tray of shrimp, like maybe she was hiding behind the canapés.

"Sorry we got stuffed into different cars on the way here," I told him, taking a deep breath and leaning ever so slightly toward him. We weren't public, since he was in the closet about his sexuality, but there was nothing I loved more than the scent of his cologne. Dior of some kind, I thought, but I'd never asked.

He finally looked back at me, brows drawn together. "What? No, it's fine. You went in the car with the crew, where you should have." Where I *should have*? Well that stung a little. I leaned back like the slap had been physical and not emotional. Not that I thought I was above the crew, but

apparently he thought he was. He looked around again and shook his head. “I’m going to go see if I can catch her in the hall. See you around.”

See you around? That was ... strangely impersonal, even for Harry. Maybe it was the champagne I’d already had making my head light and stomach queasy, but something felt off about ... everything. He’d always been strictly business in public, convinced that even a whiff of publicity about him having sex with men would be the end of his career, but *see you around?*

It wasn’t until an hour and two more glasses of champagne later, when I realized that he wasn’t coming back, that it occurred to me he hadn’t even congratulated me on my win.

A thousand tiny elves with jackhammers were trying to drill through the top of my skull, making a screeching, trilling sort of noise as they sawed away at the bone. My head was caving in, and I wanted to die.

Or maybe I *was* dead.

Was it possible to be dead and in pain at the same time? That seemed unjust, somehow. If I had to be dead, the very least the universe could give me was a cessation of the pounding agony in my head.

The screech stopped for a moment, and the imaginary elves calmed their drilling, lowered it to a regular background noise of mere pain. The searing torture when it restarted was enough to get me to lift my head.

Which made it even worse.

How the hell much champagne had I drunk?

I'd lost track after four—no, five glasses. The rest of the night was a haze of dancing and drinking and singing and ... had I cheered on Tony making out with the costume designer? That was weird, since Tony was as gay as I was, and I thought maybe she was too.

We'd all had a whole lot of champagne, though. I only hoped the two of them hadn't done something they would both regret.

Tony's driver had brought me home, I remembered, sober and helpful, and walked me up to my front door, making sure I

had the key and turned the alarm off and everything, so I didn't sleep on my stoop or accidentally summon the police. Great guy, Tony's driver. Steve? Dave?

The screech stopped and started again, and that was when I realized it was my doorbell. When had someone replaced my doorbell with a symphony of demons wailing in my skull?

It was probably just missionaries, come to sell me their form of religion. They could go bother my stay-at-home mom neighbor, who sometimes tricked people like that into impromptu child-watching by leaving them in the living room with the kids and going to do her dishes. She was a hell of a lady.

The screech happened again, though, and a moment later, there was a worse noise that sounded almost like ... like my favorite song, tearing its way through my brain.

Fuck, it was my generic phone ringtone.

Smacking my hand over the nightstand where I usually left it, I came into contact with something cold and hard and—my Oscar. I'd left it on my nightstand.

So where the hell was the phone?

Under my ass, I realized after a moment, when it started ringing and buzzing again.

How the hell had I—no, it didn't matter. I squirmed around until I could get the phone from under my ass and smacked the green button on its screen. "No."

"I'm ... sorry?"

"No," I moaned into the phone again. "Don't want any. Please no. Sleep now."

"Mr... Is this Mr. Maxim Blazek? I'm terribly sorry for bothering you, but I'm at your door, and I need to speak to you."

At my door? Oh gods, this was the person who'd been ringing my bell too? Did he want to kill me?

"Why?" was all I managed to whine.

He paused for a moment. Too long. Then he cleared his throat. “It’s ... I’m afraid it’s a personal, legal matter, Mr. Blazek, and I’d rather not discuss it out here on your stoop.”

Legal matter? I’d talked to two lawyers in my entire life. One when my grandmother had died, about her estate—the insurance and the house she’d left me. The other time for the contracts involved in selling the script. They’d both been paid and gone on their merry ways, and this guy didn’t sound like either of them.

I sighed and pushed up again, trying to ignore the pounding in my head and forcing myself up onto wobbly feet. Turning toward the door was a complication I’d never imagined, when my feet didn’t want to follow orders and I was struggling to figure out which way was up, let alone which way I had to move to get to the front door.

Fortunately, the condo was small-ish. My grandmother had managed to leave a considerable estate, what with owning a three-bedroom house near the beach in Santa Barbara that she and her husband had bought in the sixties, but even millions didn’t pay for a lot of extra space in an oceanfront Malibu condo.

I managed to stumble my way to the front door and crack it open. By some miracle, I’d actually locked the chain the night before, so that was shut. On the opposite side of the breezeway between my condo and the neighbor’s, the housewife had her door open the same amount as me, a chain keeping it secure. “You okay, Max? You want me to call the cops?”

I gave her the best smile I could muster with the hangover from Satan’s asshole. “Thanks Mrs. Vasquez, but I think I’m okay.”

Because this guy who wanted to talk to me about a personal, legal matter? He was like five foot four, and maybe a hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet. He was admittedly on the young side, but he looked more nervous than buff, and his haircut was ... unfortunate. A little like that kid with the cowlick on *The Little Rascals*. Whatever legal matter he

wanted to talk about, he definitely wasn't some rich, slick shyster come to bilk me out of whatever he thought I had.

After looking him over, I sighed. "Are you here to pretend you or someone else actually wrote my screenplay?"

He blinked in shock, but shook his head, so I nodded, closed the door in his face, unlatched the chain, and reopened it.

"Fine, come in, but be warned, I'm making coffee while we talk." He followed me in and closed the door behind him, and as soon as we had that privacy I added, "Also I'm hung over as fuck and I'm probably going to be the world's worst company, so good luck with that."

"I, um, I'd probably be pretty hung over too if I were you. Congratulations, by the way." He followed me to the condo and pulled himself onto one of the tall chairs at the kitchen island. "I'd ask for coffee, but I don't think that's a good idea."

I took the time to start the coffee machine gurgling away before turning to him. "A good idea? What, you don't think people should drink coffee?"

Maybe he was a missionary after all, and he'd come from one of those churches who thought caffeine was evil. Was that Mormons? Hell if I knew one sect from another.

"Oh no, love the stuff. Addicted like everyone else who has to work too early in the morning." Then he grimaced and slumped in the chair before drawing himself back up and setting an attaché on the countertop in front of him. "I'm just here on behalf of an asshole to do something seriously fucking douchey, and given that, I wouldn't ask you to give me anything."

"You said you weren't here about the screenplay," I reiterated. It was a horror story I'd heard from other writers, how people came out of the woodwork to sue over single common lines or vaguely similar plots once you had a successful movie. It hadn't happened to me yet, but it also wasn't the most farfetched idea ever.

I also couldn't think of any other thing someone would want with me, legally.

"It's not the screenplay." He paused, cocked his head, then shrugged. "I mean, I'm sure it is, in a way, but it's nothing legal about the screenplay. I'll preface this by saying it's going to be terrible in this moment, but I promise you, Mr. Blazek, you're going to be so much better off in the long run because of this."

The long run? What the hell was he talking about?

"Mr. Harrison Grant has asked me to come here and have you sign a standard non-disclosure agreement about your former relationship." He'd reached into the attaché at some point and indeed pulled out a packet of papers and a pen.

Wait, what?

"*Former* relationship?"

He blinked for a moment, seeming confused, then sighed, letting his head fall forward and rubbing at his temples. "Oh, this is lovely. He didn't even break it off. He sent me to do that."

Harry was breaking up with me ... via lawyer. And wanted me to sign an NDA promising I wouldn't rat him out to the media.

The young man—lawyer, I supposed—rolled his shoulders and drew himself back up, like he was bracing for a battle. "I'm sorry, Mr. Blazek. Quite frankly, I wouldn't blame you if you told me to take a flying leap and went straight to the media to tell them everything."

Behind me, the coffee maker made the weird dying gasp-wheeze noise that meant it was finished. I turned and stared at the full mug for a moment, still too groggy and confused and ...

Harry was breaking up with me. He wanted me to sign an NDA. And he hadn't even had enough respect for me, after a year together, to do it himself.

I'd spent the last six months trying and failing to start my next screenplay, and had already barely been holding back an existential crisis because if I wasn't going to write another movie, then what the hell was I? And now I was being dumped via lawyer.

For a moment, I braced myself on the counter, back to the man, gripping the marble tight in both hands and squeezing my eyes shut tight.

Then I straightened and reached into the cupboard above the coffee maker to pull out another mug, setting it in front of the machine and starting it again, and turned and set the finished one in front of the lawyer, followed by a spoon, the half-and-half from the fridge, and the sugar bowl. "I'm sorry, what was your name?"

"Jay. And you don't have to—"

"No, this is as much for me as you. If I'm going to sign your document, you're going to have to walk me through every single clause first. I don't sign legal documents without knowing what they mean." Then I turned back to the fridge. My stomach was iffy, but I knew full well what the answer to a hangover was, pretty or not. Salt and fat and protein. I needed eggs and sausage and maybe some toast.

The thought made my stomach rumble in both demand and ill-ease, but it didn't matter. Better to try something and end up throwing up than just lie around miserable forever.

That had been one of Grandma's favorite things to say. Better to try and fail than simply choose to fail.

"You ... want me to explain it? You don't want to call your publicist?" He sounded stunned, but I heard the distinctive clinks of a spoon stirring something, then a mug being picked up and then set down again on the marble countertop, so he'd accepted my offering.

So I turned to him with the carton of eggs in my hand. "Breakfast?" He cocked his head, but then nodded, watching me with something akin to fascination. Quite clearly, he'd expected me to fall apart.

Little did he know, Blazeks only fell apart in private.

I would deal with him, sign his paper if it was signable, and then when I was alone again ... Well, I didn't know what I'd do then, yet. Have a breakdown. Climb into bed and never get back out. If I thought too much about it, I'd start crying now, and it wasn't time for that yet.

“As much as your boss is clearly a fucking asshole,” I told him as I melted butter in a pan before adding the eggs, “that’s not your fault. I’m not going to take it out on you.”

“I appreciate that. The last guy threw a set of collector plates at my head. We had to give him money and replace the plates before he’d sign, and they were a pain to find.” He brushed his lapel as though in memory of ceramic shards and then shuddered. “Honestly, I keep kind of hoping one of you outs the bastard.”

I shook my head, matter-of-fact as I stirred. “You’ll probably be waiting a while. We ... you’re not queer, right?” He gave me a small head shake, unsurprisingly. “It’s still not easy. Not even now. People who seem completely normal and rational can turn into utter foaming-at-the-mouth monsters when you say ‘my boyfriend’ and they expected a girlfriend.”

“I do know that much. It always seems like he’s playing with fire, putting himself out there like that when people still get killed for being gay. Or hell, even supporting gay people.”

He didn't say queer, even though I had. Good for him.

“I’m sure there are exceptions. Maybe even a lot of them; I haven’t exactly taken a poll. But when we risk our lives every day just by walking out the front door, we know what it is to be afraid. I’m never going to weaponize someone’s sexuality against them, even if they’ve treated me like yesterday’s garbage.” The coffee maker finished my own mug, so I grabbed it from the counter and took a long drink without adding anything to it. The first mug was to wake up. The second one could taste decent.

Oh sweet ambrosia that made the pounding in my head immediately less horrific. I took a deep breath, then another

drink before looking back at Jay the lawyer. He was watching me, and I wanted to think the look on his face was respect.

He took his own sip of coffee and picked up the sheaf of papers. “Okay then, let’s get started. I say we take as long as you want, since the firm is billing him by the hour at my boss’s ridiculous rate.”

I grinned back. “Now that’s revenge I can get behind.”

“I’d recommend demanding money too, but I have a feeling you don’t care too much about that.” He paused, then glanced around behind me. “Can I help with toast or something?”

I cocked my head. “How about a big old donation to The Trevor Project? If you want to get the toast started, the bread’s next to the toaster.”

“I can do that,” he agreed, and he meant both. As he made the toast, he explained.

It seemed that my silence was worth a hundred thousand dollars to a good cause. Any more than that, Jay had to call and get an okay for, and as much as I wanted to watch Harry Grant wriggle like a bug pinned to a board, it wouldn’t actually do me any good.

Jay and I had lunch together too as he continued to explain every detail of what each clause and bit of legalese could mean.

I was almost sad he wasn’t gay, as he was a good guy. Apparently better than the one I’d wasted a year of my life dating. By the end of the day, he was billing an extra ten grand to Harry over all the time he’d spent tracking me down, then explaining the NDA and payment paperwork to me, and I thought it was Harry’s money well spent.

I knew a lot more about legalese after what had essentially become a lesson in contract law, and you never knew when that might come in handy.

Jay shook my hand as he was finally leaving just before dinner time. “I’m glad you didn’t throw anything at my head, but ... you should know you’re worth that, Max. You’re worth

more than he understands. He's a sleaze bag, and maybe I don't hope he gets outed against his will, but I do hope someone, someday, teaches him a lesson about using people and throwing them away."

"I do too, Jay. I really hope someone screws him over but good. I'm just sorry to say that it won't be me."

Because me? I wasn't the kind of man who did revenge all that well. I went to my room and cried into my pillow for an hour after Jay left. Revenge didn't come into it at all, just the question I'd been asking myself since my grandmother had died.

If I was so lovable, so worthwhile, then why didn't anyone in the whole fucking world love me?

three

Lawyers offices on the east coast were somewhat different than I was used to. Or maybe it was just this lawyer's office.

It was basically a winding hallway with two offices and a single conference room. The part of the hallway that passed for a front entrance was full of filing cabinets stacked one atop another, and some of them were old enough to be rusty. There were two plastic lawn chairs for "waiting" and a desk with a woman behind it, and she looked at me like maybe I was lost when I walked inside.

In LA, everything had been new and sleek and computerized, with lots of giant glass walls and dozens of offices and conference rooms and cubicles.

This place was right next to a barber on one side and a clothing shop on the other.

"Can I help you, young man?"

I swallowed hard. "Max Blazek. I'm here to see Mr. Smith? My realtor said she'd meet me here."

"Oh," she said, without agreeing or nodding or otherwise giving me any indication I'd come to the right place. Then she shouted, "Your ten o'clock is here."

A moment later, an older man with a receding hairline and a Matlock-esque seersucker suit popped his head and shoulders around the corner. "Mr. Blazek?"

“That’s me,” I agreed, even though I still wasn’t sure about this situation at all. Uncomfortable was the nicest way to describe how I felt.

He waved me back and I followed, relieved to see my realtor waiting in a seat at the conference table. She gave me a distracted smile, on her phone when I walked in. Whatever anyone else in the room might be, Jenny was a hustler. She was damned good at her job, and she’d helped me find the house, make an offer, and then she’d gone through the inspection in person and helped me arrange for all the repairs that had needed done from a distance, before I’d even moved out of Southern California.

Yeah, moved.

From the west coast to the east coast, thousands of miles, without even seeing the house I was moving into in person. I’d seen pictures, sure, and Jenny had given me video shots through FaceTime, but I still didn’t even know exactly where it was, since I hadn’t been there. Mostly, I’d known that a huge house on the beach for under a million dollars was a damned steal, so North Carolina it had been.

Was it an overreaction to the situation with Harry? Maybe.

But every moment I’d spent in California had been painful after that day. Everyone wanted to ask me about my next screenplay, which still wasn’t happening at all. They wanted to ask me what I’d thought of Harry, who was already in the middle of filming a new movie, trying his hand at action hero.

The man was so terrified of spiders that I’d had to handle them for him, and now he was playing a badass. I wasn’t even going to be able to watch it, and not just because it had turned out that Harry was an asshole.

I’d just needed to be away from there. Away from the people I knew, and more importantly, who knew me. Who knew too much about me. Some of them had even asked about my mysterious lover, whom I’d never discussed further than the admission that yes, I was seeing someone.

All to protect Harry.

Now, even worse, I was sort of legally obligated to protect Harry.

“This is all relatively simple, since you signed most of it on the Internet,” the balding man said as he planted himself at the conference table and started passing me paperwork. “These are just the ones that require a wet signature.”

I wasn't sure why in this day and age anything ever needed an in-person signature, but it was easy enough to show up and put pen to paper. I was there, after all.

I'd packed up my whole condo and sold it—to the Vasquez family, no less, so Mrs. Vasquez's brother could move in, and the family could take over the whole floor. And they'd bought it for even more than I'd paid a few years earlier, so that was a nice bonus.

Then I'd bought myself a house all the way across the country, sight-unseen.

Jenny had assured me that it was an incredible house, and she had hundreds of excellent reviews from happy home-buyers and sellers, so I didn't think she was a charlatan.

She'd said the property was one of the best in the area by far, and well under my budget. In fact, I'd only spent about a quarter of the proceeds from the condo sale on it, so I had more than enough money for any unexpected expenses that might pop up. I'd already spent a good fifteen grand on replacing the HVAC, since I wasn't moving to a part of the country with a reputation for heat and humidity without working central air.

I wasn't Harry to scream and freeze up at spiders, sure, but I was no action hero either.

It took less than an hour to sign all the paperwork, even with the lawyer's explanations of each page, and then Jenny told me to go have lunch, and hopefully by the time I was done, the paperwork would be filed and the house would be officially mine.

Then all that was left was to pick up my keys and go see the place.

Honestly, even if it turned out to be a nightmare, I had enough of my money left to slink even further away. Spend the rest of my life backpacking through the Andes and never return to anywhere people might know who I was.

But that had been the point of this place.

It wasn't exactly nowhere, and the people there surely watched movies, but it wasn't Hollywood. How many average people recognized screenwriters on sight in the rural south?

When I was a kid, my grandmother had a term for the middle of nowhere. She'd called it "where foxes say goodnight." I wasn't sure of the logic behind the term other than maybe that wild foxes probably slept pretty far from humans if they had a choice.

This? This was that. The rural coast of North Carolina, outside the fancy tourist-trap-filled Outer Banks, it was truly nowhere. The biggest town nearby, Welling, was barely bigger than Malibu, and even that was a good twenty minutes away from the house. It was truly, blessedly, alone in the world.

Which was what I wanted, right?

I'd arrived the night before and checked into the nicest motel I could find, and even in the middle of town, I'd been able to see the stars in the sky.

It was weird.

So there I sat, alone at a table at a nearby Italian restaurant, eating one of the better pizzas I'd ever had in my life. That was a surprise, since I'd rather expected to find barbecue and peaches and not much else to eat in the area, but apparently life was going to be a continual surprise.

I'd chosen the Italian place itself because it was one of the only restaurants open, since apparently everything in the area was closed on Mondays. It was going to take a while to get used to that notion. I wasn't used to things closing at all, let alone for entire days of the week.

Either way, this was my new life. Excellent pizza, which I couldn't complain about. Strange small offices with lawyers who treated me like an inconvenience rather than a bag with a

dollar sign on the side. Which really wasn't as bad as it could have been, all things considered.

And the ocean, even though it was a different one than my condo in Malibu had overlooked.

It even looked different, a sort of fathomless gray-blue rather than the royal blue of the Pacific. There was something compelling about it. Not better or worse, just different.

And that had been what I'd wanted, right? Different.

My phone rang, and I answered absently. "Blazek."

"Hey Max, it's all done, papers filed. Do you want to drive over to the house now?"

"Of course," I agreed, waving to the waiter to ask him for a box and my bill. "I'll meet you there in half an hour? GPS will work with the address, right?"

"It will. And half an hour is perfect. I've got your keys, so I'll bring them."

So half an hour later, with the smell of pizza filling my car, I pulled up to the place I now called home, and nearly died.

Oh, it wasn't bad.

No, it was stunning. Three stories if you counted the finished attic, a huge wraparound porch that looked like something from an old movie, Corinthian columns across the front ...

And so much bigger than I'd realized.

Sure, I'd seen the pictures and knew the square footage—something like ten times the size of my condo, but being there in person was vastly different.

"Everything okay?" Jenny asked as she stepped down out of her Jeep, her dog Jack following after her with his tail wagging madly.

"Fine," I said, my voice thin. "I just ... It's different, seeing it in person."

Jenny grinned. “She’s a grand old lady, isn’t she? I’m told the locals used to call her Fairview, probably because”—she motioned to the enormous ocean view that unfolded behind the house. “Not to mention the woods on the north side, and just ... honestly, everything about the house and property is stunning. I’d have snapped it up in a second for myself, if I’d been looking for a new house.”

She wasn’t wrong. It looked like a movie location, picturesque and perfect, with a house like a mansion and everything around lush and green. And the ocean.

This had cost not just less than my condo, but a fraction of the price? That seemed criminal.

“Like the guy said during the inspection, she could use a power wash and a coat of paint, but honestly, overall the house is in amazing repair.” She marched over to me, holding the keys up.

Like it was a momentous moment.

Because I’d bought a huge house in rural nowhere.

Reality crashed into me, in that moment.

I lived all the way across the country from everything I’d ever known, in this huge house, in the middle of nowhere.

Okay, not entirely nowhere. It was close enough to the nearest housing area to have an electricity line, though I suspected that was more because of the previous inhabitants’ money rather than that being normal this far from a town.

“I, um ... ” Turning to Jenny, I took a deep breath. “I’m going to need you to recommend a place for me to buy furniture. Maybe a lot of it.”

She cocked her head in confusion, but didn’t seem put off or anything. “Are you not moving your stuff out here?”

“Oh I am.” I looked back at the house, taking a deep breath and then letting it out slowly. “It should be here sometime late this week. It’s just that ... Every piece of furniture I currently own would fit on the front side of the porch. I lived in a two-bedroom condo back in California.”

She burst into laughter, making her dog—some kind of golden-retriever mix with a cute stubby tail—dance around her ankles in excitement till she knelt down and rubbed his head. “Yeah, we’ve got some great antique stores in the area that’ll help you fill it in. I’ll give you addresses and all that.”

“Thank you.” I brandished the keys in front of me, mustering my courage and marching toward the front door. This was my house now, and I owned it. Everything was going to be fine. A house worth of furniture couldn’t cost more than the house, right?

Even if it did, I had that much. Everything would be fine. I would not spend the rest of my life being a hermit in my giant lonely house with, like, pallets and giant spools as furniture. At the very least, I had a seventy-five inch TV, sectional sofa, and the best king-sized bed in the whole world on the way. It was a giant four-poster made of mahogany, and I had a piece of gauzy navy-blue fabric with silver sparkles I tied to the tops of the posts that looked like a starry sky over me while I slept.

Though I supposed now, there were actual visible stars above where I was sleeping. There was even a huge set of glass doors and windows in the main bedroom so I could look out at the stars and the ocean, or go out on the balcony overlooking it all.

It had been that view of the ocean from the main bedroom that made up my mind to buy the place. Through FaceTime and thousands of miles, I’d convinced myself that it was just like the windows in my condo bedroom that overlooked the sea.

Somehow, I suspected it was going to be different in person.

That impression was deepened when I unlocked the front door and pushed it open into the wide foyer with glossy parquet flooring.

Fuck me.

I turned to Jenny. “This wasn’t, like, a plantation or something, was it?” Somehow, the luxury felt like that. Like

maybe it had been built under horrible, unjust circumstances and maybe it wasn't a thing that should be owned at all, by anyone.

"Nope," she chirped, heading up the stairs onto the porch, but pausing to motion to her dog. "Do you mind Jack in the house?"

"No, no, he's fine." I waved dismissively. Yes, I might be moving into what turned out to be a fancy house, but it didn't make me a fancy guy who wouldn't allow dogs in his home. "You're sure?"

"Certain," she agreed. "The Lavigne family built the place around 1900, and they were never in farming at all. They were importers. Had a fleet of ships they built up in the nineteenth century that went back and forth from here to France. Of course, the rumor was that it was piracy more than imports, but since they never got caught at that ... " She threw up her shoulders like 'what can you do?' and I refrained from telling her I'd rather live in a pirate house than a plantation.

Actually, that was possibly cool. I'd have to look up this Lavigne family when I had some time.

Yeah, this was going to be okay. Even if the house was enormous and empty, echoing like a cave with every step I took inside.

Jenny had been right. Open layout, wooden floors, kitchen to die for with stainless steel appliances less than a decade old ... the house had been a steal.

Maybe I was on my own, nearest neighbors half a mile away and all shopping more like a half hour drive, but it was also kind of incredible. My grandmother, I thought, would have loved the place. So I'd buy furniture and fill it up, make it a home. Make her proud of what I'd done.

I just had to figure out where to start.

four

Jenny hadn't been kidding about the antique stores in the area.

I wasn't convinced most of the stuff I found in them were real antiques, but it was mostly either old enough to pass for it or useful enough that I didn't care. I'd been to half a dozen of them, and bought tons of things on promise of delivery over the weekend. It still wouldn't fill the house, but it would get me started.

An extra bedroom set in case I ever had guests. A huge wooden monstrosity of a desk for my office that overlooked the ocean. A dining table set that seated eight, as well as a sideboard and China hutch for the enormous dining room. Come to think of it, I should probably buy a set of China, since I didn't have any.

Nope, even now I just had a box of plastic plates and cups and bowls sitting in my kitchen waiting to be unpacked, because I'd never seen a reason to buy the good stuff. It wasn't like I'd had dinner parties in my little condo. I could cook, sure. I was even pretty damn good at it. I had great kitchen tools I'd spent a small fortune on. But fancy plates were about impressing other people, and I'd never cared much about that.

Maybe it was something I should work on ...

Except I didn't even live in California anymore. Who the hell was I going to try to impress with my grandmother's chicken paprikash? There were no other writers or producers or directors here.

Paprikash did sound delicious, though, even if I was going to eat it alone, off a plastic plate. They were black, since I'd figured that way they wouldn't get stained by tomatoes and paprika and such.

Anyway, it had been a long week, to say the least. I'd never been much of a shopper, which was something I hadn't realized until I had more than ten thousand square feet of house to fill with stuff.

I was especially proud of the armoire I'd found for the guest room. The main suite had a walk-in closet, so it didn't need one, but ... well hell, I didn't actually need any of the stuff, so I just liked the old walnut armoire.

When was I going to have overnight guests? Never, that was when. My grandmother had been my only family, and I'd never been the kind of outgoing guy who made friends easily.

But that suited me fine, because I needed to get back to work.

Somehow.

Honestly, going out and buying a dozen pieces of furniture during the week had been a way of procrastinating on yet another day of staring blankly at my computer. Especially given how until that morning, my only option for work in the house was sitting on the floor in a sleeping bag with my computer in my lap, because my own tiny amount of furniture hadn't yet arrived.

The moving company guys had been confused by the delivery. The one in charge had immediately come to me on their arrival and promised me he'd call the company about where the rest of my stuff might be. I'd had to reassure him half a dozen times that no, really, that was all of it. We counted every box and piece of furniture as they unloaded it, and I had it all. Four rooms worth of furniture in a house that had ... well hell, I didn't know how many rooms the house had. Six bedrooms, the listing had said, so how many rooms did that make? Four bathrooms, the kitchen, the dining room ... a lot. It had a lot of rooms, and I did not have a lot of furniture; wouldn't even with the stuff I'd spent the week buying.

It was good to finally have my own bed set up in the house. I'd washed the sheets and made the bed that morning after the movers had left, before yet another furniture shopping expedition. On the expedition in question, I'd found something else to be delivered over the weekend: an ornate full-length mirror for my own bedroom with a mahogany frame that I was sure matched my own bed.

I'd thought release week for the movie had been tiring, with my ridiculous schedule of interviews—print, voice, and video in various combinations—and meals with strangers, but this week had without a doubt been the most tiring of my life.

Partially because sleeping in a bag on a hardwood floor was a terrible idea, but that wasn't the only reason. It was sleeping in a bag in a strange place, with no one anywhere near me, no noise, no light, no nearby PCH with its constant soothing traffic.

Every night it was just me, a sleeping bag, and the low rush of the ocean.

And the reminder that I was alone.

The closest thing I'd ever had to an adult relationship had ended in a fucking non-disclosure agreement. Sure, that part of what happened was solely his fault, and he was a goddamned asshole. But I'd picked him, hadn't I? Thought he was the next best thing to Prince Charming. So gorgeous, so clever, so talented, that was Harry Grant.

Clearly, I had terrible taste in men. I'd always been the guy to fall for the villain in every TV show and video game. I'd just thought that was because they were fictional, and in real life I'd be smarter. Apparently not.

I was a sucker for a pretty face, muscular chest, and shaggy hair. Maybe the fact that I was in the middle of nowhere was for the best, so I couldn't have any more entanglements with toxic men.

On the other hand, how many gay men even lived in the rural south? Did most of them flee when they reached adulthood? Or were they just present and closeted? Was

someone going to beat the hell out of me when they found out I was gay?

Well, Harrison Grant could hide all he wanted, but that was never going to be me.

When I'd come out to my grandmother, I'd changed my mind in the middle of the conversation and told her to forget all about it. Said I would just go back to pretending I was straight. She'd given me everything, after all. Didn't I owe her a 'normal' grandson?

She'd grabbed me by the chin with the coldest glare her warm brown eyes could muster and told me to shut the hell up. That she didn't deserve for me to be anything but healthy and happy and fucking *honest* with her, and as long as I was that, she was and always would be proud of me.

It was the first time in my life I'd heard her curse, so I'd realized just how important it was. My mother had spent years lying to her about everything; boys and school and her substance abuse issues—and the last had eventually killed her.

All my grandmother had really wanted was for me to be me, and to be happy that way.

So I was the proudest fucking pride flag-waving gay man I could be, just for her. I'd shown up at the parade every year—and so had she, until the very end of her life—and I wasn't damned well going to start hiding now.

I had nothing to be ashamed of.

Well, except my taste in men, apparently.

Yup, I was going to dig out my pride flag first thing in the morning and put it up right outside my front door. Every delivery person over the weekend would get to see it, and I'd be the same out and proud gay man I'd been in LA. Just a little more nervous about it here than I'd been there.

That decision made for later, I turned my mind back to the now, and concluded that what I was going to do this afternoon was take a damned nap. I'd been on the go for days, sleeping for crap, and for the first time, I had my bed all set up and ready in my gorgeous enormous bedroom.

Maybe it'd screw up my sleep schedule and I'd be awake all night, but that was fine. That was future Max's problem. Current Max had earned a damn nap.

When I walked into my bedroom, though, there was a woman in there, standing at the end of my bed. She turned toward me, her eyes going wide, as surprised by me as I was by her.

I screamed.

She screamed.

I pulled back to the doorway, like this was an earthquake and I needed to shelter from falling debris. She ducked halfway behind one of the enormous posts of my bed, peeking out at me from behind it with one hand pressed to her chest like if she had pearls on, she'd have clutched them.

And then we both stood there staring at each other in silence for a long moment.

My blood was rushing in my ears, and my mind kept going back to what I'd been thinking about. Was she mad about my pride flag? The one I ... hadn't even put up yet. No, that was silly. What she was, was breaking and entering. Or something like that.

But as my heart rate calmed, I started to notice things other than the fact that there was an intruder in my new home.

First off, she was easily my grandmother's age before she'd passed—sixty if she was a day, and likely older. She wore a long lacy white dress that could have passed for a wedding dress for a modern Southern belle. She had the classic beauty of someone like Helen Mirren, complete with the silver hair and wrinkles that said she'd lived a long, full life.

Lived was the right word, too, because the longer I looked at her, the more I realized that I could see the window behind her. Not around her, but *through* her. She was ever so slightly transparent.

She was a ghost.

Or maybe I was losing my fucking mind, because there was no such thing as ghosts. Was she a hallucination? Maybe the mushrooms on my sandwich at lunch had been the funny kind? I thought those were maybe legal around these parts, though I was pretty sure you still weren't supposed to feed them to someone without letting them know.

“Who ... who are you?” She was the first to speak, slow and hesitant, her accent making her sound like an old southern belle, with that odd, almost English lilt and disappearing Rs.

I took a deep breath, blinked repeatedly, and figured ... what the hell? I was alone. There was no one else within half a mile of us, so why not talk to the possible hallucination? “I'm Max. I just moved in.”

She glanced at my bed again, looking at it like it was an alien specimen. “Then this is ... yours?” Her expression and tone suggested there was something wrong with it, and hey, I took offense to that. It was the nicest piece of furniture I owned, by a lot, and the mattress alone had cost me thousands of dollars. It was like sleeping on a goddamned cloud.

I'd had a professor in college who had asked what we thought was the most important element in writing well, and gotten answers ranging from innate creativity to mind-altering drugs, but in the end, he'd slammed his palms down on his desk and said—nearly shouted—“No, dammit, it's a good night's sleep.”

Now, we all knew he'd done it because it was a nine AM Monday morning class and he was sick of some of us habitually showing up half asleep or hung over, but it had still stuck with me. Especially after reading studies that said he was right, and sleep was one of the most important things you could do for your brain and body.

All that to say that I'd bought myself the best bed I possibly could, and this ghost was giving it the side-eye.

“It is mine,” I agreed, internally daring her to start something over my awesome bed. She was the interloper here, and a dead one at that. I owned this place!

I'd bought the house fair and square, and even if she'd owned it before, dead people couldn't own things.

Fuck me, I needed to sit down. I was treating this like it was actually happening and not like I was losing my mind.

There was such a thing as adult-onset schizophrenia, wasn't there? Maybe it was that, and causing hallucinations. Or maybe I had mad cow disease. Dammit, I'd always known I should become a vegetarian. I just liked bacon so damn much.

She continued looking my bed over for a moment as though it was a painting of an orgy and not a piece of furniture, before looking back up at me. "How much space does one man need to sleep?"

I scowled at her and demanded, "What else am I supposed to fill this giant empty room with?"

Fuck, I was engaging with the hallucination.

She looked around, sadness covering her features, then motioned to a sunny south-facing window. "I had my piano over there."

"That sounds lovely, but I don't have a piano. I couldn't even play if I did have one." I wasn't lying; it did sound lovely. But seriously, me having a piano was a waste of a perfectly good musical instrument, since it would essentially be a thousand-pound paperweight to me. "Now I'm sorry to be rude, but who are you, and why are you in my house? Also, are you aware that you're either a hallucination or dead?"

The look she gave me could have peeled paint. "Of course I know I'm dead, young man. Why else would I be see-through and wearing this ridiculous dress? They must have buried me in this nonsense." She sighed and pressed her hand to her forehead, slumping down onto the bed. "I suppose it fits this disaster well enough, since it's a funeral dress if ever I saw one."

"I kind of thought it was a wedding dress," I offered, though ... she was right. All that lace and layering was a little

much to be wearing around the house on your average Friday afternoon.

She looked down at the dress thoughtfully, then gave a sort of half shrug like ‘maybe,’ and looked back up at me. “I am Nadia Lavigne. And I promise you, young man, this was my house long before it was yours. My grandfather helped build this house with his own two hands.”

The Lavigne family, like Jenny had told me. I hadn’t taken any time to look them up, but it fit with what little I did know about them building the house a little over a hundred years before. It still would have been before Nadia was born, assuming she was recently deceased.

“Now,” she said, pushing herself up and sauntering her way over to me. “It’s your turn. Who are you? And who is that?”

Who was *what*? I turned to look where she was pointing, worried that my house had been invaded by another ghost or ghoul or just plain person, but she was pointing at the fireplace mantel on the north wall of the room. At the pictures of my grandmother.

That, naturally, seemed more important than anything else she’d said, so I crossed to look at them. I had dozens of them that I’d brought with me in my car on the drive across the country. Those had been the things I’d deemed important enough to pack into my car: a sleeping bag, my clothes, my computer, and my pictures of Grandma.

“That’s my grandmother. Her name was Klara. Klara Blazek.” I reached up and touched her cheek on the one we’d taken at my college graduation, cheek to cheek. She’d been sick by then, but nothing would have been enough to stop her from coming that day. I squeezed my eyes shut and took a deep breath, then turned back to her. “And I’m Max. The, ah, guy who bought your house.”

The very concept seemed wrong, somehow. Sure, I’d bought the house from an estate, but you weren’t supposed to have to talk to the dead person. Explain to them that their house was, in fact, your house now.

Nadia didn't seem angry or vengeful, though, which was a step up from your average movie haunting. She didn't tell me to get out or she'd start making the walls bleed.

No, she nodded to my grandmother's photos as though the two of them had just had a conversation, and turned to me. "I'm afraid you're going to have to furnish at least one of the guest rooms, young man. A lady needs a bed." She glanced over at mine once more, unimpressed moue back on her lips. "Even if not something so extravagant as all that."

Now, I'd already bought the furniture to fill one guest bedroom, even if I hadn't had a ghostly houseguest in mind when I'd done so. It wasn't being delivered until the weekend, but it *was* coming.

If I hadn't already bought it, I realized with sudden clarity that I'd be running out to get in my car right then and do her bidding.

Maybe it was because she was being downright reasonable compared to every fictional ghost I'd ever heard about. Maybe it was because she seemed terribly sad. Maybe it was because I was pitiful and lonely. Maybe it was because in that moment, she'd reminded me of how much I missed my grandmother.

It didn't matter all that much why, though, because in the end, I shrugged and nodded. "It should be arriving tomorrow, I think?"

She smiled at me, snapped open a fan that was hanging from a string of beads around her wrist, and flipped it toward her face as she smiled indulgently at me. For a second, I could have sworn I felt the breeze from the thing, and I expected her to say something southern and possibly insulting, like "bless your heart." But no, she just inclined her head and gave me something that looked almost like a curtsy, and disappeared.

Just as I'd promised myself, I woke up bright and early and hunted through boxes until I found my pride flag, then went out to make sure it was prominently displayed near the front door.

A light breeze blew around the house, snapping it up and making it fly beautifully next to the porch. Perfect.

I'd only just finished when the rumble of a truck snagged my attention and I turned to find a pickup with a trailer behind it pulling up my long driveway.

The end of the drive in front of the house was circular, leaving plenty of room to pull in and then back through the opposite direction, so my own car off to one side of the drive wasn't much in the way.

My determination to be myself was instantly tested when a huge guy stepped out of the driver's side of the pickup. He had to be freaking six and a half feet tall, wearing worn blue jeans, an orange trucker hat so old I couldn't read what it had once said, and a slightly graying brown beard that came halfway down to his chest.

"You Max?" he asked as his partner, shorter and squatter, but no less capable of beating the crap out of scrawny little me, stepped out of the giant vehicle.

I stuffed my hand in my pocket, reminding myself that my phone was there, and I'd already determined I had a great cell connection. I also had the internet already set up, because that wasn't the kind of thing you could live a week without.

“I *am* Max,” I told him, waiting for his judgment.

Yeah, fine, judgment probably wasn’t why he was there, but he was huge and terrifying. He was the one who got to decide what this interaction was gonna look like.

“I’m Joe.” He reached up and slid his cap off, folding the bill in half and stuffing it in his back pocket, then strode toward me. It took every bit of my willpower not to skitter back like a frightened bug, but I held my ground. Then ... he stuck out his hand to shake. “I’m here to deliver the furniture. Think I’ve got another load for you tomorrow, too, from Lily’s place.”

I shook his hand, trying to calm the tremble in my own, and nodded to him. “Nice to meet you. And I appreciate you coming out with it, since there’s no way I could carry it myself.”

He laughed, and the sound was nice, deep and rich, and reminded me of all those actors known for playing fathers. “Hell, don’t think I could carry it on my own. That’s why I got Jimmy here.”

Unlike Joe, Jimmy was not looking at me. He was looking at my flag. Looking unimpressed.

Joe cleared his throat, narrowing his eyes at his partner. “Jimmy. Might as well start with the chairs.” He stepped between his partner and the flag, motioning to the trailer behind the truck. Then he turned back to me with a nod and a surprisingly kind smile. “You just open up and let us know where exactly you want the dining room stuff, and we’ll get it all taken care of for you.”

I nodded and turned toward the house, scurrying up the stairs and opening the door. The dining room was easy to get to, right there on the first floor and in line of sight from the door, so at least it would be simple for them.

There was a raised voice outside for a second, but I thought it had been Joe’s deep baritone, rather than his friend. A moment later, they were carrying the first of my chairs inside.

As they set the first chairs down on the carpet, Joe gave his partner a stink-eye that could have made a lesser man quake in fear. Jimmy pouted like a five-year old denied candy, but he didn't slam anything or damage my chairs, so I wasn't going to make it a thing.

Well, not unless he did.

I'd taken two years of Judo; I might be able to toss him.

I pointed to the spaces I'd intended for each object to go, and Joe nodded sagely, like he could imagine the configuration, then followed Jimmy back out for more chairs.

A few minutes later when they carried in the last of the eight chairs and Jimmy turned and headed outside, huffy, Joe turned an apologetic look on me. "Brother-in-law, you know. If I smack him around, my sister'll be mad." He made a face at the door Jimmy had disappeared through. "Maybe better off, though."

I had to choke down a laugh, because it felt like that might be inappropriate. "We don't get to choose family, not even in-laws."

He sighed and nodded. "Ain't that the truth? Sure as hell I wouldn't have picked that one."

And he headed out for whatever was next. The table, buffet, and hutch had all been carefully tucked into his trailer, so the whole dining room was going to be handled.

As they were carrying the buffet, which had to weigh a few hundred pounds, since it was solid wood, another truck started up the driveway.

Shit. I hadn't really thought this part through. I hadn't expected people to arrive at the same time.

I hadn't actually thought much about the delivery part at all.

This truck pulled up right behind the first, looking like something from a movie or a car show, an older model, maybe from the fifties, mint green and utterly pristine, shiny with a fresh coat of wax. The driver didn't treat the situation like it

was a problem at all, flipping the engine off and climbing down out of the cab.

And that ...

That wasn't a man at all.

That was a bona fide religious experience. His jeans weren't so tight he couldn't move, but just tight enough to hug all the right places and show off his muscular thighs and ... ahem, anyway. The black T-shirt was a size too small, and looked like a second skin over his perfect muscles. It matched his night-black hair, cut in longish layers that blew in the breeze.

When he leaned into the cab of the truck and pulled out a black cowboy hat to set on his brow, I worried I might have an aneurysm.

He headed for me, ever so slightly bowlegged like he might have actually spent time on horses, or maybe he was just the slowest, smoothest good old boy ever to be born. Either way, it might result in my death.

As he approached me, his eyes flicked behind me to the flag, then back to my face. They were the lightest icy green I'd ever seen in my life, like glaciers, a shade I'd never seen on a person before.

Every molecule in my body froze for a moment as he looked at the flag, terrified of his reaction. Would he be a Joe, or a Jimmy?

Neither.

No, a slow, sexy smile bloomed across his gorgeous face, somehow accentuating those high cheekbones and fucking perfect cleft chin and fuck me, what was he, a model? A sex god?

He stuck out a hand like Joe had, and I had to work even harder to push down the tremble in my own hand, though this time it was for completely different reasons. "I've got your armoire and mirror here, but I can wait till they're done. Got nowhere else to be this morning."

The breath rushed out of me in a second, and I almost couldn't draw another. He was beautiful, and not instantly offended, and ... nice?

“ ’M Gentry, by the way. Gentry Fox.”

How was it possible for even a name to be sexy?

He mistook my hesitation and offered an understanding smile. “I know, country music nightmare of a name, but my parents were like that. Poor little brother got named after Hank Williams.”

I couldn't hold back a laugh at that for some reason, but shook my head. “No, no it's fine. It fits. Um, not to say that you're a country music nightmare.” Fuck, why hadn't I just swallowed my own tongue to shut me the hell up? “I'm Max,” I tacked on, like that would make him forget my nervous rambling.

His slow, easy smile wasn't the least bit bothered. I was deeply out of practice at interactions with attractive men, but it seemed almost ... flirty. I had to be misreading that.

“Fuck me, another one,” came the snide comment from behind me, and I turned to see Jimmy and Joe coming out. Jimmy was glaring at Gentry like he was a bag of garbage on his lawn. “What, is it a fucking convention?”

Gentry turned the smile on him, but ... okay, yeah, it had definitely been flirty before, because sent Jimmy's way, it went as frosty as a ski slope in January, if no less beautiful than before. “You know Jimmy, it just might be a convention. You planning to attend? I've always had my suspicions.”

Jimmy bared his teeth, taking a step toward Gentry that was clearly intended to be a threat.

Gentry didn't seem especially threatened, on the surface. His whole body relaxed, arms spread as though in invitation. If I hadn't taken years of Judo, I wouldn't have recognized it for what it was—he was ready for a fight.

Joe, on the other hand, wasn't having it. He reached out and wrapped a giant meaty hand around the back of his brother-in-law's neck. “I told you to keep your damn mouth

shut, Jimmy. You want to make forty bucks, or you want to walk home from here?"

Jimmy's whole face scrunched up in concentration, and I couldn't tell if he was thinking or trying to break free, but a moment later he scowled and turned back toward the trailer. "Come on. Let's just finish this so we won't have to hang out with no pansy."

"They're hydrangeas, not pansies," Gentry corrected, pointing to the enormous flowering bushes on either side of the porch.

Jimmy threw him an acidic look. "You *would* know that."

"Everybody with half a damn brain knows that," Joe said, coming around the side of his trailer and reaching for the bottom of the hutch as he lifted his chin toward a couple of glossy-leaved trees nearby. "Just like those're magnolias. Now get back to work or get to walking."

"Good to see you, Joe," Gentry said as they lifted the next item and headed for the door once more. "Saw your wife at the store yesterday, and she looks fit to pop."

Joe grinned over. "Damn right. Doc says that's how twins are late in the term."

I didn't follow the two of them in, since I'd already told Joe where the stuff went, and I didn't especially want to spend more time with his brother-in-law.

Gentry, on the other hand ... I was probably being a naive child again, but him, I did want more time with.

"Joe's good people," Gentry told me quietly after they disappeared inside. "You ever need anything, he'll help you out. His wife Dinah, too."

"What, not Jimmy?"

He snorted at that. "Jimmy was a bully in high school, and he never grew up. Mostly he sits around his trailer and drinks beer all day, except when Joe gets him a little work to pay for the beer. Don't know what he'll do when Joe's goodwill runs out."

I suspected that day was closer than Jimmy realized, given the shortness of Joe's temper, but I didn't say so. Likely enough, Gentry knew too, since he knew these people far better than I did.

So I slightly changed the trajectory of the subject back toward Gentry himself. "Jimmy's got to be at least forty, how do you know he was a high school bully?"

He laughed at that, slapping his thigh. "Believe it or not, our boy Jimmy is thirty-two, and I spent two years in high school with him."

"Thirty, huh?" I asked, shamelessly dropping Jimmy entirely and asking about Gentry himself.

He turned that million dollar smile back on me. "In about a month, yup. You?"

"Twenty-seven." We were both facing my pride flag, so he couldn't have too many doubts about that. But what else could I say? Why were words entirely failing me? I'd forgotten how to flirt.

Or maybe—more likely—I'd always sucked at flirting.

We stood there in silence as Joe and Jimmy came back for the top of the hutch, mostly glass, and I crossed my fingers for everyone's sake that Jimmy's hands didn't "slip" while carrying it. No one needed to deal with that.

"Armoire and mirror going in the main bedroom?" Gentry asked, tone conversational but interested, and I turned to find him looking at me. I wondered what he saw.

I'd been told I was "cute" before, but it was about the most flattering thing anyone had ever said about me. Brown hair, brown eyes, and slightly upturned nose that was, yes, cute. Or piggish, depending on whether you liked me or wanted to bully me.

I really hoped Gentry was at least the former, if not something else entirely.

"Um, no. I mean, the mirror, yes. It goes in the main. But the armoire is going in a bedroom downstairs. I—I'm not sure

which one yet.” I bit my lip, frowning. Should I have asked Nadia which one she wanted?

How weird was that?

For all I knew, after a decent night’s sleep and any possible drugs clearing my system, I’d never see her again. That made more sense than the idea that I was going to be living with a ghost and had to worry about her personal comfort.

She was incorporeal, what comfort did she actually need? On the other hand, she’d requested a bed, so maybe it was important.

“You want to look through them and decide?” Gentry asked, not seeming especially put out that I wasn’t sure. “Or you just want to pick one and go for it? I can’t imagine this is the last of your stuff.”

“I ... I don’t know. I honestly have no idea how to decorate the house.” I winced at the surprised look he gave me, but I’d already started with the truth, I might as well go on with it. “I don’t think I understood how big the house was when I bought it. I lived in a two-bedroom condo, and I didn’t even move my desk with me. It was from college and made of particle board.”

“Ah, you’re the one who bought the captain’s desk from Bev that I’m supposed to deliver later today, aren’t you?” The expression that spread across his face was bright and open. “You know that thing came from here, right?”

“That ... the desk? I bought a desk that belongs in the house?”

“Yup,” he agreed. “It was old man Lavigne’s way back in the forties. Not much of the furniture from the house has come on the market, but that one did.”

I didn’t even know what to say to that. I’d imagined it would be perfect for the upstairs office that overlooked the ocean, and suddenly, I wondered if that was where it had been before. If the pale spot on the wood floor not browned by years of exposure to the sun was because of the very desk I was having delivered.

He turned and looked at me sidelong. “So you’re new in town, obviously.”

“Obviously.” The word came out without thought, and then I almost wanted to slap my hand over my mouth. What the hell was wrong with me?

“You made any friends yet?”

Suddenly, I thought maybe the answer was yes. Still, I swallowed down my spark of hope and shook my head. “Got here less than a week ago, haven’t really had time for it.”

“ ’S a little late this week, but some of us get together Friday nights down at Joe’s bar. Maybe you oughta come.” He wasn’t looking right at me anymore, but his attention was focused on me completely. Almost like ... like he was inviting me on a date, or something like it.

“Joe like—”

“Like Joe who’s delivering your furniture right now, yup. Bar’s only open at night, so sometimes Joe does deliveries for his wife’s shop, and a couple of the others in town.”

His wife’s shop ... pregnant. The lovely woman who’d sold me the dining room set had been very pregnant, and one of the sweetest people I’d met in town so far. It only made sense she had her husband doing deliveries. “I’d say it’s a small world, but I guess it’s more just a small town.”

He nodded at that. “Sure is. And I’m sure he’d be real happy to have you. Bar’s doing great and all, but never hurts to get in new people in a small town.”

“That sounds like fun. Friday night, you said?”

He turned back toward me, beaming. “Friday night. We usually get there around five or six, but he opens at four or so, so whenever you want to mosey on over.”

“I’ll see you there.”

“Sure will.” It might have been my imagination, but I could have sworn he gave me a twice-over before going back to the discussion of where the furniture was going.

Joe and Jimmy came back out and made their exit, Joe offering another handshake and the usual pleasantries, and Jimmy throwing himself into the truck and sitting there, pouting, as he was ignored. I offered Joe a tip, but he waved me off with a glance at Jimmy, and a moment later I was alone with Gentry Fox, most gorgeous man in the fucking country.

He continued to be patience itself, letting me walk through the various downstairs bedrooms before deciding which one to put the armoire in. I decided on the one at the north end of the house with windows along two walls. It was the farthest from mine, but with a lovely ocean view. So lots of privacy for me and my ... guest. Ghost. Ghostguest?

Anyway, privacy.

And then the mirror in my bedroom, which Gentry carried like, well, it was made of glass.

“Oh, that’s a hell of a match on the wood,” he said as he settled it in near my bed. “And a gorgeous piece of furniture, that.” Unlike Nadia, he was looking at my bed like it was something to envy. Or maybe aspire to.

“It’s my favorite,” I agreed. “One of the only pieces of furniture I brought with me. That and the sofa were the only big ones.”

“Good choice,” he said, running his hand down one post, looking at the wood like it was something special. I wondered if he was, like, a furniture guy, or maybe he just liked to feel up beds.

Either way, fine by me.

Harry hadn’t complained about it, but he’d been mostly indifferent to my bed.

I walked Gentry back out to his truck, and he asked about where I was putting the desk as we went. He didn’t seem surprised or horrified by the idea it was going upstairs, just said he’d bring someone along to help with it, as well as the dolly he used to help with the armoire.

I felt oddly hollow as he headed back down the driveway, and told myself it was clearly just the fact that I was lonely. I

couldn't even truly be friends with someone in less than an hour of acquaintance, let alone something more.

I wasn't made to be entirely alone like I'd mostly been for the last week. Mostly alone? Yes. I loved silence and solitude. But I did need something. Someone.

Too bad I had yet to find them.

The sun glinted off the back window of Gentry Fox's truck as he drove away, like the universe wanted to remind me maybe I had found someone.

Kind of early to be thinking like that, since he'd invited me to a group gathering almost a week from now.

I headed back into the house, determined to get some work done before the next delivery showed up. I'd left my computer on my bed, where I'd managed about a page of very loose plans for a script. I didn't love it, but it was better than a blank page.

When I got back to my room, I found Nadia sitting on my bed, looking at my computer, her expression vaguely annoyed.

"Something I can help you with?" I hadn't expected her to be messing with my work. If anything, I'd expected a southern belle as old as my grandmother to be berating me for my pride flag out front, but I supposed there was still time for that.

She shot me a tart look, lips pursed and eyebrows lifted, and I braced myself for impact. "This is terrible, young man. The last thing the world needs is yet another movie about a man whose wife dies." She tapped the tip of her fan against the computer screen. "And didn't anyone ever tell you that semicolons are the devil's punctuation?"

"The ... what?"

"Semicolons. Truly awful. No one likes semicolons." She shook her head. "And really, with your reputation, I'd have expected more."

"My reputation?"

She looked back up at me, eyebrow lifted. "What, you think just because I'm old I didn't go see *Life After Anna* in

the theater?”

She ... had seen my movie. Holy hell.

Her gaze softened and she slid off the edge of my bed. “It was lovely, by the way. I saw on the news that it was about your grandmother, and you lost her before the movie was finished.” Walking up to me, she reached out and set a hand on my shoulder, sending a shiver of freezing cold through me, and somehow at the same time, comfort. “I’m sure she’d have been very proud.”

Maybe that rule about Blazeks not falling apart in front of people only counted with living people, because after that, nothing was going to hold back the tears.



IT TURNED out Joe was the one who showed up with Gentry that afternoon, the two of them laughing and joking as only old friends could as they unloaded the enormous monster of a desk onto a furniture dolly to get it inside.

It took them almost half an hour to get it upstairs, as heavy as it was, but they managed with no dings on the desk, gouges on the walls, or broken digits between them, so I was duly impressed.

“I don’t have much in the house yet, but would you guys like some bottles of water?” I asked as they reached the top of the stairs.

Joe grinned from where he was leaning on the desk, breathing hard. “That’d be downright neighborly if you got ’em.”

I ran off to the kitchen to grab two icy bottles and rushed back just in time to see them slide the desk into place. It fit the paler spot perfectly, and they both smiled at it, Joe patting the top and chuckling. “Welcome home.”

Gentry laughed as he accepted his bottle, nodding. “Right back where it belongs.” He chugged half the water before wiping his forearm across his sweaty brow, and I did not stare

creepily. Who was to say what constituted “creepy” anyway? Then he turned to me. “You got a chair coming? Cause I might just be able to get you the original that used to be here. I got it in the shop right now, fixing the upholstery.”

Joe lifted a brow at him as he drank his water, but didn’t say anything.

Me? I couldn’t have been more thrilled. He was offering not just a piece of furniture, but to spend more time with me. “That would be amazing. I haven’t gotten a chair yet. Didn’t find anything that really fit with it, you know?”

He laughed and knocked on the solid wood top. “Not much does, I reckon. Not like it’d look right with one of them wheely office chairs everybody’s using now.”

It really wouldn’t, and that had been half of my problem. I’d wanted something comfortable—something ergonomic—but your average office chair didn’t really fit with the clearly antique hand-carved desk.

Gentry, though, just winked at me. “I got you covered. Just waiting on the rivets, since I had to order them.”

Joe rolled his eyes. “You special ordered rivets to match the old ones, didn’t you?”

“ ’Course,” Gentry agreed. “It wouldn’t have looked right with different ones. Better to wait and get it right than rush and ruin a piece of history. Always better to take your time and do things right.” The look he gave me as he said the last told me he wasn’t talking about a chair anymore.

Oh gods. I was going to melt into the floor. The man was a literal walking sex bomb.

Joe scoffed even as he gave another chuckle, muttering something about him being entirely shameless, and threw his empty water bottle at Gentry’s head, which Gentry caught with ease, lazy smile still in place.

“I’m gonna bring Gen with me to deliver the bedroom set tomorrow,” Joe said, changing the subject as he turned to me. “No reason anybody oughta be exposed to Jimmy any more than they have to be.”

Gen. He meant Gentry. I couldn't keep the smile off my face. "You'll get no complaints from me on that. Especially after the way you two got this thing up here without crashing it. Consider me impressed."

We headed back into the hallway, together, and my heart almost stopped. Nadia was standing there at the top of the stairs in all her lacy glory, fan out.

Joe had turned toward me to ask if I had a time preference, but for a second, I swore Gentry's eyes locked on the spot where she stood. He blinked a couple times, shaking his head, and when I looked back, Nadia had disappeared.

"You okay Gen?" Joe asked.

Gentry, still staring at the spot at the head of the stairs, nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm good. Just been a long week, and I forgot to eat breakfast. You know how it is."

Joe frowned like yes, he did know, and didn't like it, but he didn't say anything.

"Do you want to stay for lunch?" I asked, just blurting the words out without even thinking about it.

Oh wow, self, that wasn't desperate at all. Considering most of what I had in the house was bread and pastrami, if they said yes, I didn't have a lot to offer, but I supposed at least I could sort of follow through.

But Gentry smiled and shook his head. "That's awful nice of you, but I've got another delivery I need to go make. We'll see you tomorrow with the bedroom. Same room as the armoire?"

"That's the one," I agreed, put out that he wasn't staying even though I had practically nothing to feed him. And Joe, of course.

Sure. Joe.

Joe rolled his eyes and wandered off, leaving us to stare at each other awkwardly for a moment, then Gentry turned and grabbed his hat from where he'd left it on the finial of the

staircase, tipped it at me as he tucked it onto his head, and followed Joe out. "Have a nice afternoon, Max."

"You too, Gentry," I said, quiet enough that I doubted it carried much farther than his ears.

Gentry. It tasted right on my tongue somehow, comfortable and familiar.

I couldn't wait to get another taste.

I 'd barely woken when there was a knock at the door the next morning, so I figured anyone who showed up at barely seven-thirty in the morning got to deal with me in my pajamas. It wasn't like a pair of stretchy yoga pants and a UCLA T-shirt was so awful, anyway.

It was Joe, hat in hand. "I'm awful sorry to show so early, Max."

To his credit, he did look terribly sorry. Also, exhausted and stressed. What was I gonna say, "no, come back later"? Not likely. So I swung the door open for him. "It's fine. Everything okay?"

He bit his lip, looking ready to explode, and Gentry was the one who answered, coming up behind him and patting him on the back with a grin. "Dinah's gone into labor. He'd have cancelled, but she told him she'd come out of that hospital bed and kick his ass if he tried to disappoint her clients, labor or not."

I had to clap a hand over my mouth to stifle my laughter at that. Yeah, the woman who'd sold me the dining room set had seemed the type to say something like that.

"This ain't even for her shop," Joe grumbled, twisting his hat. "No offense."

"None taken, and I'd have completely understood if you hadn't made it." I couldn't think of a better excuse to miss a delivery, in fact. A whole different kind of delivery. Yikes.

They worked their way through the whole bedroom set quickly, Gentry putting the bed frame together while Joe brought in the smaller pieces and put them where I directed.

He was quick and efficient, his long, dexterous fingers moving just the right way on the tools he'd brought for the purpose. He clearly did this sort of thing regularly.

"This is a pretty set for this room," he told me conversationally as he worked. "Be a nice guest room if you have people over."

"That was the plan when I bought the set." I bit my lip, considering, and finally deciding to bite the bullet. "Do you have any idea where I'd find any of the other original furniture?"

He looked up at me, one brow lifted. "Maybe. How come?"

I shrugged, failing entirely at pretending to be casual. "I don't know. It just feels ... right. If that makes sense."

It wasn't because I was thinking it would make Nadia comfortable. That would be silly, right? Making a ghost comfortable.

Thing was, when I'd gone to put my computer in the office the night before, I'd found her standing in front of the desk, a hand poised just over the dark wood, her eyes glossy with wetness. Or not wetness. I didn't even know if ghosts could cry, but if a desk had been that important to her, dammit, it just felt like the right thing to do.

Gentry glanced around the room, rubbing his lips together thoughtfully, then nodded. "I might be able to find some of it. If you get me your phone number, I'll see what I can do and give you a call."

"Woo boy, you gotta get that AC looked at," Joe announced on his way into the room with a dresser. "There's this spot right at the bottom of the stairs that's like a goddamn icebox."

"HVAC vents there," Gentry answered fast, almost interrupting Joe to say it. "Not much to be done. Old house,

gets cold spots sometimes. Creaks at night too.”

Odd.

Joe just shrugged and moved the dresser into place, unbothered and trying to hurry. Heck, I’d offered to help, but they’d both shot me down with a swift, “Dinah’d kill us.”

This time, though, when Joe finished placing the rest of the furniture while Gentry was working on the bed, I didn’t ask to tip him, just slipped an extra sixty dollars into his hand. Then I motioned to the kitchen counter. “I got some muffins at the grocery store yesterday, you should have one before you go. I suspect it’s going to be a while before you think to eat again.”

This time, he didn’t turn me down, just headed into the kitchen with a nod.

So I called after him, “There’s juice in the fridge too, if you want. Or more water bottles. Afraid I haven’t set up the coffeemaker just yet.”

I’d intended to do that before they came, but then they’d arrived just after dawn.

Gentry came out of the bedroom wiping his hands on a cloth. “All done. Looks like a little haven from the world.”

I grinned and nodded. “One of the best views in the house, so I thought ... people might like it.” Turning to avoid his eye, I motioned to the kitchen. “Come on, you should have something to eat with Joe.”

Seeming to have read my mind, Joe thrust a plate into Gentry’s hand as he walked into the room. “He had your favorite lemon poppy stuff, so I heated you one. Eat.”

Gentry gave him a look that screamed “yes, Dad,” but took the plate and didn’t hesitate to start eating the muffin on it. The moment he turned around, Joe pulled the sixty dollars I’d given him out of his pocket and slid it into Gentry’s back pocket.

“You feeling me up, old man?” Gentry asked, one brow lifted as he stuffed the bottom of the muffin in his mouth.

Joe grabbed his own plate with a chocolate muffin on it and rolled his eyes. “You wish.”

“Your wife wishes.”

At that, they both leaned over their plates and started laughing, clearly some kind of inside joke.

“Sorry,” Joe choked out after a minute. “But he might be right. She’s into that gay fanfiction online. And Asian dramas where cute guys make out.”

Okay, that was ... that was actually hilarious.

“Save her a bunch of pain from giving birth to twins today,” Gentry pointed out, and when Joe laughed again, we all did. Gentry leaned against the kitchen counter, long and lean, his legs crossed at the ankle so very casually, and smiled at me. “It’d be a problem for me and Joe, though. Two demanding tops in bed together? Recipe for disaster.”

The words were about Joe, but Gentry’s pale green eyes pierced me, clearly less interested in his friend’s reaction than mine. We stared at each other for a moment, the kitchen suddenly too damned hot, and somehow short on air.

Joe, however, scoffed. “I’m married to Dinah, boy. If there’s a demanding top alive in the world, it’s her.” He shoved a glass of juice into Gentry’s hand, and cracked open a bottle of water for himself. “And as much as I wish we could stick around, I gotta get to the hospital. Doc said it might take a while since they’re our first, but I ain’t gonna miss it, not even for you, Gen.”

Gentry downed the juice, managing a tiny nod as he did so. “ ’Course,” he agreed. “The hell kind of friend would I be if I let you miss your kids being born?”

Sensing that my window of opportunity was closing, I yanked my phone out of my pocket, thumbed it open and handed it to him. “Want to text yourself my number? For, um, the furniture.”

He grinned, wiping his hands on the paper napkin Joe had handed him on his plate, and then taking my phone and typing on it.

“Furniture, my ass,” Joe mumbled, then finished his muffin and rinsed his plate in the sink. Then he snatched Gentry’s empty plate and did the same with it.

Damn. The manners were impressive.

Ten minutes later, they were gone, and I was alone again. But that was okay. It was totally okay.

I grabbed the bedding I’d prepared and headed back to the newly furnished bedroom. Nadia was already there, looking at each piece of furniture and nodding in what looked like satisfaction.

“Good enough?” I asked as I started stretching the fitted sheet over the mattress.

“It’s charming,” she agreed, lowering herself primly into a sage green velveteen wingback chair. “You have excellent taste.”

I sketched a fake bow as I tucked a corner of the sheet. “Thank you. I get it from my grandmother, obviously.”

As I came around the corner of the bed, something glinted outside and caught my eye, so I turned to look. At first, I couldn’t figure out what it had been, but as I approached the window, I realized that there was something there, just inside the tree line.

For a moment, I had nightmare notions of someone stalking me or something wild like that, but as I craned my neck for a better angle, I realized it wasn’t a person. It was a window. A house window.

“What the heck is that? I thought no one else lived near here.”

“No one lives near here,” Nadia agreed. “The closest thing is that wedding venue half a mile up the road. And then the housing subdivision a mile off.”

I turned to look at her in confusion. “But there’s a house right there.” I pointed out the window, because the more I looked, the more it was obvious. The clear outline of a house just inside the trees. A sloping roof with a wide gable window.

Stone walls. A deep red front door that was just barely showing through hanging kudzu.

“I assure you,” she reiterated, “no one else lives anywhere near here.”

She didn’t even glance at the window, and she wasn’t saying there wasn’t a house. She was saying no one lived there. Without just saying the obvious, “yeah there’s a house but no one lives there.”

Weird.

“So who did live there, when someone did? I mean, I can’t imagine you have an extra house out here for nothing.” I was so busy staring out the window that I missed when she moved to a spot right near me.

I caught her movement from the corner of my eye and turned to look at her, but she still wasn’t looking out the window. She was looking *at* the window—more specifically at the frame of it. “It should have drapes. Who wants to look at the dirty old woods?”

She ... wanted me to block off the view of the house. And she was ignoring what I’d asked.

What the hell was going on?

“I’ll have to look into that,” I answered, continuing to stare out the window. There was no point in asking further pointed questions, since she wasn’t answering.

I owned something like a hundred acres mostly centered around the house, so I was pretty sure I owned the land the strange house was on. Did that mean I owned two houses? And if so, why hadn’t anyone mentioned it to me? Wouldn’t they have wanted to charge extra for that?

I was going to have to check that out.



THE TOWN of Welling was small. Really small. One grocery store, two restaurants, two fast food places, a handful of odd

touristy shops, and ... a bakery.

Now maybe I was setting myself up for later health issues, but honestly, was there anything in the world better than a nice fresh crusty loaf of bread?

And the local bakery? They didn't have a lot. I'd tried a pastry and found it far too sugary, and the blueberry pie looked dry as hell. But the baguettes were absolutely perfect, crusty on the outside and soft in the middle and just absolutely worth every carb.

So I was there buying one to go with spaghetti for dinner, when the house in the woods popped into my head.

"Hey, do you know anything about the old Lavigne property?" I asked the lady who owned the place, who was ringing me up. I thought maybe her name was Ella.

She looked up, brows drawn together, biting her lip. A moment later, her face cleared and brightened. "You mean that gorgeous old house by the sea, up north of town? I heard someone famous just bought it."

Um. Shit. That had not been what I'd wanted to discuss. And was I really "famous?" I wrote a movie. It wasn't like I starred in it or something. Nobody was ever putting me on the sexiest man alive list or anything like that.

"Um, no, not really."

"No?" She was back to confused. "I thought it was some big Hollywood writer or something."

"One movie doesn't really make someone a big writer," I hedged.

A teenage girl behind the counter making coffee snorted. "Yeah? How many movies have *you* written?"

Fuck. Well, nothing for that but the truth. I reached up and scrubbed the back of my neck with my hand, staring at the counter in front of me. "Just, ah, just the one." She whipped around to stare at me, and the whole room went quiet. "That's not really what I wanted to—I mean, it's no big deal. I'm just a regular writer. This is the part where everyone always goes,

‘yeah Max, but what do you do for a *living?*’ so really. Not a big deal.”

“But you bought the Lavigne house,” the girl said, eyes wide. “It’s a mansion. It’s, like, got a name and stuff.”

“That’s more thanks to my grandmother than the movie, promise. She left me a house in California, and it turns out they’re ridiculously expensive these days.” I cleared my throat and fiddled with the paper bag my baguette was in. “Anyway, I was just curious if anyone knew much about the property.”

“I’m afraid not,” Ella said, sympathy twisting her expression. “Wish I could help, but we only moved here five years ago. I don’t even know what it’s called.”

“The realtor said it was called Fairview,” I offered.

“Hey Walt, you know all about local places, right?” The baker leaned forward over the counter, looking at an old man sitting in the bakery with a newspaper, coffee, and pastry in front of himself.

He looked up. “Some. Knew Nadia from way back.” He bowed his head and sadness crossed his face, and I had to swallow down a rash of questions about her. That would be suspicious as hell, and the last thing I needed was to let the truth slip and end up being the town nutball. After a moment, he lifted his head and looked back at me. “What did you want to know?”

“There’s this abandoned house in the woods out there, and I was wondering if anyone knew anything about it.”

His face went completely blank as I said the words, like someone had hit the reset button on his brain. I’d barely finished talking when he shook his head. “Nope. Only one house out there. Only ever been one house.”

What the hell?

He turned back to his newspaper with finality, cutting off the conversation, and even the baker looked confused. She met my eye and shrugged, but I waved her off. It was just like Nadia. Like the very existence of the place made him uncomfortable. I didn’t know how to get past it, but I also

wasn't going to be a jerk and keep pressing on a subject that clearly made him unhappy.

As I walked back to my car, I pulled out my phone and dialed my realtor, who answered on the second ring. "What can I help you with?"

"A weird question, mostly. There's a house in the woods north of the house, and I wondered if you knew anything about it." She'd probably been hoping I wanted more real estate in town, but what the heck was I going to do with that?

The silence wasn't promising, though. "There is? That's weird. My website doesn't say there's a second house on the property." I could hear her tapping away on a keyboard in the background before she added, "Nope. No records of another structure on the land at all. Not that that means it's not there, just that I don't know anything about it."

I decided to play a hunch. "How long have you lived in the area?"

"About fifteen years, why?"

There it was. The two people I'd spoken to who knew about the house and denied it were in their sixties or seventies and almost certainly had been born in the area. Everyone else was clueless.

"I think this place might be a lot older than that. I didn't get a great look at it, but the silhouette reminded me of those craftsman houses they were building way back in the twenties or thirties." Admittedly, my experience with architecture was limited to California, but that was what they'd been building there at the time.

"Huh. Well I'll ask around a little, see if I can stir something up. For what it's worth, you definitely own it. You bought the land and any structures on it, so you're covered."

I reached my car and slid inside, turning it on and flipping the AC to full power. "Good. I was thinking about checking it out, but didn't want to do that if it belonged to someone else."

"Nope, you're golden. Just, uh ... be careful, okay?" I heard her moving around on the other end of the line, and her

voice had gone serious, so I could just imagine her leaning toward me, concerned expression. “You said in the woods, and you’re near the beach. And this area has a lot of snakes. Some of them poisonous. Don’t step in vegetation or water. Go slow. Please don’t get killed. I really don’t want to be the person who sold Mr. Hollywood Wunderkind the property that then killed him.”

“I promise I’ll be careful,” I agreed.

I’d never been especially frightened of snakes, but it was a point well taken. It wasn’t like I even knew what a poisonous snake looked like versus a non-poisonous one. The only poisonous ones I knew of in California were rattlesnakes, so they were kind of obvious. Not that I’d ever run into one of them either. I’d lived in a condo, for fuck’s sake. Wandering into the woods was a new concept for me.

I didn't tell Nadia my plans, even though she was swanning around the first floor of the house when I got back with my bakery haul, looking into one empty room after another like she was a hostess overseeing guests at a party.

I wondered if that had been a major part of her life. With a house this big, it seemed reasonable. Why have this much room if you didn't want to have people around?

It begged the question why I'd bought a house this big in a place where I didn't know anyone to invite over, but after the last few days, I was hoping maybe I would be able to meet some people I wanted to invite over. It was so easy to imagine enormous holiday parties where half the people in town came to talk and eat and be merry, while Nadia did the same thing, going from one door to the next, watching like a queen over her subjects.

If I was going to feed that many people, maybe I'd need that set of China after all. Or three of them.

I took some time to unpack the boxes of clothes, which was pretty simple, since they were mostly wardrobe style boxes, so it was a matter of taking the hangers off the bar in the box, and putting them on the bar in the closet. My shoes had all been tossed in the bottoms of the boxes, and were easy enough to organize.

An hour and a half later, I was breaking down the last of the wardrobe boxes to take for recycling, fully dressed in my jeans, hiking boots, and a long-sleeved denim shirt over my T-

shirt. Yeah, it was pretty warm in April to be wearing long sleeves, but it seemed like the sensible thing to do, covering all exposed skin, just in case.

Not that a snake couldn't bite through a shirt.

Dammit, Jenny had me obsessing over snakes now. I'd seen one since I'd moved, and I was pretty sure it had been a run-of-the-mill garter snake, and it had been rushing its way off the porch away from me.

With more determination than before, I shoved the last of the boxes into the recycle bin and marched off toward the tree line. Maybe I should have brought a real flashlight, but I'd figured my phone would be enough to do the trick if I needed light. It was pretty bright.

The closer I got to the trees, the more I was sure I wasn't wrong. It wasn't my imagination, despite how people kept telling me otherwise. There was a house there.

In fact, I realized, there had once been a driveway there as well. There was gravel under the layer of scrubby grass and last year's desiccated leaves, crunching beneath my feet as I walked. It seemed to run right between one side of my own circular drive and the house.

And in the middle of that area sat an old car with the sleek curved art-deco lines that proclaimed it to be from the nineteen-forties. I thought it had probably been a lovely shade of blue once, but now it was mostly a rusted out red-brown, the windows broken and gods only knew what nesting inside it.

But there it was, parked in front of the house like any moment the owner was going to jog down the front steps and climb inside.

The house itself had clearly once been gorgeous. There was some wood siding on the west end that I approached from, badly pitted and stained and covered with vines, and the south-facing front facade was a sort of stonework mosaic in various warm shades of brown and gray. Morning glory climbed up

that wall, giving the overall impression of a witch's cottage from a fairy tale.

Well, except for the fact that half the windows were boarded up, and one was broken. There was a spot on the roof that looked dark and sunken, like if it hadn't already caved in on the inside, it was getting close. While the overall structure seemed sound, time and the elements were slowly breaking it down, reclaiming it in the name of the forest.

I'd never seen anything like it in my entire life, and for the first time since I'd written the outline for *Life After Anna*, something settled deep in my gut telling me that this was important.

This needed a story.

Something had happened here, because beautiful houses didn't just get abandoned complete with cars in front of them, and entire towns didn't deny their existence for no reason.

Carefully, I took the front stairs up to the maroon front door, but they were solid stone, and might be the last thing the forest took back.

The doorknob was filthy, so I pulled the sleeve of my shirt down to cover my hand and tried it.

Unlocked.

It turned easily, and while the hinges creaked in protest, the door opened. The air inside wasn't as musty as I'd have expected, but I supposed with at least one broken window, it had some regular airflow.

There was a strange smell, dark and sweet and shudder-inducing, like something decaying. Like the very house was moldering in its own grave.

And yet, the first room inside, a wide open living area, looked almost like it was ready for someone to move in, if it hadn't been for the dust on everything. A deep red rug in a traditional pattern covered half the hardwood floor, and solid old-fashioned furniture lay dotted about the room. An ebony sofa, two deep brown leather-covered armchairs, a coffee table that looked like maybe teakwood. A beautiful old liquor

cabinet with a lock on the door and bottles still inside, all neatly organized and facing outward.

Cut crystal lowball glasses were sitting on the sideboard next to a matching decanter with the dregs of some dark amber liquid at the bottom, and the whole scene felt like it was waiting for someone to just walk in and pour themselves a drink.

I felt like an interloper. A burglar. Hansel about to be discovered by the witch while eating her walls.

There was a squeak, and something ran across my boot, and I'm not too proud to admit I screamed like a horror movie ingenue. I looked down to meet the beady eyes on an equally terrified rat that turned tail and ran away.

And yes, I did precisely the same, slamming the door shut behind me and running through the woods without a single thought to snakes or anything else that might murder me, because oh my fucking gods, a rat had been on my foot. A rat.

I only paused when I got past the edge of the trees, bending over and panting, hands braced on my knees, trying to slow my breathing. I couldn't tell if I was winded from the run or hyperventilating from panic. Maybe both. Both seemed reasonable.

A rat.

On my foot.

Not the place rats belonged.

I glanced back at the house, but it was as silent and outwardly benign as ever. It just had rats in it.

I didn't know why I was surprised that a long-abandoned house had a vermin problem, but it had been a shock nonetheless.

Rats. I gave a full-body shudder and jogged my way to my own front door, ignoring that my breath was still coming too fast. The main bathroom had a giant triangular tub with whirlpool jets, and I'd brought enough body wash and loofahs to scrub the rat-shaped stain off my whole person.

The hiking boots stayed on the porch, and the rest of the clothes got dumped in the hamper the moment I was sure Nadia wasn't in the room with me to be offended by my nakedness, and I ran myself the longest, hottest bath I'd ever taken in my life.

Half an hour later, I was sure I'd died and gone to heaven. The condo'd had two walk-in showers, and while this bathroom had one of those as well, I'd never before had the opportunity to just take a long hot soak. It was fucking divine, and anyone who said they didn't like baths was just wrong. I made a note to get myself a small army of bath bombs and such, just to try out every possible thing.

Plus the tub was big enough for two.

I definitely wanted to try that out. An image of a wet Gentry Fox sitting in the tub formed in my mind, maybe surrounded by bubbles.

I could wash all that messy black hair.

Then, you know, make out with him. And other things that I was sure a bathtub was also good for.

Plus bonus, he didn't seem like the kind of guy who ended relationships with fucking lawyers and NDAs. At the very least, I deserved a messy breakup, didn't I? I was totally worth arguing and yelling and stuff. Like Jay had said, I was worth a set of thrown collector plates, even if he didn't want them thrown at him.

Next time someone broke up with me, I decided, I was going to buy a set of plates just to throw at him. Maybe I should buy the plates now, so they'd be ready. I'd seen some really ugly China patterns at the various antique shops around, so maybe those were the way to go. I didn't want to ruin something nice, after all.

This, though, was why plate-throwing wasn't going to happen at all. Like I said, Blazeks didn't fall apart in front of people. They thought everything through from every angle, figured things out, dealt with them ... and then cried themselves to sleep, cold and alone.

It was healthy.

No, really.

It was a behavior mode that had saved my mental health as a child. My grandmother had raised me, even as her daughter disappeared into drug addiction and eventually death, and she'd never shown me any of how that affected her. Never gone to bed for a whole day or drank herself into a stupor before I got home from school. Never broken down sobbing at the dinner table.

Grandma had been in therapy from before my birth until the day she died, to be able to handle the things life had thrown at her with such grace.

She'd completely shielded me from the fallout of my mother's downward spiral, and I didn't even know how to be as grateful as that demanded. I'd spent every possible moment with her, right up through the end, but somehow it still hadn't felt like enough.

She'd been a wonder. A force of nature.

The kind of person I could only ever aspire to be.

So that was what I'd do for the rest of my life, and unfortunately, it precluded throwing plates at Harrison Grant's head. For whoever came next, well, I could only hope that this situation had taught me a lesson, and I made a better choice next time.

Gentry seemed nice. More importantly, from context clues, he seemed to be out, which was more than Harry was ever going to give me. Yeah, as much as it was anyone's right to stay firmly planted in the closet, no more of them for me. Out and proud only.

And no more rats.

I shuddered again, and it wasn't from the cool air of the bathroom on my wet skin as I reached for my towel.

Why did it have to be rats?

There was one grocery store in town, and fortunately, it was a pretty decent one.

Don't get me wrong, they didn't have a vast selection of wines and fifteen different kinds of brie, but that was okay. I'd never tell anyone back home, but honestly, all brie tasted the same to me. It was fine, but I didn't need a dozen varieties.

Like some kind of monster, I preferred Swiss and cheddar anyway.

I'd been through the store twice already, once the day I arrived and once Saturday evening, in hopes of feeding Joe and Gentry. Finally, Wednesday morning, it was time to do the real shopping.

Yes, for coffee.

I'd set up the machine along with the rest of my kitchen appliances, and was now ready to do real cooking. In fact, almost everything was unpacked. I hadn't had a ton of stuff, but it was nice to not be surrounded by boxes anymore. It had taken a couple of trips in my car and the whole recycle bin to get rid of all of them, but that was fine.

Apparently one of the previous owners of the house—heck, maybe Nadia—had made sure the house was zoned as part of the town, so local trash pickup would come and take away the last of them that I hadn't managed on my second trip. They just had to fit in the big bin they gave me for the purpose.

But something was off.

Last time I'd been in the grocery store, it had felt like any other grocery store. No one paying any particular attention to me or my cart full of muffins.

This time, I was getting furtive glances from all corners, and I couldn't figure out why.

I hadn't done anything weird, had I? No drunken streaking through downtown Welling. No fights with the town mascot. No schemes to start a new religion in my own honor.

Still, the stares continued.

All the way through the store as I picked my items.

One young woman seemed to be following me, picking up one of everything I did.

There was no one at the front but the cashier when I arrived to check out, but suddenly, immediately, there was a line behind me.

None of them went to the older woman standing at the empty register next to me. They lined up behind me.

The young cashier kept flipping her braids over her shoulder, then looking back up at me, expression mischievous and amused, like she had something she really, really wanted to say.

Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "You okay?"

"Fine," she agreed smoothly, biting her lip and glancing up at me again before asking, "So do you know Ryan Gosling?"

"What about Clint Eastwood?" the middle-aged man behind me added, readjusting his ball cap and trying to seem like he'd be unaffected regardless.

"Oh, what about Harrison Grant?" the young woman who'd picked up all the same things as me asked. "He was even in your movie, right?"

Jesus fucking christ.

It was because of the mess at the bakery. Everyone in town now knew who I was and what that had entailed. And of course, one of the first things I got asked butted right up against Harry's asshole NDA.

"I can't say I've ever met Clint Eastwood, no. I ... was once behind Ryan Gosling in a line to buy coffee, and he's just as kind as he seems in interviews, as far as I could tell. He tipped the barista twenty dollars." And Harry was an asshole, but I supposed saying that out loud would break the contract I'd signed. "And I met Harrison Grant while he was working on *Life After Anna*, yes. He seemed to get along well with everyone on set."

"Is he dating anyone?" Once again, that was the poor excited young woman who thought buying groceries like mine was going to bring her closer to Hollywood.

I considered for a moment, then shook my head. "Not as far as I'm aware, no. He's a very private man and doesn't talk about his love life much."

She sighed in ecstasy, hands pressed to her chest, clearly imagining he'd visit his old friend—me—here in Welling and fall madly in love with her. It was a nice fantasy. I wished for her that it would be true, but I was no longer sure Harry was capable of loving anyone but himself.

Still, I was surrounded by townsfolk who were all talking to me. All who knew where I lived. This was a great opportunity.

"Say, does anyone know much about the Lavigne property?"

The man who'd asked about Clint Eastwood gave a little half shrug and nod. "I used to do Miss Nadia's mowing, so a little."

It was creepy how everyone was hanging on my words, but I tried to shrug it off and go on. It wasn't like I thought everything I said was important. "Do you know anything about the abandoned house in the woods?"

His eyes went wide, and he shook his head. “There’s a house in the woods? I never noticed it. What kinda house?”

“Ain’t no house in the woods,” the older woman at the second register announced, voice firm, like the words were an order rather than a fact. Everyone glanced over at her, confused, then back to me.

I was not going to be fucking gaslit into believing a clear lie, no matter what every person over sixty in town was determined to say. “It looks like it’s from the thirties or forties. Rusted out car in front of it and everything. Like someone just walked out and left it there waiting for them to come back.”

She slammed a hand down on the belt of her register, scowling. “Y’all Hollywood folk don’t need to be coming into town making things up. *There ain’t no house.*”

The younger Black woman checking me out at my own register looked at her, eyebrows drawn together, then up at me with a little eyeroll, but didn’t say anything aloud. A moment later she murmured, “I don’t know anything, but there used to be a whole Lavigne section at the library. Maybe they’d have something in those books.”

“A house in the woods,” the woman who’d copied my grocery order was whispering, sounding too intrigued, and that got me worried.

I cleared my throat. “My realtor warned me off going into the woods, since apparently there are poisonous snakes out there.”

“Copperheads,” the man agreed with a grimace. “Got bit by one clearing out some vines on my shed one year. Stung like a bitch, whole arm swelled up, and didn’t heal for months. Don’t want to mess with that.”

“Good,” the old woman said. “That’s the end of that, then.”

Everyone shot her a glance, at the vehemence in her voice. What was with these people and that house?

Part of me worried I’d find the truth disappointing. Like maybe the owner had moved away and the whole town saw it

as a bad breakup, so they wanted to talk about it as much as I wanted to talk about how dreamy Harry was. Or maybe they actually believed there was no house. Except if they did, then why did they refuse to acknowledge the possibility? That was knowingly defensive, not ignorantly confused.

No, I had to figure this out. It was too damned weird not to dig into.

“You let us know what you find out,” my own cashier said, shooting her coworker a less than impressed look. “Sounds interesting.”

“I will, thanks.”

“I’d be more worried about getting firewood into that big old house so you don’t freeze in the winter,” the older cashier said aloud. “Making up stories might serve you in California, but it won’t keep you warm when it freezes out.”

Firewood? I knew the house had a handful of fireplaces, but it hadn’t even occurred to me. Also, it was April. Considering my options, I turned back toward ball cap guy. “Is this the right season to be buying firewood?”

“Sure is,” he agreed. “There’s this lot down highway sixteen, just off Old Church Road, where people are always cutting wood. You drop by, I’m sure you can hire somebody to cut you a load and bring it out to the house.” He chuckled and readjusted his hat. “Every bubba with a chainsaw makes at least half a business of it. Same for lawn mowing, if you’re looking for somebody to come out.” He reached into a pocket and pulled out a card, handing it to me.

It was pretty slick and professional, with the outline of glossy green grass and above, a name and phone number. I held it up. “This you, then?”

“Sure is,” he agreed. “I thought about coming out and talking to you, since I used to mow for Miss Nadia, but figured I’d give you time to settle in first.”

Now was as good a time as any to further the rumor mill in town, so I nodded to him and asked, “And the rainbow flag on the front lawn isn’t a problem?”

The cashier gave a tiny whistle and grinned at me, muttering something about balls of steel.

The guy, on the other hand, looked confused. “Is it on top of the grass? As long as I can move it to mow, that’s okay, I think?”

The cashier guffawed. “He means he’s gay and wants to know if you have a problem with it, Stan.”

Stan seemed confused by the very idea. “My cousin Billie’s gay. So’s her wife. Who cares? Ain’t my bed, ain’t my business.”

And that was so much better than I’d expected, especially after Jimmy’s behavior over the weekend. But I supposed Gentry had been right—Jimmy was still an aspiring bully, so of course he took issue where he could. Stan just wanted to make a living.

“Well then, Stan, I’ll give you a call. Thanks.” I smiled and nodded to him as the cashier piled the last of my stuff back into my cart, and I headed out to my car.

What a productive day. Groceries, lawn mowing, and a lead on getting firewood for the winter, which I hadn’t even realized I was going to need. Plus Stan the Clint Eastwood fan hadn’t been a homophobe.

Things were looking up.

I went home to put my groceries away first—didn't want my coffee creamer sitting in the sun while I tried to find someone to bring me firewood—then drove down the way Stan had pointed.

The place was unmissable. A huge half empty field with dozens of downed trees in various states of being cut into pieces. At least three people were hard at work with chainsaws, just like Stan had said, cutting cross-sections of the trees.

Before I had time to psych myself either up or out in regard to talking to someone, I realized I knew one of them.

Gentry Fox.

He was in the process of filling both the bed of his truck and the trailer behind it with wood.

He spotted me standing there, looking hopelessly awkward and useless, and grinned. "Hey there Max. What are you looking for?"

"Um, you, maybe?" I said before thinking, and the grin turned sly, then he bit his lip and gave me the most obvious once-over I'd ever seen in my life. Gah, why was I so useless with people? "Firewood, I mean. Someone said I should be getting firewood for the winter now, even though it's April, and then Stan, the lawn mowing guy, he said I should come down here, and ..."

I didn't even know what to ask for. Was there a normal way to ask for firewood? If there was, I was sure this wasn't it.

Might as well ask him if he had any nice hard wood for me and then go die of mortification in peace.

“You getting Stan back in to mow out at the property?” Gentry asked, seeming surprisingly interested.

“I mean, unless there’s some reason not to?”

He shook his head. “Nah, Stan’s good people. And he’s got two smart teenage daughters to put through college in a couple years, so he’s hustling hard these days.”

“I’ll keep that in mind when we settle on a price,” I said. Two college educations was a shit-ton of money these days, even if there were scholarships to cover parts. I wondered if maybe he took care of plants. I could use that too, since I didn’t know a damn thing about plant care, and didn’t want the gorgeous blooming bushes in front of the house to suffer for my incompetence. “Anyway, he said that I might find someone to bring me firewood here. Should I really be buying it in April?”

“Best time for it,” Gentry agreed. “Wait till fall and people might be out, and it takes time to have it dried out and ready. Also better prices now.”

“So, um, how much firewood do I even need? The house has a furnace. I made sure. They even replaced it before I moved in.” I leaned toward him, whispering conspiratorially. “I’m from Southern California. I wouldn’t survive in the cold.”

He laughed. “It don’t get that cold. Couple inches of snow over the whole winter maybe. Not even that much some years. But it’s good to have a fire. Cozy.” He turned and looked back at his truck, considering. “Fairview used to go through a couple cords every winter, but that was with near half a dozen people living there. If it’s just you, you don’t need that much. Maybe just a full cord, and then next year you judge based on what you went through this year.”

I looked at his truck too, as though maybe it would tell me how much wood I needed. “What’s a full cord? I mean that

seriously. I don't think I can stress enough how much I don't know about this."

He laughed at that. "You can't say things like that to people. Somebody's gonna sell you five cords and charge twice what it's worth." He waved at the truck and trailer. "Cord's about what I can fit in both at once. A fire or two a week, it'll last you all winter. You want a fire every day, you'll need four or five."

Wow. That was so much wood. And I didn't even know how to start a fire, let alone ... literally anything else.

"How much does one cost?"

He looked at me for a moment, hesitating, before saying, "How about two hundred?"

"Dollars? That seems ... like not much."

He shifted his shoulders awkwardly a bit, then pushed his cowboy hat farther back on his head. "Maybe I'm trying to impress you."

"It should be like twice that expensive, shouldn't it?"

His slow smile was wicked, and he shook his head. "Only if I didn't like you." He waved at the lot. "I get the wood free and cut it and stack it for drying myself. All I'm putting in is time. And I do." He ducked his head and looked up at me through lowered lashes. "Like you, that is."

Fuck me.

No, like literally. That was all I could think in that second. Yes please, I would like a heaping helping of Gentry fucking Fox and his aw-shucks stance and his good ol' boy attitude. He was like teenage me's favorite wet dream, and I wanted to throw myself at him.

But that probably wasn't appropriate for the middle of his ... place of work?

"Okay, so why don't we split the difference? You bring me a, um, cord of wood. And I'll pay you three hundred dollars. And feed you lunch. That way I feel like I'm paying a fair

wage, and we get to see if you like me when you get to know me.”

Was that too much? Too forward? I’d always waited to be hit on in the past, waited to be asked out. Harry hadn’t had a problem asking for what he wanted the very day we met. It made sense, because who the hell would turn him down?

But somehow this thing with Gentry was different. Not that he was any less gorgeous, any less out of my league, than Harry ... but was he?

It wasn’t like I was ugly, and more importantly, I was a nice person. A good one. I was worth having a relationship with. I was a financially stable career man in my twenties with a college education and my own paid-off car and house.

I was a goddamned catch, even if I wasn’t built like a Greek god.

Well, maybe Hades, all slim and dark and pale.

Gentry seemed to agree, because his smile didn’t dim at all. “You drive a hard bargain, Max, but I think I can manage that.” He looked back at his truck. “This lot’s for Mrs. Morgan, but I can cut another for you and come by tomorrow to stack it. Pretty sure the old spot at Fairview is still clear for it.”

“That sounds great,” I accepted immediately. Score. I maybe had a date. Sort of.

“How are you settling into the house?” he asked out of nowhere, and it seemed like there was a note of concern in his voice. “Anything odd?”

Odd? I almost burst into hysterical laughter. Why yes, since he asked. The ghost of an old woman who had informed me that semicolons were the work of the devil.

“No.” Oh gods, was that my voice, high and shrill and obviously fucking lying? I shook my head, too damn fast. “All good out at the house. Everything’s just fine. I’ll see you tomorrow. Allergic to anything I should know about for making lunch?”

“Not a thing. Can’t wait.” He seemed bemused by my outburst, but winked at me anyway.

I wanted to stand there awkwardly and make awful small talk, but no. No, I was going to make the smoothest exit I was capable of making. I nodded, ignoring my traitorous blushing cheeks, and then picked my way back through the field toward my car, trying not to fall down and land on my face in the mud.

Nope, I was not going to give anyone a reason to laugh at me. Not that I was clumsy or anything, but I also wasn’t an athlete or naturally graceful. The majority of my exercise happened on a treadmill, not kickboxing or something cool. My Judo class for self-defense was as much as I’d ever gone down that road, and frankly, it had been long enough I should have had a refresher. Like the bit of Czech my grandmother had taught me as a child, it seemed like something that needed regular use, lest it disappear.

It was only when I got back to my car that I realized I hadn’t asked him about the house in the woods. He wasn’t over sixty, so hopefully he wouldn’t be part of the “there is no house” camp, but I still wanted to hear what he said.

Oh well, he was coming to me tomorrow. I could ask then.

As I drove home, my phone started buzzing.

My grandmother had taught me to drive in the era of smartphones, and she’d drilled it into me: no texting and driving. No calling and driving. No looking at a map on your phone and driving. No phone in the car, period, unless the car was parked and turned off.

So I ignored it, despite the way it kept going, buzzing every few minutes like someone was incredibly determined to talk to me. Who the hell could want to talk to me that much?

If I had any living family, I’d have pulled over for fear it was a hospital or maybe Grandma was in trouble, but I had nobody. The only important person it might be was my agent wanting to know where the next damned script was, but it wasn’t like I had anything for her.

Needless to say, it was a bit of a surprise when I pulled up to the head of the drive, turned off the car, and pulled out my phone to find that I had five missed calls and half a dozen texts from Harrison Grant.

I skimmed the texts quickly, trying to figure out what was so important.

I'd done what he'd demanded, damn him. I'd left, not spoken to him again, and not told a single soul that we'd spent almost a year fucking like bunnies. What the hell else did he want?

Max. Max pick up the phone.

Dammit Max, answer me.

I need to talk to you.

Amelia Barber is going to call you and ask about us. You have to tell her the truth.

She's got the role of a lifetime but she won't take me seriously, and she won't believe me when I tell her I'm bi.

This could be MY Oscar Max. Talk to her.

The fucking nerve of this man. He'd been the one to make me sign a paper saying I would never tell anyone we'd been in a relationship. Fuck, in retrospect, had it even been a relationship? I'd thought so once, but given the way he'd thrown me away, not even spoken to me, and made me sign the NDA, I didn't anymore. We'd been fucking, and for him, it had never been more than that.

And of course an Oscar for him was what he cared about.

Jay had implied that my win might have been why Harry dumped me, and frankly, in retrospect, it fit the circumstances. He hadn't wanted to talk to me that night. Hadn't even congratulated me. Then the moment he has an opportunity for his own Oscar role, he comes straight back, assuming I'd care and help him.

The man was apparently incapable of thinking about anyone but himself.

I didn't call him back. Instead, I blocked his number and called Jay on the cell number he'd given me. "Mr. Blazek?" He asked, sounding downright confused. "Is everything okay?"

I figured Jay and I were beyond pleasantries, after our day together and my crash course in legalese. "Your client is calling and texting me, demanding I break my NDA."

"You're joking."

"I wish I were, but I'm not. Do you want to tell him no, since I'm pretty sure I'm not even supposed to talk to him? Oh, and I blocked his number just now."

There was a thump that might have been something thrown, or might have been Jay banging his head on something. "Good decision, blocking him, stick with that. I'll handle him. Thank you for calling me and not talking to him. You're ... literally the only bright spot in this man being a client."

That was one of the most depressing thoughts I'd ever heard aloud. "Good luck and godspeed, friend."

He sighed, deep and long. "Thanks. I'm going to need it."

I crashed onto my couch, staring at the ceiling. The lovely hand-carved crown molding, painted a delicate warm blue to just slightly contrast with the cream walls and ceiling. And to coordinate with the deep blue shag rug, and interestingly, it all went beautifully with my wedgwood toile-upholstered sectional sofa.

A moment after I threw myself down, the sofa shifted, like someone else was sitting down, so I turned to look. It was Nadia, and boy had I never thought I'd be grateful for that.

At least there was still only the one ghost.

Hallucination.

Hell, who knew?

She lifted a brow at me. "Feeling dramatic this afternoon?"

I scowled and threw my head back on the sofa again. "My ex made me sign an NDA that I'd never tell a living soul we were together."

"He sounds like an unpleasant young man. Why were you with him?"

He.

She'd just jumped straight to it, no questions or assumptions I was talking about a woman, and no sour face at the notion of me seeing a man. Maybe I'd underestimated the south as a whole.

How to explain Harry, though? “He didn’t do it while we were dating. He did it after. And ... I guess I should have seen it coming anyway, really. He never wanted to go out together unless we were with a whole group. I knew he was in the closet. I just thought maybe we could make it work anyway.”

She scoffed and snapped her fan out to wave it, like she could push away the thought of Harry with a stiff breeze. “Of course you couldn’t. You moved into town and put your flag right up. You’d never be any good at hiding. And why should you, just for a man? No. You deserve a man just as open and accepting of himself as you are.”

Deserve.

Just like Jay had said that I was worth more, and better. Like they knew me. Or at least, knew my relative value as compared to Harry.

“He’s a movie star,” I hedged. “A lot of people would be willing to be in the closet to be with him.”

At that, the graceful, proud, beautiful woman sitting next to me ... blew a raspberry. “Being a movie star doesn’t make him a good man. It just means he’s pretty enough people like to look at him. Lots of men like that. Pretty is cheap and short-lived. I should know, I married a pretty one.” She pursed her lips and shook her head. Her fan fluttered with her distress, and she looked away, out the window. “I was glad when he died. We didn’t get divorced back then, so I thought I was going to be stuck with him my whole life.”

Damn. That was brutal and honest. My grandparents had adored each other, but it was the kind of brutal honesty my own grandmother would have given me, if she’d hated her husband. She’d always told me the truth about my mother and her struggles, never once trying to paint it with a brush of good or evil, simply giving the facts.

“I’m sorry, that sounds awful.”

She gave me a dismissive wave with the fan. “It’s fine. It was decades ago, and I got what I wanted—my beautiful baby boy. Then eventually grandbabies to spoil. I just had to put up

with seven years of him to get there.” She didn’t quite hide a smirk behind her fan. “I took my maiden name back when he died, too. Caused quite the scandal back then. You’ve got to do it, though, you know.”

“Do what?”

“Take it back. Everything they took away from you. Your name, your dignity, your pride. It’s yours. You earned it. It’s not theirs to take, and they can only keep it if you let them. Not like money. That, they might be able to keep.”

She was right. Entirely right.

Even giving Harry this much power over me was too much. I’d let him chase me out of the state I’d been born in, and now I was letting him ruin what had been a great damned day.

That asshole was not going to take my joy away, not in my brand new place, right as I was getting my life in order. I was making a new place for myself, and he wasn’t part of that. He wasn’t invited.

“What do southern boys like for lunch, Nadia?” I asked, pressing my hands into my knees and pushing up. “I have one coming over tomorrow, and I want to make him something he’ll enjoy.”

She offered a wicked smile and pointed toward the kitchen with her fan. “Lead the way, and we’ll figure out a feast fit for a king. My boys were always partial to fried chicken. Do you know how to make that?”

“Not even a little, but I’ve got chicken, and I’m a quick study in the kitchen if you’re willing to tell me what to do.”

I didn’t think she’d been so pleased since the moment she’d clapped eyes on me as she was to teach me the secrets to her recipe for fried chicken.

Also, it was delicious. I couldn’t wait to try it out on Gentry the next afternoon.



I WOKE to the feeling of my lungs constricting, refusing to pull in air.

For a second, I thought I was having a panic attack—something that hadn't happened to me since the sixth grade, right after my mother's death. I'd spent the rest of my years as a minor in therapy, and it had done me a world of good.

Before I had time to start worrying that fucking Harry Grant had set me back and I needed a therapist again, I fully woke and it became clear that wasn't what was happening at all.

No, there was a pillow over my face, being pressed down, cutting off my air. I pushed up, but whoever was pressing down had more arm strength than I did. I barely caught half a breath before it was pressing back into me, and my brain was already screaming for air.

There was a feminine scream—Nadia. “Get off him, you beast,” she shrieked, and it was shrill even through the muffling effect of the pillow.

I wanted to panic, but no. I could do this.

It was like Judo. No, obviously I couldn't throw whoever it was, but if I couldn't push forward, I could pull back. The mattress was ridiculously soft, and I was smaller than my aggressor.

So I held back a second, then with all my remaining strength, pushed up on one side of the pillow, giving myself just enough room to slither out from beneath it, then rolled to the edge of the bed.

When I hit the floor, I sprang up as quick as I could and rushed into the bathroom, slamming the door and locking it.

Whispered cursing followed me, along with a repeated thwacking sound that I thought might be Nadia hitting the person with her fan.

A moment after I got the bathroom door locked, leaning my whole weight against it and concentrating on breathing, there was the quick tumble of someone running down the stairs and out of the house, followed by the slam of the front door, then an engine, gunning it and squealing out of the driveway.

Some tiny, sensible part of me wanted to follow them, to see if I could get a license number or a description of the car or person or ... literally anything. Some tiny bit of information that I could give the police.

But there was nothing, unless he'd conveniently left his wallet behind.

There was, a moment later, a tap on the door, followed by Nadia's voice. "Are you okay dear? He's gone. I didn't"—she gave a deep, put-upon sigh and admitted—"I didn't get a good look at him, whoever he was. He was wearing all black, and a ski mask. I'm sorry."

She was sorry?

The dead woman my grandmother's age was sorry she hadn't done more to protect me. Still shaking like a leaf, I managed to unlock and open the door, but it took me a moment to move again. To leave the safety of the bathroom.

I glanced down to see that my phone was still in its place on the nightstand. Fat lot of good it had done me there, but I had been in a panic, forgetting all about silly things like calling the cops.

And what good would it do now?

I snatched up the phone and, now that I was good and annoyed with myself, the trembling subsided enough to let me march downstairs and look outside. The front door lock hadn't been forced. It was just not locked. I'd have sworn I locked it, so either I was wrong, or they had picked it.

I could just make out black marks where their vehicle had screeched out of the drive, but when I walked over and shined my phone flashlight on them, they didn't look like they did on

TV, with clear tread marks that the cops could easily trace. They looked like black rubber smears.

Hell, I couldn't even rightfully say I was sure they had come from that car just now. What if I insisted they had and they led to someone innocent being arrested?

Those being literally the only thing I had resembling proof the whole damned thing had happened, I was at a complete loss. Call the cops and have them think I was a hysterical Californian living in a rural area for the first time? Leave it alone and risk it happening again?

There wasn't a good option.

"Are you going to call the police?" Nadia asked from behind me, hovering just inside the foyer. I wondered if maybe she couldn't leave the house, but dismissed it as unimportant.

Instead of worrying about that, I looked back at her. "And tell them what? A man—maybe a man—I didn't get a look at and no one else saw broke into my house without leaving a single trace behind, and tried to kill me for reasons unknown? I barely even know anyone in town. Why would anyone do this?"

"I wish I knew, sweetheart. I wish I knew. It's certainly not the behavior of anyone I know in this town." She waved for me to come in, watching the road behind me like she was worried whoever it was would come back. "You're not wrong that Sheriff Mulcahy probably wouldn't take you seriously with that story. There must be something you can do, though."

Something I could do.

Well sure there was. I marched back upstairs and pulled out my computer, and spent the next three hours researching. At eight in the morning, I called a local security company. When they said they couldn't make it out for three weeks, I thanked them and called another. This one said one week, so I settled and decided I was also going to go buy myself some pepper spray or something. Sleep with a kitchen knife under my pillow.

I could buy a gun, but that really wasn't me.

All the research said that gun owners were more likely to hurt themselves than intruders, and I knew if I bought one, I'd end up right in the middle of that statistic.

So no, no guns.

Instead, I asked the security company to install the works. Thumbprint locks on every outside door and motion sensors in a dozen places and cameras outside around the house—every single thing my research had told me I could do to see to it that this never happened again.

Damn them, I would not spend my life afraid.

eleven

I managed to take a nap before Gentry arrived, though my sleep was initially troubled, and I kept waking, startled, convinced someone was sneaking into the room.

The second time, Nadia was sitting in the chair near the bed, and gave me a sad look. “Sweetheart, if anyone comes into the house, I promise I’ll scream at the top of my lungs. You won’t be able to miss it. I’m just sorry I didn’t notice that one before he got inside.”

“It’s not your fault,” I groaned, rolling over on my side, facing her. “I appreciate you trying to help. It’s not like I did any better than you.”

Besides, I thought as I drifted back to sleep with her concerned gaze on me, it was kind of nice to have someone who cared. Even if she might be a hallucination.

The other option was that at twenty-seven, I’d suddenly started being able to see ghosts, and how likely was that?

I woke to the sound of an unfamiliar lullaby, though, and wasn’t sure how a hallucination could manage that. Something about the sea, which fit with what I knew of the Lavigne family, but not at all with my own grandmother singing to me in Czech when I was a kid. Her favorite had been something about ... angels, I thought.

I groaned and pulled my wrist up to check the time. Eleven. I needed to get up and get to cooking before Gentry showed up.

So I pulled myself into a sitting position and stretched, and Nadia smiled at me from her spot in the chair. “You did better that time.”

“Thanks. Really, I mean it. I felt safer knowing you were here.” I grabbed my phone as I dragged myself out of bed, bare feet planted on the floor. “Ready to see if I remember how to make your chicken from yesterday?”

She smiled serenely. “I can’t imagine anything I’d like more. Besides, I’m always here to help if you forget.”

And she was. As patient and lovely as my own grandmother had been, reminding me that I’d left the pepper out, and then making sure I preheated the oven to keep it warm when it was done frying. Frankly, it was more soothing than the nap had been.

By the time I heard a vehicle in the drive, I was practically in a state of meditation, making some pasta salad to go with the chicken that was keeping warm in the oven.

The sound did make my heart flip, though, whether because it *should* be Gentry or because it *might* be someone come back to kill me for no apparent reason, I couldn’t exactly say. Both seemed rational reasons for heart palpitations to me.

It was definitely Gentry, and by the time I got to the door, he’d already pulled his truck to a stop and turned the engine off.

When he saw me at the door, He popped his head out the passenger window of his truck. “It all right if I just pull around back and start stacking? I didn’t want to drive on the grass without asking permission.”

I waved him around, nodding. “Yeah, that’s fine. Whatever makes this easier for you.” He gave me that grin and wink of his, and I absolutely did not melt into the wooden porch floorboards. “You can knock on the kitchen door when you’re done, if you want. I’m just working on lunch now.”

He tipped his hat, then reseated himself behind the wheel and started the truck back up, pulling around the side to the back of the house.

I just had a little work left to do on the pasta salad, then I figured I'd start washing the dishes while Gentry worked on the wood pile.

I realized my mistake almost immediately.

When the pasta salad went into the fridge to chill, I turned to the dishes, and to the window over the kitchen sink.

The window Gentry was working near.

So instead of scrubbing dishes or rinsing ... hell, I didn't even turn the water on. I just stood there, motionless, watching as he worked in a perfect rhythm, stacking the wood two pieces at a time, working his way around the circle he was creating, building it up and up.

The structure itself was impressive, of course. The effortless way he balanced everything without a single piece of wood sliding out of place. Anyone who suggested this was unskilled labor was lying to himself or others.

But of course, the thing that held me rapt was the way his muscles moved and flexed under his thin T-shirt.

Had I ever found Harrison Grant that sexy? I must have, but looking back I couldn't imagine it. There was nothing wrong with Harry's gym-built body as opposed to Gentry's work-built one, but also ... Gentry was just so damned dexterous.

As I watched, he grabbed a piece of wood from the pile and apparently didn't like his grip on it, so he tossed it into the air and caught it in a different spot. Just completely effortless, even in heavy leather work gloves.

And the self-assurance he had in his own skin ...

"Cuts quite the handsome figure, doesn't he?" Nadia asked from the doorway behind me.

I whipped around to face her, all ready to stammer out my excuses for ogling the handsome man, but the only expression on her face was sheer amusement. She motioned back toward the window.

“He’s a good boy. Tries very hard, even if it doesn’t usually work out the way he hopes for.”

For some reason, it hadn’t even occurred to me that Nadia would know more about Gentry. But of course she did. Welling was a tiny town, and everyone knew everyone. Everyone talked to everyone.

“He’s, um, he’s been very nice to me.”

“And it doesn’t hurt that he’s very pretty,” she added.

“And it doesn’t hurt that he’s very pretty,” I agreed.

“And gay.”

I’d known that. Or I’d thought I knew it. The smile at my flag, Jimmy’s shitty comments, the flirting ... it had seemed like a safe enough bet. I hadn’t wanted to assume, though, so part of me hadn’t accepted that it was as sure as it was.

“He came out when he was in middle school, and it was the talk of the town,” she said, walking up to stand next to me at the window, her fan flipping slowly, casually. “Got tormented at school something fierce. But his momma told him he should be true to himself, and she’d beat the hell out of any boy who bullied her baby. But our boy’s a gentleman, and he didn’t want his momma fighting, so he learned to do it himself. Got a hell of a reputation as a brawler by the time he got into high school, so people mostly left him alone.”

This, then, was probably one of the reasons this small southern town wasn’t interested in my sexuality. Gentry had shown them almost twenty years ago that a gay man was just like any other, and just as likely to be able to kick your ass. I was grateful, since frankly, I couldn’t kick anyone’s ass.

“He loves my fried chicken,” she added. “Next time, though, we’ll make cucumber salad. With onions. He likes that.”

Next time, she said, like there was no doubt there would be a next time.

Well hell, I was ready for it.

I managed to force myself to focus long enough to rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher, and by the time I was done, Gentry was finishing his stack of firewood by covering it with a tarp that he staked down at the corners. Then he took a moment to survey his work with satisfaction and turned to head for the door, stripping off his work gloves and stuffing them in his back pocket.

I answered the door with a tea towel in my hand, just done drying off, and ushered him in. "If you want to wash up, I'll get lunch on plates and meet you in the dining room."

He ducked his head as he removed his hat, nodding. "Sounds good. Smells amazing in here."

I beamed at the compliment. I mean, yes, it was Nadia's recipe, but I'd made it. That counted, right?

I plated up two meals, making sure his was extra full, with three whole pieces of chicken and twice as much pasta as mine. After all, I wasn't planning on working off extra calories with massive manual labor in the afternoon. I was planning on sitting in my bed and trying to write.

Or more likely, trying to research the Lavigne family in hopes I'd turn up something about the abandoned house in the woods.

Speaking of which ...

I looked around as Gentry came back from the bathroom, looking almost like he'd done a whole quick wash in the sink and maybe changed shirts, since there were no wood chips on him anywhere.

"Did you know there's an abandoned house in the woods?" I might have been watching him like a hawk, just to see his immediate reaction.

There was nothing like guile in the whole process. A second of confusion, dawning understanding, then concern. "Yeah, I remember it. Been abandoned since before I was born. You ain't going out there, are you? Place can't be safe, and I'd hate it to collapse on top of you."

Finally! Someone who both knew the place existed and was also willing to acknowledge that it did. I mean, yeah, he was worried about me, and that was endearing as all hell. I hadn't even mentioned going out there.

I shook my head and shuddered. "No, no, I went out there once and I won't be making that mistake again. It has rats." Turning to the table, I motioned him to a chair. "Anyway, lunch."

His eyes lit up at the sight of the plate. "Fried chicken. One of my favorites." Then he took a deep sniff and cocked his head, confused. "Was there, ah, a cookbook in the house when you got here?"

Oh shit. He'd known Nadia, so of course he knew her freaking recipes.

"No," I said, shaking my head and trying to pretend nonchalance. "No cookbooks. Why?"

He stared at the meal a second, then looked up at me and back at it before visibly shaking off his concern. "Nothing. No reason at all."

We seated ourselves, and for a while, there was no talking, only eating. Or, well, there was Gentry utterly devouring his first piece of chicken and immediately diving into a second. I was glad I'd given him three, even though it had seemed like a lot when I'd done it.

"Do you know anything about the house in the woods?"

He shook his head, still chewing, then stopped and considered. He swallowed before speaking up. "Well, I know it's unlocked and full of furniture. We used to play in the woods when we were kids. My brother tried to go up the stairs once and his foot went through a step. Almost broke his damn fool neck."

"But nothing about who lived there or what happened?"

He stared off into space as he continued to eat, eyes distant and thoughtful, before shaking his head. "It's damn weird. Nobody ever talked about the place. One time when my brother mentioned it, Dad said 'there's no house in the woods,

don't be ridiculous.' And then he wouldn't talk about it no more. We were standing a hundred feet away from the place. You could see that rusty old Packard sitting in the drive. And he just pretended there was nothing there."

"How old is your father?" I figured it was a relatively safe question, since it was his father and not his mother. Plus I knew Gentry himself was thirty, since he'd told me.

Clearly, though, I was wrong. He winced and looked down at his plate for a moment, taking a deep breath. "He was, um, fifty-one when he passed two years ago."

I cringed, closing my eyes. How the hell did I come back from that?

Dammit, Max, always making things awkward.

"Hey, no way you coulda known." He reached out and patted my hand before reaching for his last piece of chicken. "Why do you ask?"

I swallowed hard, thinking fast, but no, there was no reason to look for an answer. The truth was the way to go. It wasn't like it was a big deal, or offensive. "It seems to be an age thing. When I ask younger people, or ones who weren't born here, they don't know much, if anything. Anyone over fifty or sixty, and they do that thing. You know, there's no house in the woods, while looking right at the place."

He seemed properly confused by the concept, brows drawing together as he ate, then shook his head and shrugged. "Wish I knew something else I could tell you, but I got nothing. That's all weird."

And that was that. It was weird, but there wasn't much to be done about it if he didn't have more information. I couldn't exactly demand that he know more than he did.

Besides, I didn't want to make the whole afternoon about that. There were a dozen things I could bother him about. The chair, the other furniture he'd said he could look into, the history of the town ... but dammit, he was a gorgeous guy who'd spent the week flirting with me, and we were having lunch together. Screw all of that.

“So you’ve lived in this town your whole life, huh?”

The slow smile was back. “Sure have. Boring, right?”

“Not at all. I mean, I’m from Southern California, but I was the same there. Born and raised. It’s not like being born and living most of your life in one place is better than another.”

He laughed at that, shaking his head. “I think most folk would disagree with you, but then, I suspect you already know you’re the talk of the town.”

I groaned and buried my face in my hands. “I didn’t even mean to have people find out what I did for a living. I guess it could be worse. At least they’re not all begging me to give their script to my agent.”

His laughter filled the room, and for just a second, I caught a glimpse of Nadia over his shoulder, looking quite pleased. Was she playing matchmaker? The sly fox.

Ahh well, I decided if she was, I was going to go along. It sounded like a good deal for me.

twelve

Just over a day later, I had spent hours looking through and dismissing every piece of clothing I owned, then going through them all again, to decide what to wear to Joe's bar.

I wasn't in California, so I doubted fashion was going to go over the same way. Did I own a gold mesh shirt for clubbing? A pink satin button-down? Yes I did, on both counts. Did I think people in a bar in this town were going to be into that? No, definitely not.

The only jeans I owned were skinny jeans, though, no work-worn button-fly Levis with the knees torn out. No work boots, and I thought there was a good chance I'd never wear my hiking boots again after a fucking rat had touched them.

So instead, I ended up in a pair of black skinny jeans, the first band T-shirt that came to hand—Blue Öyster Cult—and a scuffed pair of rainbow Sketchers. It wasn't exactly high fashion, but heck, I didn't own much of that anyway. It wasn't like I'd ever been the biggest club twink. I'd been too busy in college, then taking care of my grandmother, and then completely immersing myself in work.

Not that I had become a workaholic to try to forget how alone in the world I was. That was just silly.

The bar was in the middle of the tiny "downtown" strip of shops, and from the outside, it looked like an Irish pub I'd frequented in LA, complete with some impressive carved wainscoting on the outside, and the name of the place—the not

entirely unexpected “Joe’s Bar”—painted artistically in enormous gold letters.

For some reason, I was surprised when the music playing inside was classic rock and not country. Pleasantly surprised, since I was well versed in classic rock and couldn’t have told one country-singer-guy from the next, but surprised nonetheless.

Joe, standing behind the bar, smiled and lifted his chin in my direction. “Hey Max. How’s it going?”

“Good, you?” We went through the usual pleasantries before he threw his bar towel over his shoulder and asked what I wanted.

Before I had a chance to answer, a familiar snide voice answered for me. “Hollywood boy wants an IPA.”

“Sorry Jimmy, I don’t drink watered down piss.” I didn’t look at him as I pulled myself up onto a barstool to ask Joe, “Stout?”

Joe grinned and started telling me about what they had on tap. It was pretty damned impressive, the array of options. I didn’t know why I was surprised; it was a bar. I ordered myself an imperial that sounded interesting and turned to survey the place.

Jimmy, not to be ignored, snorted. “Just like a girl, wearing some band shirt just because it’s cool. Bet you can’t even name one of their songs. And don’t say ‘don’t fear the reaper.’ Everybody knows that one.”

Joe set my glass down on the counter with a heavy thump, glaring at his brother-in-law. “You’re on thin fucking ice. Stop it.”

“Nah, that’s fine. First of all, it’s sexist as fuck to assume a woman doesn’t know about a band whose shirt she’s wearing. And who cares if she doesn’t? It’s not your business, so leave her alone.” I turned toward him, picking up my glass and cocking my head, watching him like he was a bug under a magnifying glass. “And I wouldn’t say ‘don’t fear the reaper,’

because that's not the title of the song. It's just '*The Reaper*.' Also, *Joan Crawford*. Asshole."

Behind the bar, Joe had to cover his mouth to keep from laughing aloud, his shoulders shaking with the effort.

Jimmy clearly wanted to say something, but was struggling to figure out how to come back without just tossing out a random slur and calling it a day. I was worried that any moment smoke was going to come pouring from his ears, since his brain clearly wasn't up to the task. Apparently, after a second or two he gave up on clever and went for the slur. "You goddamn little—"

"That's it," Joe announced. "Jimmy, you're cut off, and I'm declaring it Blue Öyster Cult night." He snatched up a tablet from behind the bar, and a second later, the familiar strains of one of my favorite songs filtered through the overhead speakers.

I lifted my glass to Joe as Jimmy stormed out of the bar, deliberately kicking one foot of my barstool as he went, but not succeeding in moving it more than an inch.

My heart rate soared and blood rushed in my ears, but it wasn't bad.

It was terrifying, yeah, but also ... exciting.

I'd never in my life done anything like that before. Picking on a homophobe? Showing him up and then making fun of him? Getting someone kicked out of a bar? Okay, no, he'd gotten himself kicked out by being an asshole, but still.

I'd never been one to stand up for myself, as proven by how I hadn't even spoken to Harry after he dumped me through his lawyer, let alone hunted him down and kicked him in the teeth. But wasn't it *enough*, at some point? I'd moved across the country and kept quiet. I'd always been a good person, even if I wasn't perfect. I'd done everything I was supposed to, been nice to people, even helpful when I could ...

And it got me stepped on by people like Harry, and worse, someone here had fucking broken into my house and tried to kill me.

I was done putting up with things.

I was going to be the new Maxim Blazek. The one who didn't just sigh and accept Harry dumping me and then expecting me to help his career. The one who humiliated homophobes in public places. Calling Harry's lawyer on him hadn't been in the same league as embarrassing Jimmy, but baby steps.

"That just might have been the sexiest thing I've seen in my whole life," said a deep baritone voice that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. In a good way.

Gentry.

"Yeah?" I asked, leaning on the bar and giving him my brightest grin. "Random music knowledge, or telling the sexist homophobe to fuck off?"

"Both." He pulled himself onto the barstool next to me, looking me over like maybe the clothes I'd picked had in fact been the right ones. Lasciviously. "Glad you came. Want to come again?"

Holy shit. Was he ...

That was beyond flirting. Not to mention smooth as hell by my standards. Admittedly, my standards were more on the level of "you're hot, let's go fuck," so maybe that wasn't saying much.

"That sounds—"

That, naturally, was when the handsome man came up and threw an arm around him, leaning his head on his muscular shoulder.

Fuck me, seriously? He had a boyfriend?

I looked at the guy, frowning, determined not to like him, but damn him, he just had one of those faces you had to like. Bright and open, with wide gray eyes and full smiling lips, shaggy dark brown hair falling in his eyes boyishly.

"You're Max," he informed me, like maybe I was unaware.

Apparently every single person in town had heard of me. Why hadn't I wanted to become a hermit again?

Gentry gave a deep sigh and glared down at the guy with this odd, long-suffering expression and I—

Oh. I got it. "You're his brother. Um ... was it Hank?"

The guy made a face like he'd bitten into a wormy apple. "Aw hell, Gen, you told him I was named for Hank? No. It's Jon. Please. Nobody calls me that. Ever."

And that, I couldn't figure out. "How do you get Jon out of, uh ... Henry?"

"Hiram," Gentry corrected with a wicked grin. "The man's real name was Hiram Williams. People just called him Hank."

His brother groaned, and turned to bang his forehead against Gentry's shoulder. "For fuck's sake. I don't care how famous he was, who the hell saddles their kid with a name like Hiram in the twentieth century?"

"So he goes by his middle name," Gentry concluded. "The big wimp. Some of us decided to own the tragedy we were saddled with."

Jon blew a raspberry at him. "Hiram is way the fuck worse than Gentry."

"Besides," Joe interjected, leaning across the bar to offer Jon a full bottle of water in exchange for the empty one I hadn't even noticed he had in his hand. "If he hadn't decided on Jon, we couldn't have been Gen, Jon, and Joe in high school."

I looked at each of them, studying their faces. "Why do I feel like the three of you were a complete terror in school?"

Gentry gave me that slow, lazy smile. "That's because you're a smart man. Well educated too, I'd wager."

"By which he means he'd like to further educate you in the ways of the fox." Jon gave me an exaggerated wink and elbowed his brother in the side. "You shoulda heard him for the last week. Max this and Max that."

“Jon—” Gentry said warningly, glaring at his brother.

“Max writes movies. Max has great taste in furniture. Ooh Jo-on, Max makes better fried chicken than Gran.” Joe coughed at that, looking scandalized, and Jon nodded to him, expression stern. “Not even playing around. Imagine maligning the dead like that. Poor Gran not even here to defend herself from that slight.”

“You watch it or you’re gonna find yourself with a wedge the size of the Albemarle, you little brat.” Gentry shrugged the shoulder his brother’s head was still planted on, but it was clear his heart wasn’t in it, because he hardly moved. “And you haven’t tried Max’s cooking, so you don’t know.”

I might have been glowing, but I couldn’t have formed words for all the money in the world right then. He’d *told people* about me.

“I know,” Jon agreed, stretching the second word out like he was a schoolboy taunting his brother, and in a minute he was going to start singing that song about sitting in a tree, k-i-s-s-i-n-g. Then he did, in fact, make a kissy face.

Gentry groaned and buried his face in his hands. “I’m sorry. I’d like to tell you I’m not related to this asshole, but I can’t. Hell, even Joe’s a second cousin on the Fox side.”

Oh, I’d completely forgotten—I turned to Joe. “How are the wife and kids?”

It was Jon’s turn to groan, and Joe positively lit up, whipping out his phone and handing it over with a slideshow cued up of a stunningly beautiful Dinah who was clearly exhausted but humoring him, holding first a small pink wrinkled creature in a green blanket with ducks on it, then a different one in a yellow blanket with blue birds. “That there’s Mason, and Nadia.”

At the name Nadia, they all sort of paused and lowered their heads, clearly affected by it. Jon even lifted a hand to wipe away a tear.

Wow. Clearly they all felt about her the same way she felt about Gentry. Part of me wanted to tell them her ghost was

haunting the house and I'd spoken to her, but ... that was ridiculous. Even if they believed in ghosts, that was bound to backfire spectacularly.

“You the Hollywood guy?”

I turned to take a look at who had asked. A lovely young woman in skintight jeans and a black shirt that said “angel” in silver rhinestones. Also, frosted pink lipstick that looked like it came straight out of the eighties, and somehow, worked on her.

It was odd, because my instinct said no. I wasn't one of those people she actually meant, who owned thousand dollar suits and “did lunch” and that kind of thing. I'd always felt as much like an outsider in the movie industry as anyone in the bar would have. I'd just assumed that it was how it felt to be a writer in the industry.

But technically, she was right. I'd lived in Malibu. I wrote a successful screenplay that was turned into an award-winning movie. A fabulous damned movie.

So I nodded. “That's me, I guess. I mean, I am a screenwriter. Max Blazek.”

She popped up onto her toes, eyes lighting up and biting her lip. “Holly Willis. And you worked with Harrison Grant?”

Oh boy.

Okay, I'd been practicing this in my head since the grocery store. A little since I'd signed the damned NDA, but the grocery store had proven that it was going to be important.

“I did, yeah. He was one of the actors in the movie I wrote. I can't really tell you about him, though. He was almost a bit part in the movie, and wasn't on set that much.”

“Always seems like an asshole to me,” Joe said. “The way he snubbed that nice lady doing red carpet interviews at the Oscars? Douchebag.”

Holly scowled at him, but didn't deny that Harry came off like an asshole. Just shrugged. “I mean, he's pretty. He probably doesn't have to be nice.”

“Some of them are great, though,” I interrupted. Anything to change the subject from Harry. Literally anything. “The actress who played Klara was one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. She made muffins for the whole crew on the last day, and made sure to make an extra vegan batch for the people who couldn’t have milk and butter. A real sweetheart.”

She pressed her hand to her chest and made a little aww, and then we were off to the races. The next half hour was a discussion of people in Hollywood who were, in fact, wonderful. That I was always happy to do, even though for a lot of it she knew at least as much as me.

Gentry’s brother, too, seemed to know quite a lot, and helped steer the conversation. When Gentry leaned into me, casually wrapping an arm around my shoulders, she also seemed to take that hint well and transferred any flirting to Jon without comment, which was nice.

Meanwhile, I was sitting in a bar, talking about movies—my favorite thing—with a gorgeous man’s arm around me. It was little wonder I had a goofy smile on my face so wide it was starting to make my cheeks hurt.

I couldn’t remember being nearly as happy since before Grandma had died.

thirteen

It was almost midnight when Jon clearly started flagging, and that was when I noticed the dark circles under his eyes. His cheeks were a bit hollow too, and more than that, when he deflated, Gentry put an arm around him and pulled him in.

The scene felt almost protective. He'd mentioned being in school, so maybe he was just exhausted. It was getting toward exam time, so maybe he was working too hard. I remembered that pattern all too well.

"Time to call it a night, I think," Gentry said, voice soft and gentle.

Jon gave him a scowl, but after a moment, he sighed and nodded. "I guess I could use some sleep." He looked up at me, offering a wan smile then his hand for a shake. "It's been great to meet you, Max, but I guess Gen's decided he needs to get rid of me."

"Yeah, that's it," Gentry agreed. "Can't have you cramping my style any more tonight. I'll see you in the morning, yeah?"

"Six AM sharp," Jon agreed, then sighed again before turning toward the other end of the bar. He paused and turned back for a second, looking oddly hopeful. "If you need help getting all that furniture out of storage for Max this weekend, I can probably help tomorrow in the afternoon some."

Gentry frowned, biting his lip, but after a moment he gave a little nod.

His brother grinned. “Great. It’ll be good to have someone using all that stuff again. Almost like sending it home where it belongs.”

“All that furniture?” I asked, watching Jon go through a door in the back. “Storage?”

Gentry ducked his head, sighing and looking hesitant. “The furniture you were asking about. The stuff that used to be in the house? Well, most of it is in a storage unit me and Jon are paying for.”

That he and Jon were paying for. Nadia’s furniture. Gran’s fried chicken. The way he’d asked if there were cookbooks in the house.

“You’re related to Nadia,” I announced aloud. Maybe too loud, since a couple people still in the bar turned around to look at me.

He too turned to stare at me, blinking owlishly for a moment, then asking, voice tinged with the tiniest bit of suspicion. “How do you know about her?”

Shit.

Fuck.

Shitfuck.

It was my turn to blink and stare. “I ... I bought the house.” I waved a hand in a wide arc, like I was doing a magic show and if I made big enough gestures with one hand, no one would notice what I was doing with the other. And that was when inspiration struck. “I ... bought it from her estate. Of course I know her name.”

That seemed reasonable, didn’t it? I reasonably could have known her name, I suspected, if I’d asked about it. If I hadn’t tried not to think about that part of the house sale—the fact that I was buying the place from an estate, so it meant someone had died.

His shoulders slumped just a little, and he sighed. “I guess that makes sense. Me and Jon thought it’d be best if the house just sold when she passed. Neither of us could afford the time

and money to keep it up like it deserves. Gran'd've been horrified, but we hoped she'd have understood too."

That was it, then. The guess that had been forming in my mind had been right.

Nadia was his grandmother. Every bit of me longed to tell him she *did* understand. That she hadn't had a negative word to say about him. That she was still there, flitting about the house like queen of the manor, and she would be as long as she wanted to stay with me.

That I'd take care of her for him.

But again, declaring that you were seeing ghosts was more likely to lead to arguments and psych holds than touching conversations.

"I'm sure she would have," I said instead. "My own grandmother would have kicked my butt if I'd hurt myself trying to keep up her house alone after she died. One of the last things she told me was to sell it and follow my heart."

His lips turned up at the corner at that, and he finally looked back up at me. "Sounds like a hell of a lady. She's the one that movie of yours was about, right? Gran loved that movie. Said it was the only decent thing to come out of Hollywood in years."

I couldn't even swallow around the lump that formed in my throat, so I just nodded.

"Well ain't we a fucking mess of missing Grans?" He slid in closer to me and squeezed my shoulder with the arm still around me. "Come on, I'll take you home."

That was maybe the sweetest thing any date had ever done for me, and I wasn't even sure this had been a proper date.

That realization finally shook the lump out of my throat and let me speak up, even if it was a bit croaky. "How gentlemanly of you. Are you asking if I've had too much to drive?" I glanced back at my half-full glass, only my second beer of the night, and considered. "I've only had one and a half. You don't have to."

“Let me at least walk you to your car,” he said, sliding off the stool but leaving his arm around me. “I’d be a pretty crappy date if I didn’t, don’t you think?”

“Is, um, that what this was? A date?”

His eyes darted away, but a moment later they were back on me, all warm and green and earnest. “Well, it was what I was hoping for, but I didn’t want to be too forward if there was a chance that flag of yours was just about support and not personal. You learn to be careful quick when asking people out around these parts.”

The very thought was so sad, baby Gentry learning the hard way that merely asking someone on a date could be a mistake.

“Then I retroactively agree to go on a date with you tonight. What’s more, I had a lovely time, so thank you.”

Once again, I was treated to his beautiful smile, and it practically made the sun come out despite it being near midnight. “So that’s a yes to walking you to your car?”

“It is,” I agreed, sliding down off my own stool and leaning into him. “Far be it from me to turn down chivalry.”

I’d settled my tab ages before, and Gentry just waved at Joe, who waved back, so they seemed fine, and we slipped out into the balmy night air.

“I’m parked right over there,” I said, pointing, then remembered he’d already seen my car, so he’d probably known where it was. It wasn’t the world’s most distinctive car, but there weren’t a lot of bright teal hybrids in town, either.

Gentry wasn’t looking where I had pointed, though. He was looking off behind the building, frowning. There was motion there, between the brick backs of the buildings and where the cars were parked. Someone with their back to us, moving away at quite a clip.

“Something wrong?”

“I don’t ... I’m not sure. Just got a weird feeling, you know?” He turned and headed over into the parking area, still

looking around, like he was expecting something to happen.

It just looked like a mostly empty parking lot to me, and Gentry's own truck and its now unhooked trailer were sitting next to each other in two spaces in the far corner.

"You sure I can't take you home?" he asked.

And honestly, while I understood that something had unsettled him, the first thought dancing through my head was taking the gorgeous man home with me and having him there.

And ... yeah, *having him* there.

He'd made that sly comment about coming again when he'd first found me at the bar, but after that, with his brother present, and then other people off and on all night, the sexy flirting hadn't returned, and I'd missed it.

It had been a while since I got laid, sue me.

"Did you want to stay the night?" I walked up beside him and pressed into his arm as I asked it, leaning in to take a breath of his scent. I wanted to make sure the "in my bed" part was implicit, since I wasn't sure it was a good idea to tell him that the guest bedroom was actually his grandmother's room, and he couldn't sleep in there.

When he turned back to look at me again, the heat from the beginning of the night was back in his eyes. "You don't think it's too soon for that?"

If hell was a thing, I was so going there. I was seducing a man who worried we shouldn't fuck on the first date. Worse yet, I was planning to do it in his grandmother's house.

Okay, no, I wasn't going to be the creepy big city user guy. Just because I was determined not to be taken advantage of again didn't mean I wanted to be the one doing the abusing. So maybe it was best we had a real conversation about it first.

"So here's the thing. I'm not looking for a one night stand. And I'm not looking for a fuckbuddy to take the edge off. I don't do that well. My grandmother raised a romantic. I get attached and I fall in love, fast. So if that's a problem for you —"

Suddenly warm lips were pressed against mine, and all the words I'd meant to say were gone.

Gentry was there, a hot, hard line all down the front of me, except for that soft mouth, that slick tongue exploring, pressing at the seam of my lips, which I immediately opened to him.

Like I'd been in the process of saying, I didn't do things halfway.

I opened myself up and let him take, so take he did. He wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me in tight then sliding one hand up under my T-shirt and running it along the skin of my back as he kissed me, plundering my mouth like the pirate his ancestors had been accused of being.

Oh gods, that was an image. Gentry in one of those open white shirts, a rapier in his hand ...

I might pass out.

He pulled back, breathing heavily, and my lips already felt swollen. It had been too long since I'd been properly kissed.

I let my head loll back a bit as we stood wrapped together, our lips inches apart, breaths mingling in the tiny space between us.

"No problem," he ground out, voice deeper than usual. "Not a single damn problem with that at all. I ain't interested in no one night stands either. If I'm in, then I'm in, and I want 'em all."

I couldn't help the giggle at that. "An every night stand?"

"Only good kind," he agreed.

"Well then, no time like the present to get started." I slid my hand into the pocket of my skinny jeans and pulled out the remote entry for the car, pressing the unlock button until it made the little beeping sound that meant "stop it you prick, I'm unlocked already." Technically it'd just unlock automatically if I pulled the handle with the keys in my pocket, but it seemed like we needed some cue to get us started.

Gentry nodded, and let go of me with visible difficulty. Damn if that wasn't the sexiest thing I'd experienced in my whole fucking life. All that gorgeous sweet man, and he didn't want to let me go.

We held fingertips all the way to the back of the car, till we had to split apart to get into our respective sides, and fuck me, but was I in deep already. Yeah, yeah, infatuation, but all relationships started that way, didn't they? I once read something about how your brain reacted to new relationships like it reacted to cocaine, and I remembered thinking I'd never heard a better endorsement for coke.

Then I'd reminded myself it was that kind of thinking that had ended in my mother's death, and refused to consider it any further. With a family history like that, it was best to never find out if the predisposition was genetic.

I started the car and pulled out of the space, and it took an odd moment to get the car to stop and flip into drive, but I chalked it up to how shaky and distracted I was.

Mistake.

The car was sluggish to respond again as I pulled around the corner toward the street, braking as I did so.

I got to the edge of the lot next to Main Street, and when I pressed the brake pedal to stop and check both ways before pulling onto the road, nothing happened.

Well, better put, the goddamned car didn't stop. Since we were on a downhill slope, in fact, we sped up, heading straight across the road and toward the ocean.

"Max?" Gentry asked, voice worried but not panicked, like I was.

"Brakes," was all I managed to squeak out, shaking my head and shoving all my weight down onto the brake pedal again to no avail.

Gentry cursed, and apparently thought way the hell faster than me, reaching out and grabbing the wheel of the car, wrenching it to one side and plowing us right into a wrought iron lamppost.

The car continued to try to move forward for a moment, straining at the lamp and making a horrific metallic screeching noise, then the dash lights flickered out and everything went dead.

fourteen

It was only another moment before Gentry was pulling open the driver-side door and tugging me out of the car. I fell into his arms, shaking and struggling to breathe properly, and he wrapped himself around me, holding me tight, whispering assurances that I was okay.

Then the first sheriff's car arrived, a beautiful Black woman in the expected tan uniform stepping out and coming around to see us.

"Everything all right?" was the first thing she asked, and that was ... nice.

But of course it couldn't end there. A man had dragged himself out of the passenger seat of the car, and he scoffed. "Of course it ain't all right, looks like Fox got sauced and got himself in an accident."

"Nobody's sauced," Gentry spat back, giving the guy a glare before turning back to the woman. He took an exaggerated sniff of the air around us. "Smell the brake fluid? He was trying to pull out onto the road and the brakes went to mush."

The male deputy snorted. "Right. Somebody in this town cut Mr. Fancy's brake line. Seems likely."

That, naturally, was when the second cop car pulled up.

I didn't know whether that was good or bad, and clearly the female deputy didn't either, her shoulders stiffening as she turned to look at the car. She relaxed immediately, smiling at the older man who climbed out of the driver's seat. "Harvey,

there any way to get a look at the brake line in this position? Gentry thinks maybe it was tampered with.”

The man’s eyes widened in surprise, but he came over, that easy country-boy saunter in his step, and squatted down next to the front end of the car. Like Gentry, he took a deep sniff of the air. “Well the brake line’s definitely cut now, whether it was before the accident or not.” He turned back to her, clearly deferring to her authority. “Never heard of anything like it happening in town, but if Gentry says it happened, I believe him. Not like him to drive drunk.”

“No,” she agreed. “It’s not.”

“Oh, come on,” her partner said, voice loud and whiny and fucking grating while I was still trying not to panic. “Cut brakes? This ain’t a movie. Things like that don’t happen in Welling.”

Fuck.

“Someone broke into my house last night and tried to smother me with my pillow,” I told them, barely managing to force out the words. “I didn’t ... I didn’t call the cops because it seemed too ridiculous. Plus he didn’t force the lock, so the closest thing I have to proof is skid marks in the driveway.”

“What the hell?” Gentry demanded, pulling away far enough to look me over, like he could find an injury that didn’t exist. “You gotta tell the cops a thing like that, Max.”

“But isn’t it ridiculous? Like he said, it’s a tiny town with a murder rate of literal zero. I know, I checked. I got here a week ago. Why the heck would anyone be trying to kill me?” My voice cracked on the last, and it didn’t help my point, since I was obviously terrified.

“That’s our job to find out,” the woman said, coming over to stand next to us. “I understand your worry, but if someone is trying to kill you, we need to take that seriously, and so do you.”

“I made an appointment to have a security system put into the house so no one can break in again. I just ... I didn’t think

anyone would believe me.” I wasn’t mumbling into Gentry’s shirt. Much.

Her expression was sympathetic, and it made me feel like a bit of a heel for doubting the cops in town. Though her partner was still rolling his eyes and making scoffing noises. He muttered something about going and asking just how many drinks we’d had at Joe’s.

New Max. Not accepting that.

“One and a half beers in six hours. Want to call me drunk again? Gentry had one that I saw, and he wasn’t even driving, so you can’t pin this mess on him at all.”

The older male deputy hid a smile as he continued fiddling with the car. He stood suddenly, turning to the woman who was apparently in charge. “Yep, if that wasn’t cut before they started the car, I’ll eat my hat. Can’t really be proven now of course, but that’s way too clean a cut.” He motioned to the road. “Plus there’s a trail of something all the way back into the lot, and I’d bet money it’s brake fluid. Easy enough to test.”

And that was that.

Someone had cut my brake line. Just like someone had tried to smother me in my sleep.

We walked over to the Sheriff’s station since it was just a block away, and I spent the next hour filling out reports on both incidents. The deputy—Alicia Marks—sat with me and asked questions about who I thought might be involved.

Honestly, the whole thing was ridiculous. Did Jimmy dislike me? Sure, but I didn’t think it would lead him to attempted murder. That was silly. People got embarrassed and were homophobes all the time, but most of them didn’t turn straight to murder, did they?

She gave me a smile like I was the most precious thing she’d ever seen when I said that, patted me on the shoulder, and said that they should look into every possibility, regardless of how likely it was.

I thought of Harry, but dismissed that. I wasn't even sure if I could legally tell her about the NDA and his phone calls, regardless of her being a cop and someone trying to kill me. Besides, Harry was a self-involved asshole, but murder? Just because I hadn't called Amelia Barber on his behalf? That was ridiculous. Not possible.

The problem was that once again, that left me at a loss for an explanation. It wasn't like I'd showed up in town and caused upheaval. The most dramatic thing I'd done was plant a rainbow flag in my lawn, and most people in town didn't seem to care overly much about that.

Maybe my questions about the house in the woods? But that was silly too. Sure, people had been acting weird about it, but whatever had happened there had happened almost a hundred years ago. Most of the people in town, even those who'd been most weird about the conversation, couldn't have had anything to do with it, and if they had, they'd have been children at the time.

When I finally got out of the office with Alicia, Gentry was waiting right outside talking on his phone. "Thanks, Joe. I owe you another one." I could hear laughter on the other end of the line, and Gentry smiled, then they said their goodbyes and disconnected. "Everything okay? I mean, other than this whole damn mess?"

When I hesitated, Alicia nodded. "We've got a solid base for where to start looking into this. Thank you both for your statements. Now, you both just need to be careful. Whoever it is is obviously after Mr. Blazek, but that doesn't mean you can't get caught in the crossfire, Gentry. And there are a couple of assholes in this town who wouldn't mind seeing that happen."

Gentry's lips pursed, but he nodded. "I'll keep an eye out. And another for Max. Any idea how long it's going to take to get his car processed?"

"A couple days at least, sorry to say," she answered, giving me a sympathetic expression. "We've got to go over everything before we can release it, since a crime clearly took

place. There was a whole puddle of brake fluid in the space where you were parked.”

“Let me guess,” Gentry drawled, “Deputy Brian thinks it’s just that gay dudes don’t know how to take care of cars.”

She didn’t say a word, but pressed her index finger on the tip of her nose, rolling her eyes. “Let’s just ignore the fact that you spent all of high school working for the local garage and keep that Trans Am of your brother’s running with willpower alone.”

“Now, now, there’s some spit and string involved too,” Gentry corrected. “Anyway. We good to go?”

Alicia looked at me, clearly concerned next time she saw me it was going to be in the morgue, but nodded. “Yeah. We’ve got all we need to get started. You two be careful, though, you hear me? You’re not immortal, and I need you to not get killed. No breaking our streak of a zero murder rate.”

Gentry tipped his head. “We’ll do our best. Somebody breaks into the place tonight, they’re gonna be in for a surprise.”

She gave him an approving nod, and he turned to wrap an arm around my waist and lead me out.

“You’re still staying?” I asked when we got to the street.

He gave a snort. “Damn right I am. And for as long as you let me.”

Part of me wanted to say I wasn’t much in the mood now, what with the murder attempt, but I suspected he wasn’t talking about the sex anymore.

If he was? I was hard pressed to imagine turning him down, no matter the circumstances.

It wasn’t until he led me to his truck, sitting in the same back lot where my own car had been, that I remembered my own car was probably going to end up totaled out by the insurance company. I’d have the dealership in the city an hour away take it and try to fix it, but I didn’t have high hopes.

He opened the door for me and offered an arm to help me up, ridiculous gentleman that he was. Why had I never dated a guy like this before? I honestly hadn't thought men like him existed.

Maybe all the gay men I'd known in LA, complaining about how impossible it was to find a truly good guy, should be flooding through the south looking for men like Gentry. I suspected he was a one of a kind, but it was possible. And of course, Joe and Jon had been great as well, so maybe there was something to it.

Instead of staying next to the window, I slid to the center of the bench seat and managed to wiggle the seatbelt into place, allowing me to lean on Gentry when he climbed into the driver seat. He didn't seem put out in the least by my proximity. Quite the contrary, he put an arm around my shoulders and pulled me in against him.

"Now we've known each other for a minute or so, but I get the feeling you're not so comfortable with guns in the house."

I winced, but didn't pull away. "Do you know the statistics?"

"Can't say I do, no. We just always had a shotgun in the house for protection when I was a kid, so maybe it's not a bad idea now."

For the first time in my life, I actually gave it some thought. Someone was literally trying to kill me. This wasn't a possible theoretical for home protection. My home quite literally needed protection.

Still, though ... "I don't actually know how to shoot a gun."

"That's fair enough," he said, nodding. "But I can teach you, if you want."

Never in a million years had I thought that would ever feel like a romantic offer. "That, um, might not be a terrible idea?"

He just gave another nod and squeezed my shoulder. "Sounds good. We can do that tomorrow. For tonight, I'll just

keep it myself, and if anyone shows up, you find a room, lock yourself inside it and call the cops, okay?”

“That, I can do. I have A-plus cop summoning skills. Well, when I think they might listen to me instead of thinking I’m nuts.”

Think I’m nuts ...

Shit. Nadia. It was likely that her presence in the house was part of why I hadn’t wanted to call the cops to begin with. I was seeing ghosts. If I let that slip, the cops would think I was a loon and dismiss anything I said. And honestly ... I didn’t even know they’d be wrong to do it.

Since I’d moved, I’d started seeing ghosts and been through multiple attempted murders, in a tiny town with a negligible crime rate. I hadn’t even been harassed in LA, a town with a much worse reputation. How was that real?

More important in the short term, I was about to bring Gentry into a house where I was regularly seeing his grandmother’s ghost. That was bound to go well.

The house was just as I'd left it, which was a small favor, I supposed. Part of me had expected to come back to find the place on fire, just as another fuck you from whoever was trying to kill me.

For a fraction of a second, I had a full-blown fantasy that it was Harry doing it all, because he'd decided he couldn't live without ... well, it being Harry, it would be without that Oscar he imagined I somehow owed him.

He certainly wasn't missing me all that much.

I followed Gentry out the driver's side door of the truck, and up the front porch stairs, where he waited for me to unlock it. He might still have keys, my traitor brain pointed out. It would explain why the lock hadn't been forced.

Yes, and then he'd cut my brake line while we were hanging out in the bar together.

Though ... the brakes might have been cut earlier. I'd looked it up on my phone and found out they usually kept working for a while after the line started leaking. Maybe they'd been cut the day before, when he'd come to deliver the wood.

I shook my head, trying to force the nonsense out.

Why the hell would Gentry be trying to kill me?

It didn't make any sense, and I dismissed it. It wasn't like he'd get his grandmother's house back if I died. My current will mandated everything go to a handful of drug addiction

charities, so the place might end up a halfway house or something if I died.

I wondered for a moment what Nadia would think of that, but a pat on my lower back snagged my attention back to the present. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah I’m just ... it’s been a long week. Lots to process.”

Gentry’s hand slid around to my hip and gave a squeeze. “I can sleep in the guest room tonight if it’ll help. I can’t imagine you’re in the mood to—”

It was my turn to kiss him without warning, because in that moment, my immediate reaction to his offer to sleep in the guest room wasn’t relief, or even worry he’d run into Nadia or she’d be annoyed with me for letting someone use her room. No, I’d had a stab of irrational fear that this was my shot.

Gentry Fox was my shot, and if I missed it, I wouldn’t get another like this.

His lips were just as soft as I remembered, yielding as I practically assaulted his mouth with my own. He made a tiny, “mmm” sound, but didn’t protest or pull away.

No, he pulled me against him, gripping my hips with his ridiculously strong hands, his fingers dipping beneath my jeans to touch the skin there.

He pulled back after a moment, one eyebrow lifted. “Am I imagining things, or are you wearing nothing under them jeans?” His voice was low and rough, clearly affected by the idea.

So I offered a wicked smile back. “You’re definitely not imagining things. You think I can fit underwear under jeans this tight?”

He groaned and pulled me closer, grinding our hardening dicks together through the layers of denim. “Fuck,” he muttered. “Just when I thought you couldn’t get any hotter.”

“I do aim to please,” I whispered back, feeling surprisingly cocky in the moment. He wanted me. Me. The hottest man I’d

ever seen in my life, let alone been on a date with, and something about *me* had led to the heat in his pale green eyes.

He kicked the door closed behind us, flipping the lock closed without even looking, then grabbing me and tossing me over one shoulder in a fireman's carry.

I couldn't hold back the wild laughter at that. I was being carried, for fuck's sake. I hadn't had that happen since I was like four, and the context was ever so slightly different.

Gentry didn't stop until we were in the main bedroom, where he dropped me across my bed with a bounce and looked down at me, not even winded by carrying a full-grown man up the stairs.

"Fuck me," he muttered, dropping onto the bed, planting his knees on either side of mine and running his hands up my body from my hips, rucking up under my shirt, all the way up. "You are so damn sexy."

"I was kind of hoping for the other way around," I pointed out. "I believe I was promised a demanding top."

He laughed again, nodding. "That you were, and that I am. Not that I'm opposed to trying new things, but"—his voice went gravelly and deep—"fuck I want my cock inside you."

"That makes two of us." I reached down and grabbed the hem of my shirt, yanking it off over my head and tossing it away, then reached for the fly of my jeans.

Gentry ran his hands up and down my denim clad thighs, watching me lower my zipper like I was unwrapping his birthday present for him, eyes avid on me, licking his lips.

When I managed to shove my jeans down under my ass, baring myself to the cool air, he slid off the bed and yanked off my shoes, then my jeans, dropping them all on the bedside rug and climbing back atop me, touching every inch of skin he could reach.

"Damn," he growled. "You're just as fucking sexy out of your clothes as in them. I didn't think that was even possible."

“Your turn.” I grabbed at the button on his fly. “Need you naked. You’re the sexiest fucking man in the world, and I need it.”

He gave me that slow grin and reached for his hem, pulling his shirt off slow and easy, like he’d lived another life as a stripper, and I was worried I might melt into my bed at the very idea. He proceeded to do the same with his jeans and boxer briefs, pausing only long enough to reach into his pocket for a condom and packet of lube.

“Prepared?” I asked, snatching them from him and spreading my legs. “Boy Scout or optimist?”

He laughed and shook his head. “Normally I’d have said neither. My mother didn’t approve of the scouts, and I can’t say I’ve ever been an optimist. But maybe ... well hell, who doesn’t want things to go right. Right?”

“You’re a closet optimist,” I joked, but then took all the humor out of my voice before going on. “And this is definitely right. I haven’t felt this right about anything, maybe ever. Maybe it’s just because it’s new, but I’ve got a really good feeling about this. About us.”

He leaned in, still breathless, to kiss me again. “Me too.”

A moment later he’d pulled himself back up onto his knees between my legs, hoisting them up onto his shoulders and reaching for the lube packet, tearing it open and squeezing it onto his fingers.

He watched my face as he slid the first finger inside me, and it was all I could do not to cover my face with my hands out of sheer self-consciousness. But the way his eyes darkened when I gasped at the sensation, my mouth falling open and eyes going heavy ... well, I didn’t want to miss anything.

He went excruciatingly slow, one finger at a time, and by the time he was sliding two in and out of me, I’d reached up to pull at my own hair, impatient for what was next but knowing damned well the smart thing was to take all the prep he was willing to give.

But Gentry? He was the slowest, most patient lover I'd had in my whole damned life. He kept going, working me open until I was writhing and panting on three of his fingers, pulling at my hair with one hand and squeezing his leg with the other. "Ready," I whined. "So fucking ready, just—"

"You sure? I don't want to hurt you, and I get the feeling it's gonna be hard to hold back once I'm buried balls deep in your hot little body, Max."

"Fuck," I groaned. "That does not make me want it less. Get the hell down here and fuck me."

He grinned, ripping the condom open with one hand and his teeth, and flipping it out with that same hand, then sliding it down his huge fucking prick. How did a man get that good with his hands? It was positively inhuman.

I tried not to giggle at the idea of him being a secret werewolf or something like that, but a second later, with the fat head of his cock nudging at my hole, I couldn't think any more. The breath flew out of me as he pressed in, slow and steady, filling me to the brim. My arms went slack against the bed, and I couldn't have grabbed him and pulled him in for all the money in the world, even as much as I wanted to.

Wanted all of him, wanted his cock fucking into me like my life depended on it. Maybe it did. Right then I thought I might die if he didn't fuck me.

I pressed my hips up as much as possible with my ankles still thrown over his shoulders, and he flexed forward, fully seated inside me and pressing against every part of me.

"Aw fuck, Max, you feel so good," he whispered. "Just like I knew you would. Hot and tight and perfect."

His pale green eyes almost glowed in the darkened room, taking in my prone, helpless form. My warped writer mind realized it would be the perfect time for it if he wanted to kill me, and for some bizarre reason, the thought made my cock jerk against his belly.

Instead of anything weird or scary, he reached down between us and ran his fingers along the length of me, touch

soft and not nearly enough pressure and friction to make me come. “So fucking perfect,” he whispered again, then pulled out and pushed back in. Then again, harder, with a groan.

When I pushed into it, he let loose, fucking into me hard and fast, his lush lips slack with pleasure as he rammed home again and again, hand tightening rhythmically and reflexively around my cock as he moved, driving me closer to the edge as he went.

I let out a pitiful little whimper and his bright eyes snapped up to meet mine, and then his free hand was winding into my hair, tugging just hard enough to make me feel it. The whimper turned into a keening moan as he pulled at my hair and squeezed my cock at the same time. Just a few more strokes and I was coming all over my own belly and his hand, lightning surging through me, shuddering with the sensations, my whole body shaking every time he thrust inside me.

“Want to come on you,” he mumbled in my ear. “Can I?”

“Mmm,” I whimpered, then gave as much of a nod as I could with his hand still tugging at my hair. Fuck, it was so hot, part of me wanted to come again at the sensation.

Gentry sat up and pulled out of me, sliding the condom off and then stripping his own cock hard and fast, until a moment later he was coming in white hot stripes across my chest, covering me with his come.

When his hand finally slowed on his cock, he didn’t move away, just knelt there between my legs, surveying his work with darkened eyes. “Fuck, you look so good like this. I want to keep you in bed, covered with me, all the damn time.”

“You have no idea how tempted I am to agree to that,” I managed to say, between heavy breaths. “That was so fucking hot.”

“Didn’t pull your hair too hard? You seemed to like it.”

I grinned, reaching up to a streak of his come on my chest, rubbing my fingers through it like I could rub it into my skin. “Hottest thing ever. Do it any fucking time you want.”

He groaned, and his cock gave another dribble on my chest. “You keep doing that, I’m gonna be hard again in a minute.”

I grinned back and pointed at the nightstand. “I’ve got condoms. You weren’t the only one feeling optimistic about tonight.”

His answering smile was wicked and perfect, and promised the best damned night of my life.

My whole body ached in the morning. Gentry hadn't merely managed to get it up again to fuck me in the bed, he'd taken me into the bathtub afterward, and he was just as hot immersed in soapy water as I'd imagined.

He'd proceeded to wash every part of me, pausing in the middle to jerk off on my chest again because I was "just too damn hot," and then wash me clean again.

Me, too damn hot.

Don't get me wrong, I'd never had a lot of self-esteem issues about my appearance, but neither had I ever thought I was something extra special and gorgeous. To hear Gentry tell it, I truly was that and then some.

Gorgeous like he definitely was, but when I told him that, his reaction was just that aw-shucks and head duck that said he thought I was only saying it because he'd said it to me.

How did the man not know how stunning he was?

No, that didn't matter. What mattered was that I could spend as long as we had together reminding him that I believed it. Looking at that face was never going to get old.

Yeah, fine, we'd only known each other a week and I'd spent at least a minute of it wondering if he was trying to kill me. But he definitely wasn't. Yeah, he'd had the means and opportunity, but like the TV shows always said, there also needed to be a motive.

And if Gentry had a motive related to me, I thought it was a motive to keep me alive, not kill me. He liked me.

He hadn't once stopped looking at me like he wanted to eat me alive, and not in the cannibalistic kind of way.

He was still snoring softly when I woke, so I crept out of bed without disturbing him, and headed first to the bathroom for the morning, then the kitchen.

Everyone was always saying that the way to a man's heart was through his stomach, so breakfast seemed like a good idea. Gentry had already been impressed by my version of his grandmother's fried chicken, so bacon seemed like it might be a good addition to that.

And coffee, oh sweet nectar of the gods.

Nadia was sitting in the kitchen, on one of the tall chairs at the island that I always left pushed out on the assumption that she couldn't move it. Given that she could touch me, I might be wrong about that, but it still seemed like a good idea.

I swallowed hard at the sight of her, trying not to think of the wonderful, debauched things I'd been doing with her grandson in what used to be her bedroom just a few hours earlier.

She'd been largely accepting of me, and of my sexuality, and even of my lust for her grandson up till now. Did this change things?

"You'd best start chopping those shallots," she said, waving to the dry goods storage baskets on the counter. "He's going to wake up soon, and you don't want him to catch me giving you recipes down here."

"He probably wouldn't mind seeing you, you know," I whispered back as I reached for the shallots. "What are we making?"

"Omelets. Nice and simple. I'm sure you already know how to make them. He'll like it with shallot and parsley and that lovely cheddar you got at the store." She leaned back in the chair and sighed. "He wouldn't ... mind me being here, probably. But he'd wonder why I showed myself to you and

not him. He was ... he was the one who found me, you know. After. And I just couldn't—" She cut off, tears in her eyes, and looked away.

It made sense. I couldn't imagine the overwhelming emotions of having fucking *died*. I was all full of emotions because someone had merely tried to kill me. It hadn't actually worked, leaving me dealing with the fallout of that.

"I never thought he'd willingly step foot back in this house after that. Then you came, and you just ... you're just perfect." When I looked up at that, she was dabbing at her face with a handkerchief that was just as translucent as the rest of her.

She had to know what he and I had been up to the night before. Even if she hadn't heard us being rather loud, which was questionable at best, she had to know what it meant that we'd slept in the same bed. Right? The clothes and condom wrappers strewn everywhere?

I didn't say anything, because honestly, I didn't know what to say. I just pulled the things out of the fridge that I needed and started prepping. I definitely wasn't perfect, but it was a possibility that Gentry never would have come back to the house if I hadn't been the one to buy it. Someone else might have brought all their own furniture with them and not needed any deliveries. Some random other buyer almost certainly wouldn't have been a gay man who caught his eye.

Still, we'd been fucking in her bedroom not that long ago.

A sound grabbed my attention, and I looked up from my cutting board to find that Nadia was giggling. "The way you're blushing, dear," she managed to get out around the laughter. "I swear every new generation thinks they've invented sex."

"We don't think we ... invented sex," I protested, but could barely bring myself to say the last of it out loud. "Things are just different now. People don't wait till marriage anymore, and I know for a fact that when you were younger, the very idea of being gay wasn't accepted."

"When I was young, women owning things wasn't accepted. I can't say it's been a particular trial to unlearn a lot

of the nonsense from my childhood.” She pushed up on the stool, surveying the work I was doing, then giving a satisfied nod and sitting back down. “Besides, I’ll have you know that Gentry’s sweet daddy was born about seven months after I was married. And let me tell you, that boy was thirteen pounds, and not a bit premature.”

I dropped the knife on the cutting board, staring at her in shock, and the woman was downright smug, smirking at me and waiting for a reaction. I had no idea what to give her. Everything I learned about Nadia made me like her even more, somehow.

After a moment, she shrugged and flipped out her fan. “Fortunately for you, you can’t be trapped into a marriage that way, so you’ll be able to make your own decisions about your future. One of the best things about the modern era, really.”

Just as I opened my mouth to respond to her, we heard a creak on the stairs. By the time Gentry came around the corner into the kitchen, Nadia had disappeared.

He gave me a sleepy smile and nod, pulling himself right into the seat his grandmother had been in a moment earlier. He ran a hand along the back bar of the thing, then rubbed his fingers together and looked at them.

“Everything okay?”

He glanced up at me and the sleepy smile was immediately back in place. “ ’S cold, that’s all.”

Like the day he and Joe had brought in the bedroom furniture and Joe had complained that there was a cold spot at the bottom of the stairs. A cold spot I’d looked for later and not found. Part of me, a big part of me, just wanted to throw the truth out there and see what happened. Sometimes I could swear Gentry knew more than he was letting on.

But if he didn’t and I jumped in with “by the way it’s your dead Grandma,” that could easily be nascent relationship over. So no. I could wait. I’d have to tell him sooner or later, yeah, but it didn’t have to be now.

So I offered him a cup of coffee, which he gratefully accepted, and then we ate omelets and bacon together. Unsurprisingly, his grandmother had been right about what he liked in it, because he was still heaping on praises when the doorbell rang.

I frowned, looking toward it but not immediately standing up. I hadn't been expecting anyone.

Gentry, on the other hand, jumped up and headed right for it, so I followed along. There was a middle-aged Black man on the stoop, and he inclined his head, sticking out his hand toward me. "I'm Booker, and I'm here to install the system."

"The ... system?" I asked, thoroughly confused.

"Security system," Gentry explained. "You said you were having one put in, and that it was gonna be a while, so I called and asked if maybe things could be pushed up, since it's an emergency. And since Booker owns the company, and he's Alicia's dad, I had her confirm for him it was an emergency."

Booker waved him off. "My best former employee tells me something's an emergency, I believe him without my daughter backing him up." He looked back to me. "It's okay I'm here on a Saturday? I can come back, but the two of them made this sound like a pretty big deal."

"Now is fine. Yeah, yes, for sure." I stepped back to leave a space for him. "Please come in. I don't even have a car to get anywhere, so even if I had somewhere to be today, I can't get there."

"I can take you if you gotta go anywhere," Gentry volunteered himself and his truck immediately, without even having a destination or request.

"I really don't. But don't you have places to be today?" I remembered, suddenly, a conversation with Jon back at the bar, and clapped a hand over my mouth. "Oh my god, Gentry, you were supposed to meet your brother this morning. Six AM, he said."

He laughed and moved in, wrapping an arm around my waist and kissing me on the cheek. "You're so damn

thoughtful. But it's okay. That was why I called Joe before we finished up last night, to ask him to take Hiram to his appointment."

"You always call him that behind his back, don't you?"

Gentry grinned back. "Only sometimes. When the person I'm talking to knows how much he hates it."

I rolled my eyes at him, but it was ... so very like everything I'd ever seen in siblings. It almost made me wish I'd had one, but honestly, it had been the best for everyone, including me, that my parents had only had one child. Given that my father had eventually run off and joined a cult somewhere in Asia, and my mother had died of her addictions, more of that DNA combination roaming around the world was a bad idea.

"How's your brother doing?" Booker asked as he set his tool case down in the hall and started pulling out ... hell, I didn't know. Little boxes of mechanical components.

Gentry winced, looking at me for a second, then to Booker, who had his back to us. "He's okay. Last treatment today, then we wait and see."

"Oh, the chemo?"

Chemo.

Holy hell, Jon was in chemotherapy? The dark circles, sunken cheeks, and fact that he'd only drunk water the night before came back to me.

Gentry sighed and dropped his head, staring at the floor. "Yeah."

I took a step closer to him and slid my hand into his, squeezing it just a little. "Do you think it's a better idea to wait on the furniture until next week, maybe? Or whenever?"

"Naw," he said, shaking his head. "You don't know how much he wants to see it all back in here. Maybe as much as I do. He'll help as he can, but me and Joe were gonna do most of the work anyway. By tomorrow, he's gonna be pretty

miserable, and that lasts most of the week now, so it's not like waiting will help."

The misery in his voice was the worst thing I could imagine. I wasn't sure why he hadn't said anything before, but it wasn't my business, so I didn't press. Maybe Jon didn't want people to know.

It definitely explained why they had sold the house, and fuck did that make me feel a little bad for buying it.

Except if it hadn't been me, it would have been someone else. I hadn't forced them to come down on the price at all, at least, just insisted on paying for my own repairs to the property during the purchase process, since there had been no way I was moving into a house with only semi-functional air conditioning.

Strange to imagine that the money I'd paid for the house was probably going toward pumping poison into Jon, and even more, that it was a good thing.

It took a while to finish talking to Booker about all the things he was going to install—between locks on all the external doors and motion sensors and alarms and a whole panel for the system, his work was going to take all day.

I thanked him profusely for taking his day off to come out and help, but he waved me off. "We protect our own in this town. Gentry's always been one of us, and he's vouching for you. That means you are too."

Gentry just ducked his head in the usual way and took me back to the kitchen, where we washed the breakfast dishes together.

"So about this furniture," I said, when his hands were wrist deep in boiling hot dishwater. "How much am I paying you for that? And for delivering it?"

seventeen

It hadn't quite been an argument, mostly because we'd been cut off by the ringing of Gentry's phone. It had been Joe, calling to talk about the logistics of starting to tote the old furniture back to the house.

Joe and Jon were finished with the chemotherapy appointment, and wanted to get started right away.

Gentry had given me a frown like he wanted to go back to insisting that the furniture should have come with the house anyway, and I shouldn't be paying anything for it, but motioned to the door. "Will you be okay waiting here while I go get my trailer, and we fill up the two trucks and come back?"

I'd have questioned the whole leaving me behind part of the equation if Booker hadn't been right there in the room, drilling a hole to install a motion sensor. It would definitely be rude to ask the man to work on his day off then proceed to abandon him alone in the house.

So I nodded and waved Gentry off, then went to the kitchen and put myself to work squeezing the bag of lemons I'd bought at the store to make lemonade.

It was soothing, and reminded me of summers with Grandma when I was a kid when we'd specifically gone out to buy the lemons for lemonade, and spent the day making special infused simple syrups to go with it. Lavender rosemary had always been our favorite.

I'd make it another time, though, since I hadn't seen any lavender at the store, and hadn't picked up any rosemary. For today, plain old lemonade was what was on the menu.

It was well after noon by the time the guys got back, complete with two trucks and trailers full to the brim with furniture.

I'd already started on some sandwiches and fruit salad for lunch by then. They were my Grandma's recipes, not Nadia's, but I thought they held up pretty darn well. It hadn't seemed like the best idea to start asking Nadia's opinion while Booker was going from one room to the next setting up the security system.

When I heard the trucks rumble up, I went out to the porch to wave them inside. They'd already spent enough effort loading things onto the trucks. The stuff could wait a bit while they ate lunch and refueled.

They came in without argument, and it was clear they'd worked up an appetite, because they fell on the food like starved men. I almost wished I'd made something more substantial than fruit salad, but there were always snacks later, since it was going to take a while to bring all the stuff in.

"This sandwich is amazing," Jon mumbled, peeling it open to look inside. "Never had anything like it. What's in here?"

"Um ... " I realized with a bit of trepidation that it was probably a little frou-frou Southern Californian for them. "Chicken breast, herbed goat cheese, and fig jam?"

Jon blinked up at me like his brain had just gone blue-screen-of-death, but after a moment, closed it back up and took another bite. Then he shrugged. "So damn good."

Joe mumbled agreement through a mouthful of his own, and Gentry winked at me without even pausing in taking his next bite.

When all the plates were cleared and stacked in the sink, they all stood, stretched, and turned toward the door, ready to get to work.

I decided to start with the lunch dishes, and then see if the testosterone party would let me help them fetching and carrying things. No doubt they were better at it than I could be, but it didn't mean I shouldn't try.

Weirdly, they didn't rebuff me for the reason I'd expected, but a much simpler one.

"We know where everything goes," Jon pointed out. "Sat in every chair in the house at least a hundred times. So unless you want to rearrange stuff, which I guess we can do, it's easiest to just grab it and put it back where it used to go."

"Where it still goes," I corrected. "You're totally right. Everything right back where it came from is perfect, and I don't want to get in the way."

He grinned and tossed me two throw pillows. "Those go on the sofa they just put in the den, if you want to add them."

And that, I could do.

Gentry had been both right and wrong about his brother not being in shape to help much after a while. Right because as the afternoon wore on, Jon drooped more and more, seeming a little hazy and confused every now and then. Wrong because he was determined to see things through and finish the job.

Clearly, it was a trait their parents had taught them both very well. So when Jon almost fell stepping out of one of the trailers, I zipped over to him. "Could you possibly help me with something?"

He squinted at me in confusion for a second, but nodded, and followed me into the house. I sat him down where it was nice and cool, gave him a glass of lemonade, and right when he was starting to look suspicious of my motives, I sat down across from him and pulled out my checkbook.

"Your brother isn't going to let me pay for this stuff, and we both know that's ridiculous. Unless I'm missing my guess, the two of you are living together over Joe's bar. Chemotherapy isn't cheap. I know this. My grandmother lived it, and while Medicare covered most of her expenses, I know

what those bills look like. Please let me give you a check, and please cash it.”

He narrowed his eyes. “How do you know we live over the bar?”

I held up a hand and ticked off fingers. “At the end of the night Friday you didn’t leave the bar, you went to the stairs in the back. Gentry’s trailer was parked there next to his truck, and it looks like that’s where it’s usually parked when it’s not attached to his truck. And every other person in town has asked after the two of you in one way or another, so people are worried.”

“We were living with Gran before she passed,” he admitted. “It was convenient while I was in college, and Gen took care of the place for her. So when we realized we had to sell the house after she died, we also had to find a place to live. At first we thought we might just be able to sell her jewelry to cover expenses, but soon after she died, it went missing.”

“Missing?”

He scowled and nodded. “This old drunk, Cal, who used to spend most of his nights down at Joe’s disappeared from town about the same time, so the cops figured he broke in and stole it. Put out an APB and all, but no one’s found him yet.”

It made a horrible sort of sense. I doubted Nadia would be at all bothered by her grandsons selling off unnecessary jewels to fund important medical treatments, other than that she wouldn’t want them to be sick at all. If she had any idea where the jewels were, she’d have already made sure they were discovered. So I just nodded for him to go on.

“Since then, Gen’s working constantly to pay Joe something for the rent, but I’m sure he’s still taking a loss. And”—he snorted and turned his hand upward, running it up and down one side, like he was displaying himself as a specimen—“I’m completely fucking useless now. I’ve lost most of a year, and I could defer my scholarships for that long because of the reason for it, but ... ”

He stopped and shrugged, and I could almost feel the self-loathing simmering inside him.

“You know not a single person who loves you blames you for getting sick, right?” It seemed obvious, but I had to ask. To make sure.

His sigh was answer enough, but he nodded. “I know. I do know. And ... I’m in medical school, for fuck’s sake. I know as well as anyone that fucking leukemia isn’t a choice. I just feel so damn useless.”

I instantly wanted to invite Gentry and his brother to move back into the house. To stay for as long as they needed. That might be a touch premature, though. First of all, there was Nadia’s presence to consider. Not every man wanted to live with his dead grandmother’s ghost.

At the same time, it would be nice to have Gentry there.

No, not just for sex.

Well, yes for sex, but also, if he’d been taking care of the house for his grandmother, presumably he knew a lot about that kind of thing. He could do the same for me, and I wouldn’t need to worry about black mold and termites and stuff like that, because he’d be on top of it.

And of me, hopefully.

It sounded like the best of all worlds, even if it was way the hell too early to ask it. Right after the first date was not the time to move in together.

I’d never been so jealous of lesbians in my life.

On the other hand, he’d implied he wanted to stay for as long as my life was in danger. Was there a reason his brother shouldn’t come along?

Well, again, other than Nadia.

I looked up when motion caught my eye, half expecting it to be Gentry, checking in on his brother and maybe trying to keep him from accepting money, but instead, it was Nadia. She gave me a tiny nod, like she knew what I was thinking and wanted me to know it was okay.

“Okay, so what if ... what if I don’t write you a check? What if we say it’s your contribution to the household? All this furniture has to be worth a fortune. It’s old and solid and in amazing shape.” Jon was cocking his head, staring at me looking puzzled, so I rushed to explain. “You and Gentry could move back in here, and the furniture will just be your equivalent of paying for part of the house or something. We can work out the details later on. I know, I know, that’s stupid and maybe we’ll hate each other, but it’s ridiculous that I live in this giant house all by myself. It’s got six bedrooms.”

Jon didn’t respond right away, and I realized he wasn’t staring off into space or at me. He was looking at the window behind me. Or maybe better put, at the reflection of the room in that window, because he slowly turned around to look at the doorway behind him—the doorway where Nadia had been standing a moment earlier.

He blinked half a dozen times, then shook his head and muttered, “Fuck, I’m completely losing it.”

He turned back to me, paler and shakier than before, and leaned hard against the arm of the sofa. “I’m gonna be honest with you, Max. I’m not ... my best right now. This minute I’m the kid in that one nineties movie, but I think maybe I’m having hallucinations, not seeing Bruce Willis. But really, if you’re offering us help, there’s no chance I’m going to turn it down. The person you have to convince isn’t me. It’s Gen.”

I shoved myself up out of the chair and walked to him, patting one of the pillows on the corner of the sofa. “Why don’t you lay down and try to nap? You’re looking exhausted.”

He didn’t even argue with me or try to demur, just let his whole body fall sideways, scooting up until his head was on the pillow.

“And Jon?” I handed him the other pillow, and he looked up at me. “You might not be hallucinating. Not if what you think you saw is”—I glanced up to where Nadia had been standing—“what I think.”

His eyes widened slightly, but he didn’t demand to know what the hell I meant. The poor guy was just entirely beat. I

only knew how the chemo had affected my grandmother, but she'd slept a lot, even just on the way home from the treatments. Frankly, I was impressed with how much he'd managed afterward. He'd done way more that afternoon than I had.

Gentry poked his head in. "Everything okay?"

I pressed a finger to my lips and tiptoed out, flipping the lights off when I reached the doorway. There was still ambient afternoon sun, but hopefully it would help Jon get some rest. "I was trying to sneak money into your brother's pocket without arguing with you about it, but I think maybe he gave me a better idea."

Gentry's brows drew together in confusion tinged with annoyance. "I told you, the furniture—"

"Yes, yes, it belongs here. I agree. That doesn't change that this stuff is worth a fortune. Maybe as much as the house. And it's a freaking huge house, Gentry. Way too big for one guy." I leaned on him like I had the night before, trying to remind him of what was happening between us, in case he got it in his head I was trying to give him charity and refused me outright. "Plus your brother tells me you were taking care of the house for your grandmother. Which ... I don't know anything about. And you do. So I was thinking maybe something else that belongs here should come back."

He bit his lip, but he didn't pull away. He wrapped an arm around me and led me back toward the door. "You're serious. You're saying you want me and Jon to move in. You own the house. We're a couple of bachelors who can barely manage on our own."

"Yeah, but there are kind of mitigating circumstances there. He's got cancer, for fuck's sake, but if we give him a few years to recover, he's going to be a doctor. Maybe then he'll be the one supporting you and me."

He chuckled at the notion and nodded. "That's what Gran kept telling him when he felt bad about not working around the house while he was in school. He wasn't just laying about, he was making something of himself." Then he swallowed

hard, turning to me. “But I’m never gonna be a doctor, Max. I’m just ... I ain’t made for school. I was never—”

“Don’t you fucking dare denigrate what you do. You cut a whole cord of wood and stacked it up for the winter in one day. You fix furniture, apparently, since you were talking about the chair that goes with my desk. You don’t have to have a college education to have useful skills.” Since he’d placed himself right in front of me, it was easy to reach up and grab his face with both hands. “Like I told your brother, this furniture is worth a fortune, and I’m more than comfortable with it being your contribution to the household. You already suggested staying here while someone is threatening me. I’m just saying that maybe it would be good for it to be a longer-term arrangement. This is enough house for a dozen people. Adding you and Jon isn’t even going to make a dent.”

It was just going to mean that I had to talk to them about Nadia, but it seemed that she was willing, and that was what mattered. If I could live with their grandmother’s ghost, surely they could too.

“So,” Joe said, marching up to us with a glossy little marled wood side table under one arm. “This is the last of this load. The real question is: are we gonna go get the stuff out of the apartment while we’re at it?”

Gentry looked at him for a moment, then to me, clearly weighing his options. Finally, he nodded. “Yeah. Let’s do it. We can ... we can give it a shot.”

Holy shit.

My boyfriend of one day was moving in. And bringing his brother with him.

Well hell, I’d wanted not to be alone anymore, and this was definitely that. Hopefully while being, as Gentry had said, “a couple of bachelors,” they weren’t the kind of bachelors who left food covered plates everywhere and clothes on the floor. I didn’t want to have to murder anyone.

eighteen

Joe and Gentry went back to get the furniture from the apartment the brothers had been staying in, leaving Jon napping on the couch in the house, and me sitting with Booker, who was still working his way through the whole house.

He actually finished up before they got back, showing me how to use the app that unified the devices and how to arm and disarm the system. It was shockingly simple, and he told me to call anytime I needed help, so by the time they arrived back with another load of stuff, it was done and Booker was headed out.

“Okay, I know I’m mostly useless, but you guys have been working your butts off all day, so you’re gonna have to take my help with this.”

They didn’t argue, so I took the win and helped carry some of the smaller things inside. Then I helped Joe carry bigger things while Gentry put beds together. And by the time we were done, I was ready to drop.

“So dinner delivery isn’t really a thing here. And cooking sounds awful right now. How does everyone feel about frozen pizzas I got at the store?”

“Like they’re a gift from heaven,” Joe answered, not just leaning against the kitchen counter like Gentry and me, but dropping himself into one of the chairs at the island and resting his head on the countertop. “Sounds like the most delicious thing I’ve ever been offered in my life.”

In that moment, I rather had to agree, so I turned to start the oven preheating and then headed for the freezer, trying to decide between two pizzas and three.

Three, I thought. I had two huge guys who'd been doing physical labor all day, and two medium guys who'd also had exhausting days for various reasons.

I didn't know if Jon would feel up to food at all, but I wasn't going to not cook for him on the assumption he might feel sick. It had always been hit and miss with Grandma and the chemo. Some days she'd woken from her naps as starved as a ravenous wildebeest, and others, she'd looked at food like it had done her a personal wrong.

Seeming to read my mind, Gentry pushed off the counter. "I'm gonna go check on Jon. See if he's awake, and if he wants to eat."

As he passed me on his way out of the kitchen, he trailed his fingers along my back. Just a casual affectionate gesture, and it settled my whole world into place somehow.

Harry had never touched me in front of anyone, let alone his friends. Gentry was out, and wanted a real relationship. And he wanted to try that with me.

"S'pose this is where I ought to give you the shovel talk," Joe said from his spot at the counter. "All that he's my best friend and he's been through hell and don't you dare hurt him shit."

"If you want," I agreed, peeling the first box open. "I mean, I don't need it, because I'm never the guy who leaves the other party wounded in breakups. I'm always the sucker who gets hit with the breakup out of the blue."

"See, I thought you might be." He was looking me over, brows drawn together. "Funny thing is, that's always been Gen too. He dated the only other out guy in town for three years in high school, and the asshole abandoned him the second he could. We all knew he'd get out of town the minute he turned eighteen, but Gen? Gen thought it was true love, and they were gonna get hitched someday."

I winced and concentrated on the pizza. It sounded like crap for all parties, but really, I also couldn't imagine leaving Gentry. But—"He thought Gentry would leave with him."

"He did. Dumbass."

I had to agree with that sentiment. I'd known the man for less than a week, and I knew he'd never leave this town. Fairview. His friends and family.

Gentry belonged here. Anyone who knew him at all would know that. I shook my head. "Teenagers are self-centered. He probably didn't even think about it until Gentry was saying no. I'll bet it came entirely out of left field for him. Like why wouldn't a gay man want to escape this town?"

"Because despite Jimmy and Brian and a couple other assholes, this town is the best place in the world," Gentry said, confirming my thoughts as he came back in.

I worried for a second that he'd be angry we were talking about him, but Joe clearly had no such concerns, and Gentry just slid into a chair next to him. "Talking about Davey?"

"Yup," Joe agreed. "Selfish little prick."

"We just wanted different things is all." Gentry didn't seem bitter about his breakup like I was about Harry, but I supposed he'd had a little longer to get over it. Also, his breakup hadn't involved a lawyer. "I hear he's up in New York working as a waiter these days. He always wanted to live in New York, so I hope he's happy there."

He sounded like he meant it.

Joe, on the other hand, rolled his eyes. "Boy was terminally incapable of being happy. He could be the king of the world and he'd still be whining about something."

Gentry cocked his head one way, then the other, and finally gave a shrug, his expression saying, "yeah, maybe." But he didn't say anything about that. Instead, he gave me his usual earnest look and asked, "So are we talking about exes? Or just the stuff that's probably fucked me up?"

I winced. “I can’t really talk about exes.” I considered for a moment, and decided that while I couldn’t give them real information, I was going to be as honest as I could. Both of them seemed the type to accept an answer and leave things alone when necessary. “Literally, I can’t. My latest ex made me sign an NDA promising I’d never admit we were seeing each other.”

Joe gave a low whistle and shook his head, eyes wide. “The fucking nerve.”

Gentry was downright scowling, his eyes narrowed and lips pursed.

“Anyway,” I went on, holding up the third pizza I’d pulled out. “Is your brother joining us, and do I make this third one, or just two?”

“He’s not,” Gentry admitted, glancing behind him. “He was pretty well crashed out on the couch, so I picked him up and put him to bed. I just put his stuff in the same room he’s always used, so he’ll be fine when he wakes up in there.”

“But make three anyway,” Joe added. “I’m definitely going to eat one all on my own. I gotta be at the bar in about an hour, and I ain’t gonna make it through the night unless I eat something.”

Gentry winced and started to open his mouth, but Joe clapped a hand over it. I continued my work, opening the third pizza. Worst case scenario, there’d be a couple slices for reheating in the fridge. That never hurt anyone’s feelings.

Joe let go of Gentry after a moment, leaning back in his chair. “It was worth it, seeing all this stuff back where it’s supposed to go.” Then he cringed. “It’s gonna take another whole day to finish, though. We barely got through half the stuff in the storage unit. Maybe not even that.”

“Next week,” Gentry dismissed, waving it away as though he could literally send the work away. “There’s sure no time for it now. And I gotta buy Dinah something nice to thank her for letting you come play with us when you’ve got two brand new kids at home.”

It was Joe's turn to be dismissive. "You don't know how happy she's gonna be to hear you and Jon are back at Fairview. It broke her heart when you had to sell it with Nadia's estate." He cocked his head, considering. "Though if you really want to thank her, she always loved that oak crib Nadia had. She'd have killed anyone but you for it. Even me."

"Consider it done," Gentry agreed. "Not like me or Jon are headed for fatherhood anytime soon, if at all."

It continued like that, soft and easy, through putting the pizzas in to bake, and then devouring two and a half of them. It was impressive, the amount the two of them managed to pack away, but they really had worked all afternoon.

It was only after that, when Joe thanked me for dinner and took his leave, that things got the tiniest bit awkward. Gentry ran water to help with the dishes, but I wasn't sure what to say. How to address the many elephants in the room.

"I know what you're thinking," he told me, handing me a plate to dry.

I raised a brow at him. "That's pretty impressive. You a mind-reader?"

He put his middle finger to his temple like maybe he was, but then smiled at me. "Nah. I'm just assuming you're thinking about the same thing as me, I guess." He fished around in the dishwater and grabbed the next plate, scrubbing it for a moment before rinsing it and handing it off to me. "And just so you know, I didn't bother putting the sheets on my old bed. Figured we could wash them up later and make it a guest bedroom, unless—"

"That's perfect," I said, cutting him off. "I don't know which one it got into, so you'll have to show me, but it'll be good to have a guest bedroom."

Technically, he probably still thought Nadia's room was a guest bedroom, but he didn't contradict me. He merely nodded and handed me a glass to dry.

And because I couldn't leave well enough alone, I had to drag it out. "There's more than enough room in my bed for

two people, after all. Even if they weren't having sex. But you know that. I mean, you slept there last night and—”

Instead of handing me the next glass, he leaned over and kissed me, probably to shut me up. It worked really damn well.

“I'm gonna admit it, I'm probably going to be asleep the second my head hits a pillow tonight. We moved half a house worth of furniture today and I'm beat.” Leaning in, he scraped his stubble across my face and gave my earlobe a nibble. “But that don't mean I'm done with you. Not by a long shot.”

Somehow, it was exactly what I'd needed to hear. Gentry and I were just getting started, and boy was I looking forward to where we ended up.

Once again I woke before Gentry in the morning, but it didn't surprise me, after the day he'd had. What did surprise me was finding Jon in the kitchen, hovering around the oven.

The kitchen that smelled like sugar and lemon and blueberries, and absolutely to die for.

He gave me a tired smile, his dark circles more pronounced than they'd been at the bar Friday night, or even the day before when he'd fallen asleep on the couch.

"I'm probably not gonna be good for much today," he mumbled. "So I thought I should start this thing on a high note by offering you cake."

I nodded, faux-thoughtful. "I'm not gonna lie to you, cake's definitely going to work on me. Not that you have to do anything like cook when you're clearly feeling like used dirt, but I'm still not going to turn down cake. Do I smell blueberries?"

His wan smile was genuine and pleased. "Gran's blueberry coffee cake. Streusel on top and lemon glaze to finish it off. We used to have it almost every Sunday morning."

He pointed to a bowl of something pale yellow on the counter. "That's the glaze, in case I forget. Brain's a little hit and miss on the morning after a treatment. It's like I'm living inside a fog, and nothing's quite right. I forget what day it is, or where I need to be, or ... I don't know. Everything."

“Maybe it’s a good day to just take a nap instead of needing to be somewhere. I mean, isn’t that what Sundays are for anyway? Sleeping in and then eating sweets for breakfast?”

He leaned on the counter and his eyes slipped closed almost immediately, then a moment later he was yawning. He jerked himself back upright, shaking his head. “Sorry, sorry. I just really wanted to do something nice to thank you. You ... I’m not making it up that you’ve invited us to come back and live with you at Fairview, right?”

“You’re not making that up,” I agreed. “I’m happy to have you both here. But maybe you should sit down at the island before you fall down. Then after you eat, definitely a nap, I think.”

He yawned again, and didn’t argue as I led him to a seat. “Mostly you’re happy to have Gentry, am I right?” His tired smile was probably supposed to be a roguish grin like his brother’s, so I smiled back.

“I mean, your brother does bring a lot to the table, and I don’t just mean the fact that he’s hot like burning.” He made the required brotherly disgusted face, complete with scrunched nose and tongue sticking out, but he didn’t protest the comment. “He’s also pretty damned smart, and easy to talk to, and one of the kindest people I’ve ever met.”

“He is,” Jon agreed, nodding as he rested his chin on his hand, even as his eyes were slipping closed once more. “He doesn’t think so, but he’s all of that. An artist too. You should get him to show you some of the furniture he’s made. It’s impressive stuff.”

Somehow, that didn’t surprise me at all. Gentry had shown again and again that he was good with his hands.

In all possible ways.

Him making physical art with his hands was no surprise at all.

He joined Jon and me in the kitchen just as Jon was about to slide right out of the chair, and hip-bumped him back awake. “You sure you should be out of bed?”

“Blueberry coffee cake,” Jon whined.

Gentry nodded his agreement, then pointed off toward the back of the house anyway. “Is even better later in the day. We’ll make sure it comes out of the oven and gets glazed, and you’ll enjoy the fruits of your labor later on. For now, get some more sleep.”

“Yes Mom,” Jon mumbled, but it was more a token protest than anything else, as he slid off the stool and zombie-walked his way out of the room a moment later. His voice called back down the hallway, “don’t you dare eat the whole thing, you hear me?”

Gentry laughed and didn’t answer.

The cake was exactly as delicious as promised, and I started making plans to talk Jon into being a chef instead of a doctor. Or at least give me the recipe for the cake. Clearly, I needed to get my hands on all of Nadia’s recipes.

“I’ve got some deliveries to do today if you think you’ll be all right without me,” Gentry said as we ate our breakfast, soft and concerned and just the sweetest damn thing I’d seen in my life.

“I said I was hoping you’d take care of the house, Gentry, not that I expected you to only ever take care of the house. I hope it’s not a full time job.” I glanced around, like I was worried the ceiling was going to collapse on us, and he snorted at that.

“Fine, fine, I get it. It’s just ... I don’t want you to feel like we’re freeloading.”

I poked at my cake pointedly and he acquiesced with a nod. “Besides, I have some research I should get to. Is the library open today?”

“Only a couple of hours, but she is,” he agreed. That was pretty impressive either way, so I thought it was a good idea to take advantage of it.

So Gentry and I washed up, put the remainder of the cake in the fridge, and headed out at the same time, him to make deliveries, and me to finally get to work properly.



WHEN I WALKED in the front door of the public library, what I saw inside made me stop dead in my tracks.

The woman at the counter smiled up at me, sure, and she looked perfectly lovely, with her light pink hair and grandmotherly smile and the baby blanket she appeared to be knitting.

But she also looked to be in her sixties, a demographic that had, so far, been really freaking unhelpful about the subject I was there to research.

Nothing for it but to move forward, though.

I stepped up to the counter like a man arriving at his own firing—or maybe firing squad—and inclined my head to her. “Ma’am. I’m here to do some research on the Lavigne family, and someone told me this might be the place to do it.”

She didn’t seem immediately put off, instead perking right up, and she even set her knitting aside and offered me all her attention. “Something particular about the Lavigne family, or all of it? We’ve got quite a lot of material on the subject, so it might help if we know what angle to come at it from.”

I had less than ten seconds to make a decision before she thought I had no idea what I was doing. Tell the truth and risk the same freeze-out other people her age in town had given me, or trust in the power of librarians to do good and their wish to give information instead of hiding it?

I took a deep breath, braced myself, and nodded. “There’s an abandoned house in the woods north of Fairview, and I want to know about it.”

Her face absolutely lit the hell up like I’d just offered her a million dollars. “Martin and Daphne Lavigne’s house,” she declared, and hell, maybe I’d been the one to win a million dollars.

Holy shit.

I suddenly had more information than every single other person in town combined had given me. “It’s the ... the house that’s falling apart, that no one in town will talk about?”

The moue of distaste she made at that could only come from a thwarted purveyor of knowledge. “I can only imagine.” She gave a deep sigh, rolling her eyes and coming around the side of the desk. “Come on back, I mostly have the records you need on microfilm, since there were news stories at the time. And I’m afraid most of the rest of what I have is rank gossip of the era, mostly from my mother, since people are ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous?” I asked, following meekly behind her.

“They’re embarrassed, you see,” she said, glancing back in my direction and looking at me over the rims of her glasses. “As well they should be, but really, not that many people in town were even alive when Daphne died. Even fewer old enough to remember Martin. A dozen of them, maybe, and they were all children back then. It isn’t like it was our fault. But we just keep hiding things like our parents before us.”

In the microfilm room, she pulled open an enormous filing cabinet and started fishing through it, pulling out one item after another as she went. “You’re the movie writer, right?”

“I am, yes.”

“Good. Maybe if we talked about things more, people would be better to each other.” She pressed the film into my hands. “You look at these, and I’ll explain anything else I can when you’re done.”



IT TURNED out that Martin Lavigne had been Nadia’s uncle, her father’s younger brother, and he’d married a singer from New Orleans, Daphne Durand. From the early news stories, they’d been the talk of the town and the life of every party.

It was clear enough that they were dilettantes, flitting from one project to the next with little focus, pressing for things like

an art museum and a fancy restaurant to open in town—both of which still existed.

But it was also clear that the town had adored them for it. For both bringing culture to the tiny town of Welling like no one else ever had and being a part of everyone's favorite rich benefactor family.

The final article was short, just an obituary, and a sparse one at that.

Martin Lavigne had died after a fall off the pier downtown. He was survived by his brother, his sister-in-law, and their daughter.

There was no mention of his wife, and no obituary for her either.

I came out of the room almost more confused than I went in, but fortunately, the librarian was there at the desk waiting for me. She looked at my hands, full of only the copies I'd made of the information I wanted, so I shrugged. "I put them away when I was done. Library etiquette and all that."

She gave me an approving smile, and I drew myself up with pride. Yeah, I was weak to it. Whatever, any guy who didn't want approval from kind women his grandmother's age was probably a jerk.

"I have to admit, though, I'm even more confused now than when everyone in town was shutting me down cold. I mean, I'm glad I know who they were. But what happened to them? Why won't anyone in town talk about them?"

"I suspect most of town don't know they ever existed. You see, Martin had a drinking problem, and Daphne? Well, Daphne needed more attention than he could give her when his one true love was scotch." She leaned on the counter and sighed, shaking her head. "My mother said she cheated on him with a friend of theirs. When Martin found out, he went down to the bar, drank until he couldn't see straight, and went for a walk on the pier. No one rightfully knows whether he meant to fall in or not, but he washed up a few days later, and everyone knew why."

I couldn't imagine either situation. Feeling abandoned like she apparently had, or utterly betrayed by both wife and friend like him. And of course, human nature and frailty leading to not only misery, but outright tragedy.

"Technically, she inherited the house when he passed, but not a single person in town would talk to her after that. She was like a ghost, going through life without speaking to a single soul." She clasped her hands together and stared at them, expression distant, like she was trying to relive it in her own mind.

It was hard to imagine. Being in such a horrible situation, albeit one of your own making, and just ... living with it. "Why didn't she leave?"

"I can't rightly say I know. If it were me, I'd say she decided to punish herself for what she did. She didn't leave, though. Stayed right there in that house till the day she died, ten years after him. Just about nineteen-sixty."

"No obituary for her, though?" I motioned toward the microfilm room. "I mean, you didn't give me one."

She shook her head. "Not a peep. It was almost like she died along with him, only no one said a word about it at the time. I don't even know what she died of in the end, though if a person can die of misery, I'd suppose it was that."

Self-inflicted misery, since she could have just sold the house and left. Or hell, just left. It sounded like hell. She'd probably been relieved to die in the end.

"Nineteen-sixty," I said, finally. "It's been more than sixty years. Even the people who won't talk to me about it were barely kids when all this happened. Why keep quiet?"

She cocked her head to one side, considering for a moment. "You know, I can't say I know for sure for the others, but if I'm telling the truth? I'm ashamed of how we treated her. I was seven when she died, but even at that age, I did my share of turning my nose up and looking the other way when she passed by."

“That sad, lonely, ghost of a woman. She made a horrible mistake, I know, but no one deserved what she went through afterward. And Martin’s choices weren’t her fault at all, but we all surely blamed her for them. You think a whole town can be complicit in destroying a person? If so, that’s what we were.”

“You were seven when she died,” I repeated her own words back to her. “I mean, yes. It sounds as though the town acted horribly toward her, but at seven, it wasn’t like you knew enough about the world to understand what was going on and make your own choice. Even if you had, you’d have been one person, and a child. You couldn’t have fixed it.”

“No, but we all should have, shouldn’t we? We should have come together like a community and helped. Not hounded her till she died.”

I wasn’t sure hounded was the right word, given the implication that they hadn’t so much as acknowledged her existence, but I saw where she was coming from anyway. “I get the feeling there was some kind of loyalty to the Lavigne family involved.”

“There was, I suppose. They helped make this town. First folk with any money to settle here, a part of the country that had been skipped over by all those fancy plantations of the old south. Not that we mind that lack now, but that’s a whole different kettle of fish.” She tugged at her earlobe, shaking her head. “I always thought Nadia was the most affected by it. She knew them both, Martin and Daphne, and lost half her family in the mess. Poor thing. Sometimes I wonder if we kept pretending for her even after Daphne died, so she wouldn’t have to think about it.”

It made sense, as an idea. Or it could come back to the shame for their treatment of Daphne that she’d suggested before. It had made the most sense for Welling to simply continue to pretend, until it was made fact, and no one remembered Daphne Durand had ever lived.

I glanced down at the top sheet I’d printed off, and my heart twisted. The news story was about one of their favorite native sons and his whirlwind courtship and marriage. It

featured a picture of Daphne and Martin standing together, his arm around her waist, both of them smiling—not for the camera, but at each other.

Ten years later, Martin had been dead. It was hard to imagine, but at the same time, so very easy.

I'd been right. It was an incredible story. One of the saddest I'd ever heard. More, it was a story I couldn't possibly write unless Nadia gave me permission, and last I'd spoken to her, she'd refused to admit a house right in front of her existed.

Ah, hell.

twenty

I was in a bit of a daze as I left the library, Daphne and Martin's story circulating in my head, all the details and people and aspects that had to have combined to make up such a heartbreak.

How a beautiful, vibrant couple, so clearly in love as they were in that first picture, had destroyed each other completely in less than ten years.

I, of all people, knew that things could change quickly, and ten years wasn't short, but it still seemed like too much, too fast.

"Maxim Blazek?"

I looked up to find a lovely, poised blonde woman in a Chanel suit standing in front of me, toothpaste-ad smile firmly in place. My first thought was that she was the first person like her I'd seen from Welling.

Then I got my shit together and realized there was no way she was from Welling.

Instead of agreeing or disagreeing, I cut to the chase. "How can I help you?"

The smile didn't move, like she was literally an ad instead of it being a current expression on a human face. She held up a phone, clearly intending to record anything I said, which wasn't new or surprising.

I'd been interviewed a hundred times. I could handle this.

“Do you have a statement for me about your relationship with Harrison Grant?”

Of fucking course it was about Harry. I’d blocked his number so he couldn’t call me again, and told his lawyer to stop him from harassing me, so what was the obvious next step? Put me in an awkward position and demand I answer the question in public. Harry knew I’d never been much of a liar, and he was doubtless hoping I’d let something slip, even if I wasn’t willing to break the NDA *he’d fucking demanded I sign*.

So I stared at her blankly for a moment, not doubting at all that my expression was one of confusion, because Harry Grant was the last damn thing on my mind. I’d found my new story, and nothing was going to seem important again until I got to work on it.

After talking to Nadia. Begging if necessary.

“I’m sorry, Harrison Grant?” I shook my head as though it took me a moment to place the name. “He played a bit part in my movie. Is there something else I should know about him? Oh gods, is he dead?”

The plastic expression on her face finally broke, as she jerked back a step, blinking. “What? No, no he’s fine. He’s just ... surely you have more to say about him than that?”

“Ma’am, he had about twenty lines in the movie. He wasn’t really around all that much.” I waved at her and turned to walk off. “Sorry I can’t help you.”

“But wait—”

But I didn’t wait. I just kept walking.

Hell, I almost wished I hadn’t blocked Harry. I very much wanted to hear his meltdown over me calling his role in my movie a bit part. Yeah, it was a mean thing to do to a guy with a huge fragile ego, but I was completely done worrying about him and his feelings. Every time I thought he’d reached the lowest level he possibly could, he did something even worse.

I was finished putting up with his shit.

Instead, I drove home in the rental car I'd gotten, running possible opening lines through my head for the coming conversation with Nadia. She'd refused to even admit the house existed, last I'd spoken to her on the subject, so it wasn't going to be easy. There was no way to be sure she'd even be willing to discuss it with me, let alone give me permission to write about it.

It was, in many ways, airing her family's dirty laundry, something old-fashioned ladies notoriously didn't approve of.

She knew, though.

She had to know, because when I got home, she was sitting on the north side of the porch in a wicker chair they had brought with the other furniture the day before, looking out across the grass toward the abandoned house.

I wished she were alive, so I could grab a bottle of wine from the kitchen and start out the conversation a little less fraught than it was liable to go. Even lemonade might have helped. Food was great for defusing tense situations.

I locked the car and didn't even head inside the house proper, just climbed the porch stairs and went to join her, sitting in the wicker loveseat across from her. It didn't face the house, but I didn't need it to.

She kept staring at the tree line for a while, then closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, focused on me. "She was my favorite person in the whole world, Aunt Daphne. So much fun. Bright and bold and beautiful and talented and everything I'd ever wanted to be."

Fucking ouch. She must have guessed why I'd gone to the library.

"I mean, what little girl didn't want to be a singer at some point in her life? To be the beautiful woman all the men wanted? She was the life of every party, and Uncle Martin was ... he wasn't that." She looked back over at the outline of the house, sighing. "He was a bit of a wastrel, Uncle Martin. Didn't want into the family business. Didn't want into any business, because that would mean he'd have to work."

There was nothing I could say to that, so I kept quiet, nodding and letting her talk. It seemed like she wanted to, which was entirely unexpected. Mostly, I'd expected her to clam up again and refuse to discuss it at all.

“It was my daddy.”

The sentence was so firm, so final, and so apparently unrelated to the rest that I couldn't hold back my confusion. “Huh?”

“They had an old friend from Daphne's cabaret act who visited them often, and most everyone in town thought he was the one. But he wasn't. He was—he was like you and Gentry. Wouldn't have been interested in her that way. It was my daddy she had the affair with.”

Oh fuck. That changed everything.

“You—you're planning on writing about it, aren't you? You're going to tell her story? It should have that part in it. Daddy wasn't a bad man, exactly, but he did some bad things. And she paid for her one mistake every day for the rest of her life, and he didn't.” She shook her head. “We weren't even allowed to talk to her anymore, but I'd see him sneaking over there some nights. You see, she didn't stay in Welling because she wanted to. She stayed because she was in love with him. She put up with all that for him. And so did Mama, because she knew. Daddy was a pretty one too.”

She sighed again, leaning back in the chair, her shoulders slumping as though an enormous weight had come off them. “My baby Marcus, bless him, didn't inherit Daddy's looks and charisma, and that way everyone around him wanted to be a part of his life.” She shot me a wry smile. “Gentry sure got it, though, so I suppose it just skipped a generation. That boy could be a clone of his granddaddy. Well, except that sweet little Gentry would never hurt the people who loved him like Daddy did every day.”

“I'm so sorry, Nadia. I don't—I don't have to write it at all. I understand if that's not something you want out there in the world for people to know it.” It twisted in my gut just to say the words, because I so wanted to write the story, but it

wasn't mine. It was Nadia's, and her parents' and Daphne Durand's and Martin Lavigne's. I had no right to it if she didn't want me writing it, and I wouldn't.

She shook her head, idly flipping her fan open and looking at the lace flowers on it. "No. I've been thinking about it since you noticed the house. Trying to ... trying to decide what to do when you eventually found out. You didn't seem the type to just accept it when I said it was nothing. But what is it everyone says about how people who don't learn about history are doomed to repeat it? Not that I think anyone is going to do exactly this again, but ... keeping it a secret didn't help anyone. Not really. And that's the history everyone should learn. That history needs to be the truth. Not the truth as we wish it was. Not a prettified version of it. Erasing people because they're inconvenient is wrong, and it has to stop, for good."

"People will think I made it worse than it was," I told her. "And that I'm trying to make your family look bad."

She snorted. "Gentry won't allow that. He'll tell them it's the truth."

"But he doesn't know it's the truth. When I asked him about the house, he didn't even know who lived there." I shook my head. "No, I don't want to hurt Gentry and Jon like that either. It's their family's story too."

"You mean he didn't know the truth before now," Gentry's baritone came from behind me and I whipped around to stare at him, standing on the porch in his socked feet, looking at me and Nadia.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Gentry had already been home. But I hadn't seen his truck out front, so—

Seeming to read my mind, he hooked a thumb in the direction of the back of the house. “Finished my deliveries quicker than expected, and figured if there was a chance me and Jon would still be here come winter, we could use some more wood out back drying. Pulled the truck back there and haven't brought it out yet.”

Nadia flipped her fan in his direction. “I knew you were here. And with you and Jon moving in, you were both going to need to know I was here sooner or later, so I thought it might be best to take it off poor Max's plate.”

“You made sure he'd find us talking?” That was ... downright devious.

Her shrug was light, nonchalant, but there was something tense in her body language. Like she was worried about Gentry's reaction, but trying to pretend she wasn't.

“So Daddy was right.” He said the words to Nadia, and I had no idea what they meant. Then he came over and lowered himself into the wicker loveseat next to me, hovering his hand over my thigh and looking to me for permission.

I grabbed the hand and pushed it down, squeezing hard. “Sorry I didn't tell you.”

His laughter was fucking music, and not just because I'd been terrified he'd be angry with me. "Sorry you didn't say 'by the way your dead Gran's ghost is haunting the house I bought from you'? You're a ballsy guy, Max, but that would have been a damn fool thing to do before you knew if there was a snowball's chance in hell of me believing you."

"Your daddy was right," Nadia confirmed his previous comment. "I know we don't talk about it much, but magic does run in the family. Your daddy didn't get any, which is why he was so taken with the idea."

Gentry sighed and pushed a hand through his already messy hair, tension in every line of his face. "Don't I know it. And he was better off."

She snapped her fan shut and then reached out and bapped him on the knee with it. "Don't you speak ill of your gifts, young man. If I didn't have it, I couldn't have stayed behind to try to help."

The tension drained out of him and he smiled at her. "I am grateful for that, Gran. Thought I might be losing it when we came to deliver furniture that first day and I saw you on the stairs." He ducked his head, scratching at the back of his neck and not meeting her eye. "Sorry we sold the house. I know it was the family legacy and ... I'm just sorry."

She just shook her head. "None of that is your fault. Calvin stole the jewelry, and I couldn't stop him because I was just barely waking up in this state at the time. I didn't know what to do." She turned to us, a bright smile overtaking the sadness entirely. "Besides, if all that hadn't happened, Max never would have come to live with us, and I think maybe that's for the best."

"I'm sorry, that's ... incredibly sweet, but can we go back to magic running in your family? Magic? Like, real magic? Abracadabra and all that stuff?" I didn't want to mess up a lovely conversation between the two of them, but I didn't think the magic part could be stressed enough.

Magic, for fuck's sake.

Nadia giggled and fluttered her fan. “No, dear, abracadabra is stage magic. Sleight of hand and cleverness, and bearing no resemblance to real magic, which is a science.”

A science. Magic was a science. Well sure, why not?

I froze, blinking. “Wait, it’s not me. It’s ... it’s not me, it’s you, literally. I haven’t lost my mind, and I can’t suddenly see ghosts. You’re the magic one, so that’s why I can see you.”

Her smile reminded me of a kindergarten teacher whose problem student had finally figured out the difference between two and too. “Very good dear. Yes, you can see me because of my own magic. You haven’t changed or lost your mind. After all, Gentry sees me too.”

“I do,” he agreed with her. “Half expected you to show up at the funeral, and I won’t lie, I was a little disappointed that day when you didn’t show up to tell Maryann Jones that her cornbread is still too dry.”

“Like the Sahara Desert,” Nadia mumbled, shaking her head. “Doesn’t matter how much butter you put on it if you’re determined to bake it too long first.”

“And the jewelry,” I said, digging back into the earlier conversation again. “It was stolen by the guy the cops think?”

“Calvin Mayer,” she said with a sigh, and both she and Gentry nodded.

“But no one’s seen him since, so it’s not too likely anyone will ever find what he took.” Gentry squeezed my knee. “It’s okay. Me and Jon are fine, and we can manage on our own.”

Nadia scowled at him, once again threatening with her fan. “No, Max is here now, and so am I. You don’t have to manage on your own.” She leaned back in her chair and looked at him assessingly. “Now, Jon is sick? Tell me about it, and we’ll figure out how to help him.”

Next to me, Gentry practically went boneless with what looked like relief. “It’s leukemia. The doctors said he should be fine, and that this kind almost never kills people anymore, but he’s so miserable all the time, Gran. Like a zombie instead of Jon.”

She listened and hummed and nodded, then told him to make a list of things, and started naming herbs and plants that Gentry dutifully typed into a list on his phone, some of which sounded downright imaginary.

Rhodiola? Sounded like a car stereo brand to me.

When she finished, Gentry sat there fidgeting with his phone for a moment until she stopped and looked at him. “What?”

“It’s just ... I mean, this is great, Gran,” he hedged, holding up the phone, “but you’re the one with the real magic. I can’t make things like you could.”

“You already admitted you have magic, sweetheart.” Her look was so dry I could have used it to start a fire.

They’d both intimated it before, and while my first thought about Gentry when I’d met him had been that he was positively magical, that was a strange thought.

Magic.

Real magic.

I was having sex with a magic man. I did not giggle at the thought.

Gentry, meanwhile, winced, looking away at the floor of the porch, the trees, everywhere but her or me. “I know,” he finally muttered. “But it ain’t good magic, like yours. It’s ... fuck, Gran, it’s practically a curse, and it probably makes me an ass to say that, but it’s never done anything but hurt me.”

I pressed my fingers between his on my thigh, twining our hands together. I couldn’t really help with magic, but I could try to be supportive when possible. Even if what I really wanted was to demand all the details. *How* was he magical? What the heck kind of magic could be considered a curse?

She made a sad face and nodded. “I know it, baby. I know it. It feels that way when you bring luck to the people around you and not yourself.”

“Don’t tell me you had the same,” Gentry said, dubious and scowling.

“Didn’t I? All my friends married well and lived happy lives. I got your grandfather and widowed.” She sighed and leaned toward him. “And unfortunately, we both know all too well the luck doesn’t work for blood family.”

Gentry sighed and rubbed at his temples. “Of course not. If it did, you, Mom, and Dad would be alive and Jon wouldn’t have cancer.” She reached out and patted his hand, and I could feel him hold back a shiver. He glanced over at me and ducked his head. “It’s whiny as hell, I guess. I work at the garage in town, and the owner wins the lottery, closes the place, and moves to Aruba. I get a job for the sanitation department, and they suddenly get the funding they’ve been pressing for that lets them buy fancy new equipment, and it means they don’t need me anymore. Been that way my whole life.”

That sounded surprisingly shitty. Wasn’t good luck supposed to feel, well ... lucky? That definitely wasn’t going in the script that was simmering away in the back of my mind. Not that I was any good at writing fantasy anyway.

I had to stifle a laugh at the notion. It wasn’t fiction, wasn’t fantasy. Gentry was sitting right there next to me; the man with the world’s most painful good luck. But I couldn’t write about it because it was fiction to everyone but him. And now me.

Maybe that was the trick to writing fantasy. The ability to believe it truly was real.

I leaned against him, letting my head fall on his shoulder. “Well I promise not to move to Aruba and leave you on your own with no job.”

Gentry shifted my hand to his left, then wiggled the right one behind my back, pulling me against him. “Much obliged. I ain’t really made to be alone.”

“That makes two of us,” I agree. “But we’re not going anywhere. Me or Jon.”

“Or me,” Nadia agreed. “I have the feeling I get to choose when I move on, and I can’t see why I’d choose to leave my boys alone.”

Despite the fact that I'd finally learned all about the house in the woods, that promise was the best thing I'd heard all week.

Together, the three of us made chicken and dumplings for dinner, Gentry and me working according to Nadia's instructions, cooking the meat, chopping the vegetables, and generally working together like a dream.

Admittedly, part of that was because the kitchen was so big half a dozen people could have worked in there without bumping into each other. But part of it was just this strange and perfect synergy that Gentry and I seemed to have.

He'd ask about the carrots just as I finished with them, ready to turn around and drop them into the pan he was stirring.

I also got a crash course in how to make biscuits, which was somehow both easier and harder than I had expected. It reminded me of writing a script: you had to mix the ingredients just enough to get the dough to hold itself together, then stop. If you overmixed, Nadia promised me, you'd end up with rocks suited only for throwing at Jimmy's head instead of lovely fluffy biscuits for the dinner table. Just like if you overwrote and overedited a script, you'd end up with a bunch of plastic characters with no personality who sounded like a fast food commercial.

Jon stumbled out of his room looking bleary and rubbing his eyes right before we finished cooking. He looked at me. He looked at Gentry. He looked at his grandmother's ghost sitting at the kitchen island.

Then he leaned on the archway between the hall and the kitchen and stared at her for a while longer. “I’m not hallucinating.”

“You’re not,” Gentry agreed. “Gran’s a ghost. Dad wasn’t bullshitting you when he used to say magic was real. I always told you Gran’s cooking was magic, and it was. Her tonics always worked better than seeing a doctor and everyone in town knew it. And when I said I was cursed, I wasn’t wrong.”

“You most certainly *were* wrong,” Nadia snapped at him, scowling. “Yes, it’s not the most ideal sort of magic, but you have the power to make people around you happy, Gentry Fox, and that is nothing to turn your nose up at.”

Gentry frowned, but Jon managed to slide himself out of the doorway and make his way over to the island, pulling himself into the chair next to Nadia, watching her like he was afraid she’d disappear if he stopped. “I mean, magic sounds pretty great. Everybody with half a brain or better loves you, Gen, just like Gran. They always have. Your old boss at the garage called you his good luck charm.”

“And then he left,” Gentry pointed out.

Jon winced at that, but he didn’t disagree.

The man couldn’t be blamed for taking his good luck and running off to Aruba, I supposed, but I saw Gentry’s side much more clearly. People around him had good luck, yes, but it seemed that for most of his life, that good luck had ended with him being abandoned. Maybe bosses and jobs weren’t the worst abandonments, but as an adult, they were fucking necessary, so it was a big deal.

“If you bring Max luck, I doubt he’s going to run off,” Nadia pointed out, flicking her fan in my direction.

“Or even if you don’t,” I added. “I didn’t agree to date you expecting magic. I agreed to date you because you’re nice, and gorgeous, and easy to talk to.”

“And unlike that other boy, he wouldn’t make you sign a paper saying you’ll never tell anyone you dated,” Nadia added, sticking her nose in the air.

“What kind of worthless fucking asshole would”—Jon paused in the middle of the comment, frowning and looking at me, then groaned—“you can’t even say what kind of asshole would do that. That’s so messed up. No wonder you left Hollywood and came to Welling.”

“Hiram Jonathan Fox, you watch your language,” Nadia told him, tapping the back of his hand with her fan. “Even if you are right.”

Jon stared at where her fan had touched for a moment, then smiled, closed his eyes, and breathed deep. When he opened his eyes again, they were glassy, but he was still smiling. “Anything I can do to help with dinner?”

“Just get your behind to the table,” Gentry answered, motioning toward the dining room. “It’s already all set.”

“You could grab the butter out of the fridge if you want,” I offered. I didn’t want to give Jon a taxing job, but given how he had been feeling emotionally, it seemed like a good idea to give him a job if he wanted one.

Gentry hummed and cocked his head and looked at me. “You got any honey to go with it?”

“Sure,” I agreed, grabbing the honey out of a cupboard to add to the table.

Five minutes later, we were sitting around the dining room table, eating the benefits of our hard work, and it was wonderful. A real family dinner, the likes of which I hadn’t had since I’d lost Grandma.

There was small talk about our plans for the coming week, and what might be nice to have for dinner in the future, along with Nadia explaining what we’d need for the dishes her grandsons mentioned. I hesitantly mentioned Grandma’s paprikash, and they all seemed not just accepting, but enthusiastic about trying something new.

“Dang, I gotta get going,” Gentry said, frowning at his watch as he finished the last biscuit.

Jon frowned. “Going? I mean, I ... I can do the dishes, since I didn’t—”

“No, I can do them when I get back,” Gentry told him. “You can do them in a couple days when you get your feet back under you. And you can make Gran’s cornbread next weekend, since you’re the baker between us.”

Me, I was more concerned about where the heck Gentry was going than who was doing the dishes. No, not because I wanted to corner him in the living room and make out with him.

Okay fine, maybe it was because of that.

“You don’t have a delivery at this hour, surely?”

He looked at me, confused, then realization dawned. “Oh, no, I just agreed to work the bar for Joe tonight. The man’s got to have a few nights off a week. Normally I do Tuesdays so he can take Monday and Tuesday off, but he’s got Dinah and the babies to think of now, so I figured he could use an extra night home.” He looked around, then between me and Jon as though waiting for a dressing down. “That okay? I can do the dishes when I get back, and I—”

“Or I can do them now, since you’re going to do a nice thing for your best friend.” I waved him off and stood, stacking the plates we’d used for eating. “Seriously, Gentry, I can load the dishwasher. I know we’ve been doing them by hand together, but the dishwasher takes like five minutes.”

“And I can put them away in the morning,” Jon added helpfully. “I’m sure I’ll be more awake by then.”

“There you go, we’ve got a plan, so you’re clear to go handle the bar. Don’t have too much fun without us.”

Gentry pushed out of his chair and walked over to me, taking the plates and setting them aside, then cupping my face in both of his hands and leaning in to give me a kiss.

Contrary to all I’d seen about sibling relationships in modern media, when we broke apart, Jon was smiling at us, a dopey look on his face. “It’s about damn time, Gen.” Nadia cleared her throat, and he coughed and added. “Darn time, I mean.”



I DID THE DISHES, chatted with Jon until he started falling asleep again, and then sent him off to bed. Afterward, I set the alarm—Gentry had an entry code, so I wasn't worried about him getting in—and decided to make an early night of it myself.

It had been a hell of a day, long and emotional, and I didn't have much energy left for doing anything but starting to sort out my feelings on Daphne's story.

I wasn't ready to write it yet. I didn't have it all quite clear in my head, how I wanted it. Who exactly I wanted it to be about.

Oh, who was I kidding? It was going to be about Daphne and Nadia. They were my characters in this. This time, I thought, I was going to have to change some names and fictionalize things a little.

After all, I was taking out the magic, so it wasn't really about them anymore.

Images of actresses who might play Daphne filtered through my brain as I changed into some sweatpants and a T-shirt, climbed into bed, and drifted off to sleep.

I woke to a scream.

“You get out of my house, you murderous sonofabitch!” Nadia's voice cut through the night, and my sleep, like the sharpest knife.

I sat straight up and looked around, turning in time to see Nadia shove my bedroom door closed and press her translucent body into it. A second later there was a popping noise like someone was opening a bottle of champagne in the next room, and the metallic clang of ... well, hell, I didn't know what.

“Call the police, Max. Or no, call Gentry. He'll bring his shotgun and give this bastard just what he deserves. An ass full of lead!”

And that sounded like a pretty damned good idea to me. I rolled over to the edge of the bed and snatched my phone off it.

There was another pop, and Nadia let forth a string of curses that made me absolutely blush. I was pretty sure what she was suggesting was anatomically impossible between two humans, let alone the prodigious list of farmyard animals she was suggesting were also the man's parents.

I smashed my finger at the screen on my phone, almost accidentally calling my agent instead of Gentry, which might have gone through, since it was only about midnight back in LA, and she was regularly up at that hour. Working, even. For all the good it would have done me to talk to her while someone was trying to kill me.

“Hey,” Gentry answered on the first ring. “I’m on my way back now. Everything okay?”

A third pop rang through the room and suddenly part of the doorknob was missing.

Shots.

Clearly I was still half asleep as I hadn't immediately realized it, but the pops were gunshots, and he was shooting at the doorknob. If three shots was what a doorknob could handle, then the bathroom wasn't a safe place, because I was pretty sure most guns had more than six shots in them these days, to say nothing of reloading.

“Max? What the hell was that? What's going on? Are you okay?”

“A gun,” I managed to squeak out. “He has a gun this time.”

“Son of a bitch,” he hissed. “You get out of there. Can you climb down the rose trellis on the balcony?”

“But Nadia is holding the door—”

“She's dead, baby. A couple of gunshots aren't going to make her any more or less dead.”

He was right, of course, but it didn't change how wrong I felt abandoning the lovely lady to try to hold my bedroom door closed.

“Get out of there,” he reiterated, voice strident, when I didn't answer right away. “I'm on my way, but don't you hang up.”

I jumped out of bed and first closed the bathroom door, hoping it would distract the shooter for a moment with an assumption I was inside, then I crossed the room headed for the balcony. “Okay, but I'm going to have to put you in my pocket while I'm climbing,” I whispered back, not wanting the asshole in the hall to hear my plan.

While I was no Gentry, all athletic grace, I'd been coerced into more than my share of fake rock climbing at gyms in LA in lieu of real meetings. I could handle one rose trellis under life-or-death circumstances.

Probably.

I only hoped it wasn't as flimsy as the rose trellises my grandmother had at her home, since there was no way those could have supported my full weight after the age of four or five.

When the door broke open with a crash, I was just settling my full weight onto the wooden trellis.

It was, in fact, incredibly sturdy. It seemed to be made out of actual two-by-fours, and might have been sturdier than my first car.

The problem wasn't the trellis.

It was the fact that it was a *rose* trellis. The moment I was on it, thorns from the gorgeous blooming roses started to dig into the exposed skin of my arms and feet. Still, I had to move as fast as I could, because I was far too stationary a target while climbing down. So I sucked it up and accepted that I was going to get scratched all to hell. Better that than getting shot.

There was banging above me for a moment, but soon, too damned soon, the balcony door was shoved open. I was far

enough down that I couldn't see the door anymore, but I was still too high to hop off the trellis and let myself fall, assuming I didn't want a broken ankle.

A masculine figure in all black came to the edge of the balcony, scanning for me, and when he located me, he immediately pointed a fucking gun at me.

As he took aim, though, Nadia rushed up next to him and started to whack his arm, screaming something about how he wasn't going to take her new grandbaby away from her.

I didn't even have the time to be touched, too busy running for my life. Climbing for my life.

The asshole in black tried to pistol-whip Nadia, and it had about as much effect as one might have hoped. Even as her little fists were smacking into his arm, his hand went straight through her. It was good to have control over one's corporeality, and apparently Nadia did.

The guy gave an angry wordless shout, and turned around to start climbing down the trellis on the opposite side of the balcony. Which was a problem, because once I was on the ground, where was I gonna go? The front door was locked, so I couldn't just go back inside. I could probably break the French doors in back, but how would it even help me to get back inside the house?

I sure as hell wasn't going back to poor Daphne's rat-infested house of horrors.

How far would I even get without *shoes*?

I heard him hiss with annoyance and looked over to see him shaking his hand. Apparently the roses had gotten him too, in the space where his black gloves didn't quite meet his long sleeves.

Looking down, I gauged the drop as just a few feet remaining, and worth the risk, so I let go and let myself fall. It was jarring, my ankles and knees absorbing the strain, but my damned phone fell out of my pocket and it took me a precious moment to swoop down and snatch it up.

The asshole on the other trellis was moving way too fast, obviously more athletic than me, even with a gun in one hand. He let go and dropped down to the ground way farther than I'd been willing to.

The hamster wheel of my brain came to a screeching halt on the absolute conviction that I was about to die, but that was when the French doors in the back of the first floor opened between the gun-toting asshole and me, and Jon stepped out.

Jon dying instead of or in addition to me was not better at all, my brain insisted, continuing to blare the alarm.

But then Jon stepped forward, pivoting toward the guy while bringing up a shotgun I hadn't realized was in his hands.

"Run," was all he said.

And the guy did.

Jon still took a shot a moment later, and while the man kept running, he let out a shriek and stumbled slightly.

I put my phone back to my ear to find Gentry still yelling into it. "Max? Dammit Max, talk to me."

"I'm here. I'm ... We're okay. And your brother is kind of a badass."

Jon had been backing toward me as I spoke, and he wrapped an arm around me without turning to look at me, pulling us both toward the open French doors until we were back inside.

I scabbled for the light switch in the main hall, flipping it on, only for it to do nothing at all. The power was out. That explained why the alarm system I'd spent thousands of dollars to install wasn't working. Apparently I needed to invest in a generator as well.

"You're okay?" Gentry demanded on the phone. "I'm halfway there, and I'm bringing the cops with me."

"He ran up north, sort of toward the abandoned house, but ... well, even as impressive as Jon was just now, I don't think either of us is the person to go after him."

“Damn right you’re not,” Gentry insisted, and suddenly I could hear sirens in the background of the phone call. He hadn’t been kidding about bringing the cops with him. “You stay there and wait for us to arrive. I am not losing either of you tonight. Jon’s getting better, dammit, and I just fucking found you.”

Jon, meanwhile, was locking the French doors and pulling the drapes closed, even though that left us in near pitch-blackness.

After that, he leaned against the wall and panted, looking absolutely shattered in the glow of my phone screen, near ready to collapse.

Still, neither of us relaxed until we could hear the police sirens coming up the drive.

We were going to live.

Deputy Harvey, whose last name I still didn't know, was less than impressed.

Not with us, but with the guy who had broken in.

“—had the goddamn nerve to cut the power to the whole house. It's going to cost the county to come out and fix that line, and who knows who might get hurt in the meantime, power lines down like that?” He was ranting to his partner, who was nodding along.

Me? I was sitting there writing up my report on what had happened, trying to mentally edit Nadia out of the story, and also trying not to fall asleep, because the adrenaline from the attack had fled and it was three in the damned morning.

I yawned once more, and Gentry tapped my hand, pulling the notebook from under my arm.

All I could do was blink up at him, confused, as he turned and handed the notes to Harvey. “We'll come down to the station in the morning for an interview, but right now Max is falling asleep in the middle of writing. He's barely awake and I doubt this makes a lot of sense.”

Harvey turned to look at me, so I waved at him, cutting off in the middle to cover yet another yawn. He chuckled at that and nodded. “All right. Can't say as I blame you. We're going to stay out front till morning, though, and escort you down to the station to make your statement when you've gotten some sleep, okay? Though ... maybe sleep in a guest room, since we're still searching the area for any physical evidence?”

Gentry waved him off. “We got two extra bedrooms set up, it’s no big deal. We’ll all three stay out of the main till you give us the go-ahead to go back in.”

Harvey nodded, then looked between us for a minute and nodded to Gentry. “Sure is good to see you Fox boys back out here in your home. Nadia’d be happy to see it too.”

Gentry ducked his head and gave the man a little smile. “We’re happy to be back. And it’s good to have Max with us too. Everybody can use more family.”

“Damn right,” Harvey agreed, tipping his hat to the room at large. “Now y’all go ahead and get some rest, and know we’ll be in the drive for the rest of the night. Nobody’s coming back at you tonight.”

“And if they try, I’ll take their head off,” Gentry added, eyes narrowed in more anger than I’d realized he even had in him.

It was kind of nice to see someone angry on my behalf. Yeah, and his brother’s, but his brother wouldn’t have even been in danger if not for me. Which made no sense, but was still true, because someone was trying to kill me.

Gentry saw Harvey to the door and locked it behind him, then walked me back to the bedroom they had set up with his bed and other things. “This okay for you for tonight? It ain’t as nice as your bed, but—”

“It’s with you,” I mumbled, leaning into him. “That’s all I care about right now. You’re here.”

“I am,” he agreed, leading me to the bed and sort of not-quite-pressing me down into it, then throwing the blanket over me before going to change into pajamas of his own. “And I ain’t leaving you alone for the night again until this is figured out. Joe’ll understand.”

I’d never wanted any kind of gun in my house before, but I didn’t even hesitate at the image of Gentry checking a handgun and leaving it right inside the drawer of the nightstand on his side of the bed. I couldn’t hurt myself with it

there, and Gentry could get to it and shoot anyone who tried to break in again.



IN THE MORNING, the first order of business was apparently bandaging my arms.

Gentry had cleaned the tears in my arms from the rose thorns while I'd been only half conscious, but in the morning light, he decided some of them were deep enough that they needed to be covered.

“Might should get you to a doc for stitches on that one, it’s too damn deep.”

I tried to wave him off with the very arm he was inspecting. “Please. It’s from flowers. I’m sure it’s fine.”

“Those thorns are how roses protect themselves. They’re nothing to play around with. Maybe I ought to replace them with some kind that doesn’t have thorns.”

“Don’t you dare tear out your grandmother’s roses,” I insisted, pressing a hand to my chest in a weirdly Nadia-like pose.

He couldn’t even tamp down his amusement at that, and a moment later, we were both laughing uproariously right there in the bathroom, me sitting on the counter and him standing in front of me.

Jon poked his head in. “You two losing it?”

“Little bit,” I agreed.

He looked better than he had the day before, but still like he’d rather be back in bed than standing there.

“Sorry it took me so long to wake up last night,” he said, sighing and looking at the scratches on my arms. “I could have come up behind him and knocked him out, and this would be over now.”

“Or you coulda come up behind him and gotten shot,” Gentry pointed out, reaching out to squeeze his brother’s shoulder. “You did good. You protected both of you, and you’re both alive. That’s what matters.”

Gentry grabbed another, bigger kind of band-aid and pressed it over the larger cut that had been bothering him, apparently deciding not to push the issue any further for the moment. “Now we’ve all got to go down to the station and talk to Alicia this morning. Harvey said she should be there around nine, so anytime we leave, she ought to be there by the time we get there.”

Jon nodded. “Not that I have a lot of information. Did they find anything upstairs?”

Gentry scowled and shook his head. “There was a tool they think he used to cut the power, but that’s all they’ve got. He didn’t leave anything else behind.”

“Seems like this asshole is real good at breaking and entering for a plain old small town thug.” Jon was frowning, leaning his head against the door, like he had to sort out a puzzle.

And he wasn’t wrong. They didn’t have a key, but the locks still hadn’t been a problem for them at all, either time they broke in. They’d known to cut the power to stop the alarm system from reporting, which was something I’d have never even thought of, let alone done. This person knew way more about breaking into a place than I hoped most people did.

“I feel like we must be missing something obvious,” Jon muttered finally, shaking his head and pushing off the doorjamb.

Gentry, as I’d come to expect in the little time I’d known him, went back to the sensible train of thought. “We should stop at the hardware store while we’re out and ask about a generator. I’m not having this happen again, even after they catch that asshole.”

We all agreed it sounded like an excellent idea, and headed for the front and Gentry's truck, so we could go make our official statements.

I was still working it out in my head. How did I explain what happened without Nadia? Why had he decided to climb down the opposite trellis instead of just shooting me from the balcony?

Nope. In the end, that had to be his issue to explain when they arrested him, not mine. I'd just say exactly what happened, while conveniently leaving out Nadia.

He could try to pretend to be crazy because he'd seen a ghost, not that I thought that would get him too far. Insanity defenses weren't nearly as common as people thought, and they hardly ever worked.

True to his word, Deputy Harvey was still sitting in the drive with his partner when we came out, and they escorted us all the way back into town. We arrived at the station, and were immediately ushered into the back, where a serious Deputy Alicia greeted us.

She looked at my bandaged arms, lips pursed. "Are you okay to do this? Do you need to see a doctor?"

"Gentry's worried one of them might need stitches, but I think I can handle making a statement first." I sighed and slumped into the closest chair, after making sure there was another convenient for Jon, if he was tired and wanted to sit. "I honestly don't remember what I wrote down last night, since I was falling asleep by the time I got pen to paper."

She gave a little chuckle and nodded. "I figured. You wrote something about how you hoped the rats in Daphne's house ate him, whoever the heck Daphne is."

I shuddered at the thought, but then cocked my head, considering. "That would make everyone's life easier, I guess."

That made everyone laugh, and broke some of the tension. Coffee, donuts, and a few minutes later, and the three of us

were all sitting around silently writing our experiences the night before.

It felt like the world's worst creative writing class. Everyone take an hour and write about the worst experience you've had in your life in exact detail.

Okay, no, that had been losing Grandma, but the night before was definitely second on the list of awful things. It made the mess with Harry and the NDA look like nothing, in retrospect. I almost wanted to call Harry and thank him.

But no, I didn't feel that much better about it, and Harry was still an asshole.

Finally, I pushed the papers away with the world's deepest sigh, and bit into the donut Alicia had left for me. Raspberry jelly, and absolutely delicious. Okay, that improved the morning.

Jon was sitting at a desk across the room answering questions, and I took a moment to hope our stories would mesh. I suspected what had woken him was his grandmother's yelling, but I hadn't claimed to be doing that yelling myself.

Alicia seemed pretty sympathetic, though, reaching out and patting him on the hand before turning back to the paper he'd filled out and asking another question I couldn't hear from that distance. Jon didn't seem worried, just vaguely annoyed, which, well, weren't we all? It was justified.

I turned away, so I wasn't staring creepily at them, and glanced over at the coffee pot. It wasn't great coffee, but it was better than no coffee.

Deputy Brian slid into the empty space in front of it and poured himself another cup, and I wondered why the hell he was wearing a long-sleeved uniform. Was he one of those guys who would wear a suit with a coat to an event, even in ninety-degree heat? All the other deputies were wearing short sleeves, and so was the sheriff, from the glimpse of him I'd gotten, sitting alone in his office.

Maybe he just had bachelor-itis and waited too long to do his laundry, so all his shirts were dirty.

He stretched his arm out to grab a packet of sugar, and it bared an inch of wrist.

A bandaged inch.

I was struck by a vivid memory of the night before, when the attacker had cut himself on the rose thorns.

Same spot.

A hand wrapped around mine, squeezing so tight it almost hurt. I managed to tear my eyes away from the damning bandage, and looked over to find Gentry looking at me, his eyes wide. He didn't say a word, but picked up his pen and tapped on the section of my statement where I'd mentioned the attacker climbing down the opposite lattice and also cutting himself.

He'd seen it too.

I nodded.

He closed his eyes, jaw clenched, breathing hard.

Because really, what the hell did we do under the circumstances? Accuse a sheriff's deputy of trying to kill me? That seemed like it would go well.

Alicia didn't seem the type to dismiss me out of hand, but Deputy Brian was her partner. Even if she didn't like him, I imagined there was some loyalty there.

Absently, I wondered if Brian was his first name or last. Last, had to be, since it was stamped on his uniform. What was it with guys who had first names for last names and being enormous bags of dicks?

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't notice something was wrong until I felt Gentry tense beside me.

Deputy Brian was looming over us, looking at my statement. "I'll take this one into room B and get working," he called to Alicia.

Her head whipped up, eyes narrowed, but before she could say a word, Gentry did. "The hell you will. He's going nowhere alone with a known fucking homophobe."

Brian sneered at Gentry. “Oh, you need some special treatment because you’re a queer, is that it? Too good to have your shaky story questioned?”

“That’s enough,” Alicia said, and the whole room went silent. “You arrived on scene at the second attack and immediately accused the victims of a crime, Brian. It’s completely reasonable of them not to want to talk to you. I can handle it on my own. You go ahead and patrol without me.”

He scoffed again, practically throwing his cup of coffee down on the desk between us. It sloshed over and spilled out onto my report, and he sneered again. “Guess you’d better get started over, you—”

Alicia slammed her hands down on her desk and pushed up, staring at her partner. “Brian. Now.”

He stormed out of the office, and everyone, including the other deputies present, deflated with relief when he left.

Gentry pulled his handkerchief out of his pocket and carefully soaked up the coffee on my report. Another deputy came over with a rag and cleaned up the rest, and the two of them agreed that my report was fine, largely undamaged.

“Awful convenient of him to try to ruin it, though,” Gentry pointed out, and the second deputy, whose shirt was stamped “Raley,” stared at the report for a moment, then up at the door toward where Brian had left.

It was telling, I thought, that he didn’t immediately jump in to defend his fellow cop’s honor.

By the time Alicia got finished with Jon and came to me, I was almost buzzing with worry.

“What’s wrong?” she asked immediately when she sat down in front of Gentry and me. “If it’s Brian, I know he’s an asshole, and he’s already on report for other shit, including the way he acted the other night. Honestly, I doubt he’s got much longer in the department.”

“What he’s got,” Gentry said, leaning toward her, tapping my report with one finger, and lifting his brows at her meaningfully, “is a bandage in the spot where the attacker cut himself on Gran’s roses last night.”

“No,” Alicia denied, sitting back in the chair, eyes wide and mouth agape, but her tone was shock rather than outright disbelief. She turned to look at the door Brian had left through almost half an hour earlier, like maybe he’d still be standing there and she could see it. “I mean, I know he’s an asshole, but why? Had you even met him before the night your brakes were cut?”

It didn’t really matter that I was almost certain we knew who the attacker was, I couldn’t lie to make the truth fit the facts. I shook my head. “As far as I know, that night was the first time I ever saw him, and that was after two attempts were already made. I have no idea why he’d want me dead.”

“He is an asshole,” Deputy Raley pointed out from his own nearby desk. “I mean, sexist, racist, homophobic, you name it. Threw a tantrum when he was assigned you as a partner, even

though you're second in command around here and it's a promotion, in a way."

Alicia shot him a smile. "You looking for a promotion there, Raley?"

He shrugged and looked away, but it wasn't bothered or embarrassed, but more ... bashful. Aww, the cute deputy wanted to flirt with our Alicia.

Apparently, I was more willing to be distracted by that than she was, though, because she turned back to us instead of pursuing it. "I'll have a look at his wrist, and if it looks like"—she motioned to my bare arms, covered as they were with rose thorn scratches—"anything like that, then even if we don't know why, we'll obviously have a look into Brian's alibis for the times."

"Or maybe we'll look into his alibis anyway," Raley tossed out casually. "Easy enough to make a wound look different by taking a hot pan to your wrist or something."

Alicia scowled at that, but she didn't disagree. More than that, she looked like the whole concept disgusted her.

She shook off the annoyance after a moment and started asking her questions about my statement, but overall, she seemed happy enough with what I'd written. She called it detailed and thorough, in fact, which made the sad little creative in me perk right up. We were suckers for praise, writers, like a BDSM sub who needed to be called a good boy in order to get off.

Not that I was thinking of Alicia and getting off in the same thought. No, the thought of getting off had me looking back to Gentry, who was still stiff and angry at my side, clearly ready to hunt down Deputy Brian and kick the truth out of him. And maybe all of his teeth.

Fortunately for everyone, there weren't many questions for Gentry, since he hadn't been there when the guy had broken in, and he'd only had a phone conversation with me at the time of the attack.

Still, when the questions were done we all sat there, like no one wanted to be the first to say, or ask if, we could go. Alicia frowned. “You’re sure you hadn’t run into Brian before that?”

“As certain as I can be. I haven’t stolen his girlfriend or his job, and as far as I know, I was the only one to make an offer on the house.” I racked my brain, trying to think of another reason someone would want to kill me, and just couldn’t figure it out.

“We only got the one offer,” Gentry agreed. “Not that a deputy makes enough money to buy Fairview. No offense, Alicia.”

“None taken,” she said, a scoff in her voice. “I’d be surprised if the sheriff made enough to buy a house like that, not to mention pay the upkeep on her. She’s a monster, and you practically gotta have a full-time caretaker for that much house and property.”

Gentry shot me a tiny smile and slid his hand into mine. “She’ll get all the caretaking she needs.”

“All right you lovebirds,” Jon said, pushing out of his chair. “Those donuts were great, but it’s getting toward lunch and I need something more than empty carbs and sugar if I’m going to manage to stay awake the whole day.”

Gentry snorted. “Whatever you say, Doctor Fox, but I’ll have you remember you once lived a whole weekend on chocolate sandwich cookies and that nasty yellow soda of yours.”

“Ahh, the days of my youth,” Jon said with a longing sigh. It was funny because I was pretty sure he was right around my age, and also, not funny, because I was starting to feel the same way.

Oh, not like I was suddenly old and my back hurt all the time—I knew damn well that my body was still in pretty good shape and I didn’t have much to complain about, health-wise.

But somewhere in the last few years since Grandma had died, there had been this intrinsic change in me, where I realized I could no longer look to someone else to solve my

problems. I had to step up and do things myself, take responsibility and all that crap, and it fucking sucked.



HALF AN HOUR later found us in the local diner. They specialized in breakfast, specifically biscuits and gravy, but they also had a fairly decent lunch menu.

Jon had ordered pancakes with apples on them, because he was both a man with a considerable sweet tooth, and a lying liar who lied.

“No more empty carbs and sugar, huh?” I asked as he also drenched said pancakes in syrup.

Gentry just sighed and shook his head, patting my hand sympathetically. “Just look away. You can’t help a man who doesn’t want help.”

He turned to his own cheesesteak and fries with gusto, and I tried not to feel like I’d wronged myself by ordering a salad. It was healthy. *Yes*, I thought as I doused the crouton and cheese covered vegetables with honey mustard dressing. *Healthy.*

“Okay,” Jon said, swallowing a bite. “We need to think this thing through logically. When did the attempts start? Like, the minute you got to town?”

And they hadn’t.

It had been more than a week after I’d arrived. I shook my head. “It was—the first time, that is—it was on Wednesday night. I’d been in town like a week and a half. It was ... the day after I called my ex’s lawyer and told him to make him stop contacting me.”

Gentry scowled. “The NDA bastard?”

I nodded, chewing on my lip. “He wanted me to do him a favor, and I answered by telling his lawyer to make him go away. But that’s silly. He’s not even here, he’s in LA. It was

also after I saw Daphne's house and started asking around about it. That was bothering people too."

"You mean the old house in the woods?" Jon asked, considering. "Who's Daphne?"

Gentry took the cue from that and explained to him what had happened with Daphne, Martin, and their great-grandfather.

Jon paled as he spoke, staring in astonishment. "Fuck me, that's messed up. And the whole town shunned the poor woman? While great-granddad just kept right on"—he glanced around, but no one was paying attention—"you don't think someone in town is trying to kill you because of that, do you?"

"It don't really make sense, does it?" Gentry hedged. "Not a soul in town still alive more than ten or twelve when Martin died. And even if they were bothered by the whole mess, who'd feel strongly enough about it to kill a stranger just for being curious? It's not like there was a murder we know of."

I considered for a moment, the possibility that one of the elderly residents of town had actually killed either Martin or Daphne, and wanted to make sure no one investigated and found out. No, that didn't make sense either.

"Even assuming it's not"—I did my own quick glance around to make sure no one was listening—"who we all think. It's someone young enough to physically overpower me. To climb down a rose trellis and jump the last three feet to the ground. Anyone old enough to remember Daphne and Martin would have broken a hip doing that."

They both sat back and considered, nodding.

"I don't think his family lived here in the fifties, either," Jon added. "I seem to remember them moving here when we were in grade school. His dad worked at the garage, didn't he?"

Gentry nodded. "Just as big an ass as him, and died of a heart attack a decade back. Wasn't old enough to have known anyone involved in the situation even if they'd lived here then."

“Maybe it was the rat that ran over my shoe,” I said, picking at my salad.

Gentry sat up, staring at me with shock and horror. “There was a rat in Fairview?”

“No, in Daphne’s house.”

“Maybe it was Calvin,” Jon suggested. “He was out of shape last I saw him, but not so old he couldn’t have managed that stuff. Maybe he’s been living out in the abandoned house, and he was worried Max was gonna find him if he was exploring the place. It would explain why no one’s seen him since they think he stole Gran’s jewelry, if he’s been hiding out in the house.”

“With the rats?” I demanded, horrified.

Jon laughed. “You’d be surprised what people learn to live with when they think that’s the best choice.”

Harry, I reminded myself. He was a rat in human form if ever there’d been one, and I hadn’t just lived with dating him, I’d been grateful for it. Or Nadia and her inability to divorce her husband, so she’d had to literally live with him for seven years.

“Maybe it’s time for us to head back out there and see if we can find signs it’s been in use,” Gentry said. “I don’t think it’s Cal, because some nights he struggled to climb all the way off a barstool before he ran off, but we might as well rule him out.”

“It’s a date,” Jon agreed, but the yawn he gave over his pancakes told me he’d probably be taking a nap when we got home instead.

It was fine. Everything would be fine. Gentry would scare the rats away.

I shuddered and tried not to think about them at all.

twenty-five

Sure enough, Jon slipped off to his room for a nap the moment we got home, while Gentry and I suited up to go out to Daphne's house.

I figured I should wear the hiking boots, which were still sitting on the front porch. They'd already been tainted by rats, so it couldn't get worse, right?

For the rest, I did the same as last time I'd gone out there, bundling up in long sleeves and jeans, like it was armor against venomous snakes and giant red-eyed rats and gods only knew what other kinds of chthonic horrors that lived out there in the woods.

Gentry looked me over and nodded approvingly. Then he grabbed the shotgun Jon had used to scare the guy off the night before and slung it over his shoulder. When I lifted a brow, he shrugged. "Might as well be prepared in case it is Cal, and he's out there now."

And so we made the trek across the lawn, which felt far longer than it had the first time, into the trees and down the remains of the old gravel driveway, past the rusted car and up to the front door of the house.

Gentry turned to me, concern in his eyes. "You all right?"

"I, um ... yeah. Yeah, I'm okay. I can handle this." I could totally handle it. Yup. I was a strong independent man, etcetera.

I did the same silly thing as the first time I'd visited the house, covering my hand with my shirt before turning the

knob.

The door creaked open, and it felt like the house itself breathed out, the stink of decay wafting out from the open doorway, even stronger than the last time.

Gentry cringed and turned his face away. “You weren’t kidding about the rats, huh? Must be a nest in there, and some”—he broke off and looked at me, concerned, before continuing—“some dead ones.”

Oh, how was that even worse? Dead rats should be better than live ones, but it just wasn’t true.

Gentry took the lead, heading into the room, feeling his way gently in case the floorboards were weak. It was a reasonable choice, better thought out than anything I’d done the first time I’d come, especially since Gentry had said Jon once almost fell through one of the stairs. Not that I’d known that at the time, but still.

Breaking through floorboards was the last thing we needed to deal with now.

“Where’d you go next?” he asked, glancing around, eyes alert and missing nothing. For a moment, he considered the liquor cabinet, like maybe he wanted to see if the ancient scotch was any good, but then he shook his head and turned back to face me.

I shook my head. “Nowhere.” I pointed to a spot in the middle of the floor. “That’s where the rat ran across my foot, and I got the hell out of here.”

“And everything was the same in here then and now?”

I turned, looking around the room. The dust, the carpet, the furniture arrangement ... everything looked the same to me. It definitely didn’t look like someone could have been living there. Anyone would have disturbed the dust more than that if they’d been in the room more than a few minutes. “Yeah. Nothing has moved that I can tell.”

He frowned and nodded, looking around again then heading through the room to an archway in the back, blocked only by an old-fashioned set of swinging doors. It would have

to be a kitchen, I assumed. He pushed through the doors, and I went to follow, but he stopped dead right in the middle of the doorway.

I looked up at him, worried maybe he'd found the nest of rats. He certainly looked pale enough for something like that. His voice was low and strained when he spoke. "Max, do me a favor and turn around. Don't ... don't come in here."

"Why not?" I pressed on one of the swinging doors and managed to shove it open just about two inches before Gentry caught it and pushed it back, but that was enough.

That was a person on the golden-brown linoleum kitchen floor. A person, making that awful smell that permeated the house. I'd only gotten a momentary glimpse of gray flesh, and a side angle of a face. A face that ... was mostly gone.

I backed up a few paces, breathing deep and then remembering that what I was breathing, that awful sickly sweet smell, was dead person. There was a dead person in the other room.

Dead.

"Who ... what ..."

"It's Cal," Gentry whispered, turning back toward me and coming out of the kitchen, looking a little green. "I guess that explains why nobody's seen him in months. He's ... been here."

"Wait, that's the guy who stole Nadia's jewelry?" I glanced behind him at the still slightly swinging wooden doors, grateful that I couldn't see beyond them. "Then where the heck is the jewelry?"

The doors to the kitchen swung open once more, followed by a sound no one who'd ever seen an action movie could miss: the sound of a pistol cocking.

"He told me it was buried behind the house," Deputy Brian said as he came out of the kitchen, gun pointed at a frozen Gentry's head.

He poked Gentry with the tip of his pistol. “Drop the shotgun, or I blow your boyfriend’s head off, then yours.”

Gentry’s jaw clenched, like he was thinking about swinging around and fighting back, but quicker than a blink, the deputy turned the gun slightly and fired a shot that came so close to my head I felt the air move near my ear. It had almost felt like a bee had flown past me, it was so fast, so ... nothing.

Well, nothing but the pants-shitting terror of the fact that I’d just come within inches of being dead. I swallowed hard and tried to take a deep, slow breath, despite the panic bubbling up in my chest.

Gentry dropped the shotgun on the floor.

“Good, now kick it away.”

So Gentry did. He kicked it right over toward me.

“Funny man.” Brian looked over to me. “Fine, you kick it away.”

“He don’t even know how to shoot it,” Gentry pointed out, sounding entirely reasonable and calm like I totally fucking wasn’t.

Brian scowled and cocked the pistol again. “I don’t give a fuck. Kick the shotgun away, Hollywood.”

Oh for fuck’s sake. I scowled at him and did as he said, kicking the damned thing a few feet away from myself while

glaring at him. “You killed an old drunk over some jewelry. That’s sick.”

“Some jewelry,” he said with a snort. “You want to tell him how much your old granny’s jewelry was worth, Fox? That giant fucking box of diamonds and rubies and gold she was hoarding like a goddamn miser?”

“She wasn’t doing any damn thing like that,” Gentry denied, teeth gritted with sheer anger. “I won’t say her jewelry wasn’t worth anything, but it was hers to do with as she pleased, and I don’t see what fucking business it was of yours.”

“What the fuck did she need with it?” Brian demanded. “She didn’t do a damn thing with it. Just lazed around that big old house and did nothing, like Cleopatra being fanned with palm leaves. She could have fed people. Made other people’s lives better. But she sat on it like some rich fucking dragon.”

This was sounding like some expert level justification for bad behavior to me, so despite my building terror, I called him out. And did not piss myself, thank goodness. “Is that what you’re planning on doing with it, oh Robin Hood? Give it to the poor?”

“Fuck yes I am,” he agreed. “I grew up in a goddamn trailer in this worthless town. Not a one of the assholes in this place gave a damn when my daddy came home drunk and beat me within an inch of my life. Nobody helped me. They all cared more about the fucking rich assholes out here by the ocean, living in their mansion and hoarding more money than anyone in town ever even saw.”

“So you’re going to rob the dead and give to yourself,” I said, deadpan. “Somehow that sounds slightly less charitable than you seem to think it is.”

“I deserve that money,” he hissed at me, like one of the copperheads everyone had warned me lived under rocks and vines in the area.

Well there he was, Welling’s very own poisonous snake, Deputy Brian, and once again, the villain in my life was on

about what someone deserved. As if anyone could truly say what anyone deserved or why.

“Wasn’t much anyone could do about your daddy,” Gentry said, his voice low and sad. “When the cops asked you and your momma where the bruises were from, you both lied. What were they supposed to do?”

“Better,” he snarled. “They were supposed to fucking do better. Of course we lied. He’d have beat us even worse if we hadn’t.”

I’d heard the story before about other situations, and didn’t doubt it was true. It was too damned common. I didn’t doubt both the deputy and his mother had been trapped in their very own horror movie, no escape possible.

What I couldn’t imagine was walking out of that trauma and deciding that the world owed me.

I did understand that I was privileged. I’d had Grandma, and some men in my position wouldn’t have. A lot of them, even. Some men had a mother who wasn’t able to care for them the way they deserved and a father who was a monster, like Deputy Brian.

But he wasn’t there now, living with that father. He was an adult now, and his father had been dead for a decade. He got to make his own choices, and apparently his choices had been stealing Nadia’s jewelry and killing Calvin Mayer.

“So you and Cal planned the robbery, he stole the jewels, and you killed him, figuring that way you wouldn’t have to split the money with him. Yeah, Robin Hood would totally be proud.”

He sneered at me, turning to spit on the floor, like he was determined to be a gross stereotype. “So? He was a friend of my daddy’s. He knew too. He deserved what he got.”

“You’re a deputy,” Gentry said, sounding utterly shocked. Sweet, innocent, upright Gentry. Like he believed Brian gave a damn about the law just because he was a cop. “You know people don’t just get to decide who should live and die. That ain’t right, Jeff.”

Jeff. Jeffrey Brian. Poor guy had been cursed from the start with a name like that. I wondered wildly for a moment if it was Jeffrey Brian Junior. He probably had yet a third first name as a middle name too. Or maybe it would be worse if the middle name was a last name.

I was, perhaps, verging on hysterical.

“That’s the reason I know,” the deputy snapped back. “I see people like fucking Cal every day. They shirk their responsibilities to their families and society. They do fucking nothing and spend their whole lives drunk and useless. All I gave him was what he deserved.”

He took a deep breath and sighed and started moving, skirting around Gentry, keeping an eye on both of us as he headed for the middle of the room.

“I’m real sorry about this too, Gentry, because you don’t deserve it. You’re gay and all, but you ain’t the worst kind of guy. You’d probably eventually grow up and realize women are sexier than any fucking man could ever be.”

I blinked as my brain tried to do the mental gymnastics to follow that. Grow up? Did he think a thirty-year-old man was still in some childish rebellion phase, only pretending to find other men attractive?

“So that’s how it goes, huh?” Gentry crossed his arms over his chest, looking pissed off. “Some people deserve to die, and you get to decide that. And some people don’t deserve to die, but they’re in your way, so they get to die too? Ever think maybe the problem here isn’t them, it’s you?”

“You don’t fucking know me!” Brian screamed, his face going red and voice filled with rage in an instant. “Nobody in this whole god-forsaken town knows me. None of you ever cared. So why should I give a fuck about any of you?”

“Humanity?” Gentry asked, poking, prodding, clearly not interested in talking the screaming rage-monster down.

No, wait. He was distracting him. Making sure Brian was only looking at him. Did he want me to interfere? Dive for the gun?

No, I realized. He wanted me to run. To leave him alone to get shot.

“Fuck humanity,” Brian spat, raising his gun again to point it at Gentry’s chest. “It’s just too bad we figured out who was trying to kill your little boyfriend too late. You. You wanted his money and your house back, so you killed him. So sad, I didn’t get here in time to stop you from killing him, only barely managed to stop you from killing me. You must have lost it after your rich ass lost all your buckets of money, and couldn’t live with being poor like the rest of us assholes.”

Gentry blinked at him, cocking his head in clear confusion, but gathered his wits fast enough to snap back. “You really think anyone’s gonna buy that? I get nothing if Max dies. We’ve been dating less than a week, he’d be nuts to leave me a damn thing. And Jeff, I’m sorry, but I haven’t been rich a day of my life. A week ago, without Joe’s help, me and Jon might have been homeless.”

It was obvious Deputy Brian didn’t believe him. He just sneered again, his lip peeling back from his teeth in a near feral snarl, as he steadied the gun he had aimed at Gentry’s chest.

Oh fuck no.

No way. I'd lost Grandma because I'd had no choice. I'd accepted Harry's behavior because I hadn't seen another option. I'd even mostly ignored Jimmy and the deputy himself when they'd been raging douchebags about things they clearly didn't understand, because the other option had been to cause trouble, and I didn't like to do that.

But this?

This was a fucking bridge too far.

I took a running leap at Deputy Brian, throwing my whole body into him with every bit of strength I could. The gun went off, but because I'd just plowed into him, his hands had flown upward and it was pointed at the ceiling instead of Gentry's chest.

We both went sailing backward into the liquor cabinet behind him, and he hit the sturdy wooden ledge of the thing with a snap and pop that sounded like both wood splintering and maybe bone breaking, then his head smashed into the glass doors and the liquor bottles behind them.

I pushed off him immediately, stepping back before even thinking about the gun, but by the time my panicked brain pointed out that he still had it, it was falling to the floor from his lax hand.

He was unconscious.

I'd knocked a man unconscious.

Holy shit.

As I stepped away, he slid to the floor, boneless and somehow wrong ...

“I think you might have broke his hip,” Gentry said, coming up beside me, grabbing me around the waist and pulling me away from the deputy. He reached out with his foot and shoved the pistol over next to the shotgun on the other side of the room, far from the unconscious asshole. “I’d say you also broke his skull, but I’m not sure there was anything right in his head to begin with.”

I collapsed back into Gentry, taking lungfuls of tainted, awful air. “I didn’t ... I couldn’t ... he was going to shoot you.”

“Shh, shh, I know baby. You did ... hell, you did amazing. Worst idea ever, but you did amazing.” He pulled me in tight against him, leaning up to kiss my face, rubbing his stubble across my cheek as he did.

Before I had a chance to melt into him, though, something shiny caught my eye. I almost dismissed it as light glinting off the broken glass of the liquor cabinet and its bottles, but it wasn’t that at all.

No, it was a box, lying on its side, having fallen to the bottom shelf when Brian’s head smashed its way through the cabinet, breaking glass and knocking down shelves.

A very large mahogany box, with a strand of metallic gold covered with perfectly clear, bright red stones lying half in and half outside it. I stared for a moment, then turned to look at Gentry, who seemed amused.

“Gentry?”

“Yeah?”

“Is that your grandmother’s jewelry?”

“It is,” he agreed.

I bit my lip, glancing between the necklace and his face, worried I was about to ruin a lovely moment. “That’s fake,” I whispered, afraid to speak the words any louder than that. I

was no expert in gems, but I knew real rubies didn't look like that unless they were beyond priceless, and probably in museums.

His smile didn't falter. "I know. Most of it is. She's been selling it off a piece at a time for forty years. There are about three pieces left in the lot worth anything. Me and Jon thought we might be able to live on it for long enough to get on our feet. Maybe turn the house into a bed and breakfast or a museum or something." He glanced down at the still unconscious deputy. "I did tell him I've never been rich in my life. Gran's daddy sold off the Lavigne Trading Company in the fifties and pissed away most of the fortune because he was a selfish asshole."

That actually explained a lot. Nadia had seemed like a traditional southern belle and all, but none of the three of them had ever acted like having things was obvious and expected. They'd all seemed grateful for every meal, every day, and every single thing they got in life.

"-were out here at the abandoned house," I heard Jon's voice saying, headed toward us. "And I know I fucking heard gunshots."

"I believe you." That was Alicia. "You stay out here, and —"

"We're all right," Gentry called aloud from behind me. "Max knocked Jeff unconscious."

The door opened a moment later, and in shuffled an astounded Jon and a surprisingly pleased Alicia. "Seriously? I was just on my way out to tell you we were looking for him because he didn't have an alibi for the attacks." She winced at the position he was lying in and grabbed the radio off her belt. "I'm gonna need an ambulance out here at Fairview. I've located the suspect, and he's injured."

"That's gonna be murder suspect by the time you're done here," Gentry added while she was hooking her radio back to her belt, and she turned to look up at him sharply. "Sorry for the broken no-murder streak, but it happened months ago. He admitted it to us. He and Cal stole Gran's jewelry, then he

killed Cal so he could have it all.” Gentry motioned to the jewelry, then the kitchen door. “Body’s in there. Apparently Cal hid the stuff in the liquor cabinet then told Jeff he buried it outside.”

“And he’s been trying to kill Max because Max came in here,” Jon said on a shocked intake of breath. “He thought Max discovered the body, and any minute he’d talk to the cops and the place would be crawling with them.”

“No more chance to keep looking for the loot,” Alicia finished, hooking her thumbs into her belt and sighing, shaking her head like a disappointed parent.

“Didn’t he know most of the jewels are fake? I always figured Cal was just drunk off his head, but I thought the whole town knew Gran’s jewels were mostly fakes.” Jon asked, confirming what Gentry had said, that the family had known all along.

Not that I’d doubted Gentry. The man had absolutely no guile in him, and it was refreshing as hell.

Gentry sighed and shook his head. “Kept screaming about how we were rich. Like he never noticed I chop wood for extra cash, and have since high school.”

It was a good point. I’d seen Gentry around town working all kinds of odd jobs, and he was unusually skilled at all of them. That wasn’t the behavior of a man who’d had things handed to him.

It was too easy in life to fixate on one’s own problems and ignore that other people even had their own. To feel like your fellow man had failed you instead of accepting that sometimes there was no one to blame, or even harder than that, taking responsibility for yourself.

Obviously Deputy Brian hadn’t been responsible for his awful childhood, but he wasn’t a child anymore. He was entirely responsible for his choices to steal and murder.

Alicia went over to the swinging doors and nudged one open, glancing inside for just a second before turning back, disgusted, swiping a hand down her face. “Suppose it explains

where he's been spending all his free time for the last few months. He was out here searching for the jewels." She came over next to us and looked down at the box. "I'm afraid it's going to have to be taken as evidence for a while."

"We're okay," Gentry dismissed, not even glancing at the box again. "We sold the house because they went missing, and that's covered all the medical and funeral and such expenses for now. You keep them for as long as you need to make sure he spends the rest of his life in prison. Cal was a thieving asshole, but he didn't deserve that."

"Maybe he knew," I added, and when everyone looked at me askance, continued, "What Brian was thinking, that is. He said he buried them out back, when he actually hid them here in the liquor cabinet. Seems like something you'd do when you expected to be betrayed."

"I knew something was different about the damn cabinet," Gentry muttered. "It was all organized, bottles facing out and in a neat line. Me and Jon used to play with them when we were kids. Hell, we refilled most of them with water because they were empty. No way we left them all perfect like that."

"I remember that. We used to pretend we were businessmen in the big city," Jon added with a little smile, but it fell away when he looked down to Deputy Brian, who was making a little groaning noise, apparently starting to come around.

Alicia was prepared for that, whipping out the handcuffs on her belt and cuffing the man's hands in front of his body, likely not wanting to risk further damage to him than I'd already done. Oops. "You three should go out and wait for the ambulance. No reason you have to put up with any more of this."

Gentry kissed me on the cheek and whispered in my ear, "Could you get Jon back to the house where he can sit down? I'll stay with Alicia and make sure there's no more trouble."

I could have taken offense at the implication that Gentry could handle the situation better than I could, but ... I'd taken the bad guy down.

Me.

Skinny Max Blazek, without all Gentry's muscles or Joe's enormous bulk. Because I'd finally decided that I was done having people push me around.

No more Harry and his NDAs, yeah, but also, no more assholes with guns who thought they could take things from me.

I nodded to Gentry, then to Alicia. "Jon and I are going to go sit on the porch and wait for the ambulance. Don't forget the guns on the floor over there. That pistol is probably the same one the deputy used to shoot up our house last night, so it's proof against him."

Alicia glanced where I pointed, over in the corner, and nodded seriously. "He won't be getting his hands on it ever again. Don't you worry about this. I'm sorry he got this far, but he's done attacking you."

Jon and I were out the door before the asshole finished opening his eyes. By the time the ambulance and more deputies arrived, we were sitting on the porch, sipping lemonade.

The EMTs wheeled Brian out strapped and handcuffed to a stretcher, but they were convinced I hadn't actually broken his hip, merely dislocated it, when I'd rushed him. He was whining about suing me for damages, but there were a lot of rolled eyes from the EMTs, so I was less worried about it than perhaps I should have been.

Especially when Alicia joined us on the porch and asked, "I don't know what the hell he thinks he's gonna do with any money he wins off you when he's probably going to spend the rest of his life in prison."

Jon waved a hand dismissively. "We live in a stand your ground state and Max owns the property his life was being threatened on. Brian's leg isn't even broken. He's got no case."

It didn't matter to me in that moment, though. It was over. No more murder attempts over a case of mostly costume jewelry. No more Harry Grant or Jeffrey Brian or ... well, I

supposed there was a good chance I'd run into Jimmy again, but I wasn't putting up with his shit again. And now I'd have a reputation in town for being at least capable of defending myself.

I could move forward with my life. I could start to date Gentry in earnest. It was like a dam had broken inside me, and I knew I was ready to write Daphne's story, too.

Maybe I was going to get along well with the new Max.

epilogue

We were going to have to sort the little gold statuettes at the end of the night, but they made a hell of a display, all sitting there together on a table in the middle of the hotel suite Amelia Barber had rented the cast and crew for the party.

She'd even hired a security guard to keep an eye on them and make sure none walked off with anyone but their owner.

Best screenplay. Best director. Best picture. By the time we'd gotten to that one, the actress announcing had just tipped her head forward conspiratorially and said, "Oh come on, you all know what I'm going to say."

"How's it feel to be a multiple Oscar winner, kiddo?" Will Janssen asked, coming up beside me and clapping a hand on my shoulder. "Hell of a follow-up, in case I didn't say so before. Not often I'm jealous I didn't write a thing, but *In Secret* is incredible."

"It's a little less terrifying than last time," I admitted, not quite as at a loss for words as the last time I'd spoken to him. "I don't think I'm out of stories anymore. And the whole night isn't just a numb blur."

He chuckled and slapped my back. "Don't I know that feeling? I woke up the night after my first award win in bed with three people whose names I didn't know. Turned out one of them was my boss."

I winced at the thought, and thinking back, I wouldn't have been surprised if the same had happened to me that night. I

hardly remembered it at all, and when I tried, I couldn't summon up a single notion of how I'd felt the whole night, other than sort of ... off.

This night?

Well, this night was totally different. I smiled at Will, taking a deep breath and turning away from the shining mass of statuettes. "Thank you. And thank you for what you said that first night, too. You don't know what it meant. It's one of the only happy memories I have of that night."

"We creative types have to stick together, right? I mean, it's only a competition one, maybe two nights a year. The rest of the time we're all just trying to sail the same ocean. What kind of jerk isn't willing to throw the other guy a life preserver when it looks like maybe he's drowning?"

I smiled back at him, nodding. "Anytime you need a life preserver, you give me a call. I mean, I've got a huge house in the middle of nowhere that's always ready for the odd guest, as long as you can deal with my brother-in-law who's doing his residence at the local hospital, and our resident ghost."

His grin said he thought I was joking about the latter, but everyone always did. Ghosts weren't real, after all, so it must be a joke.

"Unfortunately," I said with a sigh, "it looks like my husband is currently the one in need of a life preserver."

He glanced over to the enormous balcony overlooking the ocean that Gentry had headed out onto for some fresh air. Big parties were overwhelming for my poor country boy, so he tended to excuse himself once in a while.

And once in a while, he got cornered by pretty girls and boys who wanted to know if he was an actor, because he was certainly pretty enough to be one. Or pretty actors who wanted to offer him an in, if he slept with them.

Will sighed and shook his head in disgust at the man who'd latched onto Gentry. "That fucking guy. It's a miracle he's managed to stay in the closet this long, but he keeps going like that, he's going to get outed."

“He keeps going like that with my husband, I’m going to shove him off the balcony and he can stay in the closet permanently,” I answered, and headed off to save my husband from the flirting asshole who was leaning in on him.

Behind me, Will laughed.

Will Janssen, my peer.

I opened the sliding door to the balcony and slipped out. The first one to notice me wasn’t Gentry. No, he was too busy trying to not make eye contact with the self-important asshole hitting on him.

Harrison Grant looked up, saw me, and scowled. “We’re a little busy out here. Isn’t the rest of the crew inside somewhere?”

“I’m sure they are,” I agreed. “Since they’re invited guests and also a ton of fun at parties. But I wasn’t looking for you, Mr. Grant. I didn’t even realize you’d been invited to this party. I didn’t think Amelia liked you. Gee, I hope you didn’t crash. I doubt she’d be too impressed with that. I came out for my husband, who’s being harassed by someone who ought to learn to keep his dick in his pants. Gentry, babe?”

Gentry, whose head had shot up at the sound of my voice, was staring at me wide-eyed, in absolute shock. I supposed he’d never seen me be rude to anyone but Jimmy before. He rushed toward me, a hand instinctively going to my waist. “Yeah, sorry. I just came out for a minute alone—”

“And got ambushed, I know.” I leaned in and kissed him, just a soft press of lips against his, but he stood there for a moment after I pulled back, eyes closed, like it had been something special.

When those bright green eyes opened again, he looked a hundred times more comfortable. “Maybe that was what I really needed, not air.”

I leaned into him, breathing in the scent of him. Not a hint of any kind of cologne, just Gentry. Just perfection. “I know you’re always what I need. Amelia wanted to get some pictures with the whole cast and crew before we left. Do you

want to grab her and do that now, then get back to the hotel room?”

“Oh god yes,” he agreed, fast and relieved. “And our flight home is in the morning, right?”

“Right.”

He pulled me in tight, this time taking the initiative to kiss me himself. “Can’t wait to get back home with you.”

“Me either.” I turned and gave Harry a glance, then turned toward the door. “Mr. Grant,” I said, as my husband and I went to find Amelia and wish her a goodnight before heading downstairs.

We might not be able to get back to the middle of nowhere that night, I supposed, stuck in a hotel room there in LA. But when you were married to Gentry Fox, everywhere you rested your head was where foxes said goodnight.

patreon

W.M. Fawkes and I have started a [Patreon page!](#) Check it out if you're interested in:

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acknowledgments

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And last but certainly not least, a great big thank you to you, readers! We couldn't do this amazing job and write all the kissing books under the rainbow without your faith, energy, and support.

You're the best. <3

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about sam burns

Sam is an author of LGBTQIA+ fiction, mostly light-hearted fantasy romances. Most of her books include a little violence, a fair amount of swearing, and maybe a sex scene or two.

Oh, and let's not forget a fox. He'd be offended at being forgotten.

She is a full-time writer who lives near the ocean with her husband and cat.

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