

PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY MATES



DADDY
WOLF'S

Feisty Nanny

SERENA MEADOWS

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(PROSPECT SHIFTER DADDY
MATES)



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PROLOGUE



Quinn woke face down on the bed, the pillow wet from where she'd been drooling in her sleep, not sure what had woken her until she heard the slam of a door. Pushing herself up into a sitting position, she swung her legs over the bed and looked around the room, trying to remember where she was; then it hit her like a bolt of lightning. Jumping to her feet, she looked around the bedroom, realizing she was trapped with no way to escape without being seen. Grabbing her backpack, she tried to think of a good excuse for still being there, but nothing came to her, and she realized she was probably going to lose one of her best clients thanks to her little nap.

Taking a deep breath, she walked over to the door and peeked out into the hallway, hoping that there might still be a chance for escape. But Mr. Smith, at least she assumed it was him since she'd never met him, was standing with his back to her in front of the door, his cell phone up to his ear, and didn't look like he was planning to move. With a frustrated sigh, she stepped back into the bedroom and looked around again, trying to decide what to do. The longer she waited to announce her presence, the worse it was going to be, but something held her back, a sense of self-preservation that she never ignored.

Only a few seconds later, Mr. Smith's voice broke the silence, "The job is done," he said. "Two shots to the head, just like you requested. I'll expect the last payment to be posted to my account in five minutes per our agreement, and don't forget you promised me a bonus."

It took a few seconds for his words to sink in, and when they did, she started backing away from the door, not only panicked but scared. Slipping

into the closet, the only place she could think of to hide, she stood, heart pounding, not sure what to do, aware that she could be in big trouble if Mr. Smith found her in the apartment. Feeling like she was going to faint, she turned and leaned against the closet wall, confused when she heard a click and the sound of a small motor coming to life.

Only a second later, the back wall of the closet began to slide open, revealing a catch of weapons, and all she could do was stare with her mouth hanging open as the gravity of the situation settled over her. She could still hear Mr. Smith talking on the phone, and she started searching for the button that would close the secret compartment, her hands shaking so badly she almost missed it. When the wall finally slid shut again, she let out a sigh of relief, but it was short-lived when she heard footsteps coming down the long hallway.

Knowing she was about to be caught, she looked around hoping to find a hiding place, then saw the vacuum sitting in the corner, and a plan began to take shape in her mind. Throwing her backpack on the bed, she slipped her earbuds in, turned them up loud enough she couldn't hear anything, then grabbed the vacuum, plugged it in, and began to push it back and forth across the carpet. Heart pounding, she started singing along with the music, hoping her voice sounded normal, her skin prickling with anticipation, rehearsing in her head what she'd say when Mr. Smith caught her.

Only a few seconds later, someone tapped her on the shoulder and the scream that came out of her mouth was real, fueled by the fear coursing through her. She stood staring at Mr. Smith for a second, then turned off the vacuum cleaner and slipped her ear buds out, not having to pretend at all that she was a bit frightened.

"What are you still doing here?" Mr. Smith demanded. "You were supposed to be gone when I got home."

"I'm sorry, I guess I just lost track of the time," she said, starting to put away the vacuum. "Just let me put this away, and I'll be gone. I didn't mean to stay so long, I just wanted everything to be perfect when you got home."

"While that's admirable, we had an agreement," Mr. Smith said, his face full of suspicion. "I live a very private life, Ms. Murphy, and I had hoped to keep it that way."

"Yes, sir, I understand," she said, grabbing her backpack. "I'll go now."

She slipped out of the apartment, took the elevator instead of the stairs, and forced herself not to run when she hit the sidewalk, but she couldn't

resist looking up at the apartment. Mr. Smith was watching her from the third-floor window, a look on his face that made her blood run cold, and she knew her little act hadn't helped. Turning away, she forced herself to walk calmly down the street, but as soon as she was around the corner, she broke into a run, her brain screaming at her that she was in big trouble.

CHAPTER 1



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson paused at the corner, but only long enough to make sure it was safe to cross, then pushed the bright pink stroller across Main Street and up onto the sidewalk. It was his third time making the loop through the busiest part of town, but walking around town was preferable to a crying baby, so he took a deep breath and started down the street, bracing himself for the looks he knew that he would get. Peeking over the top of the sunshade at his daughter, he couldn't help but smile even though she was pushing him to the limit, unable to deny how totally and completely he was in love with her.

None of the books he'd read had prepared him for the emotional turmoil that watching Ivy in pain brought him, but by accident he'd discovered that riding in the stroller was soothing, buying them both some comfort. If he was lucky, he'd be able to move Ivy to her car seat and make it back to the ranch without her waking up. He wasn't counting on it, however, since more often than not she woke up before he could get her to her crib. Deciding to drag out their walk, he turned and headed back down the street, surprised to see that a small crowd had gathered in front of the diner.

He spotted Noah and Hailey in the crowd and decided that since he had nothing better to do, he'd go say hello. But as he got closer, he noticed the somber look on everyone's face. For a second, he thought about turning around and heading the other way, but his curiosity got the better of him, and he pushed his way through the crowd, using the pink stroller to get people out of his way.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he asked, stepping up next to Noah. “Is there going to be a parade or something?”

Before Noah could answer, a line of black cars appeared at the top of the street and drove slowly toward them, “No, that’s just my father getting what he deserves,” Hailey said. “He won’t be bothering anyone in town for a long time.”

He’d heard rumors about Hailey’s family but had never really put much thought into them, “So, the rumors are true?” he asked, then wished he hadn’t when Noah gave him a dirty look. “I’m sorry, that was rude.”

“It’s okay, I don’t blame you for being curious,” she said. “I don’t know what the rumors are going around town, but they’re probably true. My grandfather took jewelry from Holocaust victims and sold it off. That’s where all his money came from. My father knew about it and kept it hidden all these years, but it’s all going to be out in the open now, I made sure of that.”

He couldn’t help but respect what Hailey had done, “That couldn’t have been easy for you,” he said. “But you did the right thing.”

“Hailey is nothing like her father,” Noah said, putting his arm around her. “She couldn’t be a part of what her father and grandfather did.”

“There wasn’t any choice but to turn them in,” Hailey said, then let out a long sigh as the last car drove by. “I’m just glad it’s over. I’m ready to start my new life.”

Noah pulled her closer, “And it’s going to be a good one,” he said. “We may not have the kind of money your father had, but we’ve got something better-- love.”

“Okay, now this is getting gross,” he said, shaking his head, but there was a smile on his face. “I guess this means we’ll be looking for someone else to run the single dad’s group.”

“Are you volunteering?” Noah asked. “Because that would be great.”

“No way. I may be a confirmed bachelor, but that’s about my only qualification,” he said. “I wouldn’t have the first clue how to run the group. You’d better find someone else.”

“Oh, well, it was worth a try,” Noah said, slapping him on the back. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

Just then, Ivy began to fuss, and he let out a groan, “Maybe if we’re all really quiet, she’ll go back to sleep,” he said. “She’s been teething, and I don’t think I’ve slept more than a couple of hours at a time for days.”

“We’ll be happy to babysit if you need a break,” Hailey said. “It can’t be

easy raising Ivy by yourself.”

Liking Hailey even more, he watched his daughter fussing in the stroller, “I might just take you up on that offer,” he said. “I probably should push her around some more, it’s the only thing that helps.”

Before he could get moving again, Ivy began to wail, big fat tears rolling down her cheeks, and he let out a long sigh. “I guess I waited too long,” he said. “Do you want to take her right now?”

“Somehow, I don’t think that would make her any happier,” Noah said with an apologetic look. “Don’t worry, this doesn’t last that long.”

He was just about to scoop Ivy up when a young woman came running over, “Oh, you poor little thing,” she said, scooping the baby out of the stroller. “Come on, now, it can’t be that bad.”

To his astonishment, Ivy stopped crying and began to coo at the woman, “See, I told you it wasn’t that bad,” the woman said, smiling at Ivy. “Aren’t you just the prettiest little thing?”

He stood there frozen in shock, a rush of emotions confusing him for a second. Anger swirled at the surface, astonishment and jealousy warred for second place, and it was all topped off with a punch of attraction that left him slightly breathless. Unable to do anything else, he studied the woman, taking in her long red hair, eyes greener than any he’d ever seen, and a body that was practically singing to him, but it was the little butterfly tattoo on her lower back that really got him.

Dragging in a deep breath, he finally managed to get control of himself, shook off the attraction, and reached for his daughter. “Lady, I don’t know who you are, but around here, we don’t just pick up other people’s children,” he said. “That could get you in some big trouble.”

The woman looked him up and down, something in her eyes he couldn’t read, “I thought you’d remember me,” she finally said. “I drove you crazy when we were kids, but I guess six years is a long time.”

He looked her up and down again, trying to figure out who she was, but discovered that was a mistake when his body began to throb with desire, and his only thought was of grabbing her and kissing her. It was almost a relief when Ivy began to fuss in his arms, and he had to turn his attention to her, but he was all too aware of the intoxicating scent of cinnamon and something sweet floating to him on the breeze.

Just then, Jayce walked up, “Quinn, there you are,” he said. “I’ve been looking for you everywhere. You can pull whatever kind of crap you want on

Mom and Dad, but don't you dare treat me that way."

It hit him then who the woman was, "Quinn?" he asked, hating the way his voice broke when he said her name. "That can't be right."

Quinn

Quinn was completely thrown off guard by the man standing across from her, the baby in his arms, his brown eyes full of surprise, and she had to fight back a wave of attraction before she could pull herself together. It was several long seconds before she realized that both men were staring at her, and the baby was beginning to fuss again, her face scrunching up with unhappiness. When she looked over at her brother, she almost laughed when she saw the same look on his face, and felt a little bit bad about the scene she'd caused at home earlier that morning.

"Jayce, will you just relax? Mom and Dad aren't going to blame you," she said. "I'm sorry you got caught up in all that, and I probably should have told you that I was leaving, but I couldn't stand to be in that house for another second."

"It is you," Grayson said, then looked over at Jayce. "You didn't tell me your sister was back."

"I'm not sure that she is," Jayce said, giving her a dirty look. "All she's been doing since she got home is stir up trouble."

"I haven't been stirring up trouble," she said, anger flaring to life. "I'm just looking for some answers. It's not my fault if it makes Mom and Dad uncomfortable."

Jayce sighed, "I don't know why you can't leave this alone," he said. "Nothing is going to change the past."

She stared at her brother for a second, forgetting that Grayson was standing there, "That's easy for you to say," she spat at him. "You were never ignored the way I was. Mom and Dad showed up at all your school functions, they helped you with your homework, they were there for you. You have no idea what it's like to be ignored your whole life, Jayce, so don't tell me to leave it alone."

"What do you think that you're going to gain, Quinn?" Jayce asked. "No matter what they say, you've already made up your mind that they don't love you."

"Because it's true," she said, then had to take a deep breath. "I just need

to know why. I need to know what's wrong with me, why they couldn't love me."

"Well, you're going about it the wrong way," Jayce said. "Baiting them and making them angry isn't going to get what you want."

"And what is?" she challenged. "I've spent my entire life trying to get through to them, and nothing seems to work except anger, so if that's the only weapon I have, I'm going to use it."

Jayce shook his head, "Quinn, you're stirring up something you shouldn't," he said. "I'm sorry that you're hurt, and you're right, I can't imagine what it was like for you growing up, but this isn't going to help. You're just going to end up getting hurt worse."

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," she said. "I'm a lot tougher than you think, I can handle the truth, and then I'll move on with my life and live it as far from this stinking town as I can get. I was hoping that you'd be on my side, that for once in your life, you'd stop making excuses for them and face the fact that they both wish I'd never been born, but I can see that's not going to happen so I'll do this on my own."

Afraid that she was going to cry right on Main Street, she turned and walked away, taking deep breaths until the feeling passed, then plopped down on a bench in the park and let out a long sigh of frustration. A part of her knew that Jayce was right, she should just accept the fact that her parents didn't love her and move on, but after six years she still could not get there. She was stuck and knew that she'd never be able to move on with her life until everything was out in the open, until she'd heard the words come out of their mouths. Then and only then would she be able to put her horrible childhood behind her and find some kind of happiness.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice that she wasn't alone anymore until Ivy started fussing. She looked over, surprised to see Grayson standing there looking a little uncomfortable. "I just wanted to make sure that you were okay," he finally said. "You seemed pretty upset."

She hated the way her heart skipped a beat when their eyes met and quickly looked away, "I'm sorry if you got caught up in the middle of that," she said. "I shouldn't have brought it all up in public, but I just get so frustrated sometimes with everyone, pretending that my childhood was perfect."

"I can understand why you might be frustrated," Grayson said, sitting down next to her. "It sounds like your parents weren't very good to you."

Realizing that she was talking to a virtual stranger, and that his compassion was doing something strange to her, she shook her head, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be dumping all this on you. I'm sure you have problems of your own," she said, suddenly desperate to get away from him. "I don't know why I came back here. It was a big mistake, but now that I'm here, I can't leave without getting some answers. Thank you for listening to me, but I think I'd better go."

She jumped up and started across the park with no destination in mind, confused by her reaction to Grayson, frustrated by her brother, unsure what she would do next. Coming home had clearly been a bad idea, one born out of her desperation to get away to someplace safe, but she'd been telling the truth about needing to hear some answers, and her parents were the only ones who could give them to her. She'd already spent years in therapy trying to overcome the feeling that she was unlovable, and she couldn't imagine spending her entire life feeling that way.

CHAPTER 2



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson watched Quinn walk away, the urge to go after her so strong, he had to force himself not to move until she disappeared from sight, then sat back on the bench and let out the breath he'd been holding. For the first time in days, Ivy was sitting in her stroller, gurgling happily and bouncing up and down, giving him a second to recover from the strange instincts rushing through him. He'd never been the kind of person who got involved in other people's lives; his motto had always been live and let live, but there was something about Quinn that made him want to find a way to make all the pain he saw in her eyes melt away.

It was so unlike him; he wasn't sure how to process the feelings or shut them down. He'd never experienced anything like it, never had to cope with his magic coming to life on its own. More than anything, he didn't want to think about what it meant, didn't want to look too deeply into those feelings or the attraction that he'd felt. Nothing good could come of it. Telling himself that it was just concern for a fellow human, he pushed it all out of his mind, but just as he was about to get up, Jayce sat down next to him.

"Sorry about that. Quinn gets herself worked up sometimes," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I thought by now she would have outgrown these little tantrums, but you know how women are, all emotion, all the time."

He looked over at his friend, a bit shocked that he wasn't taking what Quinn said more seriously, "She thinks she's unlovable," he said. "Don't you have a problem with that? I mean, she's your sister."

"She's always thought that, it's a hang-up of hers or something," Jayce

said with a shrug of his shoulders. "I think she just says it to get attention. I mean, it wasn't that bad for her growing up. Sure, my parents ignored her a little, they were just tired by the time she came around, I guess. But I was there for her. Don't you remember how I used to let her follow us around?"

"Yeah, I hated it back then," he said, smiling at the memory. "But what about after you left for college?"

"Well..... I'm sure my mom and dad took care of her. I mean, she always had nice clothes and plenty to eat," Jayce said, then winced a little. "That sounded bad when I said it out loud. I guess maybe she does have a point, but the way she's going about this drives me crazy. Causing trouble isn't going to help, and I can't seem to make her see that."

He was silent for a second, then looked over at his friend again, "It's none of my business, but you might want to think about really listening to Quinn instead of just brushing her feelings aside," he said. "She's hurting, Jayce, and you might be the only person who can do anything about it."

It was clear by the look on Jayce's face that he'd gone too far, "Since when are you the expert on relationships?" he asked. "Quinn has been a troublemaker for her entire life, and nothing has changed. You don't know what you're talking about, so maybe you could just stay out of it."

Jayce stomped off before he could say another word, and he decided that was probably for the best. He had become involved in something that was none of his business. Getting to his feet, he shook his head, wondering what had gotten into him, "Come on, princess, let's go see your grandma," he said. "We're late, and you know how crazy that makes her."

"There's my little angel," his mom said when they walked in the kitchen door a few minutes later. "You two are late, but I'll forgive you for a kiss."

He started to kiss her, but she pushed him away, "I meant from Ivy," his mother said, then gave the baby a big smooch. "Now, you can give me one too."

After he kissed her, he handed the baby over, "Sorry we're late. We were walking downtown and ran into Jayce Andrews," he said. "Did you know his little sister was back in town?"

"I did hear something about that," his mother said. "The way I hear it, she's pierced and tattooed all over her body, and she grew a set of horns while she was away."

"That bad, huh?" he asked, shaking his head. "Well, I didn't see any horns, so you can forget that part, and as far as I could tell, she only has one

tattoo on her lower back.”

His mother raised her eyebrows at him, “How observant of you,” she said, a little smile on her face. “I thought you were done with women.”

“I never said I was done with them, I’m just taking a break,” he said. “I don’t want someone getting it in their head that I’m looking to get married now that I have Ivy. She and I are just fine on our own; besides I can still look even if I’m not going to do anything about it.”

“Whatever you say,” his mother said. “Let’s go sit down, and I’ll get us some coffee. You look exhausted.”

“Ivy hasn’t been sleeping well,” he said. “We’ve been lucky to make it a couple of hours at a time. It’s beginning to get to me.”

“Are you giving your daddy a hard time?” his mother asked Ivy, who just cooed at her. “Maybe you should come spend the night with grandma and grandpa?”

“Mom, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” he said. “You already watch her three days a week, that’s enough.”

“Nonsense,” his mother said. “Ivy will stay here with us tonight. You need a break, Grayson, go out and have some fun, then get a good night’s sleep. I think you need it.”

Quinn

Quinn took one more look in the mirror, wishing she was wearing anything but the dress her mother had shoved at her the day before. “I don’t want you embarrassing us at the dinner party tomorrow night,” she’d said, a look of distaste on her face. “And do something about your hair, tone it down or something, it makes you look like a.....”

“Yes, mother,” she’d answered, cutting her off. “But you do realize this is my real hair color? There’s not a whole lot I can do about it.”

“You could let Betty die it like I suggested,” her mother said, shaking her head. “Red hair is just so.....unnatural.”

She’d stared at her mother for a second, waiting for the sting of her cruel comment to hit, but felt only anger, “I’ll wear the dress,” she’d said, giving her mother a dirty look. “But I’m not doing anything to my hair.”

“Have it your way,” her mother said. “You know what people will say, but I guess you enjoy embarrassing your family.”

With a sigh, she buried the conversation in the back of her mind, “Well,

here goes,” she said to her reflection. “One rude comment and I’m out of there, screw what people will say.”

When she opened her bedroom door, the house seemed too quiet, but she took a deep breath and started down the stairs, assuming that the door to the living room was closed. But when she got to the bottom and looked around, she saw that the door was open, the room empty, and wondered if they were having dinner on the patio. Turning, she headed down the hallway, a bit surprised her mother would be entertaining in the backyard, but it had been six years since she’d been home things might have changed.

The patio was empty when she stepped around the house, and she stood confused for a second staring at the empty tables, then headed for the kitchen. Slipping in the back door, she found the kitchen almost deserted and stood there for a second, the truth slowly beginning to sink in. Her face beginning to flame with embarrassment, she started to slip back out the door, but the cook came bustling into the room, then froze when she saw her.

“Oh, Quinn, I guess you didn’t hear,” she said. “Your mother moved the party out to the country club; something about it being better for everyone.”

The words felt like a slap in the face, and tears began to burn in her eyes, “I guess they forgot to tell me,” she said, hating how much it bothered her. “Oh well, at least I don’t have to wear this dress in public.”

“Would you like me to make you something to eat?” Mrs. Butler asked, clearly uncomfortable. “I could whip something up really quick. You’re probably hungry.”

“That’s okay,” she said, just wanting to get away from the woman. “I’ll just go into town and get something, but thanks.”

“Okay,” the woman said, then hesitated. “Your father left strict instructions that you’re only allowed to use the gardener’s truck.”

She burst out laughing, “Of course he did,” she said, the hurt replaced by anger. “I would expect nothing less.”

When she got back up to her room, she ripped off the awful dress, threw it on the floor, and stomped on it, feeling a bit like a little kid throwing a tantrum, but she didn’t care. It felt good to vent some of her anger. Throwing on a pair of jeans, she wondered why she’d even tried, why she’d opened herself up to them, and promised herself she’d never let it happen again. She was fighting a losing battle, and the truth was, she was the only one fighting. Her parents didn’t care about her, would never care about her, and it was time to accept that fact and move on.

Looking around the bedroom, she realized that she felt no sorrow at the thought of leaving her childhood home behind. There was no sadness when she envisioned packing her few belongings and never looking back. Feeling like she had the first part of the answer to her next move, she grabbed a jacket, closed the bedroom door behind her, and headed into town, her mind sorting through the possibilities.

What was normally a short drive turned into a teeth-rattling, bone-jarring adventure in the old truck, and several times she was passed on the highway by outranged drivers who didn't understand that the vehicle could only do forty miles an hour. By the time she reached the outskirts of town she was so frustrated and angry, she pulled into the first parking lot that she saw. It wasn't until the truck's engine sputtered and died that she realized she was sitting outside the sleaziest bar in town, a place they had been warned about their entire lives.

She sat staring at the building through the windshield, trying to decide if she should go inside or fire the truck up and go back home. As she sat there, she noticed that, unlike when she was growing up, the building and grounds surrounding it looked like they'd been well cared for. There were no weeds coming up through the cracked sidewalk, the windows and front door looked new, and the building sported a fresh coat of paint.

Abandoning her plan to get dinner at the diner, she shoved the truck door open, wincing when it made a loud screeching sound, jumped out and shoved it closed again, then hoping no one had noticed, walked away from the junker like she'd never seen it before. After showing the man sitting at the door her driver's license, she stepped inside, pleasantly surprised to find the entire place had been renovated. Looking around, she saw that nearly every table was occupied, and made her way over to the bar where she slid onto an empty stool.

It took the bartender a few minutes to get over to her, but she wasn't in any hurry. The pool tables at the back of the room had caught her attention, awakening the urge to get a cue in her hands. It had been months since she'd let herself join in a game, months since she'd felt that thrill of smashing the balls and seeing them fall just where she wanted them to. But she'd promised herself she was done with that, sworn that she was going to earn her money the right way, through hard work and dedication.

"Sorry about the wait," the bartender said. "What can I get you?"

She reluctantly turned away from the pool tables, trying to ignore the way

her palms were itching, and froze when she saw the man standing across the bar, a big smile on his face. “Toby, is that you?” she asked, a smile spreading across her face. “What are you doing working here? I thought you were going to college. I figured you’d be long gone by now.”

“I came back,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I got my business degree and sank everything I had into this place. I haven’t made that million dollars I always talked about, but I’m happy here.”

“I’m happy for you, Toby,” she said, surprised at how excited she was to see him. “This place is great. You’ve done an amazing job, not that I was ever in here before, but it must have been bad.”

“You have no idea,” Toby said with a shake of his head. “Now what can I get you? First drink is on the house.”

CHAPTER 3



*** GRAYSON ***

It was almost dinner time when Grayson got back home, threw his keys into the bowl by the back door, and stood in the middle of the kitchen listening to the silence, wondering if he'd made a mistake leaving Ivy with his parents. She'd been a handful the last few days, and he hated to think of them losing an entire night of sleep if her tooth started bothering her again. Even after his mother's reassurances, he'd had a hard time walking away from her and had a feeling there was more to it than worrying about his parents losing a little sleep.

If you'd told him three months ago that he'd been standing in the middle of his kitchen missing a nine-month-old instead of heading to the bar on a Friday night, he would have laughed until he passed out. But that was exactly what he was doing, and it was time to stop denying the depth of his feelings for his daughter, time to stop telling himself that her mother would come back for her someday, and they'd both be better off. He wanted Ivy in his life, wanted the dirty diapers, the crying in the middle of the night, and he didn't want to miss a single smile, laugh, her first steps, first words, or all the other milestones he already saw happening in front of his eyes.

A heady feeling of love spread through him, and for a second, he thought about driving back to his mother's house to pick Ivy up, but talked himself out of it, deciding instead to take his mother's advice. His days of being the carefree bachelor were over, he was a father now with all the responsibilities that went along with it, and it was time to start acting that way. Ivy would be the only woman in his life right now, and he was okay with that since he

never planned to get married, but he was going to need help raising her, someone he could trust to give her the same care he would.

He'd have to start looking right away, a process he wasn't looking forward to, but he couldn't keep relying on his parents. He needed someone full-time, someone who could be there every day. Looking up at the clock, he realized he had some time before going out, got himself something to drink, and then settled down at the computer. An hour later, and a lot of backspacing, he finally had the job posted on several sites on the internet and a hard copy sitting in the printer. Feeling like he'd made a good start, he shut down the computer, hoping that he'd get some responses right away, then went and took a shower, more than ready for a little fun.

The parking lot at the bar was already half full when he parked his truck and got out, but to his relief the table where he usually sat was empty. Nodding at Toby behind the bar, he made his way over, greeting people he knew along the way, then sank into a chair and let out a happy sigh. It had been months since he'd been to the bar, and it didn't look like much had changed, and that was okay with him. He needed something in his life that he could count on staying the same.

Even happier when he saw his favorite waitress sashaying over to his table, he couldn't help but smile, "Well, look who finally turned up. Some of the girls said you'd become a monk or something," Francine said, batting her eyelashes at him. "I said that just wasn't possible, not a man like Grayson."

He laughed, "Well, I didn't become a monk, that's for sure," he said. "I just became a father."

Francine's eyes widened, "I heard that too, but I didn't believe it," she said, studying him. "How exactly did that happen?"

"In the usual way," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "It's a long story, and I'm sure you have other tables to take care of. It looks like it's starting to get busy."

Francine didn't look at all happy with his answer but forced a smile, "Maybe we can get together later, and you can tell me all about it."

"I wish I could, but I've got a hot date with my bed. Being the father of a nine-month-old doesn't include getting much sleep," he said. "My parents have Ivy for the night, but I have to pick her up early in the morning."

"Ivy," Francine said with a little snort. "Brenda will be your waitress; I just came over to say hi."

She spun around and walked away before he could say another word,

whispered something in Brenda's ear, and disappeared into the back of the bar. A second later, Brenda came over, "Hey, Grayson, good to see you back," she said, then leaned in closer. "What did you say to Francine?"

"I just told her about my daughter Ivy. She's nine months old and the love of my life," he said, trying not to laugh at the look on Brenda's face. "I guess she didn't take the news well."

"Your daughter?" Brenda asked, then looked over at the back of the bar and shook her head. "Francine is going to be in a mood all night long. She was sure that....."

Brenda closed her mouth with a snap, a horrified look on her face, and he couldn't help but laugh, "Don't worry, I know what Francine thought. She was sure that she was going to be the one to finally hook me," he said, shaking his head. "I'm not stupid, Brenda, I know when a woman is trying to steer me down to the altar. I told her there was nothing serious between us. I made that very clear, and I'm sorry if she didn't believe me."

"It's not your fault. I warned her, but she wouldn't listen," Brenda said, with a sigh. "What can I get you?"

"The biggest cheeseburger that comes out of the kitchen and a big pile of fries," he said. "I'm starving, and it's been way too long since I've had one of Doug's burgers. He is still back in the kitchen, isn't he?"

"Doug will never leave that kitchen. Someday we'll have to drag him out," Brenda said, laughing. "Do you want your usual to drink?"

"Make it a double," he said, grinning at her. "I think I deserve it."

When Brenda was gone, he sat back in his chair, content to watch the other patrons, but it wasn't long before his buddies came through the door, saw him, and let out a loud whoop. After putting in an order with Toby, they joined him at the table, throwing questions at him faster than he could answer them, making him realize that he'd missed them more than he'd realized.

"Okay, everyone, shut up for a second, I just want to explain this once," he finally said. "I found out three months ago that I'm the father of a little girl. Her name is Ivy, and she's come to live with me."

Quinn

Quinn sipped her drink and watched Toby at the other end of the bar, relieved to know that she had someone in town on her side, glad that she'd come home for the first time. When he finally got a break, he came over, "It's

crazy in here tonight,” he said. “But I’ve got a couple more bartenders coming in later, so that should help.”

“You’re good at this,” she said, grinning at him. “When did owning a bar become your dream?”

“Honestly, this is not what I had planned. I never dreamed I would own a bar,” he said, filling up her glass. “I came home the summer after I graduated to spend some time with my family before I started looking for a job, but then my dad got sick, and I decided to stay. This place had been on the market for a long time, it was in bad shape, but I managed to scrape up enough money to buy it. I figured I could fix it up and then sell it when my dad got better.”

She felt Toby’s sadness from across the bar. Unlike her parents, Toby’s had been loving and kind people, “Your dad?” she finally asked, grief making it hard to say the words.

Toby shook his head, “He’s been gone for a couple of years now,” he said. “But Mom is doing good, she’s in and out of here all the time. She’ll be thrilled when I tell her that you came home. Are you going to stay?”

“I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head. “Nothing has changed, and it’s just too hard being here. I just need to get some money together so I can move on.”

“What have you been doing all these years?” Toby asked. “Did you get to go to college?”

She shook her head, “That wasn’t in the cards for me,” she said. “Unless you count the school of experience. I’ve been all over the country, done just about every menial job you can think of, and a few things I’m not very proud of, but I’m not complaining. I was in New York last, but things got mixed up, so I thought I’d come back for a visit. I’m not sure where I’ll go next, but I can’t stay here.”

“I’m sorry things haven’t changed, Quinn, but if you want a job here, there’s always one open,” Toby said, then hesitated for a second. “You know there are lots of people in town who care about you, people who would be happy to give you the love your parents never did. All you have to do is ask.”

For a second, she thought she saw something in his eyes, but brushed it off. They’d tried to be a couple once, and it had been a huge disaster. “I know, Toby, and I’m grateful, I really am, but this isn’t where I belong. I’ll stay for the summer, and then I’m going to move on. Did you really mean it about that job?”

He shrugged, “Sure, I’m always short-handed, but if you’re thinking

about working in the kitchen, we'd better have a talk about Doug. He can be a bit difficult," he said. "Why don't you come by after lunch tomorrow? We can talk about it more. I should probably get back to work now."

Before she could thank him, a cowboy came sauntering up to the bar and pushed his way between her and the man she was sitting next to. He shook his empty glass in Toby's face, "Hey, how about a refill here, and this time, don't be so stingy with the whiskey," he said. "You know you should really tell your girls to stop ignoring me. It's their job to serve me, and I'm getting tired of getting my own drinks."

"First of all, they aren't girls, they're women, and I don't own them," Toby said, barely keeping his temper under control. "If they chose not to serve you, that's their choice, but just a word of advice: if you tipped them, they might warm up to you."

The man narrowed his eyes at Toby, "Do I have to remind you how important I am to this place?" he asked, clearly insulted. "I shouldn't even be paying for my drinks, let alone tipping those tramps of yours. The last place I lived they treated me right, showed me the respect I deserved. If something doesn't change around here, I'll take my business elsewhere and then you'll be sorry."

"Well, that would be your choice," Toby said, making him a new drink and setting it down on the bar. "That will be six-fifty."

The man growled at Toby, then slapped a ten down on the bar, "You're going to be sorry when I'm famous," he warned. "I'm going to tell everyone what a terrible place this is, and you'll be out of business in a week."

Toby slapped the change down on the bar, "Do your best," he said, a smile on his face, a challenge in his eyes.

The man grabbed his drink and turned to stomp off, then saw her and paused letting his eyes roam over her body. "Well, hello there, gorgeous. I don't think I've seen you in here before," he said, leaning toward her. "The name's Sebastian and I think we should get to know each other a little better, if you know what I mean."

"Gross," she said, putting her finger in the middle of his chest and pushing him away. "I think you should back off before I make you."

Sebastian looked around to see if anyone had heard her, then back at her, "You little bitch," he hissed, then grinned at her. "You might want to be careful walking out to your car tonight. I might just decide to take you up on that offer."

“Oh, listen to the tough guy,” she said. “Threatening to beat up a woman, that’s some real class.”

“You have no idea what you’re missing,” Sebastian said, his face full of anger. “I’m going to be the top pool player in the world someday, and then you’ll be sorry.”

Quinn burst into laughter, couldn’t help herself, “Is that why you’ve been strutting around here like you own the world?” she finally asked when she could speak again. “That’s hilarious. You do realize this is Prospect, Montana, not exactly the pool capital of the world.”

“Shut up, you stupid bitch, you don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sebastian spat at her, getting right up in her face. “You’re just a woman, only good for one thing, and it isn’t playing pool.”

Using one finger to push him away again, she slid off the barstool, “Wow, I didn’t think I could be any more insulted, but I’m in the mood to teach you a lesson, so I’m going to get over it,” she said, glaring up at him. “You think you’re so hot? Let’s play. I bet I can beat you before you can even take a shot.”

Sebastian started laughing, “I don’t play pool with women,” he said. “It isn’t fair.”

“I doubt that,” she said, shaking her head. “I think you’re just afraid that you’ll get beat by a woman.”

He growled at her, “I’m not afraid,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Lead the way,” she said. “I hope you’re better at losing than you at being a human being.”

“Quinn, what are you doing?” Toby hissed at her. “Sebastian may be a jerk, but I’ve never seen anyone better with a pool cue than him.”

She grinned at him, “You haven’t seen me play,” she said, then drained her glass. “You might want to come watch. This is going to be entertaining.”

CHAPTER 4



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson sat back in his chair, content to let the conversation flow around him, so sleepy he could barely keep his eyes open but wasn't ready to call it a night. It had been months since he'd seen his friends and even if their conversation seemed a bit superficial, he wanted to make the most of the night. A few months ago, he would have been on the hunt for some companionship for the night, a willing female who understood it was just for one night, maybe two if they could keep it casual.

Shaking his head, he couldn't help but marvel at how much he'd changed, how much Ivy had changed him, and realized that he wasn't the least bit sorry that his life had gone in a new direction. But that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy himself watching his friends make fools of themselves over the single women. Then he'd crawl into bed and sleep for twelve hours, a much more appealing thought than a night of sex.

"You look awfully serious," Adam said, nudging him in the ribs with his elbow. "Are you picking out your victim for the night? Francine has been giving you looks since I sat down next to you, maybe she's up for it."

He shook his head, "I'm not in the game anymore," he said. "I'm going to focus on Ivy for now. She needs all my attention."

"Wait, what?" Adam asked, a look of shock on his face. "Not in the game anymore? That can't be right, you can't turn into one of those guys."

"I don't know what kind of guy you're talking about, but I promise not to start telling dad jokes," he said, laughing. "You all will just have to carry on without me. Just think, with me out of the picture, you'll have that many

more choices at the end of the night.”

Adam shook his head, “It’s the end of an era. The master is retiring, and nothing will ever be the same,” he said. “We’re sure going to miss you, but I guess you’re a dad now. I’m sure glad it’s not me.”

He laughed, “You never know, you could be next. Then instead of meeting at the bar, you can join the single dad’s club with me,” he said. “We meet every Saturday at the diner.”

Adam laughed, then looked at him closer, “You’re serious,” he finally said. “You belong to a club?”

He nodded but before he could answer, a commotion on the other side of the room caught his attention, and the words died away when he saw Quinn standing toe to toe with a big angry cowboy. Jumping to his feet, he started pushing his way through the crowded tables toward the bar, losing sight of Quinn as people pushed in closer to see what was going on. When he finally burst through the crowd, his protective instincts firing on high, his magic tingling through his body, Quinn was deep in conversation with an unhappy-looking Toby.

When she flipped her hair and walked away from the bar toward the pool tables, he followed, doing his best to ignore the desire sweeping through him when he saw the butterfly tattoo on her back. The cowboy followed her, calling taunts at her with each step, but she didn’t flinch. She just strolled casually through the crowd, stopped between the two pool tables, turned around, and put her hands on her hips, staring him down.

“I’ll let you pick the table,” she said, clearly enjoying herself. “I’ll even give you a handicap if you want it.”

“I don’t need a handicap, woman,” the cowboy barked. “I’ll beat you with one hand tied behind my back.”

“That could be interesting, and I’m sure there’s a few women around here who would like to see you tied up with a gag in your mouth just to shut you up,” Quinn taunted, picking a pool stick from the rack on the wall and looking it over. “I’ll give you the break, after all, you’re going to need all the help you can get.”

“Let’s get this over with,” the cowboy said. “I’m losing my patience with you woman.”

“Does that mean you don’t want the break?” Quinn asked, her voice sweet as honey. “I’ll take it, Sebastian, but don’t be surprised if it’s a short game.”

Sebastian studied her for a second, then a grin spread across his face, “Since you’re so sure of yourself, let’s make this interesting,” he said. “A little wager to go along with the game.”

“I don’t play for money anymore,” she said, shaking her head. “It started to feel wrong after a while, so now I just play for fun, and it’s going to be a lot of fun humiliating you.”

The crowd began to whisper, and he was sure he saw some bets being made, “Well, then, princess, we’ll just have to think of something else,” Sebastian drawled, then another grin spread across his face, “How about this, if I beat you, I get an hour alone with you to do what I want, not restrictions, no clothes.”

A hushed silence fell over the crowd, but Quinn didn’t miss a beat, and he didn’t know if he was turned on or horrified, “And if I win,” she said, glancing over at Toby. “You leave the bar tonight and never come back.”

He didn’t realize that Toby was standing next to him until he spoke, “Quinn, don’t you dare,” he said. “That’s a crazy bet, you might lose.”

“Oh, I won’t lose,” she said. “I never lose.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” Sebastian said, his eyes full of anticipation. “Rack them up, boys.”

He’d seen enough, was half sick at the thought of Sebastian getting his hands on Quinn, so he broke through the crowd, grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away. “Have you lost your mind?” he asked. “You can’t do this, you might lose, and then what are you going to do?”

Quinn

Quinn was so shocked to see Grayson coming out of the crowd, she didn’t react when he grabbed her arm and pulled her away from the pool tables; she could only stumble along behind him. When they finally came to stop, she wrenched her arm away from him, a mixture of anger and desire pulsing through her, stealing her breath for a second, and she could only stare up at him, her brain refusing to work.

“I don’t know who you think you are,” she finally managed to stammer. “You have no say in what I do with my life.”

“I think I’m one of your brother’s best friends, and Jayce would kill me if I let you do this,” Grayson said, his face full of concern. “You’re playing with fire, Quinn, and I’m afraid you’re going to get burned. I’m just worried

about you, that guy is a.....”

“I know what he is,” she said. “That’s why someone needs to teach him a lesson, and that person is me.”

“What if you lose?” Grayson asked, a look on his face she couldn’t quite read. “What are you going to do then?”

“Just like a man, you’re not listening to me,” she said, glaring at him. “I won’t lose. I can beat this jerk without even trying. In fact, I might just toy with him for the fun of it, so back off and leave me alone.”

Grayson shook his head, “I can’t just stand back and watch this,” he said. “You’re just asking for trouble, and I don’t know if I can protect you from that jerk if you agree to the bet.”

“I didn’t ask for your protection. I’ve been doing just fine on my own for a long time,” she said. “If you can’t watch, then I suggest you leave.”

Grayson studied her for a second, his eyes flashing with anger, frustration, and something that looked very much like concern, which surprised her, “Your brother said you were a troublemaker,” he finally said. “But he didn’t mention that you were stupid.”

“That was a low blow and you know it,” she said, shaking her head. “Grayson, I know what I’m doing. I get that you think you should protect me for some crazy reason, but you’re going to have to trust me. I won’t lose.”

Surprised when a wave of warmth spread through her, she looked up into his eyes, instantly sorry when it was followed by a sharp stab of desire. “It looks like I don’t have any choice; you’re going to do this no matter what I say,” Grayson said with a sigh. “I’m sorry I called you stupid, I just.....”

“Are we going to play pool or are you going to forfeit?” Sebastian called. “It would save us both a bunch of time.”

Grayson looked over at Sebastian and then back at her, “Go kick his ass so I don’t have to,” he said. “But I’m warning you right now, I’m not letting him put his hands on you no matter how ugly it gets.”

“Then I’d better win,” she said, both thrilled and thrown off balance by the look in Grayson’s eyes.

“Are you going to play pool or what?” Sebastian called. “The balls are all racked up and ready to go unless you’ve changed your mind.”

She turned away from Grayson, her legs a bit wobbly, her emotions a jumbled mess, but forced herself to take a deep breath, pushing him out of her mind, promising herself she’d think about it later. Needing a few minutes to collect herself, she walked around the pool table pretending to study it,

then chalked her cue before taking her place at the end of the table. She lined up the cue ball, paused for a second, pleased that her hands weren't shaking, and looked up at Sebastian.

"Last chance to take the first shot," she said, her bravado back. "It might be the only chance."

Sebastian snorted, "In your dreams," he said. "Your mind games won't work on me. I'm smarter than that, so hit the ball or forfeit. I'm tired of waiting."

She shrugged her shoulders, "Okay, if that's the way you want it," she said, then lined up her shot again before looking up at him one more time, a little smile on her face. "Just remember, you asked for it."

The cue ball hit the others with a loud crack when she sent it sailing across the table, and the sound of one ball after another plunking into the pockets made her smile, but she didn't look up from the table. There was a loud gasp from the crowd, then whispered conversation as she knocked the rest of the balls off the table, the thunk as they dropped into the pocket one of the most satisfying sounds she'd ever heard. When the eight ball was the only one left on the green felt, she stepped back from the table and looked up at Sebastian, who was staring at her with his mouth hanging open.

"I warned you," she said, then lined up the last shot and dropped the ball into a side pocket. "You wouldn't listen."

Sebastian stood, his mouth opening and closing like a fish, then looked around at his friends, "She cheated, there's no way she could have beaten me," he said. "You were all watching. She was cheating, she and Toby did something to the table. I demand another game. You can't do that, it's not fair."

"The only one who tried to cheat was you," she said. "Do you really think I didn't notice the way the balls were racked up? That was your first mistake, well, other than opening your mouth in the first place. By leaving the balls so loosely racked, you just made it easier for me to sink them all. I bet you've never seen that trick, Mr. World Pool Champion."

"I didn't cheat," Sebastian said, looking at his friends again to back him up, but they'd already stepped away from him. "Those balls were racked fair and square."

"Say what you want, we both know the truth," she said. "I just think it's a bit pathetic that you were so worried that you'd be beaten by a woman that you had to cheat. Guess you're not as sure of yourself as you are trying to

make us all believe. Now, if I remember right, the bet was that if I won, you'd leave the bar and never come back, so I think it's time for us to say goodbye."

By Sebastian's body language, Quinn could tell that she'd pushed him just a little too far and prepared herself for the attack she knew was coming. "You little bitch, you set me up," he growled, coming at her with his fists raised. "You played me, and no one gets away with that. I'm going to teach you a lesson."

Standing her ground, she gathered her strength, and tensed up her muscles to strike first, but Grayson was suddenly standing in front of her, blocking the punch aimed at her. Sebastian stumbled when his fist hit the solid force of Grayson's palm, his eyes widened, but he recovered quickly and brought his other fist up to strike out again, only to find himself propelled back into the crowd with one push in the chest from Grayson.

He landed on his butt, a circle of people around him, their laughter filling the room, "If you would like to continue this, we'd better move it outside," Grayson said. "Toby doesn't like it when people fight in his bar."

Sebastian scrambled to his feet, then pointed his finger at her, "This isn't over, bitch," he spat at her. "You're going to pay for this. No one treats Sebastian Curtis this way. Watch your back, because I'm coming after you."

"Bring it on," she said, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm not afraid of you. You're nothing but a big-mouthed blowhard, and no one wants you here. Go bother another town."

A cheer went up around her, but Grayson turned and gave her a dirty look, "Stop baiting him, Quinn, you won," he said, shoving her behind him. "Let it go."

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself," she said, then glared at him. "And I didn't need your help anyway."

CHAPTER 5



*** GRAYSON ***

“That’s not what it looked like to me, sweetheart,” he shot over his shoulder, his magic still churning dangerously thanks to the memory of seeing Sebastian going after Quinn. “Just back off now and let him slink out of here like the snake he is.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart,” she said, pushing her way past him to watch Sebastian leaving. “And don’t tell me what to do.”

“I just want to know what you’re going to do now?” Grayson said, spinning her around to look at him. “Those weren’t just empty threats, Quinn. He’s going to come after you, you humiliated him in front of half the town and proved he was a cheater to boot. He’s not just going to let it go.”

“I keep telling you that I can defend myself,” she said. “I’ve tangled with his type before, and he’s not as tough as he looks.”

Grayson let out a frustrated groan, “Quinn, he’s three times as big as you are,” he said. “Unless you’re a black belt or something, there’s no way you can defend yourself against him. Besides, he won’t come after you alone, he’ll bring his buddies along to save face.”

“You men are all alike,” Quinn said, shaking her head. “You just assume because women are smaller and weaker than you are, we’re incapable. Well, I’ve got news for you buddy, I could take you down right here and not even break a sweat.”

“Well, aren’t you just full of it tonight,” he said. “I’m tempted to call you on that one, but I’d rather not embarrass you in front of all these people.”

“I’m not the one who would be embarrassed,” she said, glaring at him.

“And I think you know it.”

Not sure if he wanted to choke her or kiss her, Grayson grabbed Quinn’s hand and started pulling her to the back of the bar, “What are you doing? Let go of me,” she said. “I mean it, Grayson, let go right now.”

“I’m trying to prove a point,” he said, pushing her through the backdoor into the little fenced yard the employees used as a breakroom in the summer. “You think you can take me, let’s see it.”

She stared at him a second, “You want to fight me,” she said. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“You said you could take me,” he taunted unable to help himself. “Prove it.”

For a second, he thought she was going to back down and was a little disappointed, but didn’t let himself think about why. “Fine, come at me,” Quinn finally said, bracing herself. “Or would you rather try to sneak up on me?”

He shrugged, “It doesn’t matter, I’m bigger and stronger than you are,” he said. “It’s a simple matter of size and strength.”

Only a second later, he launched himself at her, grabbing for her arms, but she stepped out of his way, grabbed him by the wrist, and he found himself sailing through the air. He landed on his back in the grass with a thud, the wind knocked out of him, Quinn staring down at him, a triumphant smile on her face, and he could do nothing but fight to get air back into his lungs.

“Now, do you believe me?” she asked, squatting down next to him. “I could have killed you by now if I’d wanted to. Just because I’m small doesn’t mean I’m not deadly.”

He finally managed to suck in a deep breath, desire thundering through his system, and the wolf inside him recognizing what he refused to see took over. Grabbing Quinn, he pulled her down on top of him, then rolled her over, lowered his mouth to hers, and kissed her until she was squirming beneath him. When he finally released her, she stared up at him, her eyes filled with desire for a few seconds, before she shoved him off her and jumped to her feet.

“You are such a jerk,” she said. “I hope I never see you again.”

He was still sitting on the ground, a grin on his face when she disappeared back into the bar, and he slowly got back to his feet, feeling like his entire world had just been turned upside down. After staring at the closed door for a

few seconds, he brushed the grass off his clothes, then went back inside, not at all surprised that there was no sign of Quinn. But his friends were all waiting for him, confused looks on their faces, and he knew he was going to have to explain, but had no idea what he was going to say. He couldn't even explain what happened to himself.

"Wow, man, I thought you said you'd sworn off women," Adam said, slapping him on the back. "Who the hell was that? She's a feisty little thing, that's for sure. I wouldn't mind going a few rounds with her myself."

"Back off Adam, she's not that kind of girl," he said, tempted to hit his friend. "And that goes for the rest of you jerks, hands off."

"Hey, it's a free country," Jeff said. "Unless you're laying claim to her."

"I didn't say that," he said. "Just stay away from her, or you'll be sorry."

"Hey, we're just kidding," Adam said. "The pretty little redhead is all yours, Grayson."

"I don't want her," he lied. "I just don't want any of you messing with her."

"Sure, sure, if that's what you say," Adam said, shrugging his shoulders. "I think we all got the message."

He looked around at his friends, who were all grinning at him, "It's late. I need to get home," he said, letting out a long sigh. "I think lack of sleep is making me a little crazy or something."

"Or you might be falling for the redhead," Adam said, then quickly stepped back from him, a grin on his face. "It happens to the best of us."

Quinn

Quinn woke the next morning as angry and frustrated as she'd been the night before, maybe even more so because she'd dreamed of the kiss, as she'd come to think of it, all night. Grayson had crossed so many boundaries she couldn't name them all, nor decide which one made her the angriest, but underlying it all was the simmering desire that he'd awoken and stoked with just the touch of his lips to hers. Just thinking about it made her body begin to tingle and warmth spread through her, a sure signal that she was in trouble.

She'd come home out of desperation, not to start a new life here. Getting involved with anyone would only be a distraction, one she couldn't afford when even right then, Mr. Smith might be looking for her. The thought made her shiver, and she tucked her knees up to her chest, chiding herself for

getting lost in the drama of coming home and forgetting why she was there. Deep down, she'd known coming home wasn't the answer to her problems, but it had seemed the safest place to go, the only place she knew what to expect.

Which was the worst part; she'd known what to expect, had known that she wouldn't be welcomed with open arms, that her presence in the house would barely be tolerated. She'd set herself up to be hurt, but that would never happen again. When she left Prospect, she would never look back, she'd cut her ties with the past and the people who'd disappointed her time and time again. But before she could venture out into the world, she had to know if her life was in danger, needed to figure out if it was going to require more drastic measures than just walking away from home for the last time to get on with her life.

Throwing back the covers, she got out of bed and headed for the shower. It had been a mistake to come home and would be an even bigger one if she stayed. There was one person in the city she trusted enough to call to see if anyone had been looking for her. Once she knew that she was safe, she could begin to make plans. One thing was clear, however, no matter what direction she chose to take, she was going to need money, more money than she had, so a job was second on her list.

Toby's offer was beginning to sound better and better. She'd spent time working in bars over the years, and it wasn't her favorite occupation, but she could hack it for a few months if it meant fattening her bank account. Looking up at the clock, she realized how late it had gotten, and quickly got dressed, pulled her hair back into a messy ponytail, decided to skip the makeup, then headed down to the kitchen for some breakfast. The cook was the only one in the room when she walked in, and the poor woman jumped when she saw her, then in a trembling voice told her that her parents wanted to see her in the dining room.

Her mother and father were seated at the far end of the long table, forcing her to walk the entire length of the dining room, a sinking feeling in her stomach. She kept her head held high, reminding herself that she wasn't going to let them hurt her anymore, hoping they couldn't see that her legs were shaking just a little. She shouldn't have been worried though, neither of them looked up from the papers they were reading until she'd been standing there for several seconds. Her father was the first one to look up, his eyes taking in the jeans and tee-shirt she wore, then moved up to the clock, and

with a shake of his head, he went back to reading.

“I see you haven’t changed,” her mother said, glancing up at the clock as well. “It’s nearly ten in the morning and you’re just getting up. You should be ashamed of yourself.”

She opened her mouth to defend herself, then changed her mind, “What do you want?” she asked instead, enjoying the surprised look on her mother’s face. “I have some phone calls to make and an appointment after lunch I can’t miss.”

“This won’t take long,” her mother said, frowning at her. “Is that really the way you dress?”

“Yes, and I’m not going to change, so get used to it,” she said. “Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

Her mother gave her a dirty look, the one that meant she was pushing it, but she didn’t care. “Your father and I wanted to discuss last night with you. We’re very upset that the entire town is gossiping about us,” her mother said. “Imagine how shocked we were to learn that instead of joining us out at the country club with the rest of the family to celebrate your brother’s success, you chose to cause a riot at a local bar instead. Everyone is talking about it. It’s humiliating. I don’t have to remind you that your father is a very important person, and talk like this could hurt him.”

Her father lowered his paper and glared at her, “I had hoped that you would have grown up while you were gone. I can see I was wrong about that,” he said, shaking his head. “I opened my home to you, and you repaid me by embarrassing me in front of the whole town.”

“I would have been at the country club if someone had told me the party had been moved there,” she said, anger making it impossible not to defend herself. “I came out of my room and you were all gone. The cook had to tell me where you went, so don’t blame me, this wasn’t my fault.”

Her mother stared coldly at her for a second, “I clearly remember telling you the party had been moved,” she said. “And I’d like to point out that we didn’t make you go to that bar, we didn’t force you to play pool like some kind of a barmaid; you made those choices.”

“You’ve brought shame on this family again,” her father said. “I won’t allow it to happen anymore. You need to find another place to live.”

She wasn’t the least bit upset that they were kicking her out, it was almost a relief, but something didn’t seem right. “What do you mean again?” she asked, anger starting to bubble to the surface. “When have I ever brought

shame on this family?”

“Well, last night.....” her mother said, then looked away. “Your father meant last night.

“He clearly said again,” she argued. “And don’t say I embarrassed you when I left, I’m not buying that. I don’t think you even cared that I was gone.”

Her mother didn’t argue, wouldn’t even look at her, “You really are horrible people,” she finally said. “I don’t know why I wasted all these years trying to get you to love me, I’m not sure you’re even capable of love. I’ll pack my things and get out. I never should have come back here, but I think I’ll hang around town for a while just to see how much more trouble I can stir up.”

Knowing if she didn’t escape right then, she’d break down, she turned and walked calmly back across the dining room, her head held high, the silence behind her speaking louder than any words could. By the time she made it back to her room, the anger had surfaced again, blotting out the hurt and pain, but she knew it would be back eventually. No matter how prepared she’d been, it still hurt that the people responsible for her life saw her only as something to be ashamed of.

Grabbing her bags, she began to stuff everything she’d brought with her into them, determined to get out of there as fast as she could. She’d survived without family for six years; she could do it again. She’d find someplace she liked and start over, put down some roots for a change, find a way to face life alone. When the front door slammed closed behind her, she refused to look back. Instead, she put one foot in front of the other and started down the long driveway toward town.

CHAPTER 6



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson picked at his food some more, then pushed the plate away. It had probably been a mistake to come to the meeting, but his night of uninterrupted sleep hadn't quite worked out the way he'd planned. He'd tossed and turned, replaying kissing Quinn over and over again in his mind, berating himself half the time, and desperate to do it again the rest. When he'd finally managed to fall asleep, she'd haunted his dreams, and he'd woken in the morning frustrated, a deep need pulsing inside him unlike anything he'd ever felt before.

Desperate to shake off the mood and the lingering effects of the very intoxicating redhead, he'd picked Ivy up early and come to the meeting, hoping it would help him forget the night before. But it was all anyone was talking about, and by the time the buffet was served, he wished he'd stayed home, but Ivy was enjoying herself and he hated to pull her away. Instead, he'd found a corner and hunkered down, trying to stay out of the limelight and hoping that Jayce wasn't there that day.

It wasn't that he thought his friend would be mad at him, he'd tried to stop Quinn after all; it was the kiss that bothered him. She was Jayce's sister, and he hadn't exactly behaved like a gentleman, had in fact let the animal inside him take over for a few seconds, something that had never happened to him before. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to her brother about it. That would require thinking about what happened too deeply, something he definitely didn't want to do.

What he really wanted was for the whole thing to go away, but it was

clear that wasn't going to happen when Jayce stomped up to the table. "This has been one of the worst mornings, and I feel like I should blame you," he said. "I just ran into Quinn dragging all her luggage down the road toward town. Apparently, my parents kicked her out this morning. What the hell happened last night?"

"Didn't she tell you?" he asked.

Jayce shook his head, "She said that she was done trying to defend herself," he said. "All I know is that she was supposed to be at the country club last night. My brother was celebrating a promotion at work, but she never showed up and my parents were livid."

He let out a long sigh, realizing that he was going to have to do just what he didn't want to, "Look, no offense, but I don't really want to get tangled up in your family drama," he said. "If Quinn doesn't want to talk about what happened, that's her choice."

"Yeah, well, she told me to ask you," Jayce said, looking at him suspiciously. "What did you do with my sister?"

"Hey, I didn't do anything with her," he said, knowing it wasn't quite the truth. "I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen to me. I didn't do anything wrong, so don't look at me like that."

"I'm going to look at you like this until you tell me what happened last night," Jayce said, leaning back and crossing his arms over his chest. "She's my sister, Grayson, and I know how you are, if you....."

"Ease up, will you? I know I have a reputation with women, but it wasn't like that," he said. "Did you know that your sister is one of the best pool players I've ever seen? She might even be world-class level."

Jayce raised his eyebrows, "I'm listening," he said. "I suppose next you're going to tell me that unicorns are real."

"You're not making this any easier, and I just want to remind you that I tried to stop her," he said, earning him a dirty look. "Listen, I told you I didn't want to get involved."

Jayce raised his hands in a signal of truce, "Sorry, man, I won't say another word," he said, but when he was finished with the story, his friends had a lot to say. "She wagered her body? I knew there had to be a good reason my parents kicked her out; this is just another one of her little stunts to get attention, and you played right along. I warned you about her, Grayson, she's nothing but bad news."

He sat back and studied his friend for a second, "It might have been a

little gutsy, but I don't see what harm she did," he said. "She dropped those balls in about two minutes. Sebastian didn't even have a chance to take a shot. I don't think her virtue was ever at stake."

"You sound impressed," Jayce said. "I bet the whole town is talking about this. I won't be able to show my face in public for weeks."

"I was impressed," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "She's got some real skill, Jayce."

"A woman isn't supposed to play pool," Jayce said. "It's not..... ladylike."

"Wow, you sound like your parents," he said, disappointed. "I'm beginning to wonder if Quinn is right about all of you. Where is she?"

"Sitting in the park like a bum," Jayce said. "I offered to let her stay with me, but she refused. I don't know where she's planning on sleeping tonight, and right now, I don't care."

"I have to go," he said, getting to his feet. "Unlike you, I have some compassion."

"Leave her alone, Grayson," Jayce said, getting to his feet. "She's my concern, not yours."

"One you don't seem to be handling very well," he said. "Quinn might be a little wild, but she's not bad news as you put it. I think she just needs to know that someone cares about her."

"And that someone is you," Jayce sneered at him. "I don't think so."

"Just try and stop me," he said, then turned and walked away, not sure what he was doing, but unwilling to walk away from Quinn when she needed help.

Quinn

Quinn knew she was attracting attention sitting on the park bench with her luggage all around her, but she couldn't have cared less. She'd done nothing wrong, if anyone should be embarrassed, it was her parents. Pulling out her phone, she called the motel down the street and arranged for a room. After hearing how much they wanted to charge her to check in early, she opted to spend a few hours in the park. Her next call was to Toby to move their appointment back a couple of hours so she didn't have to drag her luggage with her to the bar. Then she sat back and thought about what she would say to Miguel when she called him.

The last thing she wanted to do was drag her friend into danger, but she had to know if anyone had been looking for her, and her next-door neighbor would be the one who would know. In the end, she decided to see how the conversation went. If she was worrying about nothing, Miguel never had to know about what she'd seen in Mr. Smith's apartment. She'd find a good excuse for leaving like she did, a suitable lie to explain why she wasn't coming back, and hope he believed her for his own good.

Taking a deep breath, she punched the number into her phone, then waited as it rang, "Hey, Miguel, it's Quinn," she said when he answered. "I was just calling to check in."

"Girl, where have you been, I've been worried sick since I got your note," Miguel said. "You can't just disappear on me like that."

"I'm sorry, I didn't really have any choice. Something came up that I couldn't ignore," she said. "I know I should have called you sooner. Life has just been crazy."

"Where are you?" Miguel asked. "You could at least tell me that."

"I'll explain everything, I promise," she said. "But first I need to know if anyone has been looking for me."

There was a brief silence, "Looking for you?" Miguel asked. "What's going on, Quinn?"

"Just answer the question," she said, afraid to say more until she knew. "Has anyone been knocking on my door or asking for me?"

"No, I think I would have remembered something like that," Miguel said, a little indignant. "Quinn, what's going.....wait, now that I think about it, there was a guy from the cable company here a few days ago."

"Miguel, I don't have cable," she said, her heart beginning to pound. "Did you talk to him?"

"Yeah, he said you had an appointment scheduled. I told him you had to go out of town unexpectedly, and that was it, he thanked me and left," Miguel said. "I haven't seen him back here since then."

"I need to know if he's been in my apartment," she said, trying to stay calm and think rationally. "Can you go over and see if anything looks like it's been disturbed?"

"Not until you tell me what's going on," Miguel said. "Quinn, are you in trouble?"

"Maybe, I'm not sure," she said. "Can you just go check for me?"

"Fine, I'll have to call you back," Miguel said, "but when I do, you're

going to tell me everything. You have to promise or I'm not going over there."

"I promise, okay," she said. "I just don't want to get you involved unless I have to."

"Well, I'm already involved," Miguel said. "So, it's too late."

"I'm trying to protect you," she said. "Call me back as soon as you can."

"I'll go over there right now," Miguel said. "Then we're going to have a long talk, missy."

The line went dead, and she let out a frustrated sigh. Miguel wasn't going to let it go until she told him what was going on, and now that she'd talked to him, she'd feel guilty if she lied, which left her with another mess to clean up. It was a small one compared to the fact that Mr. Smith had come looking for her; what she didn't know is if he would keep looking, and that was the one thing she had to know before she could decide what her next step was.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't notice Grayson walk up pushing Ivy in her bright pink stroller until they were standing in front of her, "I think the bus stop is over there," he said, pointing over at Main Street. "Unless the schedule has changed, it should be here any minute."

"Very funny, now move along," she said, unable to resist smiling at Ivy. "I'm waiting for a phone call."

"It's a public park, I have as much right to be here as you do," he said, then gestured at her luggage spread around her. "Are you moving in?"

Quinn looked up at him, "Is this really necessary right now?" she asked. "I'm having a bit of a crisis; I don't have the energy to do this with you right now; maybe you could come back later to harass me."

The amused look disappeared from his face, and he looked a little guilty, "I'm sorry, I didn't come over here to fight with you. I was just joking around, I guess I got carried away," he said. "Can I sit down?"

She looked over at the empty space on the bench, then back up at him, "I really am waiting for an important phone call," she said with a sigh. "But I guess it won't hurt anything as long as you don't say a word. I've got some stuff to figure out, and I don't need you blabbing away and distracting me."

Grayson sat down next to her, then pulled Ivy's stroller over so she was facing them, "I don't blabber, do I, Ivy?" he asked the baby, who cooed at him happily. "See, I didn't think so either, some people just don't know what good conversation is."

Ivy laughed like she understood him, and she felt her mood lifting, but

looked over at Grayson, “You promised to be quiet,” she said, giving him a dirty look. “And talking to the baby counts.”

CHAPTER 7



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson ignored the dirty look Quinn gave him, plucked the baby out of her stroller and settled her on his lap, “Oops, I guess I broke the rules,” he said, giving Ivy a raspberry on the cheek, making her squeal with delight. “Your dad is a naughty boy.”

Ivy started waving her plump little arms in the air, “Dada, dada, dada,” she chanted like she agreed with him. “Naa, naa, naa, naa.....”

“See, even your daughter knows that you’re a pain in the.....” she didn’t finish. “Well, that place you sit on.”

“You can say butt in front of Ivy,” he said, laughing. “It’s not a bad word.”

Quinn studied him for a second, then let out a long sigh, “What are you doing here?” she finally asked. “I don’t think you and Ivy were just out for a walk.”

He shrugged, “I just thought you might need someone on your side,” he said. “I ran into Jayce at our single father’s meeting this morning, and he told me what happened with your parents.”

“And I’m sure he made me the bad guy,” she said, the anger and hostility back in her voice. “Don’t worry, I’m used to it.”

“Actually, I told him I thought he was being a jerk,” he said. “I’m sure you had a good reason for not showing up at the country club last night.”

Quinn snorted, “You mean like no one told me that party was being moved there?” she asked. “I suppose Jayce left that part out. Oh, wait, never mind, my mother insists she told me, and she’s never wrong. I think she did it

on purpose. I think she wanted me to look bad; they were just looking for an excuse to kick me out.”

“You didn’t exactly help things last night,” he pointed out, then held his hands up in the air. “Personally, I think what you did was amazing, but I could see how your parents might have a problem with it.”

“I’ve spent my entire life worrying about what they think of me. I’ve finally figured out that it doesn’t matter, they’re never going to love me, and the sooner I accept that fact, the better off I’ll be,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “The way I look at it, it was bound to happen eventually. I just made it happen a little sooner.”

“What will you do now?” he asked. “You can’t live in the park.”

Quinn laughed, “I’m not going to live in the park, I’m not that desperate,” she said, shaking her head. “I was just taking advantage of the free rent at my parent’s house. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not rich or anything, but I have enough money for a hotel room, and Toby is going to give me a job at the bar, so I’ll be fine until I’m ready to move on.”

He stared at her for so long, trying to sort out the rush of emotions that overtook him when he heard that she was leaving that Quinn started to squirm. “Stop looking at me like that,” she finally said. “There’s nothing wrong with living at the motel or working for Toby for a few weeks while I sort a few things out back in New York.”

Ivy started to fuss, bored just sitting on his lap. Quinn reached out and took her. “You’re not going back to New York?” he finally asked, his emotions under control. “Why not just stay here?”

She rolled her eyes at him, “I think that would be obvious,” she said, then started making faces at Ivy, who laughed. “I’m done with New York. Things got too complicated. That’s usually my sign to move on.”

“So, when things get tough, you run away,” he said, studying her. “That doesn’t seem like the woman I know.”

“Well, you don’t know me very well, but that’s not what I meant,” she said, then waved her hand in the air. “Look, it’s complicated, I’m going to hang around town until I can save up a little more money, then I’ll move on. That’s just the way it has to be.”

“You’re never going to save up enough money to leave staying in a hotel,” he said, feeling a little panic at the thought of her leaving. “You could come work for me; I need someone to take care of Ivy. I’d give you room and board plus a small salary.”

She was as shocked by the offer as he was, “Grayson, I don’t know where that came from, but I’m not a nanny. I don’t know the first thing about taking care of a baby,” she said, looking down at Ivy. “It’s a sweet offer, but it wouldn’t be fair to this little one.”

He looked down at Ivy then back up at Quinn, not willing to give up the idea now that it had been said out loud, aware that the wolf inside him was in control again, but not bothering to shut it down. “That’s where you’re wrong,” he said. “Look at her, she adores you, and Ivy doesn’t warm up to people very well. You’d be perfect for the job for that reason alone.”

Quinn stared at him for a long time, then looked down at Ivy again, “You’re serious,” she finally said, but he could see she was thinking about it. “I really don’t know that much about babies. I might do something wrong, and I’d never be able to forgive myself.”

“It’s not that hard, and your only responsibility would be taking care of her, feeding her, changing her, and playing with her,” he said. “I can lend you some books to read, and you could call me if you have questions.”

She didn’t say anything for a few seconds, then looked over at him, “Why are you doing this?” she asked. “You don’t even like me.”

“I never said that,” he said, pretending to be shocked but feeling the rush of victory. “In fact, I probably like you more than I should, but that’s for a different discussion. Will you take the job?”

Quinn

Quinn’s heart did what she could only describe as a flip-flop, a powerful thrill rushed through her, and the warmth was back when she looked into Grayson’s eyes, definitely not the kind of reaction you should have to your boss. Completely tongue-tied, she could only stare at him; then, to her relief, her cell phone began to buzz in her pocket, breaking the spell, and she managed to tear her eyes away from him.

Giving Ivy a little kiss, she handed her back over, “I have to take this call,” she said, getting to her feet, leaving his question unanswered. “I’ll be right back.”

Grayson looked like he wanted to protest, then sat back, “Ivy and I will wait here for you,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “You didn’t answer my question.”

Digging her phone out of her pocket, telling herself to calm down, she

stepped away from the pair, “Hey, Miguel,” she said, keeping her voice low. “What did you find out?”

“I’m standing in the middle of your living room and someone has definitely been here,” he said, making her stomach knot up. “It took me a second to figure it out. Everything looked pretty normal, but when I started looking closer, I could see things had been moved. Then I opened your desk, and it’s a mess. It looks like everything was taken out and then just shoved back in.”

Her heart was pounding so hard, it took her a second to collect herself before she could speak, “What about the closet in my bedroom?” she asked. “Does it look like anything has been moved?”

“I don’t think so, but let me check,” Miguel said, then she heard the sound of his footsteps. “It looks okay to me, I mean, it looks like a closet. Is there something specific you are worried about?”

She hesitated for a second, then reminded herself that she could trust Miguel, “In the back right corner of the closet there’s a secret compartment under the carpet,” she said. “All my important papers are in there. I need to know if he found them. Does it look like anything has been moved?”

There was silence on the other end, and she wondered if the call had been dropped, “Quinn, I’m not going one step farther until you tell me what’s going on,” Miguel said. “What kind of trouble are you in?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong,” she said. “I just saw something I shouldn’t have, and I’m not telling you about it because then you’ll be involved, and I don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“That’s why you ran away,” Miguel said. “Who’s after you, Quinn? I know people. Maybe I can help. You might as well tell me; I’m never going to let it go until you do.”

She sighed, “His name is Mr. Smith, although now I don’t think that’s his real name,” she said. “I’ve been housesitting for him now for a couple of months. The last time he hired me, I accidentally fell asleep in one of the guest bedrooms and was still there when he got home. He’s a hitman or an assassin or something, I heard him talking about it on the phone, and I saw a cabinet full of guns. I pretended to be cleaning when he found me, but I don’t think he believed me. That’s why I took off; if he thinks I busted him, he’s going to try and kill me.”

There was a long, unnerving silence, “Now I wish you hadn’t told me, that guy who was looking for you seemed perfectly normal, but I was talking

to a cold-blooded killer,” Miguel said. “You’re in some deep trouble, girlfriend.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” she said, then had an idea. “Miguel, I need you to do me a favor. Get that box out of the hidden space and take it over to your apartment. I’ll have to come back for it someday, but at least this way Mr. Smith can’t get his hands on it. He’s going to track me here eventually, but without that stuff, it’s going to take a lot longer. That should buy me enough time to figure out what I’m going to do.”

“If this guy is as bad as you think he is, you’re going to have to disappear, a new identity, a new life,” Miguel said. “It’s the only way, and I think I know someone who can make it happen.”

She hesitated, even though she’d been thinking the same thing, actually doing it was a little scary, “I don’t know, that seems awfully drastic,” she said. “I mean, he came by once. He might not come back. I don’t know for sure that he’s looking for me.”

“So, you’re going to wait around until you know for sure?” Miguel asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm. “That’s a great plan, Quinn. Once he finds you it’s all over, you won’t have a chance to get away.”

She let out a long sigh, “I know, I know, I just.....I guess you’re right,” she said. “It couldn’t hurt for you to talk to a few of your friends, but don’t mention my name, and don’t agree to anything until you talk to me.”

“No worries, I’m just going to make some general inquiries,” Miguel said, then hesitated. “This isn’t going to be cheap, Quinn.”

“I know, I’ll figure that part out if the time comes,” she said, then looked over at Grayson. “I’ve got a line on a couple of jobs; I don’t think money should be a problem.”

“You’re not shooting pool again, are you?” Miguel asked, his voice full of disapproval. “You said you were done with that life.”

“It’s tempting, I could have the money together a lot faster, but that would attract a lot of attention,” she said. “And I promised myself I’d never go back to that life.”

“Good, girl,” Miguel said. “You need to lie low, stay under the radar. In fact, you should get a new phone, that’s one of the easiest ways to trace someone.”

“Yeah, it’s on the top of my list,” she said. “I’ll take care of it as soon as I get checked into the hotel.”

“Are you sure you won’t tell me where you are?” Miguel asked. “I hate to

think about you all alone out there.”

She looked over at Grayson, “I’m not alone,” she said. “There are a few people here who care about me, and I need you there keeping an eye on things for me.”

CHAPTER 8



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson bounced Ivy on his knee as he watched Quinn talking on the phone, his protective instincts slowly coming to life when he saw the way she hunched her shoulders and seemed to shrink as the conversation continued. Several minutes later, she finally disconnected the call but stood staring out into the distance, taking deep breaths, before turning back to him, her face a little pale, lines of worry creasing her forehead. After slipping the phone back into her pocket, she took one more deep breath, then put a smile on her face and walked back over to them as if nothing was wrong.

“Sorry about that,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “I had to take that call.”

“It must not have gone well,” he said. “You look upset.”

Her eyes filled with fear for a second, but she quickly hid it under a smile again, “I’m fine, I just had to check up on a friend back in New York,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I didn’t get the news I was hoping for, but it’s nothing to worry about.”

“That’s not what it looks like to me. Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?” he asked. “I’m a pretty good listener, just ask Ivy.”

Quinn looked over at the baby who was playing with his keys, happily shaking them in the air, before stuffing them into her mouth, then back over at him. She opened her mouth, and for a second, he thought she was going to tell him about the phone call, but she closed it again with a little shake of her head.

“Were you serious about that job?” she finally asked, a hint of desperation in her eyes. “I’ve never worked as a nanny before, but I’m a quick learner.”

“If you take the job, you’re going to have to be,” he said, getting to his feet. “But I have a feeling you’re going to do a great job.”

The relief in her eyes struck him someplace deep inside and only intensified the feeling that she was in trouble, “I don’t know why you’re taking such a risk letting me take care of Ivy, but I appreciate it,” she said, letting out a long sigh. “Life has been a little crazy lately. It might be nice to slow down a little.”

He laughed, “I don’t know how much slowing down there will be. Ivy can be a real handful, and she isn’t even walking yet,” he said, getting to his feet. “Let’s get your stuff loaded into the truck, and then we can head out to the ranch. Your room is right off the kitchen, so you should have plenty of privacy.”

“Wait, you want me to live with you?” she asked, genuinely surprised. “I didn’t really think that through.”

“Well, that’s usually what room and board means,” he said, setting Ivy down in the grass when she started to fuss. “It’s part of your salary, Quinn, and pretty standard as far as I know.”

“I guess so, I’m just worried that people are going to talk, aren’t you?” she asked. “I mean, this is a small town, people are going to think we’re.....”

A blush spread across her cheeks, making her eyes look even greener, and a wave of desire made his body begin to tingle, “I’m sure they will, but there’s not really anything we can do about that,” he said. “My reputation around here isn’t exactly stellar. I’m used to people gossiping about me, but if you’re worried about what they’ll say about you.....”

“I can handle it if you can,” she said, squaring her shoulders. “Now let’s talk business. As thankful as I am for the job, we should probably discuss the details, maybe write up a contract; that way we’re both protected.”

“That’s fine with me,” he said. “But do you think we could do it someplace besides in the middle of the park?”

Quinn looked around, then another blush crept up her cheeks, “I guess it might be better,” she said. “But this isn’t a done deal, Grayson, and I still want to take that job Toby offered me, so don’t think I’m going to be available to you twenty-four seven.”

“I just want your days. What you do with your nights is none of my business,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “I can’t afford to pay you to be at my beck and call all day and night, although the idea of having you around all night is very appealing.”

Their eyes met and Quinn let out a little gasp, her eyes filled with desire, then a sigh escaped from her parted lips. “Oh, okay.....I mean that’s good.....no that’s not what I meant,” she stammered, then had to take a deep breath. “I just meant that I’m sure Toby will want me to work at night anyway, so that should be fine. I don’t suppose you know anyone selling a car for really cheap?”

Scooping Ivy up from the grass, he smiled at her, “I think we might have an old truck sitting around the ranch that you could drive,” he said, pleased with the way things were working out. “It’s yours until you can get something of your own; consider it a bonus.”

“That’s very generous of you,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “Why am I suspicious, though?”

He laughed, “I guess you’ll just have to wait and see,” he said. “You can drive a stick shift, can’t you?”

Quinn

Loaded down with her luggage, Quinn followed Grayson across the park, doing her best to ignore the stares they were getting. She couldn’t blame people; they did present an interesting picture. It was still a relief when they made it to his truck and she could put her stuff into the back out of sight, eliminating some of the looks they were getting, including a few frowns of disapproval from some of the older crowd. Deciding it was none of their business helped and she climbed into Grayson’s truck, watched him buckle Ivy in, then put on her own seatbelt.

“Well, we’ll be all anyone is talking about at dinner tonight,” Grayson said. “Bet you didn’t know all you had to do to shock people was hook up with me.”

She laughed, “Why do you keep saying stuff like that?” she asked, a bit confused. “Is it because you’re a single father?”

“That’s part of it now, people aren’t any more forgiving to single fathers. In fact, some people are harder on us, especially women. They think we can’t be good caregivers because we’re men,” he said, then sneaked a quick peek

over at her as he drove. “But mostly it’s because I was a bit of a.....player before Ivy came along.”

“Did you just say player?” she asked, trying not to laugh. “What exactly does that mean in a town like Prospect?”

“What do you think it means?” he asked, clearly a little insulted. “I was popular with the women. I never had to look for company on a Friday night. I could pretty much have any woman I wanted.”

“Well, weren’t you just the stud,” she said, unable to hide her smile of amusement. “What happened? Did you lose your mojo? Did things stop working?”

“Very funny,” he said, glaring at her. “I didn’t lose my mojo as you put it, I just decided that wasn’t the kind of life I wanted Ivy to be exposed to. I think they call it good parenting.”

“Point taken,” she said, nodding at him. “I bet there are some very disappointed women around town, though. I mean, if you were such a stud, there must be some very lonely.....”

“Just drop it, okay,” he said, gripping the steering wheel tighter. “I never hurt anyone, I never led them on, I never let them think what we had was any more than just something casual. It was all just good, innocent fun, and they wanted it as much as I did.”

“Hey, you don’t have to defend yourself to me,” she said, unable to stop smiling. “I just work for you. As long as I don’t have to run into your women in the morning, I’m good.”

He gave her another dirty look, “There are no women, that was the point of this whole discussion,” he growled. “Let’s talk about something else. I know, let’s discuss your love life.”

“Well, since I don’t have one, that will be a short discussion,” she said. “I like being alone, not depending on anyone else for anything. It gives me the freedom I need.”

“That sounded rehearsed,” he said, glancing over at her. “Like something you tell yourself over and over until you believe it.”

She shrugged, “If you don’t depend on anyone, no one can let you down,” she said. “When you live the way I do, that’s one of the first lessons you learn.”

“Quinn, that’s not any way to live,” he said. “You can’t cut yourself off from people.”

“I’m not completely cut off, I have a few friends,” she said, shrugging.

“That’s enough for me. I do just fine on my own.”

They pulled up in front of the ranch house a few minutes later, and she was relieved when Grayson let the conversation die. For all her bravado, there were times when she was desperately lonely, when the nights seemed like they were going to last forever. But the sun always came up the next morning, the feeling would pass, and life would go on. She’d long ago learned that thinking too much about what she might be missing was a mistake, and that went double for right now with Grayson sitting so close to her.

“Well, this is it,” Grayson said, turning off the truck. “The house still needs a lot of work inside. The barn and cattle had to come first, but it’s a solid old place. It keeps us dry and warm in the winter, so I’m not complaining.”

“It’s a beautiful house,” she said, meaning it. “It just looks like it needs a little love.”

“Come on, I’ll give you a tour,” he said, opening the door. “Then we’ll get you moved in and talk about that contract you want.”

She followed him up the front steps to the door, and a strange feeling began to settle over her as she walked inside. She paused in the middle of the entryway, looking around trying to identify it. Even in its disheveled state, the house was warm and inviting, and for a moment, she felt as if the house was welcoming her, then shook her head at the silly thought and took a few more steps inside.

The house was divided into two halves. To her right was what looked like a living room, but the furniture was covered in white sheets, so she couldn’t be sure. To the left was what she assumed had once been the dining room, but it had been furnished with a couch and couple of comfortable-looking chairs instead of a long table. A television was hung opposite the couch, and a pile of baby toys was stashed in a basket in the corner. The room was charming, and she could just picture herself curled up on the couch on a cold night, a fire burning in the fireplace, a cup of hot cocoa on the table next to her.

When Grayson popped into the vision, she shook it off, hoping he couldn’t see the blush that warmed her cheeks, “I don’t have the whole house open yet. I started with the rooms I knew we’d need to use. It’s going to be a lot of work to bring the old place back,” he said, guiding her down the hallway that led to the back of the house. “I’m taking it one room at a time. I’m afraid I haven’t gotten to yours yet, mostly because all it needs is a good

coat of paint and the floors redone, but I think you'll be comfortable enough."

The room was better than she'd imagined, even if the paint was peeling in places and the old curtains on the window were dull and grey from age. "I can work with this," she said, walking around the room. "Some fresh paint, new curtains, a rug on the floor, and I'll be nice and snug."

"Ivy and I have our bedrooms up on the second floor," Grayson explained. "We shouldn't bother you at night, and there's a bathroom through that other door, so we don't have to share."

The baby started to fuss and rub her eyes, "It looks like someone is ready for her nap," she said. "Do you want me to try to put her down?"

"Why don't you get unpacked? I'll take care of the baby," he said. "Tomorrow will be soon enough for a crash course in baby care."

She didn't want to admit that she was relieved to have a chance to get settled in. A few hours ago, she'd been planning on moving into a hotel, and she needed some time to wrap her head around the change in plans. Fear still gripped her when she thought of Mr. Smith. That alone was enough to throw her off balance, but her attraction to her now boss was another problem she wasn't sure how to handle. Even after he'd told her what womanizer he was, she couldn't calm the desire that rampaged through her when he was near, couldn't make her body understand what her brain did, that getting involved with him would be a huge mistake.

"Thanks, I don't have a lot of stuff, so it won't take me long to get unpacked," she said, then made the mistake of looking into his eyes. "Maybe we could meet in the kitchen in an hour."

"I'll see you then," Grayson said, then hesitated for a second. "I'm glad you're here, Quinn. I think this is going to work out just fine."

She wanted to groan when her body reacted to his words with another flare of desire but managed to hold it back, "I hope you're right," she said. "I don't want to disappoint you."

Grayson stared at her for a second, "I don't think I'll ever be disappointed in you," he said, making her blush. "I'll see you in an hour."

He turned and walked out with Ivy before she could recover from another burst of desire, and she stood staring after them, wondering if she'd made a mistake agreeing to take the job. The last thing she needed was a broken heart, and letting her feelings for Grayson continue to grow would only lead in that direction. It was time to act like the adult that she was and get her crush on him under control. Her life was in danger; now wasn't the time for

romance.

CHAPTER 9



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson woke to the tantalizing smell of coffee, sat up in bed and threw his legs over the side before he realized that it was Sunday. Confused for a second since he never set the timer on the coffee pot on the weekend when they could sleep in, he wondered if he'd done it by accident, then remembered that Quinn was downstairs. After briefly considering crawling back under the covers, he got up instead, awake enough at that point that he'd never be able to go back to sleep.

After throwing on a tee-shirt, he crossed the hallway and peeked into Ivy's room, smiling when he saw that she was still sound asleep, her face scrunched up against the mattress in her crib. Her favorite fuzzy yellow duck was tucked under her arm, and she sighed in her sleep, making his heart clinch with a kind of love he'd never experienced before his daughter came into his life. He stood watching her sleep for a long time, thinking about how much everything had changed, and for the better, but eventually the smell of bacon mixed with the scent of coffee drew him downstairs.

When he walked into the kitchen, Quinn was standing at the stove pulling crisp slices of bacon out of a skillet and laying them on a plate covered with paper towels, and his heart lurched, this one much different than what he'd experienced upstairs. Shocked by his response, he stood in the doorway for a few seconds, caught completely off guard, trying to find his equilibrium again, but a burst of desire quickly followed as his magic came to life. Visions of crossing the room and pulling Quinn into his arms crowded his brain, and when she turned to look over at him, a sunny smile on her face, it

was almost his undoing.

The smile disappeared when she saw the look on his face, "I'm sorry, Grayson, I thought I was being quiet. I didn't mean to wake you up," she said. "I woke up early and couldn't get back to sleep. I hope you don't mind."

It took him a second to gather himself enough to talk, "It's fine, Quinn, this is your home now, too," he said, the words making his heart do funny things again. "I want you to feel comfortable here."

The smile was back and he almost wished she would have given him one of her stinging comebacks, but instead, she went over to the coffee pot and poured him a cup. "I don't know how you like it," she said, handing him the cup. "But this is a fresh pot."

"Black is fine," he said, taking a sip, then looked around the kitchen. "It looks like you've been busy."

Quinn rushed over to the table and started cleaning up the books spread everywhere, "I just thought I'd do a little research," she said. "I hope you don't mind. I found these books in the living room. I've been reading all the chapters on babies and watching some videos on my computer."

"I'm impressed," he said, walking over and joining her, his body going haywire when he got close to her. "You must be an expert by now."

She gave him a dirty look, "Stop making fun of me; I just wanted to be a little prepared before Ivy got up," she said, her eyes flashing with annoyance. "I've never even changed a diaper, Grayson. It's a little scary, so be nice for once."

"I'm sorry, I really am impressed," he said, realizing that he was taking his frustration out on her. "I'm glad you're taking this seriously. I shouldn't have been making fun of you."

She looked surprised for a second, "Thank you," she finally said. "I'm not sure how I'm supposed to take you being nice to me, though."

He laughed, "You can't have it both ways, sweetheart," he said, grinning at her. "Choose one or the other."

"I'll take nice, thank you very much," Quinn said. "Let me just get these out of the way, and we can have some breakfast."

Just then, Ivy began to fuss from her bedroom upstairs, "Hold that thought," he said, then drained the rest of his cup. "It sounds like someone is awake upstairs. She's probably hungry and needs changed."

"I'll get her," Quinn said, squaring her shoulders. "I think I'm ready."

He laughed, "You're not going into battle," he said. "If you get into

trouble just holler, I'll be right here.”

After refilling his cup, he walked over to the stove, snatched a piece of bacon off the plate, then stood leaning against the counter, munching on it and listening for sounds from upstairs. When the seconds turned to minutes, without a call for help, he grabbed another piece of bacon, sat down at the table with a pleased sigh, pulled out his phone, and began to scan the news headlines for the day.

He was just beginning to enjoy having someone around to help with Ivy when a knock on the back door interrupted the quiet of the morning, and with a groan he got to his feet. His mother was on the other side of the door when he opened it up, a look of worry on her face, her eyes searching the space behind him before coming to rest on him.

“Mom, did I forget that you were coming by?” he asked, letting her into the kitchen, alarmed by the way she looking around the kitchen. “Is there something wrong?”

“Is there something wrong?” she repeated, a scowl on her face. “Only the fact that I was bombarded by questions at the grocery store first thing this morning about the woman you moved into your house yesterday. I thought you were done with all that running around. I thought you were going to give Ivy a more stable life than that, and now you’ve.....”

“She’s the nanny, Mom,” he said. “I hired her to take care of Ivy, she’s upstairs with her right now.”

“The nanny.....” his mother said, then collapsed into a chair. “I don’t know what I was thinking.....I guess I let my imagination get away from me. Everyone was talking about it like it was true, they said it was Quinn Murphy, and they said you were kissing her in the park. I should have known better than to listen to gossip. Is any of it true?”

“Well, it is Quinn, and we were in the park together, but I didn’t kiss her,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “She needed a job and a place to live, and I needed someone to help with Ivy. It just made sense.”

His mother studied him for a second, “I’m not sure it does,” she said, shaking her head. “Does she even have any experience? I mean, weren’t you just telling me she caused a big scene in the bar the other night? I don’t know how I feel about all this.”

“Don’t go getting all judgmental on me now, Mom,” he said. “Quinn is an intelligent young woman. She might be a little wild at times, but I have no doubt she’ll take her responsibility to Ivy seriously. You may have to just

trust me on this one. I know deep down this is the right thing to do.”

Quinn

“Look who I found upstairs,” Quinn called, walking into the kitchen, Ivy perched on her hip. “And from the way her stomach is growling, I think she’s ready for breakfast.”

When she saw the older woman sitting at the table, an unhappy look on her face, she stopped, suddenly no longer sure of herself, “Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.....Ivy and I will just go back upstairs.”

“That’s okay, you’re not interrupting,” he said. “Quinn, this is my mother, Veronica. She just came by to check on us.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, crossing over to shake the older woman’s hand. “I bet you want to hold this little darling.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind,” his mother said, taking the baby. “She looks so adorable in this outfit. I knew it was just perfect for her the second I saw it.”

“I couldn’t resist putting it on her,” Quinn said, smiling at the baby. “She’s lucky to have a grandmother who likes to buy her pretty clothes.”

“You mean spoil her,” he said, shaking his head. “Ivy already has more clothes than she can wear. Don’t be encouraging her, Quinn.”

“It’s a grandmother’s prerogative to spoil her grandchildren,” Veronica said. “I could start buying her toys instead.”

He groaned, “How about putting some of that money in a college fund or something,” he said. “That would be much more useful.”

“You are no fun,” Grayson’s mother said, sticking her tongue out at him. “Now, let’s get this little lady some breakfast.”

Quinn wasn’t sure what she was supposed to do, “Do you want me to help?” she said. “Or I could go to my room so you can have some privacy?”

“Quinn and I were just about to eat breakfast when you got here, Mom,” he said. “Are you hungry? I may have eaten a couple of pieces of the bacon, but I’m sure there’s plenty for all of us.”

“Oh, there’s more than enough,” Quinn said. “I might have gotten carried away.”

“I’ve already eaten, thank you, but I would love a cup of coffee,” Veronica said. “I can’t stay too long; I’ve got a trunk full of groceries.”

“Why don’t you sit down, and I’ll bring it to you,” Quinn said. “Do you like cream and sugar?”

“Oh, you don’t have to wait on me,” Grayson’s mother said, but he could see that she was pleased. “I’ll just get Ivy settled and help myself. You don’t have to treat me like a guest.”

“I don’t mind, really,” Quinn said, already moving toward the coffee maker. “I’ll just grab you a cup, and then I’ll get breakfast on the table.”

“I could get used to this,” he said, grinning at her. “Coffee and breakfast, and I didn’t have to lift a finger.”

“That’s what you think,” she said, grinning back at him. “You’re doing the dishes.”

Veronica laughed, “I like her already,” she said. “You might have been right, Grayson.”

She felt her cheeks flush with pleasure at the older woman’s words and hoped that no one noticed, feeling a bit pathetic that it could make her that happy, and wondered if her control was slipping. Pushing the thought away, she started carrying the food to the table: a heaping plate of fluffy scrambled eggs and bacon, then a platter of golden-brown waffles, followed by a tray of steaming blueberry muffins covered in a crunchy sugar topping.

“Wow, you can cook,” Grayson said, leaning over the muffins and taking a deep breath. “When you said you could manage in the kitchen, that was a bit of an understatement. I demand we renegotiate our contract right this instant so you can do all the cooking.”

She laughed, “That’s going to cost you a few more dollars an hour, Mr. Ingalls,” she said. “My skills don’t come cheap.”

He pretended to pout, “I guess I’ll just have to settle for three nights a week,” he said, then looked over at her, when she let out a huff. “Okay fine, every once in a while, when you feel like cooking.”

“Good thing for you I like to cook,” she said, sitting down at the table. “I think we’ve got everything. Let’s dig in before it gets cold. Are you sure you don’t want anything, Veronica? I have an extra plate right here.”

“It all looks so wonderful, and I’ve never been able to resist blueberry muffins,” she said. “Where did you learn to cook, Quinn?”

“I’ve done a lot of things since I left home,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I worked in a bakery for a while, and I’ve spent some time working in restaurant kitchens. Personally, I’d rather work in the front of the house, but you do what you have to if the bills are going to get paid.”

“You’ve been on your own for a long time,” Veronica said, then hesitated. “It must have been hard leaving home so young.”

“My parents didn’t want me around, and my older brothers refused to see the truth, so I was basically alone even when I was home,” she said, pleased that her voice didn’t betray how hard it was to say the words. “I probably shouldn’t have bothered coming back here, but I guess I just had to make sure nothing had changed, and it hasn’t, so I got my answer.”

Ivy distracted Veronica for a second, and she took the opportunity to take a deep breath to calm herself, “It couldn’t have been easy growing up the way you did,” the older woman said, regret in her voice. “We should have done more for you back then, made sure you weren’t on your own so much, but I think everyone was afraid to offend your parents.”

“I stopped worrying about that a long time ago,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I’m working on getting over it. I just wish I knew what was wrong with me, why they couldn’t love me like my brothers.”

She slapped her hand over her mouth, then sat back in her chair, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say that. You don’t want to hear about my problems,” she said, feeling her cheeks turning a bright shade of red. “Let’s just go back to eating breakfast. I didn’t mean to get so serious. I’ll probably never know; that’s just the way it is.”

CHAPTER 10



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson reached over and took Quinn's hand, a gesture that felt so natural he didn't even realize he'd done it until his skin began to warm where it touched hers. "Quinn, there's nothing wrong with you," he said, looking over at his mom for help and then back at Quinn. "Your parents are the ones who are messed up, not you; you have to stop thinking that way."

"That's easier said than done," she said, then took a deep breath. "But I'm working on accepting the fact that I'll probably never know or understand why they rejected me."

He looked over at his mom, not sure what else to say to make Quinn feel better, hoping that she'd jump in, but what she said surprised him. "I try my best to ignore the gossip that goes around this town, but sometimes it's impossible to ignore," she said. "There were some pretty vicious rumors going around town in the months before you were born. I have no proof any of what was said was true, and I never repeated it myself, but....."

"What were people saying," Quinn asked, slightly breathless. "You have to tell me even if it's only partly true. It might be the only answer I ever get."

"I don't know, these were some really ugly rumors. I'm afraid it will hurt you even more, and if they're not true, I would never forgive myself," his mom said, her face full of uncertainty, then let out a long sigh. "Quinn, are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I'm sure, I've wondered about this my entire life," she said. "If you have some answers, even if they're not exactly right, I want to hear them."

His mom looked over at him, and he nodded his head, "I'm still not sure this is the right thing to do, but about a year before you were born, there were a lot of rumors going around town that your dad was having an affair with one of the waitresses at the diner," she said. "A lot of people saw them together around town, which only fueled the fire, and when your mother found out, she went a little bit off the deep end."

"My mother?" Quinn asked. "My mother never goes off the deep end, she's always in control."

"Remember, I'm just telling you what I heard," his mom said, then hesitated for a second before continuing. "According to the stories going around town, your mother retaliated by having an affair of her own, and you were born nine months later."

Quinn sat perfectly still for so long he began to get worried, then she shook her head, "That can't be right," she said. "My mother is too.....up tight to do something like that."

"It was the talk of the town for months, Quinn. I'm sorry," his mom said. "Your mother flaunted the affair in front of everyone, made it pretty clear what she was doing. I don't think she planned to get pregnant, I don't think she meant to take it that far. She just wanted your father to behave himself."

"Do you know who my father was?" Quinn asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

His mom shook her head, "I'm sorry, I don't know, I did my best to stay out of it back then," she said. "But I do know he was part of the clan, one of the members of the security council, and he disappeared not long after your parents patched things up."

"I see," Quinn said, then slowly got to her feet. "Would you excuse me for a second, I need a few minutes to myself."

"I'm sorry, Quinn," his mom said. "I didn't want to hurt you, I hoped that you'd understand that it's not your fault. There's nothing wrong with you."

Grayson could see Quinn fighting back tears. She opened her mouth and shook her head. "I can't do this right now," she said. "I can't think about it anymore."

Quinn ran to her room and closed the door, and his mom let out a long sigh, "Did I do the wrong thing?" she asked. "Maybe I shouldn't have told her."

"She'll be okay," he said, looking over at the closed door, the urge to go to Quinn almost overwhelming. "She just needs some time to get used to the

idea. I think when she accepts it, she'll be glad that you told her."

"I hope you're right," his mom said, then smiled at him. "You should go to her; I think she needs you right now."

"I don't know, I'm not very good at that kind of thing," he said, looking over at the door. "What if I mess up?"

"You won't," his mom said, then shook her head. "I always wondered what the woman you finally fell for would be like. Just for the record, I think you've chosen well. But this isn't going to be easy. She's wounded, Grayson. You're going to have to go slow with her."

"Mom, I'm not falling for her," he said. "What makes you think that?"

"Just a mother's intuition," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I'm going to take Ivy home with me for the night, you can pick her up in the morning. Now, go make sure Quinn is okay."

He opened his mouth to argue, but his mom gave him one of her looks, "I'm not falling for her," he said, but got to his feet. "I'm never getting married, nothing has changed."

"I don't think we were talking about marriage," his mother said, grinning at him. "We were talking about love. You can have one without the other, you know."

"You're impossible," he said. "I don't know why I put up with you."

"Because I'm your mother and you have to," she said. "Now go check on Quinn. Ivy and I will clean up in here."

He got up from the table, walked over to Quinn's door, stood there trying to think of something to say, then gave up and knocked. "Quinn, it's Grayson," he called. "Can I come in?"

Quinn

Quinn sat on her bed staring into space, the tears that she'd been so sure would come blocked by the anger surging through her and the outrage at the cruelty her parents had shown her. Of all the answers she'd expected to get, she'd never imagined anything close to the truth, never dreamed that the man she called her father wasn't even related to her. In some ways it explained so much, his distance from her, the hatred she sometimes saw in his eyes, the way he always avoided her when he could.

What she couldn't understand was how her mother could be so cold to her, how the woman who gave birth to her could turn her back on her as if

she didn't exist. Through the pain and anger, one thing became clear: none of it was her fault, she'd done nothing to be ashamed of, she hadn't brought shame to the family her parents had. Then it hit her, all the years of striving for their acceptance, all the time she'd spent trying to earn their love had all been a waste. They would never accept her; she would always be the reminder of what they'd done to each other.

When Grayson knocked on the door, she was so deep in her thoughts, she didn't hear him at first, "Quinn, are you okay?" he called through the door. "I'll go away if that's what you want, but I'm worried about you, so is my mom."

She got up from the bed, surprised to find her legs shaking, and opened the door to find Grayson anxiously staring at the door. Without thinking, she threw herself into his arms. He wrapped his arms around her, and the flood of tears finally came, years of blaming herself came pouring out, all the pain and anguish of her lonely childhood rushed to the surface, spilling over and flowing out of her as she stood in his arms. When the sobs finally began to subside, he scooped her up into his arms and carried her over to the chair, then sat down and cuddled her in his lap.

A little part of her knew that she should get up, that it was a bad idea to get this close to him, but it felt so good to be surrounded by his warmth, so she rested her head on his chest instead. Letting out a long sigh, she closed her eyes, her mind quiet for the first time since Veronica had told her the truth, and wondered how Grayson could have that power, but quickly pushed the thought away, afraid to face what that might mean. Instead, she indulged herself in his comforting embrace for a few minutes more, then with another big sigh, started to get off his lap.

He clamped his arms around her, "I just want to make sure that you're okay before I let you go," he said, wiping the last tears from her cheeks with his thumb. "That must have been a big shock. I can't imagine what you must be feeling."

"I'm sorry I blubbered all over you. I didn't think I was going to cry," she said. "I'm so angry I want to hit something. I wasted all these years thinking there was something wrong with me when it wasn't my fault. I wasn't to blame for any of it, but they both shifted their guilt and shame over to me."

"That's a pretty big burden to put on a child," Grayson said. "You have every right to be mad."

"And every right to tell them how I feel," she said, jumping off his lap.

“I’m going over there to confront them. I’ve lived with their mistakes for too long. I know better than to hope for an apology, but I want them to know that I know the truth.”

Grayson got up, “Hold on a second,” he said. “Are you sure you want to do that? I understand why you want to confront them, but it’s not going to change anything, and you’re just giving them another chance to hurt you.”

She stopped just inside the doorway and turned back to him, “I know that you’re right, I should just walk away,” she said. “But I need to do this. I’m tired of them making me out to be the bad guy. I’m going to make sure the truth comes out, and if they’re embarrassed and humiliated in the process, it’s what they deserve.”

Grayson studied her for a second, then let out a long sigh, “I still don’t think it’s a good idea,” he said. “But I’ll get my keys.”

“You don’t have to go with me,” she said, surprised that he’d volunteered. “I can do this alone.”

“But I’m not going to let you,” he said, walking over and taking her hand. “You don’t have to do everything alone, Quinn.”

She started to argue, but the warmth of his hand in hers spread all through her body, and she didn’t have the strength to fight it, “I wouldn’t mind the company,” she said, then shrugged her shoulders. “I guess I’m just used to being alone.”

“Well, we’ll see what we can do about changing that,” Grayson said, smiling at her. “Starting with me going with you right now.”

Quinn knew that she was walking a slippery slope, that she could easily fall for Grayson if she let herself, but there were so many reasons that would be a mistake. She steeled herself against the feelings, pushed them down deep and pretended they weren’t there. It was safer that way because her heart couldn’t handle being broken, not when her life was such a mess. One more heartache was more than she was willing to deal with right then. She’d just have to be satisfied with being his friend and Ivy’s nanny.

CHAPTER 11



*** GRAYSON ***

Quinn was quiet as they drove across town to the ritzy neighborhood where she'd grown up, but Grayson could feel the tension radiating off her and thought once again about trying to change her mind about confronting her parents. It had nearly killed him to hold her in his arms while she cried and know that there was nothing that he could do about it but be there for her. Now he was afraid that he was letting her walk into a situation that could quickly escalate out of control, and she'd be even more hurt in the end.

When they pulled up in front of the huge mansion the circular driveway was full of cars, and Quinn let out a snort, "I forgot it was Sunday," she said. "They'll all be having dinner together; you know family time; this should be fun."

"It's not too late to change your mind," he said. "You don't have to do this, Quinn."

"Oh, I'm glad they're all here. This way Mother can't twist things in her favor like she always does," she said, an evil smile spreading across her face. "If nothing else this means there will be extra staff on duty, more people to gossip about our little discussion."

"Is that really what you want?" he asked. "I know that you want to punish them and I understand why, but don't forget it will be you they're talking about too."

Quinn was silent for a second, "I don't want to admit that you're right, but maybe I don't want that," she said, thinking about Mr. Smith. "I'll tone it

down, but I still want to confront them. I want to hear the truth from them, and now that I know the questions to ask, they can't deny me a few answers. I'm ready to move on, ready to leave this all behind. I just need to do this first. You don't have to come with me. I'll understand if you don't, this isn't your fight."

"I'm not letting you go in there alone," he said, turning off the truck and opening his door. "Are you ready?"

She looked up at the house, then back at him, and nodded, "As ready as I'm ever going to be," she said, then reaching out and taking his hand. "Thank you for coming with me. Just knowing that you're there will make this easier."

When they reached the big front door, Quinn paused for a second with her finger over the doorbell, then shook her head, pushed open the door, and walked in. "That should get my mother worked up," she said, looking over her shoulder at him. "Would you believe that she used to make me ring the doorbell, even when I was a kid and I lived here?"

Before he could answer, an older man came rushing down the hallway from the back of the house, "Quinn, you know you're not supposed to be here," the man said. "Your mother is going to have a fit if she sees you. You should have come to the back entrance."

"Not today, Timmothy, I'm done sneaking into this house through the back door," she said. "Are they in the dining room?"

"Yes, but....." Timothy started to protest, but Quinn was already on the move. "Stop....."

"Sorry," Grayson said, patting the confused man on the back, "but she won't be long."

He followed Quinn down the hallway to a set of sliding wooden doors, wincing when she slid them open with a bang, "I've always wanted to do that," she said, grinning at him before she walked into the room. "Well, isn't this cozy? The whole family together for dinner on a Sunday afternoon? I guess no one thought about inviting me. Oh, wait, I keep forgetting, you're all ashamed of me. I'm an embarrassment to this family and all that crap you've been feeding me all these years."

"How dare you come in here without ringing the bell," Quinn's mother screeched. "I thought we made it clear you're no longer welcome here."

"We won't tolerate this behavior, young lady," Quinn's father chimed in. "Leave at once, or I'll call the police and have you arrested."

“Go ahead, what I have to say won’t take that long,” Quinn said, taking a few more steps toward them. “I had an interesting chat with someone this afternoon, and a few interesting facts came to light. I just wanted to give you a chance to defend yourselves, although I don’t think that’s possible, but I’m willing to give you one more chance.”

“Quinn, you should really leave,” Jayce said, getting to his feet. “Haven’t you caused enough problems already?”

“I guess not. It looks like I still have one more in me,” she said, walking over and shoving her brother back down into his chair. “I really just have one question. Give me the answer, and I’ll get out of your lives forever. That isn’t too much to ask, not after the way you’ve treated me all these years.”

“Quinn, this really won’t do,” Quinn’s mother said, making Quinn whirl around and stare at her. “Leave right now, and we’ll pretend this never happened.”

“Oh, I’m leaving, but not until you tell me who my father is,” Quinn said, crossing her arms over her chest. “And don’t even think about lying to me, I know you had an affair to punish..... that man you’re married to, and that I was the result of that affair.”

No one spoke for several long, painful seconds, then Jayce jumped to his feet, “Quinn, that’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard,” he said. “Our mother is not the kind of woman to have an affair, she’s too.....”

“I don’t hear her denying it, do you?” she asked, cutting him off. “Well, Mother, what do you have to say for yourself?”

“If you’d been a boy, it wouldn’t have mattered,” Quinn’s mother said, rising slowly from her chair, her eyes full of hatred. “Instead, look at you, that hair, those eyes. Every time I look at you, I have to remember what I had to do with that filthy.....shifter to get your father under control. I should have sent you away the day you were born, but your father wouldn’t let me. It was my punishment for getting even with him but I rejoiced the day you left for good. You should have stayed gone.”

Quinn took each word her mother said without flinching, then let silence fall over the room again, “It’s good to know where we stand,” she said, then looked around the table. “Well, I guess that’s it for me. I just need that name, and I’ll be on my way.”

“He’s gone and you’ll never find him, I made sure of that,” Quinn’s father said from the other end of the table. “That man will never humiliate me again.”

“You did this to yourself, Walter,” Quinn’s mother snapped, then turned and walked out of the room, leaving another silence behind her.

Quinn

Quinn watched her mother walk out of the room, surprisingly devoid of emotion, then looked around the table at her three brothers, “I guess that settles that,” she said. “Be seeing you around.”

No one moved, no one said a word, and she understood the message they were sending her. She wasn’t even shocked that no one in the room was going to take her side. Years of being the bad seed in the family weren’t going to be erased by the truth. She’d hoped that Jayce would have finally understood that it wasn’t her fault, but he was just as silent as the others. Letting out a sigh of disappointment, she stepped away from him, filled with relief when she saw Grayson standing by the door waiting for her.

He held out his hand to her, “Come on, I’ll get you out of here,” he said. “I think you got your answers.”

She walked over to him, put her hand in his, and together they walked out of the house without looking back, and for the first time, she felt free of the burden she’d been carrying for most of her life. Grayson helped her up into the truck, his face full of compassion and what looked a lot like pride, but she was too tired to think about what that meant. Instead, she let him fasten her seatbelt like she was a child, then leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes, smiling when Grayson leaned in and kissed her on the forehead.

“You did good in there,” he said. “They’re all a bunch of idiots for not seeing what an amazing and special woman you are.”

She opened her eyes and looked over at him, “Thank you, Grayson,” she said, reaching out and stroking his cheek, amazed at how normal it felt. “You can be so sweet when you want to, but it’s nice to hear that. Take me home now, please.”

“Your wish is my command, sweetheart,” he said, making her smile. “I’ll have you there in a jiffy.”

Quinn woke hours later in her room, covered by a soft blanket, with only a vague memory of Grayson carrying her inside and tucking her into bed. The ugly scene in her parent’s dining room came rushing back to her, and she was tempted to bury her head in the pillows and go back to sleep, but the sound of

Grayson in the kitchen reminded her that life had to go on. Throwing back the blanket, she climbed out of bed, checked her reflection in the mirror, then opened the door and stood watching him for a second.

He'd been so sweet and kind all day, making everything so much more complicated, and she wished things could have been different, that she could stay in Prospect and explore the connection between them. But if Mr. Smith was looking for her, he would eventually end up here, and she couldn't risk still being in town when he did. It was better to walk away from something that could be wonderful than lose her life.

Besides, she reminded herself, Grayson wasn't into relationships; he'd made that pretty clear from the beginning, and she wasn't crazy about the idea of being just another one of his conquests. She might be wounded from the drama with her family, but she wasn't that desperate, no matter how deeply he affected her, she just wasn't the kind of girl to sleep with a man just because he got her motor running.

Feeling more in control, she stepped all the way out of her room, the smell of something appetizing hitting instantly, and her stomach began to growl. "Something smells good," she said. "I'm starving."

Grayson looked over at her and put down the spoon he'd been holding, a smile spreading across his face, "You look better," he said. "You've got some color back in your cheeks."

"Thanks for.....ummm.....putting me to bed," she said, feeling a blush spread across her cheeks. "I guess I was tired."

"And with good reason," Grayson said. "Dinner is almost ready, I thought we could eat out on the porch; it's a beautiful night, and I think you need a break."

"That sounds nice," she said. "Can I help with anything?"

"Nope, I've got it handled," he said. "Why don't you go on out to the porch? I'll bring the food out in a few minutes."

Quinn had to remind herself that she wasn't falling for Grayson with every step she took, but when she saw the table that he'd set up under the stars at the far end of the porch, the thought vanished from her mind. Instead, tingles of desire and a now familiar warmth spread through her as she was drawn in by the flickering candles and pretty table, complete with a vase of flowers in the center.

She jumped when Grayson stepped up behind her, "You should sit down," he said. "The food is going to get cold."

“Grayson, this is beautiful,” she said, then looked over at him. “But you should know that I’m not going to sleep with you. You’re my boss, and that’s it.”

He looked like he didn’t believe her, making her want to smack him, “As appealing as that thought is, I was just trying to have a nice dinner with you,” he said, setting the dishes he’d been carrying down on the table. “I won’t deny the fact that I would love to sleep with you, but tonight I just thought we could sit and talk.”

She gasped when a huge wave of desire rushed through her, making her entire body tingle and tighten, and she had to take a deep breath to get herself under control. “Okay, I just thought you should know,” she said. “Sleeping together would just complicate things, and I don’t have the energy for any more complications right now.”

Grayson studied her for a second, “You know, I don’t think anyone has ever called me a complication,” he said. “I can’t decide if that’s a compliment or not, but I’ll let you know when I do.”

She laughed, “Maybe that wasn’t the best choice of words,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I just can’t take on anything else right now. I don’t want to make a mistake just because I’m vulnerable.”

“Oh, now I’m a mistake,” he said, but she could see that he was amused. “I think I liked complication better.”

“Grayson, you’re making this difficult,” she said, letting out a sigh of exasperation. “I just meant.....”

“Quinn, it’s okay, I’m just teasing you,” he said. “I understand what you’re trying to say, and I promise you, this wasn’t about me trying to sleep with you. I just wanted us to have a nice evening.”

She sighed, wondering if he knew that didn’t really help, that it would have been much easier if he had been trying to get her to sleep with him. Then at least she could be insulted. Instead, he was being sweet and considerate, something he’d been doing a lot lately, making it even more difficult to keep her distance from him, both physically and emotionally.

“Thank you, Grayson,” she finally said. “I think I would like that very much.”

CHAPTER 12



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson pulled into the parking lot at the feed store, shut off the truck and sat, letting the silence wash over him for a few minutes. It had been a long week, and he was looking forward to a couple of days off over the weekend. With summer slowly drawing to an end, the ranch was busier than ever. There were calves to brand, herds to be moved down from the upper elevations, miles of fence to be checked, and repairs that couldn't be put off until winter.

Unlike the first year on the ranch, he knew what he was doing and had enough help that none of it was a burden to him alone, but Ivy's unexpected arrival had thrown him off balance just a little. He hadn't been quite as prepared as he'd have liked to have been when they moved the herds up to the high pastures in the early summer, and catching up with a baby had proven impossible. Now, thanks to Quinn, he was finally making some headway and felt confident they would be ready when it was time to round up the cattle and get them ready for market.

Quinn had slipped into the role of nanny almost effortlessly, taking charge of Ivy's days with an ease that almost made him jealous, especially when he remembered his first few weeks as a father. After their dinner on the porch, he'd been careful to keep his distance, afraid that he wouldn't be able to resist kissing her again if he got too close, agreeing in principle that mixing business with pleasure would be a mistake. If his body didn't get the message, it was up to him to control those demands, especially since for the first time in his life, his connection to Quinn went much deeper than just

physical attraction.

Letting out a long sigh, he wondered how he'd gotten himself in such a predicament. He'd always known the role women played in his life, but now those lines had been blurred by a curvy redhead with green eyes who surprised him at every turn. His mother's words about love echoed through his head as he sat in his truck, and he wanted to tell himself that she was wrong, but a feeling in the pit of his stomach told him that would be a lie.

With a groan, he got out of the truck. He wasn't doing himself any good chasing it around in his mind, and at this rate, he'd drive himself crazy before the first snow fell. Slamming the door, he started across the parking lot toward the store, but he'd only gone a few steps when a truck roared up, came to a skidding stop in front of him, and Jayce jumped out. Face full of rage, his friend closed the distance between them in only a couple of steps and gave him a hard shove before raising his fist to hit him.

"I wouldn't do that," he said, regaining his balance instantly. "You won't like what will happen if you do. Don't forget I'm bigger and stronger than you are."

Jayce seemed to think better of starting a fight and lowered his fist, "You need to leave my sister alone and stay the hell out of our family business," he snarled at him. "Thanks to you, my mother has locked herself in her room and refuses to come out and my father took off for the capital. I don't know if he's going to come back."

"Don't blame me for your family's problems. I was just there to support Quinn, something none of you have ever done," he said. "If you want to fight me for that, I'll be more than happy to kick your butt up and down this street, but your parents' problems are their own."

"If you hadn't gotten involved, Quinn never would have made such a scene. Things could have just gone on like they were before," Jayce said, flexing his fingers, his eyes still blazing with anger. "She stirred up something that should have been left alone."

"I think she might see it differently," he said. "She's been telling you that for years, but you wouldn't listen. She just didn't give you a choice the other day. I'm sorry if the truth makes you uncomfortable, but maybe you should ask yourself why. It might be time for a little soul searching, my friend. Quinn didn't do anything wrong, but the people who were supposed to love and protect her sure did. If you want my opinion, it would have been better if she'd been sent away. At least then she might have had a chance to part of a

family that loves her.”

“This is none of your business, Grayson,” Jayce hissed at him. “Stay out of it, or you’ll be sorry.”

“Now, see, that’s where you’re wrong. I care about Quinn,” he said, feeling the truth of his words deep in his soul. “That’s makes it my business.”

“You care about her. That’s hilarious; the only person you’ve ever cared about was yourself,” Jayce said. “Do you think I’m buying this garbage about her being your nanny? You’re just paying her to spread her legs for you. That’s probably all she’s good for anyway.”

The fist that connected with Jayce’s nose only a few seconds later shot out before he could think about what he was doing, and the animal inside him enjoyed the sight of blood pouring out of the other man’s nose. Jayce stumbled back a couple of feet but managed to regain his balance, his hand already covering the mess on his face. Then, he stood staring at him, his eyes wide.

“Don’t ever let me hear you say anything like that about your sister again,” he said. “The next time I do, your nose won’t be the only thing bleeding.”

Jayce backed up to his truck, jumped in, started it up, and pulled out of the parking lot, one hand still covering his nose, and he realized that they’d attracted a crowd. “Nothing to see here, folks,” he called out. “Just a little disagreement between friends; go on about your business.”

The crowd started to disperse, muttering to each other and sending him curious looks, but he ignored them and went into the feed store. The cattle and horses still had to eat even if he’d just punched one of his best friends. Everyone in the store was looking at him when he walked in, but quickly went back to what they were doing when he paused inside the doorway and stared them down.

“Well, that was entertaining,” Paul, the assistant manager, said while pushing his way through the other customers. “Do you want to explain what that was all about?”

“Not really. Jayce just pushed me too hard, end of story,” he said. “I need to pick up my order and get back to the ranch; there are never enough hours in the day.”

Quinn

Quinn checked her reflection in the mirror once more, wondering why she was so nervous about a job in a bar, especially one that her best friend owned, but everything had been different since she'd found out the truth. There was still a little pain and a lot of anger that she'd have to sort through, but she knew that time would heal a lot of the wounds that had been open and festering for most of her life. The ugliness that resulted in her birth still stunned her at times, and someday she would look for her father, listen to his side of the story, but for now she was content with the answers that she'd gotten.

Satisfied that she was ready for her first night working at the bar, she grabbed her purse and the keys to the truck Grayson was letting her borrow, turned off the light in her room, and closed the door behind her. She was surprised to find Veronica sitting at the kitchen table with Ivy in her lap and felt the first stirrings of unease when she saw the triumphant look on Grayson's face. Although it had only been a week, she'd already grown fond of the older woman, and she had a feeling Grayson was going to try to use that against her to win the argument they'd been having about her working at the bar.

"Veronica, I didn't know you were coming over," she said, crossing the room and hugging her, then kissing Ivy on top of the head. "I'm just on my way out the door to my first night of work at the bar, or I'd sit down and chat."

"That's why I stopped by. I wanted to wish you good luck," Veronica said, ignoring the noise that Grayson was making. "My son seems to think I should talk you out of it, and I do understand his concern, but I told him that you're a grown woman, capable of making your own decisions."

She looked over at Grayson, who had the good grace to look embarrassed, "Mom, you were supposed to be on my side," he said, giving her a dirty look. "Sebastian wasn't making an empty threat when he promised to come after you. I just don't think it's safe for you to work there, not unless I can go with you, and that's not going to work."

"Grayson, I don't need a bodyguard, I can keep myself safe. I have been for a while now," she said. "I'll be careful, and Toby is going to come out and meet me when I get there and walk me to my car after my shift. Nothing is going to happen."

Grayson looked over at his mother, "Won't you try to talk some sense into her?" he asked. "Am I the only one who has a problem with you putting

yourself in danger?”

She walked over to Grayson, “Life has to go on,” she said, looking up at him. “In retrospect, I should have just kept my mouth shut that night, but I was in a terrible mood, and I wanted to take it out on someone. It’s going to be okay. Sebastian isn’t going to hurt me. I’m sure that by now, he’s found some other bar to terrorize.”

It took a second for his face to soften, “I guess I really can’t stop you,” he said with a sigh. “Just promise me that you’ll be careful, I’m kind of getting used to having you around.”

“I promise not to set foot out of the bar alone,” she said, stretching up and giving him a kiss on the cheek. “It’s nice to have someone worry about me.”

Later that evening Quinn pulled two more glasses out of the rinse water, set them on the draining board, then dried her hands and grabbed a towel to dry them, relieved to have a little break from making drinks to catch her breath. It had been a long time since she’d mixed drinks, and it had taken a couple of hours to get back into the swing of things, but she’d found her groove and was enjoying herself. The bar was packed thanks to the popularity of the band Toby had booked, and she was already looking forward to depositing the tips slowly filling the jar on the bar into her savings account on Monday.

Feeling her phone buzz in her pocket, she pulled it out, sure that it was Grayson checking up on her since only a few people had her new number, but it wasn’t his name that greeted her when she looked at the screen. A wave of fear rushed through her, freezing her for a second, but she took a deep breath and opened the message, then read it several times before stuffing the phone back in her pocket.

Spotting Toby on the other end of the bar, she made her way over to him, “Hey, it looks like we’ve got a lull,” she said. “Do you mind if I take a quick break? I need to make a phone call.”

“Sure, be back in ten,” Toby said. “We’ll hold the fort down while you’re gone.”

She was calling Miguel before she even got away from the bar, “What’s going on?” she asked as soon as he picked up. “Is Mr. Smith back?”

“He’s in your apartment right now,” Miguel whispered. “He came over here first. He said he was working with the landlord who’s trying to find you, asked a bunch of questions about where you’re from, and wanted to know if I thought you might have gone home for a family emergency or something.”

Her heart sank, and she had to take several deep breaths before she could speak, “Did you talk to those friends of yours?” she asked. “It looks like I’m going to have to disappear after all.”

“Quinn, it’s going to cost you,” Miguel said. “My friends can do it, but they’re going to need fifty thousand dollars.”

For a second, she didn’t think she heard him right, “Fifty thousand,” she finally said. “That’s a lot of money, Miguel. I don’t have that kind of cash right now.”

“Well, you’d better figure out a way to get it,” he said. “I talked them down as low as I could, but fifty thousand is the best deal I could get you.”

“Thanks, Miguel,” she said. “I’ll figure something out, and call you back when I have the money.”

“Quinn, you can’t.....” Miguel started to argue, but she hung up the call, feeling like she was going to faint.

Taking deep breaths, she fought off the fear and panic, telling herself that she had to think clearly, but all she could see was Mr. Smith’s eyes boring into her as she scrambled to get out of the apartment. If he wanted to kill her, nothing would stop him. She had to find a way to come up with that money and fast before she was just another victim of his skills.

There was only one way she could come up with that much money quickly, but she hated the thought of getting back into the game, especially with Sebastian lurking out there somewhere. Hoping a better solution would present itself, she turned to head back to the bar but ran into a solid chest blocking her path, and her brain sensed danger instantly. Letting out a scream, her self-defense training kicking in, she threw a punch in what she hoped was the right direction, pleased when she heard a startled grunt, then tensed her muscles to attack again.

CHAPTER 13



*** GRAYSON ***

“Quinn, will you knock it off,” Grayson said, grabbing her by the arms. “I’ve already been in one fight this week; I don’t want to be in a second one.”

She stopped fighting and looked up at him, the fear and panic he’d seen in her eyes slowly fading away, “What was that all about?” he asked, pulling her into his arms, surprised to find that she was trembling. “Did you see Sebastian? Was he outside when you got here or something?”

“I’m sorry, you scared me, I didn’t mean to attack you,” she said. “I haven’t seen Sebastian, I just.....never mind, it doesn’t matter.”

He pulled back and looked down at her, sure that she was lying, “Quinn, are you in some kind of trouble?” he asked, studying her closely. “Because if you are, I might be able to help.”

“It’s nothing, just some loose ends back in New York. I just have a few things to figure out, that’s all,” she said, not looking him in the eye. “What are you doing here?”

“Mom insisted on taking Ivy home with her,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I knew you’d be getting off in a few hours, so I thought maybe we could stay for a little while. I haven’t been dancing in a long time.”

She finally looked up at him, her eyes wide, “Grayson, that’s not a good idea,” she said, shaking her head and pulling away from him. “I work for you; we can’t go dancing together. Everyone will be talking about us tomorrow.”

“I’ve got bad news for you; everyone is already talking about us,” he said,

shrugging his shoulders. “We might as well give them something else to talk about.”

“Grayson, you’re impossible,” she said, then narrowed her eyes at him. “What did you mean, you’ve already been in a fight this week? You didn’t say anything about that.”

He inwardly cursed his big mouth, “I ran into Jayce yesterday at the feed store. He seems to think I should stop sticking my big nose into your family’s business, and I’m to blame for everything that happened,” he said. “I set him straight, but he couldn’t shut his mouth, and when he insulted you, well, I might have punched him in the nose.”

“Oh, Grayson, you didn’t,” Quinn said, shaking her head. “But thank you for defending me. No one has ever done that before. It feels kind of nice.”

Unable to help himself, he grabbed her and pulled her back into his arms, “I can think of a few other things that feel nice,” he said. “And all of them involve you.”

She didn’t fight him when his lips came down on hers. Instead, after hesitating for only a second, she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back. The passion between them exploded into a raging fire instantly, and he was lost in the kiss as the world around them melted away. Aware only of the woman in his arms, his magic slowly came to life as the connection between them began to grow stronger, sending waves of need thundering through his body.

When he finally let Quinn go, they stood staring at each other for a long time, “Don’t do that again,” she finally snapped, then, on wobbly legs, walked away from him. “I have to get back to work.”

He watched her go behind the bar, a pleased smile on his face, still filled with warmth, then the smile disappeared when he remembered their conversation. It was the second time that she’d blown off his question about being in trouble. He wasn’t sure what she meant by loose ends, but had a feeling deep in his gut that it wasn’t good. Something had sent her running home to Prospect, the same something had put the fear and panic in her eyes, and he was determined to find out what it was.

He knew it would do no good to obsess over the situation, so he ambled over to the table where his old friends were camped out, scoping out the available women and making rude comments. Instead of sitting down right away, he stood watching and listening to them and wondering if he’d really behaved like that, then winced when the answer was yes. A bit disgusted, he

started to turn away, planning on finding a quiet table in a corner and waiting alone until Quinn got off work, but someone called his name and his chance for escape evaporated.

“Hey, Grayson, that was quite a little display. It looks like your dry spell is over,” Adam called. “She’s a hot little thing, and I hear she takes care of your kid for you too. You really scored this time. Let me know when you’re done with her, I’m next in line.”

It took him a second to get control of the anger that surged to the surface, but this time he was able to hold back, “I’m going to let that go this time,” he said, his voice the only thing betraying the fury inside him. “But if I ever hear you say anything like that about Quinn again, I won’t be so understanding.”

There was a stunned silence around the table, “Oh my God, he’s gone over to the other side,” Adam finally said, staring at him. “I never thought I would see it happen. That kid of yours must have made you soft.”

“No, she just made me grow up,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Maybe you should try it. Looking at you all now, I see just how pathetic this all is.”

“Ease up, you two,” one of the other guys said. “We’re here to have a good time.”

“Tell, Grayson, he’s the one getting all worked up,” Adam said. “I was just having a little fun. You didn’t used to be such a.....”

“Yeah, well things change,” he said, backing away from the table, realizing he had no place there anymore and didn’t care. “I’ll be seeing you all around.”

It came as a shock to realize that the bar was the last place he wanted to be, and he would have left if Quinn wasn’t still there, but he’d changed his mind about hanging around after she got off. Curling up with her in the swing on the front porch sounded like a much more enjoyable way to spend the rest of the night, just the two of them, away from prying eyes, and if he accidentally kissed her, well, he could blame it on the stars.

Quinn

Quinn spent the next hour filling drink orders and trying to stay caught up on the glassware, but the bar was still a mess when the band finally called it a night and left the stage. The cocktail servers were doing their best to catch up, but the mass exodus had left half the tables full of empty glasses, and she

grabbed a tray, deciding to help just to speed things up. After two trips back and forth, she headed for the pool tables, where there was still a crowd gathered around watching a game, and she paused for a second to catch her breath before wading in.

It had been a long night, and she just wanted to go home, take a shower, and relax, “Excuse me, aren’t you the lady who was playing pool here a while back?” a man asked. “I was here that night. I’ve never seen anyone shoot like that. Have you ever thought about going professional? You could beat half the guys on the circuit without even trying, and there’s a lot of money to be made, too.”

“Thanks for the suggestion, but I’m not interested,” she said, then started to walk away. “I really need to get back to work.”

“We’re talking about a lot of money,” the man said. “Fifty thousand dollars is the prize for winning the first round, and it only goes up from there.”

She paused, unable to help herself, “I’ll handle everything for a small fee,” the man said. “Just give me the word, and I’ll have you in a game by the middle of the week.”

When she didn’t move, he approached her and held out a business card, “Just think about it. This could be an excellent opportunity for both of us,” he said. “My name is Willie Eastman, by the way.”

She looked down at the business card, then back up at Willie, every instinct telling her that she couldn’t trust him, but finally took it out of his hand. “As tempting as the offer is, and believe me, it’s tempting,” she said, throwing it down onto her tray. “If I decide to play pool for money, I can arrange my own games.”

“Not with the kind of people I can,” Willie said, picking the card up. “I can open doors for you, young lady. With your looks and skills, you could climb to the top, play only with the best, and not in some pathetic professional league. These are players from all over the world, and they’ll reward you handsomely for giving them some competition. You’ll never have to work in a place like this again.”

She hesitated for a second, trying to decide how desperate she was. The temptation to take his offer almost stronger than her sense of self-preservation, but then she remembered the last time she’d gotten involved with a man like Willie. Barely suppressing a shiver, she closed her eyes for a second to blot the memory out, then shook her head and took a deep breath.

“I don’t mind working in a place like this,” she said. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

Willie threw the card back on her tray, “Hold onto this in case you change your mind,” he said. “Just say the word, and I’ll be here.”

It was a relief to see Grayson making his way over to her, “Hey, Quinn,” he said, leaning down and kissing her on the cheek when he joined them. “I was just wondering how much longer you’re going to be.”

“I’m almost finished. I just need to take these empties over here back over to the bar,” she said, giving him a grateful look. “I’m sorry, Willie, I have to go.”

“You have my card,” Willie said, backing away. “Give me a call if you change your mind; you won’t be sorry.”

When he finally turned and walked away, Quinn let out a sigh of relief, “What was that all about?” Grayson asked, eyeing the card on her tray. “Who was that guy?”

“He was trying to get me to join his pool league. First, he was talking professional, then it switched to a private league,” she said, shaking her head. “There were a lot of big promises coming out of his mouth, but something felt off. I was trying to get rid of him when you walked up.”

“I didn’t like the look of that guy,” Grayson said. “If he approaches you again, don’t talk to him.”

“Down boy, I’ve got it handled,” she said, smiling up at him. “Thank you for coming to my rescue, but now I really do need to get back to work, or you’ll be waiting for me all night.”

“I’ll help you,” he said, starting to reach for a glass. “Then we can get out of here sooner.”

She laughed, “Grayson, go sit down at the bar and wait for me,” she said, giving him a shove. “I’ll only be a few minutes.”

As soon as he was gone, she slipped the card into her pocket. She wasn’t desperate enough yet to get involved in an illegal league, not brave enough to take that risk again yet, even if the money was incredible. She’d been burned badly the last time, and almost lost everything, including her life. She wasn’t going down that road unless it was her last resort. Fifty thousand dollars was a lot of money, but she’d hustled more than that in only a few weeks in the old days. It might be a bit harder out here in Montana, but with a little work, it could be done.

CHAPTER 14



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson walked away from Quinn, a feeling in his gut that something wasn't right. It was the same feeling he'd been fighting since he saw her on the phone, and now with Willie added to the mix, the feeling had gotten even worse. Spotting Toby washing glasses behind the bar, he slipped onto a bar stool across from him and waited until he took a break.

"What do you know about that Willie fellow?" he asked. "He gave Quinn his card, and something doesn't feel right about it."

Toby studied him for a second, then looked over at Quinn, still picking up empty glasses, "He's bad news. He works for a private pool league out of Helena, brings in new talent for a price," he said. "He started hanging around here when Sebastian showed up, but he's never tried to recruit anyone before Quinn."

"Is this league on the up and up?" he asked, still uneasy. "She doesn't seem interested, but I'd still like to know. Something has been bothering her. I've asked her a couple of times what it is, but she won't tell me, just says she has some loose ends to tie up."

"Quinn isn't very good at sharing; she never has been. She's not used to leaning on other people," Toby said, then studied him for a long time. "You probably think this is none of my business, but Quinn and I have been friends for a long time, and I don't want to see her get hurt. I've spent the last two years watching you chase everything in a skirt that wasn't wearing a wedding ring. Quinn isn't like those women, she's better than that, she's special. I'm not going to stand by and watch you break her heart for your own

amusement.”

“Well, I guess now I know what you think about me, and to be honest, I don’t blame you,” he said, amused by the look of shock on Toby’s face.

“That was a pretty accurate description of who I used to be, but the funny thing is, that’s not who I am anymore. I’m not sure when or why I changed, but I was sickened by the things my old friends said tonight, and I almost got into a fight in your bar when one of them said something about Quinn. I hope I don’t break her heart, and I hope she doesn’t break mine. I care about her, Toby, this isn’t one of my old games, this is real, and it scares the hell out of me.”

It felt good to lay it all out on the line like that, to say it out loud to someone, and the look of shock on Toby’s face was just the icing on the cake. “You’re a lucky man, Grayson,” he finally said. “Just make sure that you take care of her.”

He looked over at Quinn, laughing with a group of people, “She’s not mine yet,” he said, shaking his head. “I have to find a way to convince her to stay in Prospect. Got any ideas?”

“You’re on your own, my friend,” Toby said, laughing. “Once Quinn has her mind made up about something, it’s impossible to change it, and Prospect isn’t exactly full of a lot of happy memories for her.”

“Then I’ll just have to change that,” he said, a plan slowly forming in his mind. “And you’re going to help me.”

“Me?” Toby asked, already shaking his head. “Don’t get me involved. I don’t want Quinn mad at me.”

“I just need some information, so calm down,” he said. “There have to be a few good memories mixed in with all the bad, and you can help me figure out what they are. If we can show Quinn that there are people here who care about her, people other than her family, she might change her mind about taking off on her own again.”

Toby thought about it for a second, “Well, we used to go to the county fair every year, and she loved eating dinner at my house. My mom was as close as she had to a mother figure in her life.”

“That’s a start,” he said, the wheels in his head turning. “I want you to keep thinking, I need people and places that will make her think of happy times. Growing up couldn’t have been all bad.”

“I’ll make a list and send it to you,” Toby said, shaking his head. “She doesn’t stand a chance, does she?”

“Nope, I’ve made up my mind,” he said, a bit shocked himself. “I didn’t know it was coming, but I’m not an idiot. Quinn would be the best thing that’s ever happened to me, well, besides Ivy.”

“You’ve got your work cut out for you,” Toby said, grinning at him. “Quinn isn’t going to give up easily.”

“And that will be half the fun,” he said, then spotted Quinn coming toward them. “Will you do me a favor and order us a pizza with everything and make it to go? Throw in a big salad while you’re at it, women love salad.”

“You bet,” Toby said. “Let the games begin. This should be fun to watch.”

Quinn walked up to the bar and set the overloaded tray down with a thunk. “Okay, that’s everything over by the pool tables,” she said, then let out a long sigh. “I forgot how much work this was, and I’m starving, I hope the kitchen isn’t closed yet.”

“Grayson already ordered you a pizza and a salad, and it’s on the house,” Toby said. “Why don’t you go punch out? It should be ready when you get back.”

“You look exhausted,” Grayson said. “Let’s skip the dancing tonight and go back to the ranch, eat pizza, and watch a movie.”

“Oh, that sounds wonderful,” Quinn said. “Just let me put these behind the bar.”

Quinn

Quinn woke to the sun streaming through her window, the sound of knocking disturbing the quiet, and she pulled the pillow over her head with a groan. “It’s Sunday, my day off; go away and leave me alone,” she called, then groaned again when the knocking started up again. “Okay, okay, I’m getting up.”

She flung the door open to find Grayson grinning at her, Ivy perched on his hip, “Good morning, we’re already running late, so hurry up and drink that,” he said, handing her a cup of coffee. “You can eat breakfast in the truck.”

“Grayson, what are you talking about?” she asked. “Where are we going? I don’t remember planning anything with you.”

“Oh, we didn’t plan anything, but I didn’t think you’d want to be left

out,” he said, grinning at her. “But you’d better hurry; if we don’t leave soon, we’re going to miss the parade.”

“Parade?” she asked, still confused. “Grayson, you still haven’t told me where we’re going.”

“A little birdie told me that you like county fairs, so I thought we’d drive over to Madison and check one out,” he said. “But if you’d rather go back to bed, Ivy and I can manage on our own.”

“Grayson.....” she hesitated, the mischief in his eyes making warmth spread through her body. “That’s so sweet.....”

He leaned in and gave her a big kiss, “I know, now hurry up and go take a shower, you smell like a bar,” he said. “Ivy and I will be waiting for you in the kitchen.”

Unable to resist, she gave in, “Fine, I’ll be ready in ten minutes,” she said, then leaned in closer. “I’m still not going to sleep with you.”

Grayson laughed, “Hmmm, that sounds like a challenge,” he said. “There’s nothing I love more than a challenge.”

He turned and walked away, leaving her gasping, her body tingling, and a sinking feeling that she was fighting a losing battle. If she was smart, she’d crawl back into bed and stay there until they left, but instead, her feet carried her to the bathroom, and she was showered, dressed, and ready to go as promised. Ivy grinned and reached for her when she walked out of her room, and she took the baby with a resigned sigh, wondering how she was ever going to walk away from the two of them.

When they pulled into the dirt parking lot next to the fairgrounds in Madison, she almost felt like a kid again as excitement surged through her. “Toby and I waited all year for the fair,” she said, looking around. “We’d both save up as much money as we could and show up as soon as the gates opened. We started with the exhibits, especially when there was food involved, played every contest they had, and then finished off the day at the carnival, riding rides and eating junk food until we were sick.”

“Well, we might want to skip the getting sick part, but I’m up for the rest of it,” Grayson said, smiling at her. “Ivy and I want you to show us how it’s done, although I think she’ll skip the rides and the junk food.”

She helped him unload the stroller, then strapped Ivy in, “Okay, we’re ready to go,” she said. “Ivy wants to see the animals first, and I think that’s an excellent idea.”

“We don’t want to miss the parade, either,” he said. “I hear it’s the

highlight of the weekend.”

“Then we’d better hurry,” she said, grinning at him. “Thank you for bringing me, Grayson. This is going to be fun.”

The morning flew by in a flurry of activity. They walked up and down the aisles of pens full of pigs, cows, goats, and sheep, sampled the prize-winning jams and jellies, spent far too long trying to decide which pie to vote for, and finished the morning off with pie eating contest which Grayson won. When he suggested they find someplace in the shade to sit down, she willingly followed him over to the picnic area, surprised when she spotted Veronica sitting at a table in the shade of a big tree.

“There you are. I figured you’d be hungry and tired by now,” Veronica said, getting to her feet. “I’ve got a mountain of food here. Come and get something cold to drink, and then we’ll eat.”

She looked over at Grayson, “I hope you didn’t make your mom haul all of this in here,” she said, completely overwhelmed and trying to cover it up. “Not that it doesn’t look wonderful, and I am starving.”

Veronica took Ivy out of the stroller, “Grayson didn’t want Ivy to get too tired,” she explained. “He asked me to pick her up after lunch. The food was my idea.”

“Well, it’s very sweet, thank you both,” she said, feeling tears stinging her eyes. “It makes an already perfect day that much better.”

They indulged themselves with heaping plates of fried chicken, potato salad, and fresh sliced tomatoes. Then Veronica brought out an apple pie, and even though she was stuffed, it was impossible to resist. When she finally pushed her empty plate away, she was so sleepy she could barely keep her eyes open and had to stifle several yawns while she helped clean up.

“That was an amazing lunch, Veronica, thank you,” she said. “I’m so full I don’t want to move. A nap would be perfect right now.”

The older woman laughed, then looked over at Ivy sound asleep in her stroller, “I think Ivy agrees with you,” she said. “Why don’t you stretch out in the grass next to her? I brought a blanket you could spread on the ground.”

“I’ll get it,” Grayson said. “I could use a little nap myself before we tackle the rest of the fair.”

“While you three are resting, I think I’ll just pop over and check out a few of the exhibits,” his mom said. “Just give me a call when you’re ready for me to take Ivy home.”

After they’d packed away the food, Veronica headed for the fair and they

stretched out on the blanket under the tree in the shade. Grayson pulled her into his arms, settled her so that her head was resting on his chest, and a deep feeling of comfort and contentment spread through her. Even though she knew it was probably a mistake, she snuggled up against him, and only a few minutes later, she was sound asleep.

CHAPTER 15



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson woke to the sound of Quinn snoring softly next to him, and was smiling before he even opened his eyes, the warmth of their connection spreading through him. Shifting just enough so that he could watch her sleeping, he felt a wave of tenderness wash over him. He knew that he was completely hooked, and that he was going to do everything he could to see that Quinn stayed exactly where she was, right next to him. There was no doubt in his mind that she was in some kind of trouble, and the deep instinct to protect her, fueled by his magic and the wolf inside him stirred to life, followed by frustration that she didn't trust him enough to tell him what was wrong.

Taking a deep breath, he told himself to be patient. Quinn wasn't used to depending on anyone but herself, life had taught her that lesson. Pushing her would be a mistake, but it was impossible to ignore the fact that she was in danger, and it was driving him crazy not to be able to help her when she so clearly needed it. Wondering how he'd managed to fall for such a strong and stubborn woman, he let out a long sigh, but knew that was part of the reason that he'd fallen and fallen hard.

A few minutes later, Ivy began to stir in her sleep, a sure sign she was about to wake up. Quinn opened her eyes, and smiled up at him when she saw him watching her, then started to sit up. He wrapped his arm around her a little tighter to keep her right where she was, then rolled her over so she was under him, leaned down and kissed her, relishing in the feel of her lips on his and the little sigh that escaped from her chest. He deepened the kiss, tasting

and teasing until Quinn was squirming underneath him and moaning softly in the back of her throat.

When he finally broke the kiss and looked down at her, her eyes were dazed with pleasure, and it took everything in him not to kiss her again. “Did you enjoy your nap?” he asked, grinning down at her. “I didn’t know that you snore.”

“I do not,” she said, pushing him off her. “And stop kissing me like that.”

“There are lots of other ways I could kiss you, but I’m not sure that’s a good idea in public,” he said, enjoying the blush that spread across her cheeks. “We might have to save that until we get home.”

Quinn’s cheeks got ever redder, “That’s not what I meant,” she said, a little breathless. “You have to understand, this is dangerous for both of us..... for all of us.”

There was a tremor of fear in Quinn’s voice, and he studied her for a second, sensing that she was talking about more than just them hurting each other, “What does that mean?” he asked. “What are you afraid of, Quinn? I know we haven’t known each other that long, unless you count the time we spent together when you were kids, but you can trust me. I just want to help. I know that it’s not easy for you to depend on other people, but you’re not alone anymore.”

She looked up at him, a mixture of sadness and regret on her face, “Grayson, you don’t understand, it’s not about trusting you,” she said, shaking her head and scooting away from him. “This is just something I have to do by myself. It’s the only way. I won’t bring you and Ivy into it.”

“Don’t you understand? We’re already involved,” he said, his frustration building. “You matter to me, Quinn, I care what happens to you.”

“Don’t say that,” she said, jumping to her feet and putting her hands over her ears. “You’re just making this harder on both of us. This is just the way it has to be.”

He wanted to shake the truth out of her, but took a deep breath instead and got to his feet, trying to think of another way to convince her, but just then his mother came walking up, “Oh good, you’re all awake, you wouldn’t believe what I saw.....” she said, then saw the look on his face. “I’m sorry, am I interrupting something?”

Quinn shook her head, “No, of course not,” she said, stepping away from him. “I was just going to take Ivy over to the bathroom and change her.”

Quinn grabbed Ivy, slipped the diaper bag over her arm, and headed

across the picnic ground to the bathrooms, “She’s driving me crazy, Mom,” he said. “I didn’t think this was the way it was supposed to be.”

His mother laughed, “There’s nothing easy about falling in love,” she said, patting him on the back. “You’re just going to have to be patient with her.”

“I’m trying, but she’s in trouble, Mom,” he said, turning to look at her. “She’s running from something, but she won’t tell me what it is. She’s scared, I can sense it, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“She has to learn to trust you, son,” his mother said. “I think that’s one of the hardest things for all of us, but especially for Quinn. She was let down as a child, and not just by her parents.”

“She says it’s not a matter of trust,” he said. “She thinks she’s protecting us by not telling me.”

“That does make things a bit more difficult,” his mother said. “Do you think it’s possible that she’s in that much danger? I mean, how much trouble could she be in?”

“Now you see my problem,” he said with a sigh. “I have no way of knowing if she won’t tell me.”

“Give her some more time, Grayson,” his mother said. “I’m afraid that’s all you can do.”

Quinn

Quinn hoped that when she got back, Grayson wouldn’t start questioning her again. She’d come so close to telling him she’d had to bite her tongue, but she couldn’t put him or Ivy in danger. She had no idea how much time she had before Mr. Smith found her, but it was clear that he wasn’t going to give up, and if he really started digging, it wouldn’t be long before he found his way to Prospect. She needed to be gone by then.

“I wish I could stay with you, Ivy,” she said, feeling tears sting her eyes. “But that would be selfish of me. You and your dad might get hurt, and I’d never be able to forgive myself.”

Ivy reached for her, cooing as if to comfort her, and she couldn’t help but smile, “I love you too,” she said, then blew a raspberry on the baby’s stomach, making her laugh. “Let’s go see what your dad is up to. He’s making it very hard for me to walk away, but I don’t have any other choice, a very bad man is after me.”

Ivy's face clouded over and she started to fuss, "Okay, we won't talk about it," she said, picking her up. "For the rest of the day, we'll just pretend that everything is fine. Is that better?"

The baby snuggled into her arms, happy again, and she couldn't help but laugh, "I must really be losing it," she said, shaking her head. "Now I'm acting like you can understand me. Come on, let's go find your dad."

Walking back across the picnic grounds, she decided that she'd make the most of what was left of the day. Tomorrow would be soon enough to figure out what she was going to do. Her time in Prospect was coming to an end much sooner than she would have liked, but the truth was, it might have been for the best. She'd been having too many thoughts of staying.

It was time to move on, time to see a new part of the world, maybe even venture out of the United States for a change, she thought, feeling none of the excitement she usually felt. For the first time she was going to regret leaving someone behind, but that was just the price she had to pay for her freedom. The pain would fade, and the wounds would heal in time, and the next time she'd be more careful.

When she and Ivy got back, Grayson and Veronica were waiting for them, "Are you ready to go to the carnival?" Grayson asked, a smile on his face, his earlier frustration gone. "Mom is going to take Ivy home with her now. We'll pick her up on our way home."

Veronica took Ivy, "Come on little lady, you and I are going to have some fun of our own this evening," she said. "Your dad and Quinn want some adult time."

They helped Veronica back to her car, packed everything into the trunk, waved them off, then stood in silence, watching the car disappear down the road. "I'm sorry about earlier," she finally said, hating the tension between them. "I know you think I'm being stubborn....."

Grayson turned to her, then surprised her by pulling her into his arms, "I'm just worried about you, Quinn," he said. "You matter to me; no one has ever affected me the way you do, and I don't know what to do about it."

"I wish more than anything that things could be different, but they aren't," she said. "But maybe for tonight we could pretend that there's nothing standing between us and just have a good time. It was so sweet of you to bring me here, and I don't want to ruin it by fighting with you."

He looked down at her, then let out a long sigh, "I can't say no to you," he said. "Another confusing development," he said. "Fine, you win, we'll

ignore it for tonight, but that's not going to last, Quinn."

She stretched up on her toes and gave him a big kiss, "Thank you, Grayson," she said. "I know it's a lot to ask, but I want to think about something else for a few hours."

"Well, then, let's go make ourselves sick on the rides," he said, taking her hand and leading her toward the bright lights and music of the fairway. "What do you want to ride first?"

The sun had been down for several hours when they finally made it to the Ferris wheel. Quinn's arms were full of the stuffed toys Grayson had won playing the games, and she was exhausted, but the sight of her favorite ride gave her a little boost of energy.

"This ride was always my favorite. Toby and I would save it for last, sometimes even ride it twice if we weren't ready to go home yet," she said, looking up at the blinking lights, a smile on her face. "This would be the perfect way to end the night, don't you think?"

"I couldn't agree more, except for the part about the night ending," Grayson said, taking her hand and leading her over to the line. "We might have to ride it twice."

As soon as they were seated, Quinn slid over as close as she could to Grayson and snuggled into his arms, surprising him for a second, but then he pulled her closer. She planned to make the most of their last few minutes together, and wanted to remember the magic of the night for the rest of her life. The moon was almost full, the stars shone brightly in a clear sky, and she closed her eyes for just a second to imprint the image on her brain, then looked over at Grayson.

He was watching her, a look of tenderness on his face that made her heart begin to pound, and when his mouth came down on hers, she didn't resist. She wanted the kiss as much as he did. When she began to kiss him back, the passion between them burst to life, and she didn't fight it, but instead she welcomed the warmth and reveled in the way her body responded to his. They sailed round and round on the ride, the world around them melting away as they feasted on each other, then came to a stop at the top of the ride and sat there suspended above everything.

Desperate for air, they finally parted, and she looked around, "Oh, Grayson, it's so beautiful," she said. "Everything looks so much smaller from up here."

The ride started moving again, and she leaned over to watch the ground

coming at them, sucking in a shocked breath when she saw a familiar figure standing at the entrance to the carnival. Unable to believe what she was seeing at first, she stared at the lone figure dressed all in black, then sat back in her seat when his head swiveled her way, afraid that he was going to see her.

Heart pounding, she watched as Mr. Smith began to walk around the carnival, aware that they were going to have to get off the ride in just a few seconds, fear and panic making it hard to think. The ride came to a stop at the bottom, and the bar that had been keeping them safe slowly lifted. She jumped up, grabbed Grayson's hand, and pulled him down the metal steps, her only thought of escape.

CHAPTER 16



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson thought at first that Quinn was joking around, that she was pretending that she couldn't wait to get him alone after that last kiss, but when he saw the fear in her eyes, he pulled her to a stop. "Quinn, what's wrong?" he asked, tipping her chin up so he could look in her eyes. "You look terrified, and you're shaking. What happened?"

"Nothing, I mean.....I just saw someone I don't want to run into," she said, shrugging her shoulders, clearly trying to hide how rattled she was. "I should have said something instead of taking off like that, sorry. Can we go now? I'm really tired. It's been a long day; thank you for bringing me."

"Hold on, you forgot your stuffed toys. I'll grab them," he said, stepping away but not missing the way she was scanning the crowd. "Here we go. Now we can go home."

They started for the truck, Quinn walking a few steps in front of him, her eyes still scanning the crowd, and the frustration was back, making him want to shake her again. When they were in the truck, she put on her seatbelt, locked her door, let out a long sigh of relief, closed her eyes, and rested her head on the headrest, her body finally relaxing.

He sat watching her until she opened her eyes and looked over at him, "I'm still not going to tell you, so don't even ask," she said. "Let's just go home."

Jamming the keys in the ignition, he started the truck put it in gear, wishing he could think of a way to force her to tell him, his frustration growing with each mile they drove. Quinn did her best to ignore him, her

entire body turned away from him, the message quite clear that she didn't want to talk to him, and he knew that he was close to snapping.

"Did it ever occur to you that as Ivy's dad, I deserve to know what's going on?" he said. "If you're in some kind of danger and something happens when you're with Ivy, she might get hurt."

"Don't you think I've already thought of that?" she said, looking over at him, her face full of worry. "I keep telling myself she'll be safe, that nothing will happen, but now I'm not so sure. I think it might be better if I left. I can go stay at the hotel. It would be safer for you and Ivy if I wasn't living at the ranch. I could still come and watch her for you, I guess.....I don't know....."

"Or you could tell me what's going on, and we could figure it out together," he said. "That's what people who care about each other do, Quinn. There's nothing wrong with asking for help."

She turned away and looked out the window again, "I'm not going to tell you, so stop asking," she said. "I won't leave you without someone to watch Ivy, but only for next week. After that, I have to be on my way. I was never going to stay in Prospect. You knew that, Grayson."

He was surprised to find they were already home and turned onto the dirt road that led to the ranch, "So, that's it?" he asked. "You're just going to pack up and leave?"

Quinn didn't answer until they were parked in front of the house, "It's the only way," she said. "I know you won't believe me, but it's not what I want either. It's just what I have to do."

She got out of the truck before he could say anything, started for the house, then stopped when she saw a man sitting on the porch, "There you two are," Steve, his ranch manager, said while getting to his feet. "I didn't mean to scare you, but Grayson, we've got a problem that can't wait until morning."

Quinn let out a ragged breath, then shivered before turning around and coming back over to the truck, "I'll take Ivy upstairs and put her to bed," she said, her voice trembling. "I'm sure she's tired, and it sounds like Steve can't wait. Thank you again for a wonderful time; I'll remember it always."

He watched her walk away, frustrated and angry that she wouldn't listen to reason, then looked over at Steve, who was waiting for him anxiously, "What's so important it couldn't wait until tomorrow?" he demanded, wishing he could go after Quinn, then saw the look on his friend's face.

“Sorry, it’s late, and I’m tired. We had a long day, and that woman is so stubborn I could.....”

Twenty miles away, Mr. Smith was making one final round of the carnival. He was not the least surprised that he hadn’t seen Quinn Murphy in the crowds, but he was finally ready to find a place to sleep for the night. After eighteen hours on the road, he’d been too keyed up to sleep, and the welcoming lights of the fair had drawn him in, a good diversion to give him some time to relax.

It had also been a good learning experience, he decided as he walked back towards the parking lot. He stuck out like a sore thumb here, his black clothes a warning beacon announcing that he was a stranger. The last thing he wanted to do was attract attention. After a good night’s sleep, his next stop would be a clothing store, and then he’d push onto Prospect and come up with a good story to explain his visit to town.

He already knew that there was only one hotel in the tiny town. If Quinn Murphy had run home, it wouldn’t take him long to find her, and then he’d make up his mind how to dispose of her. It wasn’t going to be a job he enjoyed, but he couldn’t risk that she’d expose him, and he couldn’t have anyone walking around who could connect him to the apartment back in New York.

Quinn

After changing the baby and putting on her pajamas, Quinn settled down in the rocking chair with her and began rocking her to sleep, taking comfort in the warm bundle in her arms. Ivy reached up and stroked her face with her tiny little hand, smiling up at her, then snuggled deeper into her arms with a contented sigh, closed her eyes and fell asleep, nearly breaking Quinn’s heart when she thought about leaving her. She rocked the baby for a long time, putting off what she knew she had to do for just a little longer, but finally got to her feet and put the baby in the crib.

After giving her a kiss on her head, she went downstairs to her room, pulled out her phone and Willie’s business card, punched in the numbers before she could change her mind, then listened to it ringing. When it started to look like he wasn’t going to answer her heart sank. Willie was her best hope for coming up with enough money to change her identity. Without a big payoff, it could take years to raise that much money, years of running and

hoping that she wouldn't be caught.

She was just about to hang up when the call went through, "This is Willie," he said. "What do you want?"

"This is Quinn Murphy, the woman from the bar, the one you said could go professional," she stammered. "I changed my mind. I would like you to arrange a game for me, and the sooner, the better."

"Well, how about that? You're the last person I expected to hear from, little lady," Willie said, his voice suddenly dripping with honey. "I'm so glad you called. This is such an unexpected surprise, I'm a little overwhelmed."

She didn't believe his act for a second, "Cut the crap, Willie," she said. "This isn't my first time around the block. Do you have a game for me or not?"

"It wouldn't hurt you to be a little nicer," Willie whined. "I'm doing you a favor, after all."

"Sorry if I was a short with you," she said with a sigh. "I'm not exactly happy about this, but that's not your fault."

"That's better," Willie said. "Give me a couple of days to pull something together. I should be able to have a little gathering ready by Wednesday night. Will that work for you, your highness?"

"You can't make it any sooner?" she asked. "I'm in a bit of a hurry."

"These things take time," he said. "Besides, this will give you a few days to practice. This isn't just any game, sweetheart, this is the real thing, and you'd better be prepared."

"I'll be ready," she said. "You just tell me where and when, but it has to be after six o'clock. I have to work until then."

"I'll text you the time and directions once I have the details worked out," Willie said. "You might want to think about quitting that job. You won't need it after the game, I promise you that."

The line went dead and she shivered, a bad feeling in her stomach, but she pushed it away. She needed to disappear, and Willie held the key to making that happen. No matter how much the thought of what she was going to do scared her, she didn't have any choice. Mr. Smith would find her if she stayed in Prospect. But Willie's words still echoed through her mind, and she found herself shivering again, the feeling that she couldn't completely trust him joining the sense of unease.

Promising herself that she'd be on her guard the entire time, she got ready for bed, climbed under the covers, and forced herself not to think about

Grayson and Ivy. She'd have time to mourn her loss once she was gone and she knew they were safe. It was an indulgence she couldn't afford right then, a sure way to knock herself off her game, and she needed to win. She fell asleep dreaming of playing pool and tossed and turned all night, reliving the night she'd made the biggest mistake of her life.

When she woke the next morning, Grayson and Ivy were already out in the kitchen, and she groaned, not sure she could face his questions again. She dressed slowly, hoping that if she stalled, he wouldn't have time to pester her before he had to go to work, but when she stepped out of her room, he was waiting for her. He shoved the baby into her arms, looked pointedly at the clock on the wall, then stomped off and slammed out of the back door without saying a word.

Feeling the sting of his rejection, she carried the baby over to her highchair and strapped her in, "Just let me have some coffee, and then we'll have some breakfast," she said. "Your dad is mad at me, but he'll get over it. A few months from now, you'll both have forgotten me, and life will go on. You'll see, everything is going to be fine."

Saying the words out loud made them easier for her to believe, and then she put it all out of her, shoving all the fear and worry, all the sadness and sense of loss to the back of her mind. Ivy became her entire focus for the day. They played and took a long walk, and while the baby was sleeping, she cleaned the kitchen and made dinner, determined to stay busy enough that she couldn't obsess over what she was about to do.

When Grayson came in for dinner, his face streaked with dirt, the smell of the outdoors still clinging to him, she had to fight the urge to run to him, to dump all her troubles on him. "Dinner is ready," she said instead, handing Ivy over to him. "I picked up some shifts at the bar this week. I have to go, or I'll be late."

"Thanks for cooking, I appreciate it," he said, then turned away from her. "Come on, little lady, Daddy needs to get cleaned up for dinner. You can come with me."

It felt like a piece of her heart had just shriveled up and died, the pain was just as sharp as she knew it would be, but she took a deep breath and turned away from the sight of Grayson walking away from her. Forcing herself not to think about how easy it would be to call him back and say the words he wanted to hear, she got her things and got out of the house before he could come back, sure that she'd never survive seeing the pain and confusion in his

eyes again.

CHAPTER 17



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson turned into the diner's parking lot, pulled into his usual spot, then turned to let Ivy out of her car seat, shaking his head when he realized she wasn't there. He was in no mood for an emergency meeting of the single dad's club, but as a loyal and thankful member, he didn't have much choice but to make an appearance. His mom had been more than happy to watch Ivy at the last minute, and at first, he'd thought it might be good to get out of the house instead of spending the entire night worrying about Quinn.

Now he wasn't so sure, especially when he saw Jayce's truck parked in its usual spot right up front. The last thing he wanted was another round with his former best friend. He sat staring at the building for a second, debating going back home, but remembered the debt he owed the men inside and got out of the truck, determined to do what was needed and get out as fast as he could.

He ran into Grant coming through the front door, "What's going on?" he asked. "We've never had an emergency meeting before."

"It's not really an emergency," Grant said, "We just wanted to be sure we had as many members here as possible. We need everyone's input about some changes we want to make to the group."

He remembered hearing some talk over the last few weeks, "You're talking about the idea of opening the group up to all fathers, aren't you?" he asked. "I heard some of the guys talking about that at the last meeting."

"Noah and I have been working on a proposal," Grant said. "We want to

present it tonight.”

“Let me know if I can be of any help,” he said. “This group saved my life when Ivy showed up, and I couldn’t have done it without all of you.”

Grant headed for the back of the room where a table had been set up and he found a place to sit where he could see. He sat back with a sigh, hoping it didn’t take too long. When Jayce slid into the seat next to him, he looked over at him, and then started to get up, but his friend reached out and grabbed his arm to keep him from leaving, his face full of remorse, and he sat back down.

“I’ve been acting like a total jerk, and I deserved that swing you took at me,” Jayce said. “After you nearly broke my nose, I had a bit of a wakeup call, I guess you could call it. I’ve been wrong about Quinn all along. I’m sorry I didn’t see it before, but after a long and very painful talk with my mother, it’s pretty obvious she set my sister up as the bad guy. Most of what I believed to be the truth was all lies my mother told. I should have listened to Quinn, and I should have followed my gut.”

He studied Jayce for a second, “That’s great, but I’m not the one you should be telling,” he said. “You should be talking to Quinn.”

“I tried to. I went to your house, but no one is home,” Jayce said. “I was hoping you’d know where she is.”

“She’s working at the bar at night,” he said. “She’s been working every night this week.”

Jayce shook his head, “I heard she was working there, so I stopped there first,” he said. “She’s not working tonight.”

“Maybe you just didn’t see her,” he said, a bad feeling in his stomach. “Did you ask Toby?”

“I didn’t see Toby either, so I asked one of the bartenders,” Jayce said. “He said he hasn’t seen her all night.”

“They were probably in the office together or something,” he said, telling himself there was nothing to be worried about, but the bad feeling in his stomach was still there. “I’m sure she’s there. I’ll run over there with you. We won’t miss much of the meeting.”

When they walked into the bar, Toby was standing behind the bar and waved at them, “Hey boys, I thought you two were fighting,” Toby said. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re looking for Quinn,” he said. “She told me she had to work tonight.”

Toby shook his head, “I don’t have her scheduled until Friday night,” he said. “She was in here the last two nights, but she wasn’t working, she was.....well.....”

“What?” he demanded, nearly throwing himself over the bar. “Come on, Toby, we really need to find her.”

Toby looked over at the pool tables, “She swore me to secrecy, but she’s been hanging out with Willie, practicing her shots,” he said. “I tried to talk her out of whatever she’s been planning with him, but she wouldn’t budge. She said it was a matter of life and death, or something close to that.”

“Why didn’t you stop her?” he asked. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“She’s a grown woman, Grayson, I can’t control her,” Toby said. “I don’t like Willie any more than you do, but we don’t know that she’s in trouble.”

“You’re an idiot, and I’m about to shed blood in your bar, so brace yourself,” he said, then turned and stomped over to Willie, reached back, and drove his fist into his face. “Where is she?”

Willie tumbled off his stool and landed on the ground in a heap. He reached down and grabbed him by the front of his shirt and pulled him back to his feet, “Tell me where Quinn is right now, or I’m going to drag you outside and beat it out of you,” he said, getting right in his face. “I’m going to count to three, so you’d better make up your mind fast.”

“Hey, I was just doing my job,” Willie said. “Sebastian isn’t going to hurt her; he just wanted a rematch. The money was too good to pass up.”

Quinn

Quinn pulled into the parking lot of the old bar, her senses tingling, the feeling of danger around the old place palpable in the air as she cut off the engine. She sat looking at the building. The only reassurance she was in the right place was the line of cars parked in front of the old boarded-up entrance. It was easy to see why Willie had told her to go around back, but the thought of walking through the darkness made her shiver, and she thought again about just turning around and going home.

Telling Grayson the truth was beginning to look better and better, but she’d come this far, she had to see this through. If she got inside and didn’t like the look of things, she could just turn around and leave. At least, that’s what she told herself as she got out of the truck and began making her way through the tall weeds to the back door, her eyes roaming the shadows for

any sign of danger. There was a weak light over the back door, a tiny beacon in the darkness, and it was a relief to reach its feeble, flickering glow. She knocked on the door before she could change her mind, wincing when the sound seemed to echo back at her.

Suddenly very aware of how vulnerable she was, she started to back away, but the door was thrown open, "There you are, we were beginning to worry that you'd gotten lost," a man said, smiling at her. "I'm big Pete, and this is my game. Willie says good things about you, so this should be a great night."

A woman walked up behind him, "Get out of the way, Pete, you're probably scaring her to death. I can't believe Willie sent her out here on her own," she said, giving the big man a shove. "Come on in, honey, these boys wouldn't hurt a flea. I'm Bertha, by the way, big Pete's wife."

Feeling instantly at ease, she followed Bertha inside, surprised to find the place relatively clean, "It's a lot better on the inside than it is on the outside," the woman said as if she'd been reading her mind. "I was a bit surprised myself when we walked in. Can I get you a drink?"

"Just a ginger ale, thanks," she said. "I don't drink when I'm playing pool."

"That's smart, but you if you change your mind, let me know," Bertha said. "I'll just introduce you around, and then I'll get that drink for you."

Her confidence growing, she smiled at Bertha, "Thanks, I'm glad you're here," she confided. "I was a little nervous walking up. This place looks a little scary. I almost didn't come in."

"Can't say I blame you, but we have to keep these games hidden," Bertha said, leading her over to the pool table where five men were gathered. "The cops and whatnot, you know how it is. Okay, you all, this is Quinn. She's a lady, so I expect you to treat her like one."

She looked at the men gathered around the pool tables, but no one said a word, "Hi, it's nice to meet you all," she finally said. "Thanks for letting me join the game."

Greeted by only silence from the men, she began to get nervous again, but then Pete appeared, "Okay, now that we're all acquainted, let's get started," he said, rubbing his hands together, an evil glint in his eye. "After all, we came here to play pool, not socialize, although there may be some of that later."

"Pool first, fun later," a voice from behind her said. "After all, Quinn has

come a long way to play this game. We wouldn't want to disappoint her by skipping that part, even if the outcome will be the same."

Her heart began to pound, and she slowly turned around to find Sebastian standing behind her, a triumphant look on his face, and cursed herself for being such an idiot. "Sebastian, you didn't have to go to all this trouble if you wanted a rematch," she said, hoping her voice wasn't shaking. "I would have gladly taken you on without all the fuss."

"Oh, but you see, this is about more than just a game of pool," he said, taking a few steps toward her. "You need to be taught a lesson, and I'm the man who's going to educate you with a little help from my friends."

Her first instinct was to make a run for the door, but it was already blocked by one of the men, and she looked around for another way out, panic welling up inside her when she realized she was trapped. Forcing herself to calm down, she took several deep breaths and looked back over at Sebastian, noticing for the first time the insane look in his eyes. Feeling like history was repeating itself and she might not come out alive this time, she walked over and picked up a pool cue.

"Let's start with me kicking your butt again and see where it goes from there," she said, wondering where Bertha had disappeared to, then realized the other woman must have known what was going on and wouldn't be any help. "You went to a lot of trouble to prove that you can beat me. What are you waiting for?"

"I wouldn't be in such a hurry," Sebastian said. "You aren't going to like what's going to happen when the game is over. In fact, I'm fairly certain it's not going to be a pleasant experience for you. But the boys and I are going to enjoy ourselves. I've been thinking about this since you cheated me that night at that pathetic bar; now you're going to pay for what you did."

"You keep saying that," she said, deciding she wasn't going to go down without a fight, "but I don't see you doing anything."

Sebastian walked over and grabbed a pool cue, "Let's play, you rack them, and I'll take the first shot," he said. "And I'm going to be watching you, so don't try anything funny."

"I don't cheat like you do," she said, walking to the end of the pool table, "I don't have to."

CHAPTER 18



*** GRAYSON ***

Hangiing onto the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles were turning white, Grayson kept his eyes on the road as they streaked through the darkness, each second feeling like an hour as they rushed to the old abandoned bar. He'd left Willie bleeding on the barroom floor, blubbering about calling the cops, and rushed out to his truck, only vaguely aware of Toby and Jayce following him, then sped out of town, Toby giving him direction from the passenger seat. Jayce was silent in the back seat, but he could feel the tension radiating off of him, and felt sure that his friend had learned his lesson.

"If something happens to Quinn, I'll never forgive myself," Jayce said, echoing his thoughts. "Are you sure we can trust Willie?"

"We don't really have any choice," he said. "I just hope we're not too late."

"We're almost there," Toby said. "Watch for a dirt road on the right, then we should find the bar about a mile further. We'll be there in ten minutes at most."

Those ten minutes felt like an eternity, but the bar finally came into view, sitting all alone in a patch of trees, and he pulled over, cut the lights, then the engine. "We're going in on foot from here," he said. "We'll have a better chance of not being detected if we shift and split up. It looks like the front door is boarded up, so there must be a back entrance. There might be guards. If you run into one, take him out and move toward the back door. I'll take care of anyone there, and then we'll all go in together."

“Got it,” Toby said. “Are you sure you don’t want to call the clan for backup?”

He shook his head, “There’s no time, she’s been in there with them for at least an hour,” he said. “We have to go in now.”

“Grayson, I can’t.....that is I’ve never.....” Jayce fumbled for words. “I’ve never shifted, my mom thought it was.....low class, she made my dad stop after they were married, and forbid us boys from ever doing it. I want to help, but I don’t know if I can.”

He turned in his seat and looked back at Jayce, “No wonder you’re so screwed up,” he said, shaking his head. “Look, I wish we had more time to work through this, but the bottom line is that it’s what you’re supposed to do, it’s what our bodies want to do. Open yourself up to it, and it should come naturally, that’s the best I can do for you. If you want to stay behind, I’ll understand, but we have to go now.”

Three men stepped out of the truck, but only a few minutes later, three wolves slunk away, finding the deepest shadows and made their way toward the bar, their eyes glowing just a little in the darkness. After watching Toby and Jayce head in different directions around the building, he started toward the side of the building, following Quinn’s scent through the tall weeds until he spotted a faint light shining over the back door. Crouching in the shadows, he waited, watching and listening for any sign that there were guards, but he was greeted with only silence and finally made his way toward the light.

Only a second later, Toby and Jayce appeared from around the other side of the building, and together they stood at the back door, listening to the sounds coming from inside the bar. He finally nodded his head, and the wolves disappeared as the men took their human form again, the power radiating off them enough to make the lightbulb above their heads burn brighter.

“There’s five or six of them,” he said. “It sounds like they’re playing pool, so hopefully we aren’t too late. “I’m going in first, you two follow me. Our number one priority is to get Quinn out of there, but if I get a chance to take Sebastian down, I’m going to take it.”

Toby and Jayce both nodded, he took a deep breath, let his magic flow just enough to enhance his strength, and kicked open the door, then after a quick look to make sure there wasn’t a guard, stomped inside. Toby and Jayce fanned out behind him as soon as they were inside, and he braced himself for the fight he knew was to come.

Quinn

Quinn walked around the pool table several times looking at the shot she was about to take from every angle, stalling for time, hoping for a last-minute rescue, but knew that it wasn't coming. She'd screwed up, let her independence turn her into a stubborn fool. She saw that now, she just wished it wasn't too late, that something horrible wasn't about to happen to her. There was no doubt in her mind that if she lived through what Sebastian had planned, she'd never be the same, she'd be broken for good, and nothing would change that.

Resigned to her fate but determined to put up a fight right to the end, she lined up the shot and knocked the ball into the pocket with a sharp crack that echoed through the empty building. When she stood up, Sebastian was glaring at her, his face a shade of bright red she didn't think was possible, and she gripped the pool cue in her hand a little tighter.

"Please tell me you didn't think that I'd let you win," she said, pleased that her voice wasn't shaking. "You made it very clear what was going to happen to me after our game, so just consider that my way of saying screw you, asshole."

"You little bitch," Sebastian screamed at her. "I'm going to kill you, but first, I'm going to do things to you that you've never even imagined, and my boys are going to watch while I do it. I might even share you with them. I haven't decided yet."

He lunged for her, but she was ready, "Not without a fight," she said, driving the pool cue into his groin, making him scream like a little girl and bend over to clutch his testicles. "And I'm a good fighter."

Without even missing a beat, she slammed the stick into his stomach, then brought it down over his back, pleased when Sebastian collapsed onto the floor and began to roll around in pain. Chest heaving, she looked around the room, calculating her chances of beating the other five men and getting out alive, deciding they weren't great when she saw the lust in their eyes.

Bracing herself, she held the pool cue in both hands and lifted it up in front of her, "I probably can't take all five of you out, but I'm sure as hell going to try," she said. "Who wants to try first?"

The men looked at each other, then Pete stepped forward, "I'll give you a go, I like my women feisty," he said. "Come at me, love, let's see what you've got."

Before she could make a move, the back door flew open with a loud crack, and Grayson came rushing into the bar, Toby and her brother right behind him. For a second, she let down her guard. Pete lunged for her, but she was faster and twisted easily out of his grasp before bringing the pool cue down on his head, knocking him to the dusty floor, where he lay perfectly still, clearly out cold.

“You bitch,” one of the four men said. “You’re going to pay for that.”

“I don’t think so,” Grayson said from the other side of the room. “She’s not alone any more, gentlemen, although that’s using the term loosely.”

“Stay out of this, buddy,” the man growled at Grayson. “She’s ours and we’re not willing to share. Just move on if you know what’s good for you.”

Grayson

“Now, that’s not going to happen, I think we both know that,” he said, taking a few more steps toward Quinn. “We could stand here trading insults for a while, trying to prove who’s tougher, or we could get right to it. But I just want to warn you, you’re messing with a very pissed off shifter right now, so think really hard about what you want to do.”

“Screw you, I’m not afraid of your kind,” the man said. “Shifter or human, I’ll beat the crap out of you and take your woman. I might even let you watch while I take her right here on the floor.”

Grayson shook his head, “I told you I wasn’t going to let you do that,” he said, then looked behind him at Toby and Jayce. “Let’s get this over with so we can go home. It’s been a long day.”

“I’m ready when you are,” Jayce said, a big smile on his face. “This should be fun.”

Quinn let out a little gasp, and he looked over at her, “Sweetheart, why don’t you go wait outside? We won’t be long,” he said. “You might not want to see this.”

She shook her head and took a better grip on the pool cue, “I’m not going anywhere,” she said, her voice getting stronger the longer she looked into his eyes. “I’m not walking away from this fight.”

“There probably won’t be much of a fight,” he said, shrugging his shoulders, deciding that if she wanted to see the other side of him, this was the time. “Just remember that it’s me inside the wolf. Nothing will have changed on the inside, only the outside will look different.”

“Let’s go, puppy dog,” the man said. “I’ve got a kennel at home that’s just the right size for you.”

He looked over at Quinn one more time, then let his magic flow, enjoying the moment when he shed his human form and power surged through him. Only a second later, he felt a rush of power join his and knew that Toby and Jayce had shifted as well, and he began advancing on the men, his teeth bared, a low growl coming from deep in his chest. Quinn gasped again and stumbled back a couple of steps, before regaining her balance and tensing her muscles for an attack.

“Holy shit,” the man said, a look of fear replacing the menace in his eyes. “Sebastian said they turned into dogs, but that isn’t a dog, that’s a wolf. Screw this, I’m getting out of here.”

The other three men didn’t move, just stood staring at the three wolves, little whimpers coming from their throats, and Quinn started making her way over to him. “I think we can leave now,” she said, reaching out a trembling hand to touch his head. “It really is you in there.”

He rubbed his head on her hand, warmth spreading through him, then turned and walked out of the bar, Quinn’s hand on his neck. When they got outside, he slowly suppressed his magic until the wolf form faded away, leaving him human again, then looked down at Quinn, still afraid that she was going to reject him. She reached up and stroked his cheek, then shook her head before throwing herself into his arms and bursting into tears.

Sweeping Quinn up into his arms, he started for the truck, “Let’s get out of here,” he said. “I think we need to find someplace to spend the night.”

Quinn

Quinn wanted to make the tears stop, but they wouldn’t, the reality of how close she’d come to those men doing terrible things to her thundering through her mind now that she was safe. She was only vaguely aware of Grayson climbing into his truck. She felt the truck moving but could only cling to him, letting his warmth soak into her frozen body. When the tears finally dried up, she kept her face buried in his chest, unable to look up at him, knowing that she’d see disappointment and hurt in his eyes.

It was so obvious now that she should have told him what was going on, so clear to her that she should have trusted him to help her, and she didn’t know if she could ever face him again. Her independence had almost cost her

dearly. Her stubborn refusal to accept help and believe that someone cared enough about her to want to help had almost ruined everything.

When the truck finally came to a stop, she lifted her head and looked up at Grayson, her heart sinking when she saw the steely look on his face. "I'm sorry. I should have told you that I was in trouble," she said. "I shouldn't have tried to fix things on my own, but I didn't want you to get hurt."

"Well, as you can see, I'm pretty tough," he said without looking at her. "We'll talk about his later."

"I'll go get us a couple of rooms," Toby said, looking over at them, then back at Jayce. "Unless you want your own."

"I'll stay with Quinn," Jayce said.

"She's staying with me," Grayson said, the tone of his voice making it clear no one should argue. "Quinn and I need to talk."

She was tempted to point out that it should be her choice, but looked up at Grayson and decided to keep her mouth shut. "Fine," Jayce said. "I'll share with Toby then; I don't really want to be alone."

"Okay, I'll be right back," Toby said, jumping out of the truck. "Maybe someone should think about finding us something to eat. I'm sure Quinn is hungry after all that, and I haven't had my dinner yet."

"I'll do it. There's a diner right across the street," Jayce said, then hesitated. "Quinn, I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I was a real jerk, and I should have listened to you."

She looked back at her brother, a confusing mixture of emotions making her a little dizzy, "I'm sorry, Jayce, but I can't do this right now," she said, shaking her head. "I need some time."

"Okay, I understand," he said, his face full of disappointment. "A life time of wrong can't be fixed with an apology."

CHAPTER 19



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson opened the hotel room door with one hand, Quinn still in his arms, carried her inside, then slammed the door closed with his foot and forced himself to put her down. She swayed for a second, then found her balance, but wouldn't look up at him, "Look at me, sweetheart," he said, reaching down and tipping her chin up. "I'm angry at you, but that can wait for later. Right now, I just want to make sure that you're okay. Those men didn't hurt you, did they?"

"No, none of them got close enough to touch me," she said, finally looking into his eyes. "How did you know? How did you find me?"

"I ran into Jayce at a single dad's club meeting. He was looking for you to apologize, and when I suggested the bar because you were supposed to be working, he told me you weren't there," he said, a hard edge in his voice. "When we got to the bar, Toby squealed, and I beat the truth out of good old Willie."

"I'm sorry, Grayson, I should have told you what was going on," she said. "I made a huge mistake; I can see that now."

He studied her for a second, then let out a long sigh, "You still haven't told me anything. I don't know what or who you're running from. I have no idea why you were so desperate you willingly put yourself in that much danger," he said. "But you look like you're about to collapse, and your shirt is covered in blood, so I think that discussion is going to have to wait. You need a shower and a change of clothes before we talk, then you're going to tell me everything, Quinn, every single detail. Is that clear?"

She nodded her head, tears in her eyes, “I don’t deserve you, Grayson,” she said. “I’ve done nothing but push you away, but you’re still here, caring about me.”

Unable to stop himself, he pulled her into his arms and crushed his mouth to hers, then ran his tongue over her teeth until she opened her mouth to him with a sigh. He kissed her until she was trembling in his arms, then let her go and stepped away from her, the passion he’d unleashed making the room buzz with electricity. Quinn swayed on her feet, her eyes filled with wonder, and he forced himself to turn away from her, afraid that he wouldn’t be able to resist taking her right then and there before they talked.

“I’ve got a change of clothes in the truck,” he said, his voice husky with suppressed need. “I’ll go get it while you take a shower.”

As soon as he got outside, he took deep breaths of the cold night air, then stood, letting the breeze cool his heated skin, before knocking on the room next door. “I need the keys to the truck,” he said. “I need to get some clean clothes for Quinn.”

“Is she okay?” Toby asked, digging the keys out of his pocket. “You’re not going to……I don’t know……”

“I’m not going to hurt her, if that’s what you’re thinking,” he said. “I’m just going to talk some sense into her. She scared the hell out of me, Toby, took ten years off my life. I don’t know what I’d do without her, and I don’t know how to make her understand that.”

“Have you tried telling her?” Toby asked. “Sometimes with Quinn the only way to get your point across is to tell her straight out. It didn’t work out for me the time I tried it, but you’re different.”

“You’re in love with her, aren’t you?” he asked, the truth hitting him. “I’m sorry, Toby, I didn’t see it before now.”

Toby shrugged, “It clearly wasn’t meant to be, not the way you two are,” he said. “It’s okay. Maybe I’ll be able to move on now, but I’d appreciate it if this stayed between us, though.”

“I won’t say a word,” he said. “Quinn doesn’t ever need to know.”

When he got back into the room, Quinn was sitting on the bed dressed only in a towel, and the only thing that held him back was the food in his hands. “I ran into Jayce on my way here,” he said. “He’s got enough food for an army, and I’ve got some clothes you can wear for now.”

Quinn took the clothes he handed her without a word and went back into the bathroom. When she came out, he had to suppress a smile when he saw

her in his sweats and tee-shirt. “It’s hard to stay mad at you when you’re dressed like that,” he said, then sighed. “Come over here and sit down, we can talk while we eat.”

“I’m not really hungry,” she said, taking a seat at the little table by the window. “But you go ahead.”

He put the cheeseburger and fries down in front of her anyway, screwed the cap of a big bottle of water, put that in front of her as well, then sat down. “Okay, start at the beginning, and don’t leave anything out,” he said. “I’ll eat and you talk. You’ll feel better after you tell me, I promise.”

“None of this was my fault,” she said, feeling like a kid in trouble, then saw the look on his face. “Okay, maybe tonight was my fault, but I was desperate. There’s a man after me, and he wants to kill me. I need fifty thousand dollars to change my identity and disappear, and I thought Willie had the perfect way for me to get it.”

It took him a second to absorb everything she’d said, then shook his head, “You can be stubborn and annoying, but I can’t imagine what you could have done to make someone want to kill you,” he said, then laughed. “Never mind, I’ve seen you in action.”

“Grayson, this isn’t funny,” she said, reaching for the water and taking a big drink. “This guy is a hitman, an assassin. I was housesitting for him and accidentally fell asleep. When I woke up, he was home, and I heard him talking on the phone about making a kill. I panicked and tried to hide in the closet and found a secret compartment in the wall full of weapons. I thought maybe leaving the city would be enough, but I saw him the other night at the carnival.”

He sat back in his chair, a bit stunned, “Okay, that was a bit more than I expected,” he said. “Are you sure about this, Quinn?”

She nodded, “I wish I wasn’t, but I saw him, Grayson,” she said, the fear he’d seen so many times back in her eyes. “I didn’t want to tell you because I was afraid it would put you and Ivy in danger. I thought I’d just disappear and that would be the end of it, now I don’t know.....Mr. Smith could be in Prospect right now.”

“Well, then it’s a good thing we’re not there,” he said, sitting back in his chair. “I’m not going to let this guy hurt you, Quinn, but we’re going to need some help. If he’s as dangerous as you say he is, it’s going to take the entire clan to protect you.”

Quinn

Quinn looked down into her lap, the memory of the three men who meant the most to her suddenly becoming apex predators making her shiver, “Jayce told me that your mother wouldn’t let them shift,” Grayson said softly. “I hope I didn’t scare you earlier, but we really didn’t have any choice.”

“I thought all that talk about shifters was just that, talk, more of my mother’s lies,” she said, looking up at him. “She always called them monsters. She used it against my brothers any time she was mad at them, so I just assumed.....”

“We’re not monsters, Quinn,” he said. “We’re just people like everyone else, with a little magic running through our blood. It’s a special gift that we treasure and respect, and there’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I’m not afraid. I don’t think I was ever scared, awed is more like what I was feeling,” she said, studying his face. “I knew you wouldn’t hurt me; I could see it in your eyes.”

Grayson got up from his chair and pulled her into his arms, the look in his eyes making her heart flutter in her chest. “There are some things about being a shifter that do make me a little different than other people. Since your mother refused to see what we have as a gift, you may not know about them,” he said, stroking her cheek and sending her pulse racing. “Wolves mate for life, and so do we, Quinn. The magic inside us recognizes our perfect mate, and for me, that’s you. I could never hurt you, you’re like the other half of me.”

The truth of his words was so plain to see in his eyes that she couldn’t breathe for a second, “I almost messed everything up,” she said, tears stinging her eyes. “Can you ever forgive me for being so stupid?”

“Don’t forget stubborn,” he said, but there was a little smile on his face. “I’ll forgive you, but only on one condition: no more hiding things from me, no more trying to solve all your problems on your own, and no more refusing help when you need it.”

“I think I can manage that,” she said. “I don’t deserve you, Grayson.”

“And no more saying things like that,” he said. “You’re an amazing woman, Quinn, strong and capable, with a heart as big as they come. I’m the one who is lucky to have you.”

“So, we’re really going to do this?” she asked. “It’s kind of scary, isn’t it?”

“A little, but I guess that’s the way falling in love is supposed to be,” he said, grinning down at her. “You’re not going to chicken out on me, are you?”

“Not on your life. In fact, I think there’s something that’s been long overdue,” she said, realizing that all the barriers between them were gone. “And it starts with this.....”

When she reached up and wrapped her arms around Grayson’s neck, he let out a groan and pulled her up against him, “I like where this is going,” he said, then dipped his head and kissed her until they were both breathless.

Her entire body throbbing with desire, she looked up at him, then slowly began to unbutton his shirt, anticipation making it hard to breathe. After shoving the shirt off his shoulders, she ran her hands over his chest, sighing at the feel of his warm skin under her fingertips, and felt the weeks of frustration melt away as the passion between them came to life.

Grayson pulled the oversized tee shirt over her head, his breath caught in his throat when he saw her naked breasts, then he reached out and cupped them in his hands, sending waves of pleasure racing through her. His thumb and fingers began to toy with her hard nipples, and her legs nearly gave way, forcing her to cling to him, and he took advantage of the moment, slamming his mouth down on hers in a kiss that touched her all the way to her soul.

Sweeping her up in his arms, he carried her over to the bed, laid her down, then stripped off the sweats he’d loaned her, and he stood over her, his eyes roaming over her body as a deep growl came rumbling from deep in his chest. She opened her arms to him in an invitation, desperate to feel his hands on her naked body, and he quickly stripped off his pants then joined her in the bed. His mouth found hers as his hands began to roam, and she could barely catch her breath as the waves of sensation washed over her, almost overwhelming her with their intensity.

His mouth followed the path of his hands, tasting and teasing until he’d explored every inch of her body, and she was writhing under him, desperate for more. He paused just long enough to look down at her, then slipped his hand between her legs and gently pushed them apart. When he began to stroke her swollen nub, her hips came up off the bed, and she was completely lost in the rush of pleasure that flooded her body. Grayson took her higher and higher, and when she tumbled over the edge, his mouth found hers in a kiss that only intensified the feeling and kept her floating in a cloud of pure sensation for several intensely wonderful minutes.

When she finally came floating back down, a deep throbbing need began to grow deep inside her, one she knew only he could satisfy, “Please, Grayson, I need you now,” she said. “I need you inside me.”

“Those are the sweetest words I’ve ever heard,” he said, slipping between her legs. “I’ve been waiting to hear them since the first time I kissed you. After tonight, you’ll belong to me forever, Quinn.”

His eyes locked on hers again, he grabbed her by the hips and with one powerful thrust, drove himself deeply inside her, his eyes glowing, a growl of satisfaction coming from deep in his chest. Quinn called out his name as her body accepted him, and a new and more intense feeling of pleasure spread through her, followed by the warmth of the connection between them. With every stroke of his powerful hips, Grayson took them higher and higher, until with a cry of his own, he took them over the edge and kept them suspended there for several minutes before he collapsed on top of her.

She welcomed his weight, the solid reminder that he belonged to her and would until the end of time, completely unaware that there were tears of joy running down her cheeks. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Grayson asked when he saw her crying. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“No, you didn’t hurt me. That was amazing,” she said. “I’m just so happy, I never thought I would find someone like you. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life alone.”

“You’re never going to be alone again, sweetheart,” he said, rolling her over on her back. “In fact, you’re going to get tired of having me around.”

“I don’t think that’s ever going to happen,” she said, grinning up at him. “But you’re welcome to give it a try.”

“Hmmm,” Grayson said, nuzzling her neck, his hand sliding down between her legs. “That sounded like a challenge, and you know how much I love a challenge.”

The response that popped into her mind was lost when his finger slipped between her folds and began to explore. Instead, she let out a long sigh of pleasure and gave herself over to the power of the passion they shared.

CHAPTER 20



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson woke just as the sun rose and watched Quinn sleeping in the early morning light, his heart nearly bursting with love, and for the first time since she'd told him about Mr. Smith, he spent some time thinking about the problem. He'd already come close to losing her once; he wasn't going to take that risk again, but it was hard to defend against an enemy he didn't know, and at this point, there was little they knew about the man.

One thing was clear, they couldn't face a cold-blooded killer on their own. They would need help from the clan, and the sooner he made a few phone calls, the better. Slipping out of bed so he didn't wake Quinn, he quietly got dressed, then grabbed his cell phone and left the room. Jayce was sitting on a bench between their rooms and jumped to his feet when he saw him, a mixture of anxiety and embarrassment on his face.

"Is Quinn okay?" he asked. "I was hoping she'd be ready to talk to me this morning, I feel so terrible, I....."

"Right now, we've got bigger problems. There's a hitman after Quinn. That's why she put herself in danger last night. She was trying to make enough money to change her identity and disappear," he said. "So, mending your relationship is going to have to wait until we've handled this guy."

Jayce stared at him for a second, "A hitman?" he finally asked, then shook his head. "Never mind, what are we going to do?"

"I'm going to call the clan security and put the word out for everyone to watch for this guy to show up in town," he said. "Then I'm going to get Quinn some breakfast, and we'll figure out what the next step is. I don't like

the idea of just sitting around waiting for this guy to strike, but at this point, I don't know what else we can do."

"We could hide her somewhere for a while," Jayce said, starting to pace. "That would keep her safe."

"But for how long? She can't hide forever," he said, shaking his head. "We have to find a way to get to this guy before he gets to her."

"Lure him out, you mean," Jayce said. "Trick him into going after her, then.....well, I don't know."

"Then we let the clan handle him," he said, warming up to the idea. "No matter how tough this guy is, a pack of wolves might be just enough to make him back off."

"You go make those phone calls, I'll get Toby up and fill him in," Jayce said. "I know that Quinn is mad at me, and she has every right to be, but I'm not going to let her down this time."

"Sometimes actions speak louder than words," he said, clapping his friend on the back. "I'd better make those phone calls. Quinn spotted this guy at the carnival last weekend over in Marshall, so he could already be in town."

When he came back with the food, Quinn sat up sleepily, her hair tousled from sleep, and for a second, it felt like his heart would burst with the love he felt for her. Setting the food and coffee he was carrying on the table with shaking hands, he tried to wrap his mind around the fact that she was finally his, and a burst of joy made his head swim just a little.

Quinn jumped out of bed and rushed over to him, "Grayson, are you okay?" she asked, wrapping her arms around him. "All the color just drained from your face, and you're shaking."

"I'm okay," he said, smiling down at her. "Especially with you standing naked in my arms."

Her face turned a bright shade of pink, and she started to pull away, "I should get dressed," she said. "I feel silly standing here with you dressed."

"Well, that's easy enough to fix," he said, stripping off his clothes. "Now we're both naked."

She laughed, "Breakfast is going to get cold if you keep looking at me like that," she said, pointing at the containers on the table. "And we missed dinner last night."

"We'll heat it up in the microwave," he said, swinging her up into his arms and carrying her over to the bed. "Besides, this will only take a few

minutes.”

It was half an hour before they sat down to eat, but neither cared that the food was cold, “What are we going to do about Mr. Smith?” Quinn asked. “He’s not going to give up until he finds me.”

“No, I don’t think he will either, but I bet he’s never come up against a clan of wolf shifters,” he said. “I’ve already got the security council working on it. If he’s in town, we’ll know. Prospect isn’t big enough for him to hide in. Jayce suggested that we find a way to draw him out, and then we’ll let the clan handle him. It will be up to them to decide what to do with him.”

“You mean, they might kill him,” Quinn said with a shiver. “I hate to be responsible for someone else’s death, Grayson.”

He reached across the table, “It’s you or him,” he said. “If killing him is what it takes to keep you safe, then I don’t see that we have any choice, but we’ll keep you out of it. I don’t want you anywhere near this guy anyway.”

Quinn was quiet for a second, “I’m not exactly wild about the idea of seeing him again either,” she said, pushing her empty plate away. “But I’m not sure hiding out is the answer either.”

“Let’s just take this one step at a time,” he said. “We need to give the security council enough time to find out if he’s in town.”

“So, we wait here?” she asked. “I hate the idea of hiding out in a motel room.”

“Yeah, it’s not exactly my idea of fun either,” he said. “But right now, it’s the best plan we have.”

Quinn

Quinn was cleaning up the mess from breakfast when there was a knock on the door. Startled, she let out a little scream and looked over at the bathroom where Grayson was taking a shower, feeling a bit silly. After looking through the peephole in the door, she opened it, glad to see Toby, but not sure she was ready to see her brother. He was holding a shopping bag and looked relieved when he saw her in one piece.

“Are you okay?” he asked, shoving the bag at her before she could answer. “I thought you might need a change of clothes. I hope I got the sizes right. I had to guess.”

“Thank you for everything you’ve done, Toby,” she said, taking the bag and giving him a hug. “I don’t know what I would have done without you.”

“I was afraid that you’d be mad at me for telling Grayson what you were up to,” Toby said, shaking his head. “I know you swore me to secrecy, but.....”

“Toby, you saved my life, I could never be mad at you,” she said. “If you hadn’t told Grayson, well..... I’m just glad you did.”

Toby studied her for a second, “Quinn, it’s none of my business, but Jayce is driving me crazy, so I’m going to stick my nose into it,” he said. “Will you talk to him, give him a chance to apologize again? He won’t shut up about it, and he’s becoming annoying.”

She laughed, “I’m sorry, Toby, that’s not really fair to you,” she said, giving him another hug. “Let me get dressed, and then I’ll talk to him.”

When she came out of the hotel room half an hour later, Jayce was waiting for her on the bench between their rooms. He jumped to his feet when he saw her, “Quinn, I’m so sorry,” he said before she could even take a step. “I should have been a better brother, I should have listened to you, I should have done so many things differently. Can you ever forgive me?”

“Well, you’re here, and that goes a long way toward making things better,” she said, walking over and hugging him. “Thank you for coming to my rescue. I wouldn’t have made it out of there without the three of you.”

“You were doing pretty good on your own,” he said, smiling down at her. “Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“Oh, I just picked it up here and there,” she said. “But what about you? You shifted, Jayce, you’ve never done that before.”

A little smile appeared on his face, “It was incredible, and I can’t wait to do it again,” he said, the grin on his face getting bigger. “I can’t even begin to describe how it felt, but it’s unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before, and I’m not giving it up. I think Mother was jealous, I think that’s why she made Dad stop and wouldn’t let us shift. I can’t believe it’s taken me this long to figure out the truth about her.”

She studied her brother for a second, “Better late than never,” she finally said, realizing that she wasn’t angry at him anymore. “She made my life miserable, but that’s all over now. I’m ready to put it all behind me and move on.”

“So, you’re still leaving?” he asked, clearly disappointed. “I hoped that.....well, since you and Grayson.....”

“I’m not going anywhere. Everything I want is in Prospect,” she said. “I’m afraid you’re going to be stuck with me for a long time.”

“We’re going to start over, Quinn,” Jayce said, pulling her into a big hug. “I’m going to be the kind of brother you deserve.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said. “And I want to get to know my niece. She’s almost five, and I’ve barely seen her.”

“I’m sure she’ll love that,” Jayce said. “She needs a woman in her life.”

Just then, Grayson came out of the hotel room, “It’s good to see you two talking, but we need to head back to town as soon as we can,” he said. “The council wants to see us right away. They want to know more about Mr. Smith, who is staying at the hotel in town, by the way. He’s been telling anyone who will listen that he’s a writer and doing research for a new book. It gives him the perfect excuse to wander around town and snoop.”

A wave of fear and panic shot through her, but she took a deep breath and pushed it away, reminding herself that she wasn’t alone. “Well, at least he made it easy to find him,” she said, then sighed. “I don’t suppose we could just talk to him and tell him to leave me alone?”

“If he’s come this far, I don’t think that is going to work, but we can suggest it to the council,” Grayson said, coming over and putting his arm around her. “It’s going to be okay, Quinn. We won’t kill him if we don’t have to, but I can’t say that option is off the table. He can’t come into our territory and threaten one of us. The clan won’t allow it. I’m afraid it’s a shifter thing.”

“We protect what’s ours, whether land or people,” Toby said, stepping out of his room. “Are you all about ready to go? The council meeting starts in an hour.”

They loaded back up into the truck and headed back to Prospect, her stomach churning the entire way at the thought of Mr. Smith walking around town looking for her. “We’re not going to let anything happen to you,” Grayson said, reaching out and taking her hand. “I know you’re worried and I don’t blame you, but I promise we’ll keep you safe.”

CHAPTER 21



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson led Quinn through the crowd of people, stopping occasionally to introduce her to someone on the council, then settled her on a bench in the front row. “I don’t think I’ll ever remember all these names,” she said, looking around the room. “Half the town must be here.”

“Do you still feel like you’re alone?” he asked, grinning at her. “Like it or not, you’re one of us.”

“I can see that,” she said. “I just feel bad that I caused all this trouble.”

“We haven’t had a good fight in a while,” a man sitting behind them said. “This should be fun.”

He turned around, “Henry, you’re always up for a good fight,” he said, shaking the other man’s hand. “You remember Quinn, don’t you?”

“Sure, you used to come into the gas station with Toby for sodas,” Henry said, grinning at Quinn. “You’ve grown up since the last time I saw you.”

Before Quinn could answer, the council started taking their seats at the front of the room, “Okay, everyone, let’s take our seats so we can get started,” Adam, the head of the council, said. “We don’t have all day. Some of us need to get back to work.”

Quinn looked over at him, “That’s Adam Miller,” he whispered. “He’s the head of the council and runs the feed yard south of town.”

When the room was quiet, Adam got to his feet, “First, I think we should bring everyone up to speed on the situation,” he said, then looked at them. “I’d like to have Quinn give us some background on this Mr. Smith, and then we’ll discuss our options for getting him out of town.”

Quinn looked over at Grayson, “It’s okay, just get up and tell them what happened,” he said. “Start at the beginning, and don’t leave anything out.”

Getting to her feet, Quinn took a deep breath, then in a clear voice, told the clan about her house-sitting job, falling asleep on the bed in the guest bedroom, Mr. Smith’s return home, and the cache of weapons she’d found. When she was finished, Adam asked her a few more questions, then thanked her, and let her sit down again.

“You did great,” Grayson whispered, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze.

“Now I’d like to hear from the security council,” Adam said. “Duke, why don’t you share your findings with us.”

An older man rose to his feet, “I had my people do some poking around, and Mr. Smith has three high-powered weapons with him, a handgun stashed in his car, and two rifles with scopes in his hotel room,” he said. “We’re assuming that he’s planning a long-distance strike, which would be typical for an assassin, but also makes it difficult for us to predict when or where he’ll try to go for the hit. Since we have an advantage that he isn’t aware of, the council feels that luring him out and pushing him to go after Quinn would be the best course of action.”

“Then we could control where and when he goes after her,” Adam said, nodding his head. “That could work. Do you have a plan in mind?”

“We’ve been working on that as well, and since the forest gives us our biggest advantage, we all agree we should use that against him,” Duke said. “If we lure him out of town and into the mountains, he’ll be not only outnumbered, but out of his element. A secluded cabin would be ideal, but a cave would do as well. Either way, we’ll have a long talk with our friend Mr. Smith when he arrives and hopefully convince him to leave town.”

“How do you plan to lure him out of town?” one of the council members asked. “Someone will have to lead him into the mountains. He won’t just go on his own.”

Duke looked over at Quinn, “We think the best bait would be exactly what he’s after,” he said, and his stomach sank. “It’s a risk that is more than worth the reward.”

“No way,” Grayson said, jumping to his feet. “We’re not using Quinn as bait. We have to figure out another way.”

“She’ll never be alone; you’ll be with her, and the rest of us will be there too,” Duke said. “I know how hard this will be for you, Grayson, but this

gives us control of the situation and the upper hand.”

“I’ll do it,” Quinn said, getting to her feet. “As long as Grayson is with me, and I know all of you are there backing us up, I’m willing to be bait.”

“Quinn, this isn’t a game, that guy wants to kill you,” he said, turning her to face him. “I can’t let you put yourself in danger.”

“I know exactly how dangerous Mr. Smith is, I looked into his eyes, and they were dead,” she said, shivering. “I just want this to be over, Grayson. I want to be able to walk around town without worrying that there’s someone out there with a gun pointed at me. I want to get on with my life; it’s time to put an end to this, and if that means I have to take a few risks, it will be worth it.”

“I’m not going to talk you out of this, am I?” he asked, looking into her eyes, then sighed when she shook her head. “Why do you have to be so stubborn and brave?”

“I guess that’s just who I am,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “But I wouldn’t be so brave if you weren’t going to be right there with me. You said you’d always protect me, and I believe you. Besides, I’m not completely helpless, just ask Sebastian.”

He laughed, couldn’t help himself, and then pulled her into his arms, “Why do I feel like I’m never going to win an argument with you?” he asked, then turned to the council. “We’ll do it, but nothing had better go wrong, or there’s going to be hell to pay.”

Quinn

Quinn took the last bag of groceries from Grayson and set them down on the table in the little cabin, then stood looking around for a second before shaking her head. “Toby is full of surprises since I got back,” she said. “First the bar, now this cabin. For someone who always said he wanted to live as far away from Prospect as he could, he sure did put down some roots.”

“He’s not the only one,” Grayson said, coming up behind her and wrapping his arms around her. “Seems to me you weren’t staying either, and now look at you.”

She turned in his arms and looked up at him, “I think that might have something to do with a very handsome shifter who somehow managed to steal my heart,” she said, grinning at him. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Who, me?” he asked, trying to play innocent. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Well then, maybe I should remind you,” she said, stretching up on her toes and kissing him. “Does that make you think of anything?”

“Hmmm... still in the dark,” he said, his eyes filled with desire. “Maybe there’s something else you could do to spark my memory.”

She started unbuttoning his shirt, “Well, let me see,” she said, shoving it off his shoulders. “There are several things I could try, but there’s one that is very appealing.”

Sinking to her knees, she pulled off Grayson’s boots, got back to her feet, and reached for the buckle on his belt, grinning up at him. “Something may be coming back to me,” he said, his voice husky, his eyes already beginning to glow. “But I’m not sure yet.”

Slipping the buckle free, she slowly unzipped his pants, freeing his already hard manhood, and Grayson growled deep in his throat, making her body respond, tightening and tingling in just the right places. Wrapping her hands around him, she stroked him several times before sliding his jeans slowly down over his hips and sinking back to her knees. When she took him into her mouth, Grayson’s groan of pleasure filled the little cabin, and a feeling of power rushed through her, giving her the confidence to continue.

She lavished him with attention, a thrill rushing through her each time he moaned until with a growl, Grayson pulled her to her feet, swept her up in his arms, and carried her over to the bed. After throwing her down onto the soft mattress, he ripped off her clothes, desire blazing in his eyes, then covered her body with his and kissed her until she was squirming beneath him. Trailing his hand down her stomach, he pushed her legs apart, then kissed his way down her body until he was crouched between her legs.

Running his hands up the inside of her legs, he lowered his head, then slid his tongue over her sensitive nib, and a rush of intense pleasure shot through her, stealing her breath. The second brush of his tongue made her suck in a lung full of air, then cry out as her body was overwhelmed with pure sensation, and all she could do was lie there as he lapped at her. He took her higher and higher until she tumbled over the edge, crying out his name, her entire body trembling and shaking with the power of what she was experiencing.

Before she was completely recovered, Grayson flipped her onto her stomach, pulled her up onto her hands and knees, then slipped between her

legs, using his knees to push them open farther. When she felt his throbbing manhood slip between her folds, she cried out as a new knot of pleasure began to form deep inside her, and anticipation thundered through her. Grayson grabbed her by the hips and drove himself into her with a growl that made the windows rattle, and she was filled with not just the pleasure of their joined bodies, but the joining of the souls.

Filled with the warmth of the love they shared, she cried out his name as he drove himself into her over and over again, climbing with him until with one final growl, he emptied himself inside her. Her orgasm flowed over her as his body throbbed and pulsed inside her, intensifying the sensation until she was completely swept away by the power of what they shared. When his body finally stilled, Grayson collapsed onto his side, taking her with him, but still deeply buried inside her, and pulled her up against his chest.

“I think my memory is finally coming back,” he said, nuzzling her neck. “But I have to warn you, I might just lose it again.”

She laughed, “Well, we can’t have that,” she said. “I’ll just have to keep reminding you.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said. “But it might take another sixty or seventy years, so I hope you’re dedicated.”

“Oh, I’m incredibly dedicated,” she said, looking at him over her shoulder. “And you know how stubborn I am.”

Grayson rolled her over on her back and leaned up on one elbow to look down at her, “I never thought I would say this to a woman, I never thought that I’d feel this way,” he said. “But I love you, Quinn, I love you more than I ever thought possible, and a lifetime of loving you won’t be enough.”

Tears stung her eyes, tears of happiness that she couldn't stop, “I love you too, Grayson,” she said. “I can’t imagine my life without you.”

He kissed her until they were both breathless, then looked down at her, “I want you to marry me, Quinn,” he said. “I want to tell the whole world that you belong to me and always will.”

She smiled up at him, “I can’t think of anything I would like more than to marry you,” she said. “I love you, Grayson, and I’ll never get tired of saying it.”

CHAPTER 22



*** GRAYSON ***

Grayson put the last plate back in the cabinet, hung the towel he'd been using up to dry, then walked over to where Quinn was standing at the window watching the sunset. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her up against his chest, "Do you think he's out there?" she asked, turning to look up at him. "It's a bit spooky thinking about it."

"Then let's not," he said, turning her around. "As frustrating as it is being in here, I feel better knowing that you're safe, but just in case, let's get away from the window."

"You're probably right, but I just wish we didn't have to sit here doing nothing," she said, letting him lead her into the living room. "It's driving me crazy."

"Let's build a fire and play a game or something," he said, looking at the stack of board games on a shelf. "I used to love to play games when I was a kid."

"Okay, that's better than sitting around waiting for something to happen," she said. "I could make us some popcorn. There's some in the cabinet."

"That sounds good. I'll just get the fire started," he said. "This will be fun, you'll see."

She rolled her eyes at him, then came over and gave him a kiss, "I'll be right back," she said. "Do you want something to drink?"

"A soda pop would be great," he said. "Thanks, sweetheart."

Quinn disappeared into the kitchen, and he heard her banging around as he laid the fire. He couldn't blame her for being anxious, he was practically

jumping out of his skin. Striking a match, he lit the paper under the kindling, then sat back and watched the wood begin to catch fire with a pleasant crackling sound. But a few seconds later, he started to get worried when he noticed that the smoke wasn't going up the chimney, and jumped to his feet, looking for a lever to open the flue.

By the time he found it, the cabin was filled with smoke, "Grayson, is everything okay out there," Quinn called. "There's a lot of smoke in here."

"I forgot to check and see if the flue was open," he said, flipping the lever. "It should go away in a second."

But the smoke was still pouring into the room from the fire, now burning brightly, and he knew that he had a problem. After flipping the lever back and forth a couple of times, he started looking for something to put the fire out, but there was nothing next to the fireplace, and his eyes were beginning to sting and burn. He started to use his foot to kick the fire apart, but realized it was too hot and backed up a couple of steps, knowing that water was the only thing that would put it out.

He turned to go into the kitchen just as there was a loud crash, and Quinn began to scream. The fire forgotten, he raced out of the living room just in time to see a man dressed all in black grab her and point a gun at her head. He froze just inside the doorway, watching the smoke pour out of the splintered back door, then looked back over at Quinn and the man.

"You can kill her, but it won't do you any good," he said, hoping his voice didn't betray him. "The entire town knows who you are and what you do. You won't get very far before they find you. We're willing to let you go on your way if you leave and never come back."

The man laughed, "You're not exactly in a position to bargain," he said, starting to back toward the broken door with Quinn. "The little lady and I are just going to take a little walk. Nothing for you to be worried about."

"You don't honestly think I'm going to let you take her, do you?" Grayson asked. "You can't be that big of a fool."

"I'm the one with the gun," the man said. "That makes me the smartest man in the room."

Outside the cabin, a chorus of howls split the silence of the night, "Do you hear that?" Grayson asked. "Those are my friends, and I can promise you that gun won't stop them all. Give it up now, and I'll tell them to let you pass unharmed."

"Now I've heard it all," the man sneered at him. "Nice try, cowboy, but

I'm not afraid of a few wolves, even if you could control them."

"Here's the thing you might not understand," he said. "Those aren't just wolves, and there aren't just a few of them. I don't suppose you've ever heard of shifters? We're a rare breed, but there are enough of us around here to see that you never step out of the woods again."

"That's bullshit," the man said. "I'm not falling for that."

"Then I guess I'll just have to show you," he said, glancing over at Quinn, who nodded her head, then he let his magic flow. "Don't forget I warned you."

The transformation was instant, the danger to his mate enough to bring the wolf out immediately, and for a second, he almost lost control. Reining in the urge to kill, he stood growling and showing his teeth, pleased to see the gun in the man's hand beginning to shake. Then, he began walking toward him, bracing himself for the moment he could strike, knowing that Quinn would find a way to free herself.

Quinn

Quinn didn't move even though every nerve in her body was telling her to run; instead, she watched as Grayson became a wolf, a little smile on her face when Mr. Smith began to freak out. "He warned you," she said, driving her elbow into his stomach and twisting out of his grasp. "You should have left when you had the chance."

"He..... he.....that's impossible," Mr. Smith stammered, his arm going limp. "People can't turn into wolves."

"Now that's where you're wrong," she said, grabbing the gun and pointing it at him. "Around here they can. You should have left when you had the chance."

The man shook his head, "This isn't happening. I must be dreaming," he said, then made a lunge for the gun. "I'll just shoot it, and it will go away."

She tried to jump away from him, but he was too fast, and before she could stop him, Mr. Smith had his hands on the gun. "I have to shoot it," he kept saying over and over, a wild look in his eyes. "I have to kill it."

He was so much stronger than she was; she knew that it wouldn't be long before he got the gun away from her, and the wild look in his eyes scared her. Taking a deep breath, she did the only thing she could think of and brought her knee up into his groin. His grip on the gun began to loosen, letting her

pull it out of his hands, and she slammed it down on the back of his head with a crunch that made her wince. Mr. Smith crashed to the floor in a heap and she jumped back from him, the gun still in her hands, her chest heaving with ragged breaths.

She felt the rush of power when Grayson shifted but couldn't look away from the man, afraid that he would jump up again. Then she realized that he was barely breathing. "I think I killed him," she said when Grayson walked up and took the gun out of her hand. "And the worst part is I'm not sorry, he was going to shoot you."

Grayson put the gun down on the table, then turned her away from Mr. Smith and gathered her into his arms. "You didn't kill him, he's still breathing," he said. "But you did kick his butt. He won't forget this night for a long time."

She looked up at him, "I thought he was going to kill you, Grayson, I was so scared I was going to lose you," she said. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I can't imagine my life without you."

"I'm right here, alive and well, thanks to you," he said, tipping her face up. "You're the bravest woman I know, and that's just one of the many reasons I love you."

"I love you too, Grayson, now and forever," she said. "Can we go home now?"

"I love you too, Quinn," he said. "Let's go home. We've got a wedding to plan, and the sooner the better."

"What's your rush?" she asked, laughing. "Aren't you the one who swore he'd never get married?"

"I guess you should never say never," Grayson said, grinning at her. "In my defense, when I said that, I didn't know I was going to fall in love with a fiery redhead who makes my life complete."

"Well, in that case, I guess I won't hold your words against you," she said, stretching up to kiss him. "Let's go home now. It's time to start our lives together."

Grayson swung her up into his arms, "I can't think of anything I would like more," he said. "By the way, we should probably talk about how many kids we're going to have. Ivy needs brothers and sisters."

She laughed, "You don't waste any time, do you?" she asked, grinning up at him. "But I wouldn't mind having a house full."

"Then we'll just have to see what we can do about that," he said. "It sure

is going to be fun trying.”

EPILOGUE



Grant found a place in the shade and stepped away from the crowd, wondering why he had ever possessed him to agree to a blind date, and to a wedding no less. Pulling on his tie, he shifted from foot to foot, wishing he could just go home, but he didn't want to miss the wedding of one of his close friends. Grayson would never forgive him if he wasn't there, but the thought of spending it with a woman he didn't know and had no interest in getting to know made him feel like he couldn't breathe.

He started tugging on his tie again, trying to get more air in his lungs, "Grant, you're going to wrinkle that beautiful silk tie if you keep doing that," Bridget said, slapping his hands away. "You look like you're about to pass out. Just calm down, it's just a date."

"Easy for you to say," he said. "Where is she? I just want to get this part over with. I don't know why I let you talk me into this."

"Because you know I'm right," she said. "You need to get out more, Grant. I get that you want to be a good parent, but even good parents have a life away from their kids."

"I don't need to hear the lecture again, thank you very much, it already worked, I'm here," he said. "But if she's not going to show up, I'm going to go inside. It's hot out here."

He started to walk away, thinking that he'd dodged a bullet, but Bridget stopped him, "Not so fast, mister, there she is," she said. "And be nice, Grant. Amy has had a rough time of it lately. She needs some understanding."

"What does that mean?" he asked. "What's wrong with her?"

“Nothing is wrong with her,” Bridget said. “Just forget I said that.”

“That’s not going to be easy,” he said, but Bridget was already walking away.

Forced to follow, he walked behind her, grumbling under his breath, mad at himself for agreeing and wondering how long he had to stay. “Grant, this is Amy,” Bridget said, making him look up. “She’s new to town, and doesn’t know anyone.”

The woman standing next to Bridget looked like she wasn’t very happy to be there either, but he couldn’t stop staring at her as a strange feeling spread through him. “Hey, Grant,” the woman said, looking him up and down. “I just want to get something straight right from the beginning. I only agreed to come because Bridget forced me to,” she said. “I’m not looking for romance, and I’m not looking for a roll in the hay, so let’s just get this over with.”

I hope you enjoyed the book! Want to read more of this series? [**CLICK HERE**](#) to get book 6 “[**Daddy Wolf’s Reluctant Blind Date**](#)”.