



MAYHEM UNDER THE MISTLETOE



SIX POINTS
BOOK  SEVEN
SECURITY



LORI SJOBERG

Mayhem Under the Mistletoe

A Six Points Security Novel

Lori Sjoberg

Mayhem Under the Mistletoe

Tis the season for a fake romance!

All Fiona wants for Christmas is to repair the broken pieces of her life after an ugly breakup. Thanks to her ex, she's sworn off men, at least until her emotional scars have a chance to heal. For now, she'll settle for watching her hot downstairs neighbor from the safety of her balcony when he goes on his daily run. But things get messy when her Grinch of an ex shows up on her doorstep, insisting they get back together and refusing to take no for an answer.

Enter Joseph Pinto, security specialist, former Navy SEAL medic, and Fiona's hot neighbor...

All Pinto wants for Christmas is a cold beer, a hot pizza, and for his hockey team to win on home ice. Is that really too much to ask? But his meddling mother is playing matchmaker, and he can't enjoy a moment's peace with all that racket upstairs. After sending Fiona's ex packing, he proposes a relationship of convenience: in exchange for protecting Fiona from her ex, she'll help convince Pinto's mom to stay out of his love life.

Just one problem...

It doesn't take long for their fake relationship to start feeling very real. The tree is decorated, the mistletoe is hung, and the temptation to act on their mutual attraction is growing stronger by the minute. But the ex from Hell is determined to get Fiona back at all costs, and his mom is still causing trouble. Pinto's determined to keep Fiona safe, but who will protect them both from the greatest threat of all, a broken heart?

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CHAPTER 1

HOLIDAYS WERE THE WORST.

A mild headache lurked in her temples as Fiona Perkins drove out of the lot of the school where she taught eighth grade. Rush hour had already reared its ugly head, and she hoped to reach home before the worst of it turned the roads into parking lots.

Technically, there were four more school days until the official start of winter break. But the kids had mentally checked out days ago, anticipation building for that two-week vacation at the end of the calendar year. At this point, trying to teach them anything was an exercise in futility, and the rest of the week would be packed with educational films, worksheets, and anything else that required minimal concentration yet kept them from climbing the walls.

A few car lengths ahead, horns blared when some jerk in a Camry cut across three lanes of traffic to turn in to the Publix. The driver ahead of her slammed on the brakes, and her heart leaped into her throat when she barely

avoided smacking his rear bumper with the front end of her old Nissan Sentra.

To be fair, she was looking forward to the time off as well. Teaching could be a rewarding profession, but it was also exhausting. It was no easy task to keep a classroom full of hormonal eighth graders interested in science and engaged in each day's lesson.

Fiona's phone chimed as she merged into traffic, and she frowned at the sound of the chime she'd assigned to her ex. Long story there, one she had no interest in revisiting, and she ignored his message just as she had with all of the others he'd sent over the past few weeks. Sooner or later—God, she hoped it was sooner—he'd get it through his thick skull that she wasn't ever going back to him and leave her the hell alone.

At the next light, she turned left, and a few miles later, she nearly sighed as her apartment complex came into view. Unfortunately, as with most teachers, her school day didn't end at the ring of the final bell. She had her own homework to complete tonight. There were papers to grade, lesson plans to update, and emails from parents and administrators that required her attention. With luck, she'd get it all done by nine and have enough time to watch an episode or two of her favorite murder mystery series. The latest season just dropped the other day, and she couldn't wait to experience the twists and turns of the latest whodunit.

There weren't any open parking spots in front of her building, but she managed to snag one not too far from the mailboxes. She gathered her things, shoved the door closed with her hip, and, after a slight detour to pick up the junk mail clogging her box, headed for the stairs. The second-story studio apartment wasn't much—she couldn't afford anything larger—but it wasn't

like she needed more space anyway. Most important, cats were allowed, because she wasn't about to live anyplace where Wanda wasn't welcome.

The apartment also had a balcony with an unobstructed view of the nearby nature trail, which explained why Liz, her friend who lived two buildings over, was waiting at the door with a bottle of red and an impatient look on her face.

"About time you got here." Dressed in jeans and a fitted gray tee, Liz held up the bottle. "They didn't have the one you like, but the guy at the liquor store said this one's just as good."

Fiona looked longingly at the bottle. Sometimes it sucked being responsible. "I can't tonight; I've got too much work."

Liz stared at her over the tops of her glasses. "You've got to be kidding."

"I wish I was." To emphasize her point, she raised her briefcase full of worksheets that needed to be graded.

True to form, Liz made a dismissive sound. "Oh, come on, live a little. It can wait until after the show's over."

Realizing the futility of arguing, Fiona shoved her key in the lock and pushed the door open. As usual, Wanda was curled up on the recliner like a queen on her royal throne. She let out a soft meow as Fiona walked past and set her purse and briefcase on the floor beside the coffee table. One of these days, she'd get around to buying a desk, but it wasn't all that high on her mile-long list of priorities.

Liz made a beeline for the kitchen, where she got two glasses from the cabinet and a corkscrew from the drawer by the stove.

"What do you think he'll be wearing, blue or black?" she asked as she wrestled the cork from the bottle.

"Does it matter?" Fiona smoothed a hand along Wanda's back, the most

affection the cat was willing to tolerate before dinnertime.

The cork came out of the bottle with a pop, and Liz poured the wine into the glasses. She handed one to Fiona. “I suppose not. But it’s been a long, crappy day and I need a fix. Maybe he’ll shake things up and wear red this time.”

Trying hard not to laugh when Liz waggled her eyebrows—it would only encourage her—Fiona opened the sliding glass door leading out to her balcony. There wasn’t much on it—just a tiny green plastic table, two mismatched chairs she’d picked up at a garage sale, and a potted plant she needed to water—but it was her little oasis. She took one chair, Liz sank onto the other, and they clinked their glasses together.

“What made your day crappy?” Fiona stretched her legs out in front of her. In a perfect world, she would have changed from her conservative work clothes to something more comfortable, but there wasn’t enough time for that. As a consolation, she pulled the elastic band from her hair, letting the blonde strands uncoil from the tight bun it had been in since this morning.

“Eh, the usual.” Liz propped one booted foot on the metal rail. She and her two older brothers ran a microbrewery a few miles down the road. One brother brewed the beer, the other kept the books, while Liz was in charge of the employees and customer entertainment. “The band that I booked for Friday canceled—their singer got busted for possession—so I spent half the day scrambling for another act to fill the slot.”

“Who did you end up with?”

“No one, which really sucks. Jeremy’s going to do another Trivia Night.” She shrugged. “Better than nothing, I guess. How was your day?”

“Same old, same old.” Fiona sipped her wine as the stress of the day began to ebb from her system. The guy at the liquor store was right. This red was

fantastic, and just as good as the one she normally bought.

“Is that kid still being a jerk?” Liz asked.

“Yep. I’m pretty sure it’s his default setting.” For the most part, her students were great, eager to learn, and seeing the spark of light in their eyes when a concept crystallized in their mind was what kept her in the profession. A few misbehaved from time to time, but overall, they paid attention in class and kept up with their assignments. But every year there were one or two who gave her a run for the money. This year’s problem child was a thirteen-year-old boy who craved attention, and it didn’t matter to him whether it was good or bad.

“What did he do this time?”

Fiona swallowed another sip of wine before she answered. “Coach Abernathy caught him pooping in the boy’s room urinal. Apparently, it’s some new challenge that’s circulating online.” She wasn’t sure whether it was more disgusting than the last big thing that went around on social media, and she honestly didn’t care. If anything, she was more curious about who on earth came up with these things.

The disgusted expression on Liz’s face matched Fiona’s opinion of the matter. “What kind of punishment did the little demon get for that?”

“One week of in-school suspension, plus his mother insisted that he clean all of the urinals in that bathroom for each of those days.” The last part was rather surprising. Most of the time, this particular parent refused to believe her son could possibly do anything wrong. Perhaps being caught with his pants down—literally—had something to do with the change of attitude.

“That’s rather fitting. Way to go, Mom.” Liz checked the time on her phone and frowned. “He’s late.”

“I saw his car in the lot when I came in. Maybe he’s too busy today.”

Liz scoffed. “That man is never too busy. He lives for this shit.”

As if on cue, a door closed somewhere downstairs. Less than a minute later, her neighbor appeared on the sidewalk, looking drool-worthy in dark-blue running shorts and athletic shoes that had seen better days. No shirt, which she supposed made sense, considering how unseasonably warm the week had been. He had a swimmer’s build, powerful and lean, with tanned skin, chiseled muscles, and a tattoo on one arm, though she couldn’t quite tell what it was. His face was masculine perfection—strong jaw, full lips, straight nose, carved cheekbones, and eyes that reminded her of molten chocolate, warm and rich. His hair was a few weeks past the time for a cut, the dark strands curled against the nape of his neck, while a row of piercings in his left ear glinted under the late-afternoon sun.

“Damn.” Liz fanned herself. “That man is delicious.”

Though she totally agreed, Fiona shushed her friend. “He’s going to hear you.”

“No, he won’t. He’s wearing earbuds.” Still, she lowered her voice and leaned toward Fiona. “You should take him out for a test drive.”

Fiona sipped her wine. She should probably feel bad about lusting after the guy like a sorority girl on spring break. She didn’t even know his name. They’d exchanged pleasantries a time or two when their paths crossed on the sidewalk in front of the building, but that was as far as she was willing to act on her attraction. “The last thing I need is to get involved with my neighbor.”

There were so many ways for that to go wrong. She didn’t need more drama in her life. And with him living in the apartment directly beneath hers, it could get pretty awkward if things went south between them. It would be like taking the walk of shame every day for the rest of her lease.

“Are you high? A guy like that is *exactly* what you need to get your groove

back.” Liz gestured to her neighbor as he broke into a brisk jog. “Look at the way those muscles move. I bet he can go for miles without breaking a sweat.”

Fiona shook her head. Guys like that were magic and fire. More likely than not, he’d rock her world but, in the end, she’d get burned. Again. As it was, she still hadn’t fully healed from the wounds her ex had inflicted. She wasn’t broken, but the cracks were still visible, and the last thing she needed was another bad experience on her relationship resume. “I need to find a nice, safe guy, like a tax attorney or a computer programmer.”

Her friend blew out a noise that said exactly what she thought of the idea. “Once upon a time, you thought the cop was safe, and look where that got you. Besides, it’s not like you have to shackle yourself to the guy for the rest of your natural-born life. Just take him around the block a few times.”

“No, thank you. I’m perfectly content with admiring the merchandise from afar.”

“Chicken.”

“I’m not chicken. I’m just not ready. Besides, who wants to start a relationship this close to Christmas? The holidays are stressful enough as it is. There’s the parties, and gift exchanges, and do I include him in my normal holiday activities or come up with new stuff that’s only for us?” She huffed out a breath. “See what I mean? I’m getting stressed out just thinking about the hypotheticals, and I don’t even know the guy’s name.”

Liz made clucking noises, and Fiona rolled her eyes.

“Cluck all you want, it’s not happening.”

A pout pursed Liz’s lips. “Fine, have it your way. For now. But don’t think for one minute that I’m going to stand idly by and watch you turn into a cat lady.” She finished the last of her wine and stood.

“Where are you going? Hot Guy should be back any minute.” The end of

the run, when he came back all sweaty and disheveled, was Liz's favorite part of the show. Okay, it was her favorite part too. It might end up being the highlight of her evening, and how freaking pitiful was that?

"I'd love to stay, but I've got to go. Jeremy wants me to try his new porter before we open tonight. Why don't you stop by after you're done grading? It's always quiet on weeknights; we can talk."

Tempting, so damn tempting. It had been weeks since she'd gone to the bar. "I wish I could, but it's going to be late by the time I finish."

"Well, if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

After a quick hug, Liz let herself out, and Fiona sat on the balcony for another five minutes or so, long enough for her downstairs neighbor to return from his run. Breathing heavy, he bent at the waist, his hands resting on his knees, completely unaware of her presence. That was probably for the best. She'd die of embarrassment if he ever glanced up and caught her watching him like the crazy cat lady she was clearly turning into.

Best to leave before that happened. Empty glass in hand, she slipped inside and locked the sliding glass door behind her. The time she'd wasted meant she wouldn't be able to go to the bar or watch her show, but she decided it was worth it. She and Liz hadn't had much time for talk lately, and watching her neighbor run in those short little shorts let her know that her libido still existed.

Crossing to the kitchen, she placed a container of leftover takeout into the microwave and filled the cat's bowl. Maybe Liz was right, and it was time for her to dip her toe back into the dating pool. But taking that kind of leap was hard when you didn't trust your instincts anymore. Nothing about Dennis had raised red flags. She'd thought he was a good guy, safe. And look where that

had gotten her. It was better to be alone than be with a man who didn't love and respect her.

A knock at the door broke her train of thought. Liz must have forgotten something—she did it all the time. Or perhaps she wanted to take one more shot at talking Fiona into joining her at the bar tonight.

She went to the foyer and opened the door, and a chill slid down her spine at the sight of her ex in the hall.

That's what she got for not checking the peephole.

Tall and muscular, with well-defined features and warm brown eyes, Dennis had the appearance of a man you could trust, a plus in his chosen field. He wore tan slacks and a black polo shirt tucked in at the waist, while a light jacket likely concealed the Glock he carried for his job. At the sight of her, a smile curved his lips, and for a fleeting moment he reminded her of the man she'd once considered marriage material.

Now she knew what lurked behind that mask of civility. Every muscle in her body went rigid, while her grip on the doorknob tightened. "Why are you here?"

"I've been trying to get a hold of you, but you haven't responded to any of my messages. We need to talk. Can I come in?"

"No. You can say what you want outside."

The smile slipped a notch or two, but the rest of his mask remained in place. "I'd rather not have a private discussion in the hallway where everyone can hear."

Boundaries, she reminded herself for what had to be the thousandth time. She didn't want him in her life, and she certainly didn't want him setting foot inside her apartment. "I'm sorry, but you're not coming in. Now what. Do. You want?"

The muscles along his jaw flexed, but he kept his temper in check. That level of restraint was a rarity for him. When they'd been a couple, any pushback she gave had been met with an immediate barrage of verbal abuse and gaslighting that left her questioning her own sanity.

"I've been thinking about us, about the good times we had." His features softened as he met her gaze. "I've missed you, babe. We never should have broken up."

For a moment or two, she simply stared at him as a torrent of memories flooded her brain and jacked up her heart rate. She'd walked on eggshells for three long years before she mustered the courage to leave the jerk. No way was she going back to that. "You're joking, right?"

"I'd never joke about something like this. We were made for each other, Fiona." His smile returned, brighter than before.

At one time, she would have found it charming. Now, it grated on her nerves because she knew it was nothing more than a tool he used to get whatever he wanted.

"Think of all the good times we had, like that weekend we drove to—"

"No." She cut him off, because for every good time, there were two or three bad ones that she really didn't want to think about. "We are never getting back together."

He had the nerve to act disappointed. "But I love you, babe."

"Well, that's too bad, because I don't love you. I've moved on, and you should too." Normally, she didn't speak so bluntly, but she didn't want to give him any hope for reconciliation. She wanted him to go away, to leave her alone, and forget she ever existed.

She didn't wait for his response, and the shock on his face when she closed the door was satisfying as hell.

Of course, he didn't go away. That would have been too easy.

CHAPTER 2

FRESH FROM THE SHOWER and dressed in faded jeans and a black T-shirt, Joseph Pinto switched on the television on his way to the kitchen for a beer. His after-work run had burned off some of the stress that came from a long day on the job. Pizza and a few beers over hockey should take care of the rest of it.

As the only combat medic on the payroll at Six Points Tactical & Security, it was his responsibility to treat any new recruits who got injured during the field portions of their training. Most of the time, it was simple stuff like rope burns, twisted ankles, and minor heat exhaustion. But every so often shit got serious, and it usually happened to the guy who talked smack about getting the best time on the obstacle course. Today's brainiac was a former Army Ranger who should have known better than to fuck around on Jacob's Ladder. Luckily, the fall didn't puncture his lungs, but the broken ribs would take a month or two to fully heal.

Right on time, the delivery guy arrived with Pinto's large pizza with ham, pepperoni, and black olives. As he tipped the driver, a door slammed upstairs,

and the sound of a man cursing drifted down the stairwell. That was life in an apartment building. For the most part, his neighbors were quiet and kept to themselves, but every so often, someone slammed a door, or threw a party, or had an argument in the hall. All in all, it could be worse. At the last place he lived, two guys got into a knife fight over a college football game.

Inside the apartment, Pinto set the pizza box on the kitchen counter, and when he opened the lid, the spicy scents of meat and marinara filled the room and made his stomach grumble. He took out his phone to see why his buddy wasn't here yet—he only lived a couple of miles down the road—and frowned when he found a message from Hatch. Apparently, there was something going on with his kid sister, and he wouldn't be able to make it tonight.

“Oh well, more for me.” Though he wouldn't have ordered a large if he'd known he'd be eating alone. On the bright side, he'd have enough left over for breakfast tomorrow morning. He grabbed the pizza box, picked up his beer, and parked his ass on the couch in front of the television as the pre-game show began.

Even with the volume cranked up, he could still hear the guy upstairs banging on the door and screaming like a lunatic. Normally, Pinto would have ignored it. As a general rule, he didn't stick his nose in other people's business. All he wanted tonight was to enjoy a few beers in the comfort of his apartment, while watching the Devils beat the snot out of the Rangers on home ice.

But it didn't sound like the asshole upstairs planned to let up anytime soon. To the contrary, he was only getting louder.

Annoyed, Pinto put his beer back in the fridge, left the apartment, and trudged up the stairs. The guy standing in the second-floor hall was so busy

pounding on the neighbor's door that he didn't even notice his approach. Big guy, sturdy build. An inch or two taller than Pinto. He carried himself like a man who worked out. Not that any of it made a difference. He could have looked like Schwarzenegger in his prime, and Pinto still would have come upstairs to tell him to pipe the fuck down.

"Is there a problem?" he said loudly enough to be heard over the commotion.

The banging stopped.

Slowly, the guy glared over his shoulder, a scowl etched into his face. "Who the hell are you?"

"I'm the guy who's trying to enjoy a hockey game, but I can't because you're making too much noise." He tossed an extra helping of New Jersey into his voice, because he wanted to make it crystal-clear that he wasn't in the mood to mess around.

The apartment door opened, and his neighbor peeked through the crack. She was an attractive woman—long blonde hair, high cheekbones, full lips, and curves in all the right places, the type who used to catch his interest before his self-imposed dating moratorium. He'd seen her around the building a few times before but didn't know her name. What mattered at the moment was the fear in her piercing blue eyes. That concerned him. It also pissed him off.

"Are you okay, ma'am?" Pinto asked the woman.

She said, "No" at the same time the asshole said, "None of your goddamn business."

Every muscle in Pinto's body tensed. His eyes narrowed. Back in Jersey, that "no" from the woman would have been enough for him to pound the guy into next week. Fortunately, he'd learned a lot about self-control since then.

“It becomes my business when my neighbor is scared out of her wits because some asshole’s trying to beat down her door.”

The asshole scoffed. “I was knocking.”

“I don’t give a shit what you call it. Read the room, pal. She doesn’t want you here. That means it’s time for you to hit the road.”

The guy fully turned toward Pinto, his back straight, shoulders squared, and hands half-curved into fists. It reminded Pinto of a bull about to charge. “I’m not going anywhere without my woman.”

“I’m not your woman,” his neighbor said through gritted teeth.

So much for spending a quiet evening at home. Odds were this was going to end with one of them riding in the back of an ambulance and the other man going to jail. Neither option appealed to Pinto. Losing a fight to this putz would be a major blow to his ego, but if he had to call his buddy Hatch for bail, he’d never hear the end of it. Still, he had no intention of going anywhere until this guy left the building and he knew his neighbor was safe.

“Look, I’m not here to start shit, but it’s more than obvious that she doesn’t want to have anything to do with you.” Pinto made sure his voice wasn’t angry or threatening, but rather matter-of-fact. He shifted his body weight in case he had to dodge a punch—or throw one. At this point, it could go either way. “I’m only going to tell you one more time, and then I’m going to get rude. Leave while you still can on your own two feet.”

The guy’s chin jerked up as he huffed out a breath. “And if I don’t?”

Pinto shrugged, his patience exhausted. Fucker wanted to play, so be it. “You’re a big boy. I’m sure you can put two and two together without me breaking out the finger puppets.”

The vein on the other man’s forehead looked as if it were ready to burst. Horrible as it sounded, Pinto kind of hoped it would so he could go back to

the hockey game. Puck drop was happening any minute.

“I don’t think you realize who you’re dealing with.” The guy pulled his jacket aside to reveal a badge clipped to his belt. Just above it, resting in its holster, was what appeared to be a department-issued Glock.

Pinto’s eyes squinted as he stared down at the badge that just made things a lot more complicated. He mentally cracked his knuckles. Over the years, he’d known a lot of good police officers—one of his buddies in Jersey was a cop—but it seemed as if every department had a few who were nothing more than bullies with a badge. “You’re a long way from Avalon Springs, Officer Heckler. I don’t see how that’s supposed to impress me.”

“It means I’m the fucking law.”

“Not in this city. Here in Orlando, you’re just another jerk who gets his rocks off harassing women. Should I call the actual Orlando police and see what they think about you flashing your badge on their turf?”

Pinto and the guy glared at each other like old gunslingers in the Wild West. More likely than not, Officer Dickhead had extensive police training, not to mention he was armed. But Pinto was trained just as well, if not better, and if push came to shove, he could hold his own in this type of situation. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but he wasn’t about to walk away and leave his neighbor to fend for herself.

Seconds that felt more like minutes ticked by, and just when Pinto thought the cop was going to throw a punch or pull his weapon, the guy made a sound of disgust.

“You’re not worth the reports I’d have to file.” The cop turned his gaze to the woman. “We’ll talk later.”

“No, we won’t.” She opened the door a little wider, one hand holding the knob, while the other white-knuckled a phone. “Don’t come back.”

It was a wonder the look he gave didn't turn the woman into a pillar of salt. As he stormed past, he knocked shoulders with Pinto, and it took every last bit of Pinto's discipline to keep from taking a swing.

Pinto watched in silence, his senses still on heightened alert, as the guy descended the stairs, got into his car, and drove out of the lot. When the taillights disappeared from view, he turned his attention back to the woman in the open doorway.

Even though tension lined her delicate features and tightened the corners of her mouth, she was still a knockout. She managed a smile, but it didn't come close to reaching her eyes. "Thanks, but you shouldn't have done that. I could have handled him."

"No offense, but it didn't look that way from where I was standing. Does he pull this shit often?"

"That depends on your definition of often," she said with a shrug. "Usually, if I see him coming, I turn off the lights and pretend I'm not home."

"You shouldn't have to put up with that crap. Have you ever considered slapping him with a restraining order?" It wasn't a magic bullet against this kind of harassment, but it was better than nothing.

The shift in her expression led him to believe she'd been asked that question too many times before. "I tried that when we first separated, for all the good it did. Judges are reluctant to approve protective orders against members of law enforcement, especially in a he-said/she-said situation."

"So what, they won't do anything until he actually hurts you?" That was bullshit, but sadly not surprising. "If you want to try again, I'll go to court with you and testify to what I just saw."

Her features softened, and it did things to him that he didn't want to examine too closely. "I appreciate the offer, but it's not worth the effort."

Dennis knows how to manipulate the system. He'd find a way to come out on top, and then he'd make your life a living hell."

Pinto assumed it was probably too late to avoid the latter scenario. Once the asshole learned who he was—and he seemed like the type to do a little digging to find out—he'd have his buddies in the department pull him over every time he ventured into his jurisdiction, which meant he needed to stay the hell out of Avalon Springs for a while.

Still, he had no intention of turning his back on his neighbor. Not because she was hot, or because he expected anything in return, but because he wasn't some sort of scumbag who left people in need of help twisting in the wind. His parents raised him better than that. If he walked away and something bad happened to her, he'd never be able to live with himself. "If you're not going to take him to court, then I want you to call me if he comes back."

Wariness clouded her eyes. "I don't know if it's a good idea for you to get caught up in the middle—"

"Look, if I didn't want to get involved, I'd be downstairs watching the game. We're neighbors. We're supposed to help each other, right?" He stepped closer and held out his hand. "Give me your phone, and I'll give you my number. Whether or not you call is totally up to you."

For a few long moments, she watched him from the open doorway, indecision plain on her face. At last, she handed over the phone, and he tried not to think about the zing of awareness that came with the brush of his fingers against hers.

It took less than a minute for him to add his number to her list of contacts, and then he sent a text to his phone so he'd have her number as well. Finished, he handed it back.

She glanced at the screen. "Your name is Pinto?"

“That’s what everybody calls me.” His mouth curved up. “And you are?”

A blush rose in her cheeks. “Fiona Perkins. I’m sorry; I should have introduced myself earlier.”

Pinto waved a hand in dismissal. “There’s nothing to apologize for. I’ve been in this building for nearly a year, and I still don’t know the names of most of the people who live in it.”

Now that he thought about it, the only neighbor he knew by name was Meredith, the old lady who lived in the apartment next to his. At eighty-two, she was pretty damn spry, but every so often she knocked on his door to ask him for help with a stubborn lid, or to have him kill a cockroach that found its way inside her home. He’d given everyone else a nickname, like Yappy Dog Lady or Stoner Dude, people he knew in passing but not well enough to get invested in their lives.

Fiona’s features visibly relaxed, and it made him happy to see the frown lines between her eyes fade away. “You said Pinto is what everybody calls you. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your actual name?”

“Pinto’s my last name. First name’s Joseph, but the folks back home call me Joey. I’ll let you decide which one you want to use.”

Her mouth seemed on the verge of a smile as she tilted her head to the right. “Pinto doesn’t feel right, but you don’t look like a Joey. Would you mind if I called you Joe?”

“Not at all.” He ignored how much he liked the way his name sounded on her lips. There was a very good reason for his dating moratorium, and he had no intention of breaking it now, especially with a neighbor. That could get all sorts of complicated.

Pinto stepped back toward the stairwell. The game awaited and his pizza was getting cold. At least, that was what he told himself. “I meant what I said

earlier. If that jackass shows his face again, give me a call, and I'll be here faster than Domino's."

"That's a lot to promise."

He winked. "Trust me. I'm good for it."

CHAPTER 3

“AND WHAT VALUABLE LESSON did we learn this afternoon?” Pinto asked Dorian, one of the new recruits at Six Points, as he finished wrapping the guy’s ankle. Thankfully, it was only a bad sprain and wouldn’t require a trip to the hospital.

The recruit had been doing well on the obstacle course, until he decided to shave a few seconds off his time by jumping down from one of the walls instead of using the rope ladder to aid his descent. With the help of his partner, he’d managed to complete the course within the allotted time—barely—so he wouldn’t have to run it again. Tomorrow marked the beginning of firearms training, which would give the newbies time to recuperate from the various minor injuries they’d suffered during what Pinto considered basic training on steroids.

Dorian’s pale brows snapped down over his eyes. “Um...be careful?”

Their boss, Ryan Flint, dressed in camo from neck to toes, made a buzzing sound from where he stood a couple of feet away. “The correct answer is:

Don't throw caution to the wind just because the clock is ticking. Keep your wits, use good judgment, and you won't end up in the emergency room."

"Or the morgue," his brother, Wade, added as he strode past.

As with most private security firms, all the recruits had varying degrees of military experience. The training program was more of a refresher, a test of strength, stamina, and agility, because any soldier worth his or her salt should be able to handle this shit. The Flint family maintained high standards, and they expected each employee to clear that bar before they were allowed to represent Six Points in any sort of professional capacity.

"How bad is it?" Ryan asked after Dorian limped off to the metal bleachers where the rest of the recruits cheered on the last remaining pair as they crawled under the barbed wire and into a tunnel. The obstacle course was located on a plot of land directly behind the industrial park that Six Points called home. An eight-foot chain link fence surrounded the property, while No Trespassing signs were posted every twenty-five feet or so to discourage people from trying their luck on the course when nobody was around.

"He'll live." Pinto packed his supplies back into his medical bag. He hoped he wouldn't need to use them again, but you never knew when somebody was going to catch a case of the stupids. "His ego's more bruised than his ankle. A few days' rest and he'll be good as new."

"Thank fuck. Austin would've been all over my ass if we lost another guy to injury." Ryan moved closer and pitched his voice lower. "What's your honest opinion of Dorian?"

With a noncommittal shrug, Pinto said, "He seems like a good enough guy."

"That's not what I asked and you know it."

Pinto paused a few moments to give the question more serious

consideration. It meant a lot to him that one of the bosses actually valued his opinion, and he intended to give one that was honest and helpful. “Well, I don’t think anyone’s going to ask him to bring the potato salad to the Mensa picnic, but I think he’s a solid recruit. He’ll be fine as part of a security detail.”

“But not as a decision-maker.”

“That depends on how he performs in the simulators.” Those who graduated from firearms training went on to work through a series of simulations to see how they’d react in various scenarios. It was a good way to learn who’d be quick to pull the trigger, or whether a moment’s hesitation might get them, their team, or the person they were charged with protecting killed.

Ryan glanced at the group on the bleachers and then back to Pinto. “Fair enough. I assumed Luther would be a total wash and he proved me wrong.”

That was one of the guys from the last batch of trainees, and one of the few who’d been hired in spite of his lack of military experience. He’d made it through the obstacle course by the skin of his teeth and sheer determination. On the weapons range, he nearly drove the instructor to drink. But he’d shown nerves of steel and next-level judgment in the simulators, earning the highest score of any recruit to date.

Ryan watched as the recruits helped one another scale the tower, approval clear on his face. “You can cut out as soon as these two cross the line.”

“Thanks.” Pinto zipped his bag shut. The sun was starting its slow descent, the air cooling a bit. Still warm compared to the rest of the country—it certainly didn’t feel like Christmas, but the break from the heat was welcome. “Firearms training starts tomorrow at seven, right?”

“Yeah, but you don’t need to come in until eight. Navarre will have them in

the classroom for the first hour or so.”

A former Army sniper, Navarre was by far the best marksman at Six Points—hell, one of the best in the country. Rumor had it he could shoot the head off a matchstick from a thousand yards out. The recruits wouldn’t be required to achieve that level of accuracy, but they would be expected to handle their weapons with the skill, safety, and professionalism required of every security specialist at Six Points.

Pinto tipped his head in acknowledgment. “Sounds good; I’ll see you at the range.”

Due to zoning and liability issues, Six Points lacked an on-site weapons facility. To compensate, it maintained an account at a nearby outdoor firing range. Each employee was required to log in at least once a week for target practice, and to maintain a marksman qualification. So far, the arrangement seemed to work well for all parties involved, but if Six Points grew much bigger, they’d need to find a larger facility to handle the additional volume.

The last two guys staggered over the finish line, and the other recruits erupted into raucous applause, because they’d beaten the fastest time of the day by a solid eight seconds. While Ryan broke off to talk to the group, Pinto hitched the strap of his medical bag over his shoulder and headed for the main building. Before he went home, there was someone he needed to see and a favor to ask.

With work no longer serving as a distraction, Fiona moved front and center in his mind. She’d been lingering in his thoughts ever since he’d walked downstairs last night. Not because he found her attractive—he did, but that was a whole other matter he was trying hard not to dwell on—but because she seemed like a genuinely decent person who didn’t deserve to get harassed

by that asshole cop. And now that he'd stuck his big nose in her business, he might as well learn the full extent of what he'd gotten himself into.

This late in the day, the building was quiet, the air a few degrees cooler than it was outside. The security teams mostly worked in the field, and the only people around were administrative and cyber support. The sound of Pinto's footsteps filled the hall as he walked to Nina Flint's office. He muttered a curse when he found she wasn't there. The door next to hers was open, where Sloane Welker typed away on her laptop, her feet propped up on her desk and her head bobbing to whatever song played in her earbuds.

A tall woman with red-streaked hair and lots of dark eye makeup, she was one of the techs that Six Points hired when they expanded their cyber security division. Today she wore a purple shirt over black cargo pants and combat boots, a conservative outfit for her. Multiple piercings dotted both ears, while a tiny diamond stud marked the right side of her nose. No visible tattoos, but it wouldn't surprise him to learn she had a few.

He knew better than to form an opinion based solely on her appearance. From what he'd heard, she was damn good at her job. If she wasn't, she'd already be gone.

He stepped into the doorway and waved a hand to catch her attention, and she nearly jumped out of her skin. "Sorry; I didn't mean to startle you."

She reached up to pop the buds from her ears. "It's okay; I get tunnel vision when I'm in the zone. What can I do for you?"

"I was looking for Nina. Do you know where I can find her?"

Sloane shook her head. "You just missed her. She and Austin left for the airport. Some sort of conference in Vegas. They won't be back until Monday. Larissa's down the hall if you need her."

Oh, hell no, that so wasn't going to happen. He liked Larissa; she was sharp

as a tack with a wicked sense of humor, and he respected her cyber security skills. But he wasn't ashamed to admit she scared the living crap out of him. He'd heard enough horror stories about what she did to people who got on her bad side, and he'd sworn long ago to avoid doing anything that might put his name on her shit list.

After weighing his options, he decided to take his chances with Sloane instead. "That's okay; I know she has a ton of stuff on her plate. Do you think you could help me? I need a background check on a guy."

"Sure. Which account is it for?"

This was where things could get tricky. Nina owed him a few favors and would do this for him without a second thought. But Sloane...well, she'd been with the company for only a short time and he hadn't gotten a feel for her yet. She didn't strike him as the type to respond well to sweet-talking, so he figured it was probably best to go with blunt honesty. If she said no, he'd suck it up and grovel to Larissa, because he didn't want to wait until next week to get the information from Nina.

"Here's the thing: it's not for an account. Before you say no, let me explain," he added before she could turn him down flat. "My upstairs neighbor is being harassed by her ex, who happens to be a cop. I pissed him off last night by making him leave, and I'd like to know what kind of hornet's nest I just kicked."

"Is she your girlfriend?"

"No, she's a friend who happens to be female."

Sloane arched an eyebrow. "Do you want her to be your girlfriend?"

Nope, not going there, even though the question filled his head with bad ideas. "Does it matter?"

Leaning back in her chair, Sloane stared up at him as if the answer were

obvious. “I commend you for helping your neighbor, but you’re asking me to allocate company resources for your personal business. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m the new kid on the block, and that kind of crap could get me fired. So if you really want me to take that chance, I need a compelling reason.”

Shit, now he felt like a dick for asking her to do something that could jeopardize her job. He held up his hands in a don’t-shoot-me gesture. “Look, I’m sorry. Forget I said anything. The last thing I want is to get you into trouble. It’s just...don’t worry about it, okay? I’ll go talk to Larissa.”

He was looking forward to that conversation almost as much as his next prostate exam, but if that was what it took to get the information he wanted, so be it.

He’d taken two steps into the hallway when he heard Sloane say, “Wait.”

Hopeful, he turned back to face her.

“I didn’t say no; I only asked for clarification. You said you wanted to know what kind of hornet’s nest you’d kicked. If she’s not your girlfriend, why are you staying involved?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” Pinto said simply. “She’s a good person who made the mistake of dating an asshole with a badge, and now he’s making her life miserable. What kind of person would I be if I sat back and watched that happen?”

Sloane stared at him for a few long seconds, lips pressed into a thin line. At last, her shoulders slumped on a heavy exhale. “I can’t do it on the clock, but I can work on it during my break.”

It took everything he had not to do a fist pump. “As long as it’s not going to cause you any problems.”

An edge crept into her voice. “I said I’d do it. Now give me the information

and I'll get to it as soon as I can." She shrugged. "Or take your chances with Larissa. It doesn't matter to me either way."

Before she could change her mind, he handed her a slip of paper with everything he knew about Dennis the asshole cop. It wasn't much, but it should be enough for her to work with. "Thanks. I owe you big-time."

"Yes, you do." The hint of a smile warmed her mouth as she made a shooing motion. "Now get out of here so I can finish my work."

"Aye, aye, ma'am." He gave her a salute and took his leave.

Outside the building, Pinto slipped on a pair of yellow-tinted shades and crossed the lot to his car. There were times when he was tempted to trade his old Mustang in for a newer model, but it ran well, still looked sharp, and nowadays, it was all but impossible to find an affordable car with a manual transmission.

Most important, the car was paid off, and he hated the idea of making payments.

His phone rang as he unlocked the door, and he grimaced at the sound of his mother's ringtone. She'd called three times while he'd been at the obstacle course, but he'd been too busy to talk. And even though that excuse no longer applied, he was still tempted to let the call go to voicemail.

Not much in life unnerved him. Bullets flying, bombs exploding all over the damn place while he tied off a severed artery? Sure, no problem. The Navy had taught him how to handle that shit in his sleep. But nothing filled his soul with dread like the prospect of talking with his mother.

He drew a deep breath and answered the call. "Hey, Ma."

"Don't you 'Hey, Ma' me. I've been calling all day." Her voice was pure New Jersey, and it made him cringe and feel a little homesick at the same

time. “Why didn’t you answer? I was starting to worry you were dead or in the hospital.”

“I was working. You know I can’t talk on the phone while I’m working.”

She made one of those sounds that indicated she didn’t believe a word he said. If she’d been standing within arm’s length, she would have thwacked him upside the head. Back in the day, Dad would have done the honors, but she’d had no problem with picking up the slack after a reckless driver on the Parkway sent him to an early grave.

“So what’s up?” he asked as he got in the car and shoved his key into the ignition.

“I’ve been thinking,” she said, a beginning that never bode well for him. “Since you haven’t come home since you and Gina—”

His hackles went up. “It’s only been a year.”

“Twenty-two months,” his mother corrected him. “I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

Great, it was going to be one of *those* conversations. There must be something in the water in Trenton—or maybe they taught it in prenatal classes, because every mother he’d ever encountered up there was a master at wielding the whip of guilt, his mother the best among them. If she set her mind to it, she could make you feel bad about something you’d only considered doing.

Pinto ran a hand through his short, dark hair. “You’re only fifty-six, Ma. It’s not like you’re ready to check into a nursing home.”

“You never know what life might bring you. Just look at what happened to your father, God rest his soul.” She muttered something too low for him to hear, and he would have bet his next paycheck she was making the sign of the cross. “Do you remember Tommy Tortelli’s mother? She had a massive

heart attack a few weeks ago, died in the back of the ambulance. She was two years younger than me. Two years!”

“She also smoked three packs a day.” Both of Tommy’s parents had smoked more than a tire fire at the junkyard. He couldn’t recall a time in his life when he hadn’t seen a cigarette in their mouths, between their fingers, or in the ashtray in front of them. Their poor kid used to show up at school every morning reeking of Marlboro Reds and coughing like a coal miner. Looking back, it was probably why Pinto had never been tempted to pick up the habit.

In contrast, his mother never smoked a day in her life and only drank the occasional glass of wine. Of course, her diet was a whole other matter. Meals in the Pinto household tended to be rich, filling, delicious, and guaranteed to clog your arteries. Think lots of cheeses, meats, and fried foods, with the occasional vegetable thrown into the mix to give the appearance of a balanced diet. But considering his mother went to the family physician at the slightest cough or snuffle, he was confident the doctor was on top of any ailments she might suffer.

“As I was saying,” his mother continued. “Since you haven’t been able to come up for a visit, I’m coming down to see you for the holidays. Isn’t that great?”

It was a damn good thing he hadn’t been drinking, because he would have spewed liquid all over the dashboard. Of all the ways to describe the news, *great* wasn’t anywhere on his list. After a shell-shocked moment or two, he scrambled to find his voice. “Are you sure you want to travel during the holidays? The airports will be a mess.”

“I know; that’s why we’re driving.”

“We?” His stomach dropped. This was getting worse by the second.

“Who’s we?”

“Stephanie and Sadie are coming along.” Her voice bubbled with excitement at the mention of Pinto’s sister and her seven-year-old daughter. “I’m taking them to Disney Land!”

He almost corrected her about which Disney theme park was located in Orlando but held his tongue because it would only piss her off. “The parks are going to be even worse than the airports. Maybe you should wait until spring.”

“Nonsense, it’ll be fine. Disney’s always busy, so what does it matter? At least this way the weather will be nice, and we’ll get to see the place all decked out for Christmas.”

It felt as if the walls were closing in, but he wasn’t quite ready to throw in the towel. “Won’t you miss seeing the rest of the family over the holidays?”

“I’ll see them as soon as we’re back. This Christmas, I want to see my son.”

The tone in her voice made it perfectly clear that there’d be no talking her out of this.

Resigned to his fate, Pinto slumped against his seat. For better or for worse, he loved his family, though he preferred to express that love from a comfortable distance. Living in Florida provided a buffer against the family drama, the stupid fights over petty bullshit, and his mother’s not-so-subtle pressure for him to marry a “nice Italian girl” who’d be open to giving her tons of grandkids.

To this day, and despite the circumstances, his mother hadn’t forgiven him for breaking up with Gina. A large part of that was on him. He should have known better than to get involved with the daughter of a longtime family friend. But he’d been young, dumb, and recklessly in love, too blind to see

the warning signs flashing right in front of his face. And now that he understood the error of his ways, he'd never make the same mistake again.

"Where are you planning to stay?" He hoped to God the answer wasn't his one-bedroom apartment. Worst-case scenario, two of them could sleep in his bed while the other crashed on the couch, but he wasn't thrilled with the prospect of bunking on the floor for the duration of their visit. Not to mention, he didn't want to even think about the logistics of sharing a single bathroom with three females. Knowing them, he'd have to drive to Walmart every time he needed to take a leak.

"We booked a hotel near the parks," she replied, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

Okay, he could handle that. He'd work during the day while they enjoyed the parks, and then he could drive out to visit them over dinner. And on Christmas Day, they could come to his place, which meant he should probably buy a tree...and ornaments. And a few gifts. To save on postage, he normally emailed gift cards, but if they were driving down to visit, the least he could do was drag his ass to the store and put more thought into their presents.

It looked as if his to-do list just got a whole lot longer.

"When are you coming?" he asked, wishing he hadn't tossed his medical bag into the trunk. The way his stomach was churning, he could use an antacid or two.

"We're leaving Sunday morning after church. North Carolina is the halfway point, so we'll stay the night there and make it to Orlando the next day."

"Sounds great." He started his car. As soon as he got home, he planned to call his sister Stephanie to get the scoop on why his mother was so insistent

on visiting him. “Call me when you’re all settled in, and we’ll make plans from there.”

CHAPTER 4

MOVIE DAYS WERE THE best, especially during the week before a holiday break when the students were one step from climbing the walls and their attention spans were shorter than a Chihuahua that chugged a can of Red Bull. The only challenge was finding a movie that would hold their interest while teaching them a thing or two about science.

Today's selection, one of Fiona's personal favorites, focused on the women who worked behind the scenes at NASA during the height of the Space Race. Judging by how well the kids paid attention, the movie had been a hit. She'd find out for sure tomorrow after they watched the final installment and had a discussion on several of the movie's key points.

With the workday over, Fiona headed for home, her briefcase much lighter than usual because the only papers inside were from recently turned-in past due assignments. She parked in front of her building, ignoring the tug of disappointment when she didn't see Joe's car in the lot. On the bright side, she didn't see Dennis's car either. She counted that as a win.

As she climbed the stairs, she felt a sense of *déjà vu* when she found Liz

waiting at her door. Today her friend wore a shiny blue blouse over skin-tight jeans and black leather boots with heels that could double as murder weapons. No wine this time—the half-full bottle from yesterday was in the refrigerator—but she carried a small, brightly colored gift bag, which she handed to Fiona.

“What’s the occasion?” Fiona slid her key into the lock. She hoped Liz wasn’t giving her an early Christmas present, because the gift she’d ordered online a few weeks ago hadn’t arrived yet.

“No occasion. I just wanted to give your place a little holiday cheer.”

Fiona inwardly cringed as she entered her apartment. Wanda lounged on the recliner, her tail flicking in acknowledgment of their arrival. Fiona lightly stroked the cat’s fur as she passed and set her school bag in its usual spot.

Buying Christmas decorations was on her list, but things had been so hectic at school she simply hadn’t had time to go anywhere beside the gas station and grocery store. Not to mention, her finances were tight. Nobody went into teaching for the money. It was going to be a few more days until her paycheck landed in her checking account and she’d have a little breathing room for anything aside from basic necessities.

And, to be honest, she wasn’t in much of a mood for celebrating. Overall, it hadn’t been a good year. Her love life had taken a dive, she barely earned enough to pay the bills, and her car was making a noise that would likely put skid marks on her credit card. Hopefully, next year she’d feel less like Scrooge and more like her usual Christmas-loving self.

“I’m usually not this Grinchy about the holidays,” Fiona said.

“I know.” Liz’s heels clicked against the tiles on her way to the fridge. “It’s not your fault your ex is a douche. Now open your present while I pour the wine.”

Curious, she removed the tissue paper from the top of the bag, peered inside.

And laughed.

It was a Christmas ornament designed to look like a letter to Santa, with swirly red cursive writing that read: *Dear Santa, Sorry about all the F-bombs. I'm a teacher and this year was CRAZY.*

Still laughing, Fiona peered up at her friend. "I love it. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome." Liz pried the cork from the bottle. "It's plastic, so it won't break if Wanda knocks it off the tree."

"I guess that means I'll have to get a tree." She'd been debating whether or not to bother with one this year. Wanda wouldn't mess with it—she stopped climbing the tree a few Christmases ago—but if she bought a tree, she'd also have to buy all the trimmings, and she wasn't sure she had enough room in her budget for that. Maybe a small, sparsely decorated tree, and then she'd hit the after-Christmas sales to load up on supplies for next year.

As if on cue, Fiona's phone chimed with Dennis's ringtone, and she ignored it, like all the other calls he'd made today. Still, her stomach sank while her pulse jumped, and she hated the fact he had that kind of power over her months after their breakup.

"Is that the asshole?" Liz set two glasses on the counter. A rhetorical question, considering she'd helped Fiona select the shower scene music from *Psycho* for his ringtone.

"The one and only." She sent the call to voicemail without even looking at the screen. He must not be working today, because he'd been calling practically nonstop since around eight this morning.

After their breakup, she'd considered blocking his number, but there were

so many ways to get around a block that it seemed like an exercise in futility. At least this way, the caller ID let her know not to answer the phone.

Her friend made a face as though she'd smelled something bad, her default expression whenever the subject of Dennis arose. "I'm surprised he's not texting like he usually does."

"He only sends texts when he's confident they can't be used as evidence."

When they'd been a couple, he'd constantly sent messages to see where she was, what she was doing, and who she was doing it with. At first, it hadn't seemed like a big deal, because he'd acted as though he was only interested in how her day was going. But as time wore on, the messages adopted a more overbearing tone, and she started to feel as though she were living under a microscope. Heaven forbid she was doing something he didn't like, or was with someone he didn't approve of—like Liz. When that happened, there was hell to pay whenever she got home.

Liz poured wine into the glasses. "What's he pissed off about now?"

"Who knows?" Fiona toed off her dress flats and pushed them under the coffee table. That was a big fat lie, because she knew exactly why he was calling, and she didn't want to deal with it. "I'm guessing it has something to do with his visit last night."

"That was you?" Her friend's eyes widened. "I heard there was some sort of dust-up in one of the buildings. What happened?"

"It really wasn't that big of a deal." Fiona crossed to the kitchen and leaned against the counter. She'd been hoping to avoid this conversation, mostly because Liz would blow it out of proportion, but she didn't see a way out of it now. "I don't even know if I'd call it an argument."

Liz rolled her eyes so hard her prescription probably changed. "Why didn't you call me? Better yet, did you call the cops on the cop? Please tell me you

did; it would make my frigging week.”

Much to her friend’s disappointment, Fiona shook her head. “No, it didn’t get that bad, but for a little while, I thought Dennis and Joe might duke it out in the hall.”

A part of Fiona that she refused to acknowledge had wanted to watch Joe beat the stuffing out of Dennis. Given Joe’s muscular build and his air of self-assurance, he certainly seemed capable of doing it. But in the end, it would have only made matters worse. Joe would have ended up with an arrest record and time in jail, while Dennis would direct his full fury at her and make her life even more difficult.

She still didn’t understand why he was trying to re-insert himself into her life. More than six months had passed since she moved out of their home, and nearly three months since she’d last heard from him. After all this time, why did he suddenly decide they were meant to be together?

Liz’s brows drew down in confusion as she put the bottle back in the fridge. “Who’s Joe?”

“Hot Guy. He came upstairs because Dennis was making so much noise, he could hear it inside his apartment.”

It took a lot to leave Liz speechless. When she finally regained the power of speech, she said, “Are you telling me that Hot Guy came up here last night and this is the first I’m hearing about it?”

“There isn’t much to tell.”

“And here I thought we were friends.” With a huff, Liz shoved a glass of wine into Fiona’s hand and then pointed to the sliding glass door. “Balcony. Now. I want to hear every last detail and don’t you dare leave anything out.”

As they made themselves comfortable outside, Fiona gave a play-by-play of the previous night’s events, from the time Liz left her apartment to the

moment Fiona watched Joe go back downstairs to watch his hockey game.

When she finished, Liz stuck her lower lip out in a pout. “Damn, I miss all the fun.”

Fiona shot her some side-eye. “Dennis is never fun, especially when he gets angry like that.”

To be fair, Dennis had never physically harmed her, but there had been occasions, mostly toward the end of their relationship, when she’d worried that he might. Most of the time, he preferred to screw with her head and make her feel lower than the dirt beneath her shoes. But last night he’d truly scared her, especially when he’d kicked the door so hard she thought it might fly off the hinges. God only knew what he would have done if he’d gotten into her apartment.

“Yeah, but Hot Guy came charging to your rescue like a knight in shining armor.” Liz propped one booted foot on the rail. “I bet he likes you.”

“Likes me?” Fiona scoffed. “The man barely knows me. He was just mad about the noise, nothing more.”

“He wouldn’t have given you his number if he was only concerned about the noise.” Liz swirled the wine in her glass. “Twenty bucks says he wants to strip you naked and lick you like a lollipop. Have you called him?”

It took a few seconds for the question to sink in, because her brain was stuck on the naked lollipop licking. “Why would I?”

“Um, because he’s hot? I think that’s reason enough.”

Fiona’s phone buzzed to signal a new call. Much to her relief, it wasn’t Dennis. But it wasn’t a number she recognized, so she sent the call to voicemail and set the phone back on the tiny table between the chairs. “He said to call if Dennis came back. That’s a pretty narrow parameter.”

“That might be what he said, but I doubt that’s what he meant. Just send

him a text thanking him for the assist.” Liz sipped her wine. “Or better yet, bring him a batch of your double fudge brownies. One bite and he’ll be putty in your hands.”

“You’ve seen the man. With a body like that, I doubt he pollutes it with brownies.” To have a rock-hard body like that, he probably maintained a strict diet of tofu and tree bark, in addition to all that running and whatever else he did for exercise.

And although she understood the importance of a balanced diet and exercise, she’d come to terms with the fact she’d never have the figure of a fitness model. A body like that required ridiculous amounts of hard work and discipline, and there was no way in hell she’d give up brownies. Or wine. Or pizza. Or a million other things that were simply too delicious to live without.

“Then consider it a litmus test. If he doesn’t eat brownies, he’s simply not worth your time.” Liz set her glass on the table, picked up Fiona’s phone, and swiped at the screen.

“What are you doing?” A sense of unease slid down Fiona’s spine.

After a few more swipes, Liz started to type. “Sending Hot Guy a text.”

“No!” In a panic, Fiona grabbed for the phone, but Liz held it out of reach.

She tapped feverishly at the screen and then hit the Send button with an exaggerated flourish.

“There. Now we wait.” Liz looked like the proverbial cat that just ate the canary. “Good thing you only have one Joe in your contacts. Otherwise, I might have sent it to the wrong guy, and wouldn’t that be embarrassing?”

Fiona stared at the phone as though it might sprout teeth and bite her. “Dare I ask what you sent him?”

“Oh, come on, when have I ever steered you wrong?” Her friend smiled sweetly. “I thanked him for his help last night and asked if he’d like to come

up for a game of naked Twister.”

Spots danced in front of Fiona’s eyes. She could feel the blood draining from her face. This was worse than the time when Liz gave her number to that guy with no chin at the bar. Seriously, it was like he just had a slope from his mouth to his neck. “Please tell me you’re joking. Otherwise, I’ll have to find a suitable lake to dump your body.”

That got a laugh out of Liz. “Relax, I’m just jerking your chain.” She held out the phone. “Here, see for yourself.”

Fiona snatched the phone from Liz’s grip. As she read the message, relief nearly knocked the wind right out of her. There was nothing lewd in the text, a departure for Liz, just a brief message thanking him once again for his help last night with Dennis.

“I appreciate you keeping it G-rated.” And grammatically correct, without any of the shorthand commonly found in text messages. It actually read like something she’d type, because her teacher brain refused to send anything that read as though it were written by a teenager.

Liz raised her glass in a mock toast. “I aim to please.”

The breeze kicked up, ruffling Fiona’s hair as she set the phone back on the table. After months of scorching summer heat, it felt good not to sweat. The guy on the news said a winter storm was heading their way. If that actually happened, temperatures might dip low enough to make it feel like Christmastime, at least by Florida standards. Folks from up north might still find it balmy, but true Floridians broke out the winter gear when thermometers dipped below seventy.

Little by little, the stress of the day drained from her system, and she sipped her wine as she watched a middle-aged woman walk her dog on the path below. The short-haired terrier stopped every few feet to mark a tree, or a

bush, or any other upright object. Only three more days until winter break, and then she'd be off until after New Year. Plenty of time to rest and recharge.

Her phone chimed with Dennis's ringtone again, and the stress snapped back into place. Why couldn't he just leave her alone? With a sigh, she picked up the phone.

"Don't answer that," Liz said.

"I didn't intend to." She sent the call to voicemail, but before she could set the phone down again, it buzzed to signal an incoming text.

Liz's gaze slid to the phone. "Bet you a dollar it's Hot Guy."

"His name's Joe." If they kept calling him Hot Guy, one day she'd slip up and call him Hot Guy to his face, and then she'd have to move. Or change her name. Maybe both. Just thinking about it made her heart skip a beat.

Fiona swiped at the screen. Sure enough, it was a response from Joe, and she barely suppressed the urge to smile as she read the message.

No problem. I meant what I said. Call me if he comes back.

"What did he say?" Liz asked, and Fiona held the phone out so she could read the text. A grin stretched across her friend's face, and she knew she'd never hear the end of it. "Aw, yeah. He'd totally be up for naked Twister."

Glass empty, Fiona stood. "I'm going to start dinner. Should I make enough for two?"

"Only if you're planning on inviting Hot Guy to dinner. Joe," she quickly added before Fiona could correct her. "I'll pick up something on my way to the bar."

Fiona went inside to the kitchen, where she put her glass in the sink. "I thought you were off tonight."

"I was, but Marley called out with the flu."

Someone knocked on the door, and Fiona's stomach knotted with dread. Odds were Dennis was on the other side of the door, pissed off because she wasn't answering his calls. She went to the door and checked the peephole, and her breath caught at the sight of Joe's handsome face.

"Don't tell me the asshole's back," Liz said.

"No, it's Joe."

Liz's eyes widened. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Hot Guy Joe?"

Fiona nodded, unable to contain the riot of butterflies fluttering in her belly. It was ridiculous. She barely knew the man. For all she knew, he could be a total creep. And yet here she was, nearly as giddy as a teenager because a hot guy was at the door.

"In that case, what are you waiting for?" Liz gestured to the door. "Let him in!"

Fiona slid the bolt and opened the door, and there he was, looking strong, rugged, and ready to conquer the world in camo pants, combat boots, and an olive-green T-shirt that molded to his chest in all the right places. His thick, dark hair was tousled as if he'd been driving with the windows rolled down. His phone rested in a holster that was clipped to his belt, while the tactical watch around his left wrist appeared tough enough to withstand a nuclear blast.

He smiled at the sight of her, a flash of white in his five o'clock shadow, and she was pretty sure at least one of her ovaries exploded. "Hey, I just wanted to check how you're doing after what happened last night with your ex."

Before she could answer, Liz crossed the room to stand beside her. "Hi, I'm Liz. You must be the man who rode to her rescue."

The statement seemed to fluster him. "Um, well...I wouldn't call it a

rescue.”

“I don’t care what you call it. You helped my friend and for that I’m eternally grateful.” Liz tossed back the last of her wine and handed the empty glass to Fiona. “I’d love to stay, but I better get ready for work. I promised Jeremy I’d be there by seven, and you know how he gets when I’m late. If you have time, why don’t you stop by tonight? That goes for you too,” she told Joe. “First round is on the house.”

Fiona watched as Liz slipped past Joe, checked out his ass, and then disappeared down the stairs.

“She seems nice,” Joe said once they were alone.

“She’s incorrigible, but I love her like a sister.”

To paraphrase an old saying, family wasn’t always blood. She and Liz had been through all kinds of crap together and came out the other side even stronger. When she’d left Dennis and had nowhere to stay, Liz had given her a shoulder to lean on and a couch to sleep on for as long as she’d needed to get her feet back under her.

Joe smiled. “Which bar does she work at?”

“Spiny Norman’s off Rouse. She and her brothers own it.”

“I’ll have to check it out sometime.”

Her phone rang—Dennis again—and she bit back the curse that was perched on the tip of her tongue.

Joe’s gaze tracked to the phone. “I take it that’s your ex.”

She nodded. “He’s been calling all day.”

“Have you answered any of his calls?”

“No, but he’s persistent. It’s one of his superpowers.” That, along with his uncanny ability to identify and exploit her insecurities, had locked her into a bad relationship for much longer than she cared to admit. Hindsight being

twenty-twenty, she should have gotten out long before they moved in together. The warning signs had been clear as day. But now that she was free, she'd rather spend the rest of her life alone than be treated like garbage again.

Joe extended his hand. "May I?"

If she had a lick of sense, she'd say no. Nothing good could possibly come from him interacting with Dennis again. If anything, it would make matters worse. And yet here she was, for reasons she couldn't begin to explain, handing her phone to Joe.

He swiped at the screen to answer the call and put the phone to his ear. "Hey Denny, Fi can't come to the phone right now. Actually, she can but she doesn't want to talk to you, so how about you give it a rest?" He paused to listen to whatever Dennis had to say. When he spoke again, his Jersey accent was thicker than before. "Well, I appreciate the suggestion, but I'm pretty sure that's anatomically impossible. In all seriousness, you really need to learn when to quit. If she didn't answer the first twenty calls, number twenty-one isn't working either. Take the L like a man and move on with your life. Trust me; you'll be a lot happier."

He didn't bother listening to whatever Dennis said in response. Instead, he ended the call and gave the phone back to Fiona.

"That was fun." A note of amusement warmed his eyes, the brown so dark it was hard to tell the difference between the iris and the pupil. "I doubt it'll do any good, but it was worth a shot, right?"

The phone sounded again with Dennis's ringtone, and Fiona let out a sigh. She should have known better than to give him the phone. "Not to be rude, but I better go. If he's not already on his way, he will be soon. I'd rather not be here when he arrives."

A serious look settled over Joe's face. "I can make him go away if you

want.”

She didn't know what he meant by that, and she wasn't about to ask.

“I appreciate the offer, but I don't want things to escalate any more than they already have. It's better if I just spend an hour or two with Liz at the bar. By the time I get back, he'll have given up and gone home.”

The pair of lines between his eyebrows deepened. “You shouldn't have to flee your own home because of that asshole.”

“That's life,” she said with what she hoped was a casual shrug. “Sometimes it's better to take the path of least resistance. Sooner or later, he'll realize he's wasting his time, and then he'll move on with his life and leave me alone.”

The noise Joe made suggested he didn't agree, but he kept the opinion to himself. That was good, because she wasn't in the mood to play the If-I-Were-You game with her neighbor.

Joe leaned one shoulder against the doorframe and crossed his arms over the broad expanse of his chest. There was something in his eyes she couldn't identify, his expression impossible to read.

Just as she was about to ask what was on his mind, he said, “I'm sure this is going to sound crazy, but I have a proposition for you.”

CHAPTER 5

THIS EARLY IN THE evening, Spiny Norman's was quiet, with only a handful of tables occupied and a couple of patrons at the bar. That would change as more people left work for the day, giving them maybe an hour or so before things got loud enough to make conversation a challenge.

Pinto breathed in the scent of hops and barley as he followed Fiona to a table by the wall, trying hard not to notice the sweet sway of her ass and failing miserably. In his defense, it was a mighty fine ass. Any man, straight or otherwise, worth his salt would have taken notice.

He claimed the seat that backed against the wall and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "This place is pretty new, isn't it?"

From what he could tell, the brewpub had risen from the ashes of a franchise restaurant that went belly-up a few years ago. As far as bars went, it was fairly well lit, with exposed brick walls and wood beam ceilings that gave the place a rustic feel. Handcrafted wood tables and plush faux leather chairs made you want to kick back and watch a game or two on the wall-mounted televisions. A glass wall behind the mahogany bar showed off the

brewery's stainless-steel fermentation tanks, the room at least twice the size of the area reserved for customers.

"About six months," Fiona replied as she hung her purse on the back of her chair and took a seat.

She'd insisted on leaving her apartment for fear of her ex showing up and making an ass of himself. Again. She hadn't even taken the time to change from her work clothes into something more comfortable, and how messed up was that? Nobody should have to put up with that shit. If he had his way, she wouldn't have to worry about that jerk any longer.

The door by the bar swung open, and Liz came through, carrying a tray filled with freshly cleaned pint glasses. As if sensing their presence, she glanced in their direction, and a huge grin split her face. She handed the tray to the guy working the bar, wiped her hands with a towel, and made a beeline for their table, her boot heels clicking against the polished floor.

"Hey girl, I wasn't sure if I'd see you tonight." Her gaze slid from Fiona to Pinto and then back to Fiona, the question clear on her face.

"Dennis," was all Fiona said, and Liz's upper lip peeled back.

"You shouldn't have to hide from that prick."

"She won't for much longer," Pinto said, and all eyes went to him. "Long story; Fi can fill you in later. In the meantime, what do you suggest in the way of stouts?"

Though she looked as if she wanted to pry him for details, Liz gave him a quick rundown of the beers on tap. They each made their selections, and she headed back to the bar.

Cheers broke out from the group a few tables over, the college-aged guys high-fiving each other as though they'd been the ones to score a power-play goal against the Islanders. On-screen, a fight broke out between two players,

their pads flying across the ice as the men pounded each other, while the refs waited for the right opportunity to separate the two.

As the noise settled down, Fiona eyed Pinto with the same level of skepticism typically reserved for unsolicited emails from Nigerian princes offering untold riches. “So what kind of proposition did you want to discuss?”

Cut to the chase—he liked that in a woman. “You don’t trust easy, do you?”

“Nope.” She didn’t elaborate, and he knew better than to ask.

More likely than not, it had something to do with her ex, and it made him despise the asshole even more than he already did.

Liz returned with their drinks and set them on the table. “Anything else I can get you? Napkins, pretzels...a shovel and some tarps for disposing the body?”

Fiona laughed, and it softened some of the tension around her eyes. “Thanks, but I think we’re good.”

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me.” Liz winked. With a flip of the bar towel over her shoulder, she headed for the table with the hockey fans, leaving them to resume their conversation.

Pinto leaned back in his chair and sampled his chocolate stout, the subtle bitter taste perfectly balanced with just the right amount of creaminess. Odds were Fiona would turn him down flat, but he had to give it a try. “I think we’re in a unique position to help each other out.”

She raised one eyebrow. “How so?”

Here goes nothing. After one last mental crack of his knuckles, Pinto launched into the pitch he’d whipped up during the drive to the bar. “My mother’s coming down from New Jersey next week. She’s a worrier; it’s in

her blood. She loves her kids, and she wants what she thinks is best for them, but that doesn't always track with what we want for ourselves. In my case, she wants me to settle down and start giving her grandkids as soon as possible, and that ain't happening anytime soon because...well, I've got my reasons. It's a constant source of conflict between us, and this visit would be a lot less stressful if she was under the impression that I'm in a relationship with a nice, stable woman who might eventually give her what she wants. I was hoping you could help me with that."

A pair of lines appeared in the space between Fiona's eyebrows, making it clear that his pitch sounded better in his head than it did coming out of his mouth.

"You want me to lie to your mother?" She said it with the same level of disdain as if he'd asked her to drown a litter of puppies.

"Only once or twice." He threw some extra confidence into his voice in the hopes of assuring her that it wasn't a big deal. As far as he was concerned, it wasn't. The little white lie would go a long way toward easing his mother's worries. And really, she had nothing to worry about. He was healthy, happy, and enjoyed his life exactly the way it was. Why screw it up with unwieldy entanglements?

"My mother's convinced that if I don't get married soon, I'm going to die alone and unloved, probably on the couch with a beer in one hand and the remote control in the other. I'm thinking we could do lunch—maybe dinner; whichever works better for you—and then I can tell her that you're busy with work or something for the rest of the time she's in town. You'd be doing us both a big favor. With that bone of contention out of the way, we'd be able to relax and enjoy some quality family time together."

The ice in Fiona's eyes thawed a fraction. It gave him a glimmer of hope.

She sipped her pilsner and set the glass on the table. “And what would I get out of this arrangement?”

“Protection against your ex. Whenever that clown shows up, day or night, you give me a call and I’ll come play the role of your knuckle-dragging, over-protective boyfriend. I’ll hang around until he crawls back to whatever rock he lives under.”

Fiona went quiet for a few long moments. To her credit, she had a great poker face; her expression gave absolutely no indication of which way she was leaning. “I have to admit your offer holds a certain appeal, but I don’t know if it’ll work.”

“It’s worth a shot, isn’t it? Wouldn’t you feel safer with a big, strong guy at your beck and call?” He wagged his eyebrows, and the hint of a smile creased her lips before her expression shuttered again.

She folded her arms across her chest. Her head tilted a little to one side. “Is this some weird angle to...you know...”

“Get into your pants?” Her suspicions didn’t offend him in the least. To the contrary, he didn’t blame her one bit for questioning his motives. There were way too many lowlifes out there just waiting for a chance to prey on unsuspecting women, and they made it so much harder for normal guys like him to get laid. “Look, sweetheart, I’m not gonna lie. You’re gorgeous. I’d have to be dead not to notice. But I’m not in the market for a woman right now, and even if I was, I know easier ways to get one.”

“Um, thanks. I guess.” She sipped her beer and set the glass back on the table. Something shifted in the depths of her eyes, but he had no idea what it meant. “If we do this—and I’m not saying we are—what are you planning to tell your mother after she leaves? Are you going to keep lying to her about being in a relationship?”

It was a fair question, one he'd already considered. "Sooner or later, I'll tell her that things didn't work out between us. Don't worry; I won't make you the bad guy in the breakup. She'll assume I'm the asshole anyway."

"Why's that?"

He flashed an unrepentant grin. If they went through with this, she'd eventually hear all about his turbulent teenage years, so he might as well disclose it now and get it out of the way. "I was a rotten kid, always getting into trouble. Ma says I'm the reason she went gray at an early age."

Eyes narrowed, Fiona studied him as though she were trying to solve some great mystery of life. "You don't seem rotten now. What changed?"

"I grew up," he said simply. The real answer was a bit more complex, but it would do for now. "After high school I joined the Navy, and the military has a way of filing off the rough edges. If you want, I can give you a list of references so you can verify that I'm not a serial killer or anything."

"I don't think that's necessary." Still, the serious look on her face indicated she wasn't quite sold on the idea. "What if we get caught?"

"We won't."

"You can't guarantee that."

"Nothing in life is guaranteed. But I do know this: if you don't do anything, your ex will continue to make your life suck. Is that what you want?"

She frowned. "Of course not."

"Then why not take a chance at making your life better? Be my fake girlfriend for a week. In return, I'll be your fake boyfriend for however long it takes to get rid of that jerkoff cop."

"That might take a while."

"Good thing I enjoy a challenge." Pinto grinned in the hopes a little added charm would help to seal the deal. "So what do you say? I help you; you help

me. It's a win-win all around."



GLASS IN HAND, FIONA sipped her beer while she mentally debated the merits of Joe's offer.

She had to admit, the idea intrigued her. Joe had been instrumental in convincing Dennis to leave last night. It would be nice to have someone close by who could help when her ex returned. And he would. It was only a matter of time. When Dennis set his mind on something, he was more tenacious than a bulldog with a bone. It would take someone just as determined to keep him at arm's length until he finally gave up and left her in peace.

But she wasn't completely comfortable with the notion of deceiving a woman she'd never met, which seemed a touch hypocritical, considering how much she liked the idea when it came to getting Dennis off her back. By and large, she played by the rules. She never cheated on her taxes, only drove a mile or two over the posted speed limit, and always made sure Wanda was up to date on all her shots. Lying to his mother didn't feel right.

Then again, it was merely a minor deception to make his mother happy while she visited her son over the holidays. Not to mention, it made Joe's life easier, and it wasn't like anyone was getting hurt.

Still, they needed to discuss a few details before she agreed to anything.

"If we do this, how much physical contact would be required?"

The corners of his mouth twitched. "If I mauled you in front of my mother, she'd beat me with her shoe. That said, she'd probably think something was up if we didn't have any public displays of affection, like holding hands, or my arm around your waist. And yeah, the situation might call for a kiss or two."

She ignored the way her body lit up just thinking about it. “No tongues.”

The twitch turned into a smile. “I’m good with that. Bottom line, we won’t do anything that makes you uncomfortable. And if you change your mind, just say the word. No hard feelings.” He held out his hand. “Do we have a deal?”

She’d have to be out of her mind to agree to this. Aside from the fact she barely knew the man, it probably wouldn’t work. And yet here she was, nodding like an idiot.

Fiona shook his hand to seal the deal, and she sucked in a breath at the zing of awareness that shot up her arm and spread through her body like wildfire.

“Are you okay?” Joe asked, concern on his face.

She slipped her hand from his grip. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little tired. It’s been a long day.”

His expression said he didn’t believe her, but he didn’t call her out on it and for that she was grateful. “We should probably iron out the details of our relationship so we don’t get caught in a lie.”

“Fair enough.” She straightened in her chair. “I suppose we should start at the beginning. How did we meet?”

“Oh, that’s easy. You’re my neighbor. I couldn’t help noticing you’re gorgeous. But I wasn’t sure if you were interested in me, so I never made any moves.” He took a long pull from his beer. His gaze flicked up, catching hers, and she couldn’t look away if she tried. “But then one day I caught you and your friend watching me from your balcony while I was out jogging, and the rest, as they say, is history.”

It took everything she had to keep her jaw from hitting the table. For the life of her, she couldn’t think of a time in her life when she’d been this mortified.

She'd be perfectly happy if the floor opened up and swallowed her, chair and all.

For a moment or two, she considered denying it, or maybe blaming it on Liz, but what was the point? She wasn't that good of a liar.

Fighting the urge to make a run for the ladies' room, she coughed to clear the lump in her throat. "You, uh...so you noticed that, huh?"

His mouth warmed with the kind of smile that could get a woman into trouble. "In my line of work, you always have to be aware of your surroundings. After a while, it becomes second nature."

Heat flooded her face. Oh, God, she was blushing. "I, uh...I don't know what to say. I mean, I know we shouldn't have objectified—"

"That better not be an apology, because there's nothing for you to be sorry about. If you jogged by my window, you know damn well I'd pull up a chair and watch."

Heat spread to other parts of her body at an alarming rate. "That doesn't make me feel better."

Joe leaned back in his chair, one leg crossed over his knee. "Then how about we say we met in the laundry room?"

"That might work," she said, thankful he'd taken mercy on her and offered a change of subject.

"Sure, it'll work," he said. "We were both waiting for our clothes to dry and one of us started a conversation—Ma will assume it was me, so let's run with that. One thing led to another, I asked you out, and we haven't been able to get enough of each other ever since. Plausible yet vague, without a ton of details to trip either of us up."

"Sounds good. Where did we go on our first date?"

He took a swig from his beer. "We didn't go anywhere. I made you dinner."

Fiona blinked, then blinked again as she tried to picture him tinkering around in the kitchen. It was kind of hard with him dressed like he just walked off an Army barracks. “You can cook?”

He shifted in his seat. “Why do you find that so unbelievable?”

“I didn’t say it was unbelievable.”

“You didn’t have to; I can see it all over your face.”

Though he didn’t seem offended by it, which was a relief.

Finished with his beer, he set the empty glass on the table. “Tell you what; come over tomorrow after work and I’ll show you what I can do.”

“Like an actual date?” Her pulse quickened at the thought.

Joe lifted and lowered one shoulder in a casual shrug. “I prefer to call it a tactical planning session. You like lasagna?”

“Sure.”

“Good. Come hungry. Dinner will be ready at six.” Joe pushed up from his chair and dropped a few bills on the table to cover the tip. As he started for the door, he looked back over his shoulder at her. “Don’t forget to bring a bottle of red.”

CHAPTER 6

FIVE MINUTES TO SIX, Fiona knocked on Joe's door.

Nerves skittering, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other as she picked a cat hair off the sleeve of her fitted V-neck shirt. She'd almost worn the black turtleneck instead, but decided it was too frumpy. Besides, red was a Christmas color, and even though she wasn't feeling festive, she could at least play the part.

Then again, it might be too flashy for dinner. For a fleeting moment, she considered running upstairs to change but abandoned the thought just as quickly.

She blew out a frustrated breath. She was being ridiculous. There was no reason for her to feel insecure. Heck, this wasn't even a real date. What had Joe called it? Oh yeah, that's right: a tactical planning session. Just two people engaged in a mutually beneficial arrangement. Totally platonic.

Except for some minor hand-holding, or an arm around her waist.

Maybe a kiss here and there.

That was it.

Nothing more.

She tried to ignore the twinge of disappointment that settled in her stomach like a ball of lead.

Seconds later, the door swung open, and her mouth went completely dry.

Forget about dinner—Joe looked good enough to eat in pale denim and a forest-green Henley with the sleeves pushed up past his elbows. His short, dark hair was still wet from the shower, his face freshly shaved. He paused a moment to look her over, and when he smiled, her heart thudded in her chest.

“Hey,” she said with a little finger wave, feeling like a total dork.

“Hey yourself.” His gaze drifted down. “Merlot...nice choice.”

Huh? Oh yeah, the wine. “Thanks. I wasn’t sure what kind of red paired best with lasagna, so I went with the brand I drink on the balcony with Liz. Not that we’re lushes or anything,” she added. “We just have a glass or two after work a few times a week.”

“Hey, I’m not judging.” He moved back and opened the door wider for her to enter. “There have been days when I cracked a beer open the second I walked through the door. You two been friends for a while?”

“Since college.” Fiona stepped into the foyer.

As expected, the apartment had the same general layout as hers, with the same off-white walls and sand-colored carpet. But the décor leaned heavily toward early twenty-first century man cave. A mismatched leather couch and recliner faced a television that was bigger than her. Sports paraphernalia adorned the walls. New Jersey teams—not a surprise, considering his accent. Several remote controls sat on the scarred wooden coffee table in front of the couch. Everything appeared clean and organized, as if he’d just given the place a top-to-bottom scrubbing.

Joe crossed to the kitchen and opened the drawer by the refrigerator. “What,

were you sorority sisters or something?”

“No, we met in a creative writing class. She was late on the first day, and the only open seat was the one next to mine. After class, we grabbed a bite to eat, and we’ve been friends ever since.” She leaned against a Formica countertop that was identical to the one in her kitchen. “That smells great.”

“Thanks.” After a bit of rooting around, he took a corkscrew from the drawer. “Hopefully it’ll taste as good as it smells.”

“I can open the wine,” she offered, and he handed her the tool. “So what kind of work do you do?” It was one of those things she’d been meaning to ask but the question kept slipping her mind.

He slid the drawer shut. “Private security.”

“Oh, like bodyguard work?”

That would go a long way to explaining why he came home from work at the end of each day dressed like some sort of action hero. An action hero who currently looked remarkably domestic—and smoking hot—in his tiny galley kitchen.

“Among other things.” He opened the cabinet by the stove, took two wine glasses from the top shelf, and set them on the counter. “How about you?”

“I’m a teacher; eighth-grade science.”

He let out a low whistle. “I bet your job’s rougher than mine.”

“Teaching middle schoolers can be a challenge. There are days when it feels like a circus.” She tugged, and the cork came out of the bottle with a soft pop. “They’re at that age where everything in their lives is in a state of flux. Puberty is wreaking havoc on their bodies, their relationships with adults are shifting, and boundaries are constantly tested. But it’s certainly never dull.”

“I can imagine.”

Joe slipped on mitts, opened the oven, and the mouth-watering aroma of lasagna flooded the apartment. Not that she was complaining. If Johnson & Johnson ever replicated the scent, they'd make a killing in the air freshener market.

“I hope you're hungry; I made a ton.”

No kidding. The pan looked large enough to feed every person who lived in the building. “Starving, but I don't think I'll be able to put a dent in that.”

He grinned. “I always make a lot so I have plenty of leftovers. If you like it, you're welcome to come back for more.”

While she filled their glasses, he set the small square table and loaded two plates with piping-hot lasagna. He put the plates on the table, and then added a basket of bread and a bowl of freshly grated parmesan.

He made a sweeping gesture toward the table. “Dinner is served.”

“Thank you,” she said as he pushed her chair in for her. She waited for him to take his seat before she picked up her fork and sliced into the lasagna. A plume of aromatic steam rose from the forkful of food, and she blew on it to avoid scalding her mouth.

Fiona took a small bite, and the explosion of flavors nearly had her moaning out loud. “Oh, my God. This is incredible.”

He smiled, satisfaction plain on his face. “Thanks. It's my mom's secret recipe.”

“What makes it a secret?”

His smile broadened as he picked up his wine glass. “If I told you, it wouldn't be a secret, now would it?”

She liked this playful side to him. It made her want to be playful as well. “You wouldn't even share it with your fake girlfriend?”

“Are you kidding? My mother almost didn't share it with me. I had to

swear on the family Bible that I wouldn't pass it along to anybody, but you're more than welcome to ask her when she's in town."

Over dinner they talked, sharing bits and pieces of their lives, and with each passing moment, she found herself increasingly charmed by him. How could she possibly not? Smart, attractive, charismatic, and funny, in addition to being a good cook was one heck of a combination.

Joe ate a bite of lasagna and washed it down with a swig of wine before he continued the tale from his childhood. "So me and Gabe head for home, feeling on top of the world because we thought we got away clean. But then we turn the corner, and our house comes into view, and there are my parents standing on the front porch, hands on their hips, looking like they want to skin us alive."

Captivated by the story, Fiona leaned forward to pick up her wine glass. "Who ratted you out?"

"Ricky Schmidt, that little weasel. We should have known better than to let him tag along. His parents busted him coming home late, and he dragged the rest of us under the bus with him."

"What did your parents do?"

"Well, they started by smacking the shit out of both of us. Then they made us go back to Jenny's house, apologize to her parents, and clean up all the toilet paper. It ended with both of us grounded for a month and having to work at Pop's shop every day after school." A devilish smirk curved his lips. "Much to their dismay, it failed to straighten us out."

She laughed, unable to hold it back any longer.

Joe ate another bite of lasagna and then pointed at her with his empty fork. "I bet you were a model student."

"That depends on who you ask."

His eyebrows rose. “Okay, you’ve got to elaborate on that one.”

Fiona paused to sip her wine and gather her thoughts. “I used to call my older sister the Stepford Child. She was the kind of kid every parent dreamed of having: straight As, honor society, math club, band geek, never served a day of detention or got called to the principal’s office. She was one of those students who didn’t date, didn’t go to parties, didn’t smoke or drink or even curse.”

Joe paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. “Christ, was she grown in a lab?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” Fiona replied. “I’m a few years younger, so when I hit high school and wanted to go out with my friends and have a boyfriend—you know, the normal stuff that most teenagers do—they didn’t know how to deal with me, because they’d expected me to behave just like her. Honestly, I thought I was fairly normal, but my mom acted like I was some sort of demon spawn.”

Joe snorted. “Did the cops ever come to your house looking for you?”

“No.”

“Then your parents got off easy. By the time I graduated from high school, my folks were on a first-name basis with half the beat cops in town. I wouldn’t be surprised if they all chipped in and had a block party when I enlisted.”

Fiona broke off a piece of bread and used it to sop up some of the sauce on her plate. “What did you do in the Navy?”

“I was a combat medic on a SEAL team.”

Her eyes widened. That explained why he was built like something fresh out of a fitness magazine. “Wow, I’m impressed. I’d ask about what kinds of missions you were on, but I suppose that’s classified, right?”

“Something like that.” He ate another bite of lasagna.

“Why did you leave?”

Another shrug. “It was time to move on, do something different.”

On the outside, he seemed relaxed and aloof, but she sensed an underlying tension lurking just beneath the surface.

“Did I touch on a sensitive subject?”

“Tangentially.”

She gave him a point for honesty. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“Don’t be. I served my country honorably. It wasn’t like I got kicked out or anything. But my reasons for leaving were...complicated.”

“Fair enough. We don’t need to know every little detail of each other’s lives, just enough to convince people we’re an actual couple.”

The ghost of a smile warmed his mouth. He drank the last of his wine, picked up the bottle, and filled his glass halfway. Then he brought the bottle to her almost-empty glass and filled it as well.

“Thank you.” As she reached for the glass, her gaze met his, and for a moment or so she lost herself in the warmth of his chocolate-brown eyes.

The sound of her phone buzzing to signal an incoming text broke the spell and made her jerk in her seat. She’d meant to switch it off before she came downstairs, but it must have slipped her mind.

“Do you need to answer that?” Joe asked.

“It’s probably Dennis.” To be sure, she got up, crossed to the phone, and checked the screen. Yep, it was him. She turned off the phone without reading the text and returned to her seat. “Sorry about that.”

He waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. “There’s nothing for you to be sorry about. It’s not like you can control when he’s going to call. If you don’t mind me asking, why did you stay with him for as long as you did?”

“I’ve thought about that a lot since I left.” She had the therapy bills to prove it. “When we first started dating, Dennis seemed like the perfect guy. He was sweet, and considerate, and he made me feel like I was the only thing that truly mattered in his life. It was intoxicating.

“But things changed when we moved in together. It was as if he didn’t feel the need to keep the mask in place anymore and his true personality began to seep out. It wasn’t all at once, though...just a little at a time. Over the course of a year and a half, he went from ‘You’re wearing that tonight?’ to ‘You’re not wearing that tonight, are you?’ Eventually, he felt confident enough to say, ‘You’re not wearing that tonight,’ and ‘No woman of mine is leaving the house dressed like that.’ The change was so subtle I barely even noticed it, kind of like the proverbial frog in the pot of water.

“In my gut, I knew something was wrong, but I kept telling myself that I was overreacting. But the escalations continued, from what I was wearing to who my friends were and who I associated with at work. If somebody called or sent me a text, he’d demand to know who it was and what they said. It got to the point where I felt like I was walking on eggshells all the time. The only time I felt happy was when I was at work, and as soon as I got in the car to drive home, I could feel the stress start to build.”

“What finally convinced you to leave?”

“Wanda, of all things. Dennis never liked her. I’m pretty sure the feeling is mutual.”

“Smart cat.”

Fiona paused to sip her wine. “Dennis claimed he was allergic to cats. Anytime she was near, he complained about his sinuses, though it never seemed to happen when we visited his buddy who had two Persians. When I moved in, I agreed to keep her out of the bedroom, but then I’d come home

from work and find her locked in my office. He'd totally deny putting her in there, but how else could it have happened? Then one day he announced we had to get rid of her because his allergies were getting worse, and if I didn't agree, then I didn't really love him or care about his feelings."

Joe scowled. "What a manipulative ass. What did you do?"

"I cried myself to sleep that night, because I didn't know how I was going to bring myself to give her up. I adopted her when she was a kitten after I got my first teaching job. She's a member of the family. The next morning, I was watching Dennis eat breakfast, looking so smug and pleased with himself, and I just...I don't know. I guess something snapped inside me. I don't think I've ever felt that angry. At him for being such a jerk, and at myself for putting up with it for so long. But I also realized that I had to get out of there before things got any worse. So as soon as he left for work, I called in sick. Then I packed as much as I could fit into my car, got Wanda into her carrier, and got the hell out."

"Good for you." He raised his glass to toast her actions. "Where did you go?"

"I spent the first night at a hotel. I felt so stupid for letting things get so bad, for not listening to the people who'd warned me over and over again. I was too embarrassed to ask them for help. Liz called me the next day after Dennis showed up at her apartment, looking for me. We'd barely spoken for months because Dennis hated her. She'd never been fond of him either." Fiona chuckled. "She didn't judge me, or say I told you so, just welcomed me into her home until I could get back on my feet. She also put in a good word for me with the management company, so when a unit opened up, I got first dibs."

He smiled. "Remind me to thank Liz the next time I see her."

Fiona slumped in her chair, suddenly feeling exhausted from revisiting her time with Dennis. “I just don’t understand why he’s acting like this now. He was like this right after the breakup, but after a few weeks, he gave up and left me alone.”

“Maybe he never really gave up.” As he stood, Joe collected their plates and brought them to the kitchen. “Is it possible he’s been licking his wounds all this time and finally decided to make one last attempt to get you back? Or maybe something happened in his life to trigger his newfound fixation.”

“Could be.” She wasn’t fond of either possibility. “I can help with that.”

“I’m sure you can, and I appreciate the offer, but it only takes one person to load the dishwasher. I’ll take care of the pan after it cools a bit more.”

He moved back to the table and reclaimed his seat.

“Thanks again for dinner,” she said. “It was delicious.”

“My pleasure; I aim to please.” He gave a smile that reached his eyes, and a ripple of warmth went through her that had nothing to do with the merlot. “How about we lighten things up with the lightning round?”

She gave him a questioning look. “What’s that?”

“It’s a way for us to learn more about each other. I ask you a question—nothing too personal—something like what’s your favorite dessert or how many times have you watched *Star Wars*. Once you give me an answer, you get to ask me a question in return.”

“How will you know if I’m telling the truth?”

He raised a brow. “Are you planning to lie to me?”

“Well, no. Not really. But what if there’s a question that I don’t feel comfortable answering?”

“Then I keep asking questions until we get to one you’re comfortable with. This isn’t supposed to be an interrogation. It’s meant to be fun. Fair enough?”

“I suppose.”

“Good.” His smile returned. “We’ll start off with the easy stuff, things that most couples would know about each other. What do you normally have for breakfast?”

“An Oreo Pop-Tart and a can of Diet Cherry Coke. What?” she asked when his upper lip peeled back.

“I think a Snickers bar has more nutritional value.”

“Oh, and what do you eat?”

“Breakfast bar and a cup of coffee.”

She barely held back a shudder. The only way she’d ever been able to stomach coffee was if she added so much cream and sugar it probably didn’t qualify as coffee anymore. And breakfast bars...blech. The ones she’d tried tasted like cardboard.

“Next question,” Joe said.

“Wait, don’t I get to ask a question?”

“You asked what I ate; now it’s my turn again.”

“That wasn’t my question,” she protested. “It was a response to your question for me.”

“It’s still a question.”

Fiona huffed out a breath to signal her annoyance. “Fine, whatever. Ask your question.”

“What’s the first thing you do when you come home from work?”

“I pet my cat, Wanda.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes, but you only asked about the first thing I do, which is pet the cat.”

Amusement tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Splitting hairs, are we?”

“Hey, you started it.” She gave a smug look. Two could play that game.

“My turn. Who’s your favorite Marvel character?”

“Deadpool. Yours?”

“She-Hulk. If you could only listen to one song for the rest of your life, what would it be and why?”

“Ah, now we’re getting to the truly important stuff.” Clearly enjoying himself, Joe swirled the wine in his glass before taking a drink. “‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ by Queen, because it’s impossible to stay in a bad mood while listening to that song.”

He straightened in his chair, a hint of challenge in his eyes. “If you could go back in time and change one thing in your life, what would it be?”

“Oh, that’s a good one.” She paused to weigh the possibilities. Her first impulse was to say she wouldn’t have gone on that first date with Dennis, but who knew where that would have led? She could have wound up with someone who treated her better...or much, much worse. “I don’t think I’d want to change anything because there’s no way of knowing where the butterfly effect would take me. Every experience I’ve had, every person I’ve met, everything I’ve ever done in my life—good, bad, or otherwise—has shaped me into what I am today. I like where I live, where I work.” Her gaze met his, and she felt a flutter in her belly. “I really like my friends. One change, even the tiniest bit, might set me on a totally different path where I wouldn’t be nearly as happy.”

He stared at her for a few long seconds. “You put way too much thought into that.”

“I’m a science teacher; what did you expect? And no,” she added, “that isn’t my next question. It was merely rhetorical.”

He laughed when she stuck her tongue out at him.

Fiona couldn’t tell whether the buzz in her blood had been caused by the

alcohol or Joe. At this point, she really didn't care. It just felt good to be able to relax and enjoy good food, good wine, and even better conversation.

"When this arrangement is over, do you think we can still be friends?"

He seemed confused by the question. "Why wouldn't we?"

"Some people don't think it's possible for members of the opposite sex."

"Some people are idiots." He drank the last of his wine and set the empty glass on the table. There was wine still left in the bottle, but he made no move to refill his glass. "We're adults, Fiona. We're not at the mercy of our hormones. If we want to remain friends after this, there's no reason we shouldn't be."

"I'd like that." She smiled. "Name one thing that makes you happy."

His fingers toyed with the stem of his glass while he considered her question. At last, his gaze drifted up, meeting hers, and his eyes warmed with what appeared to be genuine affection. "You."

CHAPTER 7

THEIR TACTICAL PLANNING SESSION had far exceeded Pinto's expectations.

It wasn't often that he connected with a woman as quickly—or strongly—as he had with Fiona. But seriously, how could he not? Smart and beautiful, with a sharp sense of humor was his favorite kind of catnip. They'd talked for hours, long after the wine bottle ran dry and they'd switched to plain old water.

Their chemistry was impossible to ignore. It practically crackled in the air between them. Too bad he had no intention of acting on it. It sucked, but his head wasn't in the right place for that kind of relationship, and the last thing he wanted was to hurt her. She deserved better than that. She also deserved a lot better than Dennis, so he'd keep his end of the bargain and make sure the asshole left her alone.

"You don't need to walk me home," Fiona said as he closed the door to his apartment.

"A real boyfriend would." He placed a hand at the small of her back and did

his best not to acknowledge the hum in his blood as they started up the stairs. “Remember, we have to act our parts anytime we’re out in public. For all we know, Dennis could be watching from the parking lot.”

Her muscles stiffened against his flattened palm, and he felt like an ass for startling her. That hadn’t been his objective. He’d only wanted her to get into the habit of pretending they were an actual couple whenever they weren’t behind closed doors, because you never knew who was watching.

“You think he’s out there?” She lowered her voice to a whisper, while her gaze darted about as though she were worried her ex might pop out of the shadows like some demented jack-in-the-box.

“I didn’t see him, but it never hurts to be safe.” He leaned closer and caught a whiff of her perfume, something sweet with a hint of vanilla, and more intoxicating than the wine they’d drunk. “Don’t worry; I promise I won’t let him bother you.”

At the top step, she reached into her pocket for her keys, and he felt a stab of disappointment that their evening was coming to an end. He was about to suggest they meet again over the weekend when she stopped at the door and turned to face him, concern creasing her brow.

Before he could ask what was wrong, she blurted, “I had a great time tonight, and you’re a really great guy, but—” Her lips pressed into a thin line. “I don’t know if this is going to work.”

Pinto’s brows drew down in confusion. “Why not? I thought things were going pretty well.”

“They are! It’s not that. It’s just...” She blew out a breath. “Dennis is a cop. He’s great at reading people, especially me, and I’m not a very good liar. He’s going to take one look at us and know we’re not really a couple.”

“Then we’re going to have to work that much harder to convince him.”

Reaching out, he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. When she didn't flinch or pull back, he smiled and gentled his voice. "I think we'll be just fine, Fi. I'm up for the task; I think you are too. But if you like, we can hold another tactical planning session...your place this time."

The hint of a smile warmed her mouth. "I'd like that. You're not allergic to cats, are you? I should have asked during the lightning round."

He shook his head. "Even if I was, I'd put on my big-boy britches and suck it up."

She laughed, a soft, intimate sound that heated him from the base of his neck all the way down to his toes.

A door slammed on the first floor, and the sound of chatter drifted up the stairwell as the young couple from 12-D headed for the parking lot.

Fiona's gaze met his, and the buzz in Pinto's blood grew stronger. His whole world narrowed, until the only thing he saw was Fiona by her front door, looking sexier than words could ever describe.

He swallowed against the sudden tightness in his throat. "If this was a normal date, I'd kiss you goodnight right about now."

Fiona caught her bottom lip with her teeth. "I, uh...I suppose you're right. It's probably a good idea to practice that sort of thing before we're in front of a live audience. You know, so it looks believable."

That was his story and he was sticking to it. Pinto stepped closer, deep into her personal space, and her sweet, feminine scent enveloped him. His heart rate quickened as he cupped the side of her face, his fingers sliding into her hair while the roughened pad of his thumb lightly stroked her cheek.

"Is this okay?" he asked, concerned his voice might crack like an overeager teenager on his first date.

She nodded, the pulse at her throat beating wildly.

“Relax, Fi. I’m not going to bite. But if any of this makes you uncomfortable, even a little bit, just say the word and we’ll find another way to make this work.”

She let out a low, shaky laugh. “I’m fine, really. Now, what are you waiting for? Practice makes perfect, right?”

“Damn straight.” He wasn’t about to wait around for a second invitation.

Bending his head, he brushed his lips over her mouth and then sank in, soft and slow.

She tasted like the wine they’d drunk: dark, rich, and seductive. As far as kisses went, he kept it fairly tame, a tender exploration designed to deceive rather than seduce. Yet it triggered a need, a hunger for more, and he reveled in the feel of her body softening against him.

A husky purr rose from her throat as her arms looped around his neck, and every rational thought in his brain evaporated. It felt as if a fuse had lit deep inside him, sending a blast of raw heat through every nerve in his body. Lost in the moment, he skimmed one hand down to her waist, his fingers slipping under the silky fabric to graze the bare skin beneath.

He was about to suggest they go into her apartment when the blare of a horn in the parking lot cut through the haze of lust like a knife and snapped Pinto to his senses.

With a muttered curse, he pulled back just far enough to break contact. Her arms fell back to her sides. Their chemistry might be off the charts, but this wasn’t a real date, and that wasn’t a real kiss. It was merely practice so they wouldn’t look awkward to the people they meant to deceive. At least, that was what he kept telling himself so he wouldn’t dive back in for round two.

Pinto stared down at Fiona as the fog slowly cleared from his mind. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes a little glassy. Strange as it sounded, it relieved

him to know that he wasn't the only one affected by the kiss.

Determined to regain some sense of composure, he moved his hand from her waist and cleared his throat. "Do you think that's convincing enough to fool your ex, or should we practice some more?"

Fiona let out a breathy laugh. "I think we're good."

That was too bad, but probably for the best. Normally, his self-control was ironclad, but one kiss with Fiona had reduced it to a charred pile of rubble. In the future, he'd be more careful.

He didn't want their evening to end, but he knew if he lingered, it would lead to complications neither of them were prepared to address. He backed up a step to put more space between them and jammed his hands into his pockets so he wouldn't give in to the urge to touch her. "Goodnight, Fiona. Make sure to lock the bolt once you're inside."

"I will." She smiled. "Goodnight, Joe. Thanks again for dinner. I had a good time tonight."

She opened the door to her apartment and a sliver of light spilled out into the hallway. The proverbial devil on Pinto's left shoulder whispered for him to follow her inside—you know, to make sure everything was safe and sound—while the angel on his right shoulder reminded him of all the things that could possibly go wrong if he let the little head do all of his thinking.

For once in his life, he actually listened to the angel. Still, he couldn't resist calling out to Fiona before she closed the door.

She glanced back at him, one hand on the knob, and the heat that came when her eyes met his was beginning to feel familiar.

He backed up another step, just in case the devil managed to put the angel into a headlock. "If you change your mind about needing more practice, you know where to find me."

The blush returned to her cheeks. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The door clicked shut, leaving him alone in the hall. He waited until he heard the bolt slide into place before he turned to leave.

According to his watch, it was quarter to eleven—not late for a Friday night, especially when he had the weekend off. He wasn’t tired by any stretch; to the contrary, his body was wired with restless energy in need of an outlet. Going to a bar or a club didn’t hold any appeal, and there wasn’t anything at the movies that he was interested in watching. He briefly considered a late-night run, the weather was perfect for it, but then he remembered Fiona watching him from her balcony, and it only made matters worse.

As he walked down the stairs, he powered up his phone and found a missed call from his sister Stephanie. Curious, he sent her a text to see whether she was available, and his phone chimed with her ringtone as he stepped into his apartment.

“About time you called back,” he teased when she answered the call.

“Excuse me for having a life.” Humor laced her thick Jersey accent. A year and a half apart in age, they’d been giving each other crap ever since they learned to talk. Nowadays, it was mostly of the good-natured variety. “I’m surprised you’re calling on a Friday night. Shouldn’t you be out disappointing some unfortunate woman?”

Normally, this would be the point where he hit back with a cheap shot at her nonexistent social life, but he knew she was sensitive about anything even remotely related to her divorce, so he pulled that particular punch.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but I just got home from a date.”

“Are you serious?” Steph barked out a laugh. “Jeez, it’s not even eleven. I hope that poor woman has plenty of batteries.”

If they'd been in the same room, he would have flipped her off. "She's a teacher, you putz. She's been up since the ass crack of dawn. Forgive me for being considerate."

"Now there's a first." His sister snorted. "I assume you want to talk about Ma."

"You would be correct." He toed off his shoes, plopped down on the couch, and reached for the remote control. Maybe he'd luck out and find some nice, boring documentary that would put him to sleep as soon as he got off the phone. "Care to shed some light on her sudden decision to pay me a visit?"

"It wasn't my idea." The irritation in her voice led Pinto to believe she was telling him the truth. "I was planning on having a nice, quiet Christmas, but then Ma came over last week and announced—right in front of Sadie—that she wanted to take us to Disney for the holidays. So if I say no, Sadie will hate me for being the big, mean mommy who won't let her visit Cinderella's Castle. Is that some bullshit or what?"

It was, but he still would have appreciated a friendly heads-up. "You could have warned me."

"I know. I meant to call, but then things got crazy at work, and Leo's being an ass about visitation, and I've got to figure out how to make all of this fit into my schedule so I won't lose my job and my daughter won't hate me." She made an exasperated sound. "Look, I'm sorry, okay?"

Understanding took the edge off his irritation. The divorce had been brutal on his sister. It was bad enough the lousy bastard had cheated on her with their barely legal babysitter. Then he'd acted as though he was the injured party when she left his sorry ass. To make matters worse, he'd had the nerve to fight for full custody of Sadie with the bogus claim that Steph was a bad

mother. And now that he'd gotten his ass spanked in court, he made a point of dragging his feet with the child support payments.

The last thing she needed was Pinto piling on with petty bullshit.

"Next time I'm up, remind me to kick the shit out of Leo. I still owe him."

"Please don't do that," Steph said. "I'd rather not have to explain to Sadie why Uncle Joey got arrested for beating the tar out of Daddy."

He grinned. It would totally be worth it. "You know you'd love to see it."

"That's beside the point."

Pinto blew out an exaggerated exhale as he continued to flip through channels. "Fine, have it your way, but the offer still stands."

Maybe, if he asked really nicely, Nina could inflict some of her computer wizardry on Leo. Nothing that would jeopardize the prick's job—then he wouldn't be able to pay child support—but maybe she could add him to the No Fly List or give his contact information to every marketing company known to man. Not nearly as satisfying as breaking his kneecaps, but it would have to do for now.

"So is Ma doing this for Sadie's benefit?"

"No, I think it has something to do with Mrs. Tortelli's heart attack. She's been acting weird ever since the funeral; you just didn't notice because you're not up here. It's like she's determined to make sure all of her kids are settled down and in a good place before she shuffles off the mortal coil."

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Hey, I never said it was rational. Just be glad you're down there and don't have to deal with this crap every day."

A sympathetic shudder went through him. "That bad?"

"No, I'm just making shit up," Steph said, the sarcasm in her voice unmistakable. "She tried to set me up with Dickie Lewis last week."

It took a few seconds for Pinto to put a face to the name. “You mean Dickie the Bear?”

“The one and only.”

Back in high school, Dickie got that name because of his massive build, and the fact he was hairier than Chewbacca. It was rumored the guy started shaving in the fourth grade. Well over six feet, he had the face of a street brawler, and it hadn’t surprised anyone when he went to work as an enforcer for the Moreno family. By most accounts, he excelled at his job.

Pinto paused on a channel airing an old Will Smith action movie, realized there were only ten or fifteen minutes left, and resumed flipping. “Why on earth would Ma think he’d be a good match for you?”

“He helped her load her groceries into the car. She said he was very respectful.” The last part was said in a perfect mimic of their mother’s nasal voice.

Pinto couldn’t resist yanking her chain. “You know, not for nothing, but Dickie could handle your problems with Leo.”

He could practically hear Steph’s eyeroll. “Thanks, but I prefer men whose knuckles don’t drag on the ground. Besides, if he snaps Leo’s spine, I can kiss any future child support goodbye.”

“Your choice.” Pinto moved the phone to his other ear. “So, on a scale of one to ten, how bad is Ma going to be when she gets here?”

“It depends on how serious you are about that girl.”

He briefly entertained the notion of letting Steph in on the ruse, but his sister had a long history of unintentionally spilling the beans at the worst possible moment. She’d been like that since they were kids. So, instead, he went with what he hoped passed for heartfelt emotion. “She’s a damn good woman, Steph. I like her a lot. I think you’ll like her too.”

“What I think doesn’t matter. If Ma’s not convinced you’re one step from popping the question, she’ll be handing out your number to every unmarried woman she meets while she’s down there.”

CHAPTER 8

“OKAY, LET ME SEE if I’ve got this straight.” Liz reduced the speed on her treadmill from a jog to a fast walk, and Fiona quickly followed suit. Outside, rain pelted the windows, which was why they’d skipped the hiking trail and were using the fitness center at their apartment complex instead. “You went to Hot Guy’s place, where he fed you delicious, homemade lasagna—bonus points, by the way, because he knows how to cook—and you polished off a whole bottle of wine.”

“I didn’t drink it all by myself,” Fiona said between gulps of air, too winded to sound defensive. It had been over a week since her last workout, and she made a mental promise to exercise on a more regular basis. “I’m pretty sure Joe drank more of it than I did. And we drank it over the space of two and a half hours. I didn’t even get a buzz.”

The skepticism on Liz’s face said it all. “So you ate the food, drank the wine, talked for hours, had a great time, and then he kissed the living daylights out of you when he walked you to your apartment. But it wasn’t a real date, and this isn’t a real relationship.”

“Exactly.” Fiona poured more enthusiasm into her response than the situation warranted, mostly to convince herself that the kiss hadn’t been a big deal. Because it wasn’t. Really. There wasn’t any point in reading things into it that weren’t actually there. It didn’t matter how amazing it felt, or how close she’d come to inviting him into her apartment, because everything about their relationship was smoke and mirrors. “Like I said, it’s just a business arrangement. He gets what he wants, I get what I want, and neither of us has to worry about messy entanglements.”

“What about sex?”

Leave it to Liz to cut to the chase.

A flare of heat zipped through Fiona’s body that had nothing to do with the treadmill. Her gaze cut to the guy using the leg press at the other side of the room. As far as she could tell, he couldn’t hear their conversation because of the buds in his ears, but she lowered her voice anyway. “That isn’t part of the deal.”

Liz shook her head in disapproval. “Sounds like a raw deal to me.”

Fiona chugged some water and tucked the bottle back into the little holder by the screen of her treadmill. “Sex would only complicate things. Can you imagine how weird things would be if we took that step and things didn’t work out? Talk about awkward.”

“Now, you see there? That’s your problem.” Liz pointed an accusing finger at Fiona. “Instead of thinking about how great it could be, your mind went straight to a worst-case scenario.”

“That’s because my last relationship *was* a worst-case scenario. I’d rather learn from history than repeat it. Besides, I’m not ready for that yet.” There was more to it than that, but she wasn’t prepared to admit out loud that she no longer trusted her instincts when it came to men. What if the next one was

even worse than Dennis? If given the choice, she'd much rather spend her free time with her cat than get suckered in by another controlling jerk masquerading as a nice guy.

“And when exactly will you be ready?” Empathy softened Liz’s features. “Sweetheart, I’m not trying to be hard on you, but you’re a grown-ass woman in the prime of her life. You’re smart, funny, loyal, and you have needs—hot, sweaty needs. And let’s be real; orgasms are right up there with sleep, exercise, and a well-balanced diet.”

“I don’t need a man for an orgasm.”

“No, but they can be a lot more fun when the right guy’s involved.” Liz grinned. “I’m not telling you to run off and marry Hot Guy. I’m just saying there’s nothing wrong with having some fun with him if that’s what you both want.”

In theory, that sounded wonderful. There were days when Fiona wished she could have those kinds of no-strings relationships. But when push came to shove, she preferred sex with an emotional connection, and she just wasn’t brave enough to test those waters yet.

The treadmill beeped as it slowed to cooldown mode, and she heaved out a sigh of relief. They’d been at it for forty-five minutes and her energy was beginning to flag.

Fiona drank another swig of water. “Look, all I know is that I’ll be ready when the time is right.”

“And in the meantime, you’re probably missing out on some quality toe-curling sex. Seriously, look at the guy. I bet he’s packing some primo equipment.”

“What he’s packing doesn’t count for squat if he doesn’t know how to use it.” She suspected that wasn’t the case with Joe, but she refused to let her

mind wander too far down that particular path.

Liz, on the other hand, was so familiar with that path she could travel it at night with her eyes closed. “Oh, I’m sure he knows how to use it just fine. He’s not one of those guys who lives in his parents’ garage and spends every minute of his free time surfing the internet or playing video games. Now that I think about it, he looks like the type of guy who’s open to suggestion.” She waggled her eyebrows, and it was all Fiona could do to stifle a laugh. “I bet he’s got a tongue like a lizard.”

Fiona shook her head. Anything else would only encourage her. “Can we please talk about something else?”

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted to talk about your fake date.”

“My mistake; I won’t make it again.”

How Liz could roll her eyes while exercising was a mystery to Fiona. If she ever tried it, she’d probably trip, face-plant on the treadmill, and knock out her front teeth.

“Come on, don’t be like that. I only want the best for you. You deserve it after three long years with the asshole.”

“Thanks.” No matter what, she could always count on Liz to have her back. It was a stark contrast to her own family, whose first question at the news of her breakup was to ask what she’d done to cause it. She’d always been the black sheep of the family, and their lack of support and compassion during that stressful time had only driven the point home.

The treadmill beeped to signal the end of the cooldown period and slowed to a stop. Fiona wiped the sweat off her brow with a towel, grabbed her water bottle, and hopped off the machine before Liz had the chance to suggest they keep going for another twenty or thirty minutes.

“Where do you want to grab lunch?” Liz asked as she gathered her things.

Just the mention of food made Fiona's stomach growl. Funny, at work she could go nearly all day without eating a bite, but once she was home, her internal clock demanded food every few hours. "How about Taste of Brooklyn?"

One of the best Jewish delis in the area, it was her favorite lunchtime destination. Their pastrami on rye was overstuffed and teeming with flavor, while their garlic fries were second-to-none. And now that she'd worked off last night's lasagna, she wouldn't feel too guilty about splitting a slice of cheesecake for dessert.

Of course, she'd still have to eat a light dinner if she wanted to keep the guilt at bay.

"Sounds great; I haven't been there in a month." Liz bent to collect the rolled-up yoga mat she'd left on the floor. "But I'll need to grab a shower first."

"You and me both." After sweating her butt off on the treadmill, she didn't even want to think about what she smelled like. Plus, her grungy workout clothes weren't fit for eating lunch in a restaurant. A quick shower and change of clothes would go a long way toward making her feel presentable.

As they headed for the door, Fiona switched on her phone, and the sound of Dennis's ringtone filled her with dread.

"Ignore it," Liz said.

Although that was exactly what she wanted to do, Fiona shook her head. "I've been dodging him for days. If I don't deal with him soon, he'll come knocking on my door." And the last thing she wanted was a repeat of the other night. She hated confrontations, especially the face-to-face variety. It was comforting to know that Joe would help her if Dennis showed up at her

apartment, but she'd rather avoid a potentially nasty altercation between the two men.

After a deep, fortifying breath, she put the phone on speaker and answered the call in her best teacher voice. "Hello, Dennis."

"You're screwing him, aren't you?" His harsh voice filled the room.

Fiona's gaze darted to the guy working out, thankful to see he was still listening to whatever was blaring in his earbuds. Still, she turned the volume down lower so only she and Liz could listen.

"Well, hello to you too," Fiona said. "And how have you been?"

"Answer the question, Fiona."

Liz gave the phone her middle finger.

She knew exactly who Dennis was referring to but decided to delay the inevitable for a little while longer. "Refresh my memory as to who you're talking about."

Over the course of their relationship, he'd constantly accused her of cheating on him with colleagues at work, male friends she'd known since college, and even the fathers of some of her students. One time, he went so far as to insinuate that she was a little too "friendly" with the Amazon delivery guy. It had left her defensive, annoyed, and insulted, because she'd never cheated, never so much as looked at another guy while they'd been together. But now it made her wonder whether he'd acted that way because of his trust issues, or whether he'd been projecting his own infidelity onto her.

An irritated huff carried over the phone. "Oh, cut the crap. You're too damn smart to play dumb."

Funny, he used to do everything in his power to make her think she was a complete simpleton incapable of taking care of herself. At one point, she'd

started to believe it. Never again. “Are you referring to my neighbor who came upstairs to ask you to stop making a scene?”

“Yeah, the pretty boy. He’s lucky I didn’t throw his ass down the stairs.”

Pretty wasn’t how she’d describe Joe, but whatever. She pictured him at the end of his run, hot and sweaty, with his clothes plastered against his rock-hard—

“Are you even listening to me?” Dennis’s voice barged into her thoughts. “Jesus, that’s so typical of you.”

Fiona silently counted to ten before she responded. She hadn’t planned to whip out the boyfriend card this soon, but he’d ticked her off enough that she threw caution to the wind. “If you really must know, Joe and I weren’t a couple when you stopped by unannounced. I mean, I’d seen him around the building but we’d never officially met. But after you left, we finally got to talking, and well, we went out the other night. He’s a really nice guy; I like him a lot. So, in a way, I suppose I should thank you for that.”

Liz put a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh.

There was a long pause before Dennis said, “You’re kidding, right?”

“You know I never kid about things like that.” Fiona normally wasn’t the vindictive type, but she would have given anything to see his expression at that very moment. “Does that answer your question, or is there something else you’d like to know?”

There was another pause, longer this time, and she started to wonder if he’d hung up.

“We need to talk,” he finally said. “About us.” A heavy sigh came over the phone, the one he usually gave when straining for patience. “In spite of the way things ended between us, I still love you, babe. I’m willing to overlook

the pretty boy if you come to your senses and move back home where you belong.”

The urge to roll her eyes was almost overwhelming. Why he considered that a valid line of reasoning was a mystery of life. “That’s mighty generous of you, but why now? I haven’t heard from you in months.”

“I was giving you space, because I knew if I pressured you, it would only push you further away. I wanted you to come back on your own, but I’ve really missed you, babe. It’s not too late to work things out. I’m willing to try if you are.”

The sincerity in his voice tugged at her heartstrings, but Fiona knew better than to take his words at face value. Beneath the veneer of charm and heartfelt emotion was a master manipulator. “There’s nothing for us to work out. It’s time for you to move on with your life. Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

She could have sworn she heard him growl.

“Why are you being so difficult? You know we’re meant to be together.”

“I’m not being difficult. I came to my senses. In no universe are we meant to be together. We are over, done, finished. I don’t know how else I can make it clearer for you, but I’m getting tired of explaining it.”

Wow, it felt really good to say that, and she smiled when Liz gave her a thumbs-up. But Dennis wasn’t the type of guy who handled rejection well, and she braced for his reaction.

There was another long pause. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded deathly calm. “Are you sure about this?”

A chill went down Fiona’s spine. Everything about this conversation made her uncomfortable, but it was long overdue. She squared her shoulders. “I’ve never been more certain about anything in my life.”

Dennis muttered a curse. “In that case, I want my stuff back.”

Fiona gaped at the phone. “What stuff? I didn’t take any of your stuff.”

As it was, she’d left in such a hurry that she’d only taken what she could cram into her car. Everything else she’d written off as a loss, including a few items with sentimental value that she’d never be able to replace. All things considered, it was a small price to pay for her sanity and freedom.

“How about that silver locket I gave you?” Dennis said. “I want it back.”

“That was a birthday gift. Are you seriously going to be this petty?” Talk about rhetorical questions. If he wanted the locket that badly, then fine, he could have it. She’d never been all that fond of the locket and hadn’t worn it since she moved out. If it hadn’t been in her jewelry box when she hastily packed her things, she wouldn’t have taken it along.

“That locket is a family heirloom,” he said. “It belonged to my grandmother.”

“You never mentioned that when you gave it to me.”

“Sure I did.” He had the nerve to sound offended. “You just weren’t paying attention.”

If she kept rolling her eyes this much, they’d eventually get stuck in the back of her head. She had no idea why he was lying, and she really didn’t care. But if the locket meant that much to him, then perhaps she could use it as leverage for some of the things she’d left behind—that is, if he’d kept any of it. “You can have the locket, but in return, I want my Christmas decorations.”

“Which ones?” he asked. “Some of them are mine.”

Fiona glared at the phone. “What are you talking about? You didn’t buy any of them.”

“Yeah, but some of them were bought while we were together. I want half.”

“Are you even using them?” She’d bet twenty dollars the answer was no. He’d never helped decorate for the holidays, and then he’d complained about how they cluttered the house until she’d packed them back up the day after Christmas. Personally, she preferred to keep the decorations out until New Year’s Eve, but he’d pitched enough of a fit that she’d given in to his demands.

“Whether I’m using them at the moment is irrelevant.”

That was a no.

“If you want, you can come over with the locket, and we can go through the Christmas shit together.”

And that was a *hard* no. She had no intentions of ever setting foot in that house again. Too many bad memories she’d rather forget. “Most of the decorations are things I bought before we even started dating. Why don’t you just bring them over here when you come to pick up the locket? Then we can go through what’s in the bins and see which items you want.”

“Are you nuts? I’m not hauling all of that shit over there.”

She expected as much, though she still felt a sharp stab of disappointment. And resentment. There was no logical reason for him to be this difficult. More likely than not, she’d never see her Christmas treasures again. “Then there’s nothing left for us to discuss.”

“Fiona...”

He said her name in the voice he used when he was at the end of his patience. *Good*. Maybe now he’d finally come to accept that there would be no reconciliation. Then he could lick his wounds, move on with his life, and forget she ever existed.

“I mean it, Dennis. There’s nothing you can do or say that is going to change my mind. I’ll mail you the locket when I have time, but it probably

won't be until after the holidays. Don't call me again." She ended the call before he could toss out another objection and switched off her phone.

CHAPTER 9

WITH HIS EYE AND ear protection in place, Pinto watched from his spot behind a wall of Plexiglass as the trainees took turns going through what had become known as the Grinder. Personally, he thought the name made it sound far worse than it was. Back when he'd been a new recruit, he'd actually enjoyed the experience.

A harsh buzz pierced the air, marking an abrupt end to the exercise. The fluorescent overhead lights flickered on, illuminating a plywood cutout of a young boy riddled with bright-red paintball splotches.

Pinto walked toward the cutout, his footsteps echoing in the cavernous warehouse as he noted the tightly packed grouping at the center of mass. It would have been impressive, had the trainee not just shot the shit out of the wrong target. "Would you care to explain why Johnny deserved to die?"

The simulation was designed to evaluate skill, reflexes, and judgment. There were several scenarios to keep things interesting, such as clearing a building of hostiles, rescuing hostages from a terrorist compound, and retrieving an injured soldier from behind enemy lines. Trainees were tasked

with identifying potential threats, determining whether they actually posed any sort of imminent danger, and, if they did, taking appropriate measures to neutralize them without incurring casualties. A number of those potential threats were played by employees of Six Points, while others—like little Johnny—were spring-loaded cutouts that popped out from behind walls and corners to add to the level of difficulty.

Some security companies preferred to use computer programs for these types of exercises, but Six Points preferred a more realistic simulation that engaged all the senses and didn't feel so much like a video game. Overall, it gave a much better indication of how a recruit would act in a real-life situation.

“Aw, cut him some slack,” his partner Hatch said. “We all know Johnny looks shady.”

Pinto shot him a glare to make it clear that now wasn't the time for them to play good cop, bad cop. “That's all well and good, but I don't remember you icing any kids when you went through this.”

To the contrary, Hatch had aced the course on his first attempt with zero incidents of friendly fire and zero hesitation at killing the bad guys. And he'd done it all with startling efficiency. It was as if he'd been gifted with a sixth sense that told him what the threats would be a few seconds before they appeared.

In his usual cocky fashion, Hatch flashed a hundred-watt smile. “What can I say? Words fail to describe the full scope of how awesome I am.”

Pinto shook his head and returned his gaze to Troy, the trainee who'd just gunned down a hypothetical five-year-old. “Care to provide any insight?”

Troy ran a hand over his closely cropped hair, his deep-sunk eyes scrunched together under thick, heavy brows. According to his file, the Army

veteran recently turned twenty-eight, but he probably still got carded whenever he went out for a few beers. “I don’t know, man. I guess I got carried away.”

“Getting carried away is fine when you’re playing *World of Warcraft*. The real world isn’t as forgiving.” Not only could the guy face felony charges, but Six Points could lose its business license and get sued into oblivion. Liability insurance only covered so much. No way would the Flint family risk their reputations and livelihoods for a guy with an itchy trigger finger.

Lucky for Troy, he’d get two more chances to make it through the course without misidentifying any of the targets. Failure wouldn’t get him fired, but he wouldn’t be eligible to work any jobs that required the use of deadly weapons. It would also limit his paths to advancement, because nobody wanted to be on a team with the guy who had a nasty habit of putting holes in the wrong fucking people.

“You need to give yourself enough time to evaluate the situation,” Pinto told the recruit. “Going with your gut doesn’t always work in a high-stress environment.”

Troy made a sound that said exactly what he thought of Pinto’s advice. “By the time I’m done evaluating, the hostile will have put a bullet in my brain.”

“Or you’ll have avoided a friendly fire incident that might get you charged with manslaughter.” Pinto gestured to the paintball-splattered target. The ability to make the correct split-second decision was critical in this line of work. Troy should have developed the skill while he was in the military. But then again, that might explain why he was a civilian now.

“All right, folks,” Pinto called out to the recruits hanging out in the waiting area. “That’s it for today. Don’t leave the building until you check your gear in with Navarre. We’ll see you at seven tomorrow morning.”

As the guys headed for the weapons station, Hatch crossed to stand beside Pinto and lowered his voice to avoid being overheard. “You were kind of hard on Troy, don’t you think?”

Pinto gave his partner a pointed look. “Imagine how that would have gone over if Austin or Wade were here.”

Truth be told, Austin was one of the best bosses that Pinto had ever worked with. He was fair, firm, loyal, and consistent, and he tended not to play favorites, even among members of his family. But he also held his employees to a high standard, and he had a low tolerance for bullshit. If you pissed him off, he’d let you know it, but he always gave ample opportunity for you to make things right in his world.

As for Wade...well, he mostly scared the crap out of Pinto, though the love of a good woman had softened the worst of his jagged edges. Still, there was plenty of jagged to go around, which was why Pinto made a point of staying off the guy’s radar.

Hatch shrugged, the closest he’d ever come to conceding the point. “Think he’ll be able to clear the course?”

“I don’t know. It could go either way.” Ultimately, Troy’s attitude would have the greatest impact on his future at Six Points. If he showed genuine promise and a willingness to learn, the Flints would likely work with him to develop his abilities.

If not...well, he wouldn’t be the first recruit to wash out of the training program.

As Pinto left the warehouse, he switched on his phone, and it immediately chimed to indicate there were text messages waiting to be read. He tapped the icon and scrolled through the list, deleting the spam that clogged his inbox on a regular basis. One message from his sister, two from his mom—he’d read

those when he got home. Then he spotted a text from Fiona, and a smile stretched over his face.

They were supposed to have had another tactical planning session over the weekend, but a raging case of food poisoning had forced him to cancel at the last minute. He should have known better than to try his luck with the leftover Chinese food in the back of his fridge. So instead of meeting over pizza and beer, they'd traded texts and filled in the details of their fake relationship.

Her message popped onto the screen: *How are you feeling?*

He'd never been much for texting—it was too damn hard to hit those tiny letters with his big fingers—so he called Fiona instead.

“I'm alive, though I might have puked out half my body weight,” he said when she answered the call, and then cringed. “That was too much information, wasn't it?”

“Not at all,” she said on the heels of a laugh. “You keep forgetting I teach eighth grade. What you said is tame in comparison to what comes out of their mouths on a daily basis. Are we still on for tomorrow?”

“Good question. Hold on, let me check.” If everything had gone according to plan, his family had arrived in Orlando this afternoon and checked into their hotel. Quickly, he pulled up his mother's messages, and the lurch in his stomach had nothing to do with his earlier case of food poisoning.

“Yep, they're here and looking forward to seeing us. Are you still okay with dinner tomorrow?”

“Of course,” she said. “A deal's a deal, right? Besides, I already told Dennis we were dating, so it's only fair I live up to my end of the bargain.”

The note of worry in her voice triggered protective instincts that caught him completely off guard. They weren't in an actual romantic relationship, but he

considered Fiona a friend, and friends watched out for each other. “How’d your ex take the news?”

“About as well as expected.”

“Do you think he believed you?”

“I don’t know. I hope so.”

“Don’t worry, Fi. We’ll make sure he believes it.” He switched the phone to his other ear and dug into his pocket for the keys to his car. “Would it make you feel better if we had another tactical planning session? I’m free tonight.”

“I’d like to but I can’t. I’m supposed to meet Liz in an hour.”

That disappointed him more than he was willing to admit, and he brushed the feeling aside. That kind of emotion had no place in their arrangement and could only lead to trouble. “No worries, I’ll just see you tomorrow. We’ll have plenty of time to talk then.”

The hotel where his family was staying was an hour’s drive away, maybe longer if traffic sucked worse than usual. That would give them ample opportunity to make sure they had their ducks in a row.

He doubted there’d be any problems. The framework they’d built for their fictional relationship was relatively simple and easy to remember: after meeting in the laundry room, he’d invited her to his place for dinner, and they’d been head over heels with each other ever since. The rest were minor details about places they’d been together and things they knew about each other.

Knowing his mother, she’d be ecstatic to see that he wasn’t wasting his life away on cheap booze and fast women. He was also fairly confident that she’d approve of Fiona. Honestly, how could she not? The woman was the complete package: brains, beauty, a sharp sense of humor, and a genuine

desire to help those around her. The only possible strikes against her were that she wasn't Italian and didn't live in New Jersey.

He swiped at the screen to end the call, and his phone immediately chimed again. The caller ID showed Sloane's number. *About damn time*, he thought, as he slid behind the wheel of his Mustang. Yes, he knew she was doing him a favor, and he understood that she was squeezing it in between all the other work she did for the cyber security unit, but he'd been growing impatient for the results of the background check on Fiona's ex.

He put the phone back to his ear and slid the key into the ignition. "Hey, Sloane. You got something for me?"

"I wouldn't be calling if I didn't. The report you wanted should be hitting your inbox any second."

"You're amazing. Thanks for all your help." With a turn of the key, the engine rumbled to life, and he plugged his phone into the port. "Can you give me the bullet points version of what you found?"

"What, you can't read it yourself?"

"I'm in the car."

An exaggerated exhale carried over the car's speakers. "Dennis Heckler, age thirty-six, born in Jacksonville but grew up in Palatka. His parents divorced when he was fourteen, and he went to live with his father. He earned his bachelor's degree in criminal justice at UF and from there he went into the academy. Upon graduation, he worked for several police departments in Central Florida before being hired by Avalon Springs, where he's steadily risen in the ranks for the last eight years. From what I can tell, he recently became eligible to take the lieutenant's exam but has yet to do so. Clean record, no arrests, not even a parking ticket, which isn't too surprising for a cop. He's got a few dings on his personnel record, though."

That got Pinto's attention. "What for?"

"It seems he has a habit of roughing up suspects while his body cam is supposedly on the fritz."

The seat belt tightened across Pinto's chest as he straightened in his seat. "How many has he roughed up?"

"Internal Affairs investigated six. He was cleared of wrongdoing every time, but the charges were dropped in four of the cases. Three of the four sued the department and settled for undisclosed amounts."

So Heckler either had serious anger management issues or simply enjoyed beating the crap out of people. Neither was a good personality trait for someone charged with serving and protecting the community.

He couldn't help but wonder if the asshole had ever laid hands on Fiona. She'd given no indication that their relationship was physically abusive, but she might not have wanted to discuss something that sensitive with a man she barely knew. Real girlfriend or not, just thinking about the possibility made Pinto's blood pressure soar into the stratosphere.

"Did you find the names of the people who sued?" He was curious to see if any of them were willing to talk about their experience.

"Now you're just trying to insult me." Sloane snorted. "Read the file when you get a chance and let me know if you need more information. If I'm not in my office, leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Will do." Eager to get home so he could read the full report, he pushed down the clutch and slid the car into first. "Thanks again, Sloane. I appreciate your help."

"You're welcome. And Pinto?"

"Yes?"

"Be careful with this guy."

CHAPTER 10

IT WASN'T NORMAL FOR Pinto to feel edgy before a date. He'd gotten over those kinds of jitters back when he was a teenager. Yet here he was, on pins and needles, because somehow this felt different.

After one last check in the mirror, he shut off the light on his way out of the bedroom.

For starters, this wasn't an actual date. It was more along the lines of neighbors helping each other out. Sure, he liked Fiona. She seemed like a decent person, was incredibly easy to talk to, and he enjoyed spending time with her. And that kiss. *Fuck, that kiss.* Try as he might, he couldn't stop thinking about how good she'd tasted the other night, how perfectly she'd fit in his arms. How much he'd like to—

He stopped himself before he veered deeper into dangerous territory.

Bad shit happened whenever he let his hormones do all of his thinking.

Like it or not, their relationship was purely transactional. His mind wasn't in the right place for anything more. He needed to keep reminding himself of

that, or he'd start getting ideas—hot, filthy, sweaty ideas—that he had no business contemplating.

As he tucked his wallet into his back pocket, Pinto brushed his insecurities aside and stuffed them into a deep, dark corner of his mind. It was how he'd prepared for missions while serving in the Navy, and he didn't see much difference between venturing into a combat zone and visiting his mother.

Pinto left his apartment, went upstairs, and knocked on Fiona's door. He still regretted not being able to squeeze in that additional tactical planning session. On the plus side, it had kept him away from temptation. But it also kept them from practicing being a couple, and now it had him a little nervous about their ability to convince his mother that she didn't have to worry about her son dying alone and unloved.

After a few moments' wait, Fiona opened the door, and even though she was dressed conservatively, his mouth went completely dry. She wore black slacks, a blue blouse that showed the faintest hint of cleavage, and black shoes with low heels. A heart-shaped pendant hung from a chain around her neck. Gold studs dotted her ears. Her makeup was subtle, while her long, blonde hair was swept up in an intricate twist.

“Wow, you look fantastic.”

A touch of color flushed her cheeks, and he decided to tell her how attractive she was as often as humanly possible.

She smoothed a hand over the front of her shirt. “Thank you, but it's not anything special, just something I wear when—”

“Fi?”

Her gaze flicked up to his. “Yes?”

“Just take the compliment.”

The smile and shaky laugh she gave made it obvious that he wasn't the only

one battling nerves. “Thank you. You don’t look too shabby either.”

Pinto glanced down at his charcoal slacks and white polo shirt. Both were new, because he had nothing but jeans, cargo pants, T-shirts, and his old Navy uniforms in the closet. He could have gotten away with something more casual—this was Florida, after all; he once saw a guy wear overalls and flip-flops to a funeral—but his mother would expect better.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” She stepped out of the apartment, locked the door behind her, and dropped the keys into her purse.

Pinto held out his hand, and when she took it, he felt a buzz in his blood that was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Traffic sucked. No surprise there—it was the default setting in Orlando. Multiple massive construction projects were supposed to ease congestion, but they only seemed to shift bad traffic from one place to another. To make matters worse, there were thousands of tourists on the roads at any given time, none of whom had any idea where they were going and drove ten miles below the speed limit in the passing lane while staring at the GPS on their phones.

At least there weren’t any wrecks to turn I-4 into a giant parking lot. Still, traffic got heavier with each mile closer to the attractions. As they crept along, they used the time to go over their cover story again, making sure no details were overlooked and they were on the same page.

At last, the hotel came into view, and Pinto felt a weird mix of happiness and trepidation. He loved his family, he really did, but he had reasons for living a thousand miles away from them.

His pulse ratcheted up a notch as he pulled into the hotel lot and parked in

the visitor section. His family had chosen one of the myriad hotels located just off Disney property that offered a daily shuttle to the parks. At first sight, it was nothing special to look at, but it was well-maintained, brightly lit, and with plenty of amenities for his family to use when they weren't doing the tourist thing. If they were lucky, the warm weather would continue to hold and they could even make use of the outdoor pool.

As if sensing his unease, Fiona reached across the center console and gave his hand a squeeze. She offered an encouraging smile. "You've got this, Joe."

"Thanks. I appreciate you doing this for me." He got out, rounded the front of the Mustang, and opened the door for Fiona. She took the hand he offered, and once again he tried to ignore how the simple contact made his body rev.

She tilted her head toward the hotel, though her gaze stayed fixed on his. "Do you think they're watching?"

"I'd put the odds around 60-40."

"Then I suppose we better act the part." Before he could ask what she meant by that, Fiona rose onto her tiptoes and brushed her lips over his.

Fucking hell, it felt as though he'd been hit with a thousand volts. Warmth filled his chest, erasing the tension, while his hands instinctively moved up to grip her waist. His inner caveman wanted to take over and maul her like a frigging animal, but he somehow summoned enough restraint to keep himself in check.

To his disappointment, the kiss ended all too soon, though it was probably for the best. The last thing they needed was to get busted by hotel security for making out in the parking lot. Pinto took her hand, laced his fingers with hers, and headed toward the building.

The hotel's glass double doors slid open and a blast of arctic air welcomed them into the lobby. The first thing Pinto saw was his mother perusing a rack

of brochures wearing a T-shirt with Mickey Mouse ears on the front, knee-length pants, and white sneakers, the Orlando equivalent of a flashing neon sign that announced: I'M A TOURIST. She was average height, a little heavier than he remembered, with short, jet-black hair that she swore was natural but wasn't. Almost two years had passed since he'd last seen her, but she didn't look as though she'd aged a day. Not having teenagers—and an asshole husband—in the house probably worked wonders for her stress levels and added a decade or two to her life.

The sight of her triggered an avalanche of memories: some good, some not-so-good. He didn't believe there was any such thing as a perfect childhood. Regardless of whether they admitted it or not, everybody carried some sort of baggage with them into adulthood. His could have been a whole lot worse, so he usually tried not to dwell on the past and focused on the future.

As if sensing his gaze, his mother turned toward him, and a smile lit her face, making the fine lines along her eyes and mouth fan out. In the blink of an eye, she crossed the room and caught him in a bone-crushing hug.

“It's good to see you too, Ma,” he managed to say before he ran out of air.

“Oh, my God, it's been so long.” Her voice was muffled against his chest. Just when he thought he might pass out from oxygen deprivation, she pulled back to give him a once-over. She frowned. “You're too skinny. I felt ribs.”

“I'm fine, Ma.” In his mother's mind, anyone without a solid roll around their midsection was one step away from starvation. As a kid, she'd constantly shoved food in his face, determined to load him with so many calories he couldn't possibly burn them all off. It never worked, but she'd never stopped trying.

Her gaze slid to Fiona. “Is this your girlfriend?”

“She most certainly is.” He smiled as he placed one hand at the small of

Fiona's back. "Ma, I'd like you to meet Fiona Perkins. Fiona, my mother."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Pinto," Fiona said in a measured tone she likely used for parent-teacher conferences. She exuded warmth and confidence, which was good, because his mother could smell fear from a mile away.

For a long, uncomfortable moment, his mother looked Fiona over like a drill sergeant inspecting a new recruit. "Are you sleeping with my son?"

"No, ma'am," Fiona replied before Pinto could object to the question.

Still, he shot his mother a warning look that she pretended not to notice.

To his right, the elevator doors slid open, and a child's squeal pierced the air. His seven-year-old niece, Sadie, burst out of the car like a thoroughbred at Monmouth Park, ignoring her mother's command to slow down, and tore off in his direction. Dark-haired with olive skin, a slender build, and classic Italian features, she looked just like her mother had at that age. The Pinto genes were strong.

He dropped to a crouch, scooped the girl up, and spun her in the air. "Christ, you got big. What's your mom been feeding you?"

The little girl giggled, while her mother said, "Everything. She's eating me out of house and home."

Pinto set Sadie down and gave his sister a hug that briefly lifted her off the ground as well. She'd lost weight since the last time he did this. "You look great, sis."

Stephanie scoffed in true New Jersey fashion. "You always were such a suck-up."

At thirty-one, she was younger than Pinto, the oldest girl, and third in the overall pecking order. Growing up, she'd been the responsible one, though she'd scandalized his Catholic family by getting divorced six years after her

daughter was born. Personally, he thought it was the best decision she'd ever made. Her ex was an ass.

"I only suck up to Nonna." Pinto ruffled her hair, and she playfully batted his arm.

His sister turned her attention to Fiona. "And you must be the unfortunate woman who puts up with my brother. I'm Stephanie, and this is my daughter Sadie. I was hoping my brother would introduce us, but apparently he's forgotten his manners."

"I'm Fiona." She smiled. "It's nice to meet you both."

"Sheesh, if you'd given me a second, I would have done it. Way to throw your big brother under the bus." He wrapped an arm around Fiona's shoulders. "See what I had to put up with growing up? No wonder I moved a thousand miles away."

"And they say women are drama queens." Stephanie shook her head. "Come on, let's get something to eat. I'm starving."

They ended up at a Tex-Mex restaurant less than a mile from the hotel. Luckily, with the dinner hour winding down, the wait to be seated wasn't long. The hostess led them to a table in the outdoor dining area, handed out menus, and told them the waitress would be with them shortly.

"Are the fajitas good here?" Stephanie asked as she opened the menu.

"Beats me," Pinto said. "I've heard this place is good, but I've never eaten here before."

Like many of the locals, he treated the tourist areas as if they were radioactive. Too many people, too much congestion. Everything was overpriced. It wasn't worth an hour's drive when he could find anything he wanted closer to home for a lot less money.

Fiona glanced up from her menu. "The steak fajitas were delicious the last

time I was here. And if you're in the mood for something spicy, I recommend the chicken diablo.”

“Cool.” Stephanie gave Fiona a smile, and some of the tension in Pinto’s muscles relaxed. With the exception of her asshole ex-husband, his sister was a good judge of character, and it pleased him to know she liked Fiona.

His mother, on the other hand, kept eyeing Fiona with the same level of scrutiny typically reserved for people selling timeshares, which meant he wasn’t out of the woods yet.

“Did you have a good day at the parks?” Pinto asked nobody in particular. When it came to his family, his strategy for conversation was simple: keep asking questions—open-ended if possible—because the more they talked about themselves, the fewer opportunities they had to pry into his personal business.

As expected, Sadie launched into an animated recap of the day’s events, from the moment they walked through the gates of the Magic Kingdom to the moment she’d seen Pinto as the elevator doors opened in the hotel lobby. Head bobbing, hands wildly gesturing, and voice pitched with excitement, the little girl practically vibrated with energy, an amazing feat, considering she’d spent the entire day exploring the theme park. When she finally crashed—probably once she had a belly full of food—it was going to be epic.

“What was your favorite ride?” Fiona asked her.

“The Jungle Cruise—no, wait—Pirates of the Caribbean! It had Jack Sparrow and everything! We were going to ride it again, but the line was too long, and Mommy said we can try again tomorrow. Right, Mommy?”

“That’s right, sweetheart.” Stephanie gave her daughter a tired smile. Chasing a kid around Disney all day had to be exhausting. “Now that we

know which rides you like the best, we'll hit those first thing in the morning before it gets crowded."

"Sounds like a good plan to me." Pinto gave his niece a smile. The worst part about living in Florida was being so far away from this kid. "If you see Goofy, give him a hug for me, will you?"

The waiter arrived with chips and salsa, gave a quick rundown of the night's specials, and took everyone's drink orders.

"I almost forgot to tell you," his mother said after the waiter left. "I saw Gina at the supermarket last week. She looked really good."

Every muscle in Pinto's body tensed. He had a sinking feeling about where she was going with this. "That's nice."

"She asked about you."

Yep, that was exactly where he thought she was going. No way in hell was he going there with her. "Ma..."

"You should have seen them," she said to Fiona, completely ignoring—or totally oblivious—to the warning in his voice. "They made such an adorable couple. Their children would have been beautiful. Oh, wait! I think I still have some pictures of them on my phone from that time—"

"Ma!"

His mother froze, her hand in her purse. "What? I'm just making conversation."

"And I'm saying I don't want to talk about Gina," Pinto bit out. He hoped it was enough to rein her in, because he didn't want to make a scene in the middle of a crowded restaurant.

He shot his sister a look of annoyance, because he didn't appreciate being blindsided with news of his ex, and she mouthed, "Sorry; I didn't know."

An awkward silence settled over the table. Stephanie suddenly got

interested in what Sadie was coloring in her book, while his mother studied the menu as though she'd be tested on it later. Beneath the table, Fiona reached for Pinto's hand and gave it a comforting squeeze.

"So what kind of work do you do, Fiona?" Stephanie asked in a move to change the subject.

"I'm a teacher; eighth-grade science."

"Ah." His mother said it as if that explained some great mystery. "You know what they say: Those who can, do; those who can't, teach."

Fiona's expression suggested she'd heard that one plenty of times before. "I prefer the words of Aristotle: Those who know, do; those that understand, teach. Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, and Stephen Hawking were all teachers. Being able to pass on skills and knowledge to the next generation is a discipline unto itself."

"Well, I'm sure it's nice to get the summers off." In a clear act of dismissal, she turned her gaze to Pinto. "Gina just got hired by that humongous law firm downtown. You know, the one with the guy who's on those billboards all over the place. She's taking the bar exam next month. If I remember right, she said she's going to specialize in environmental law. Isn't that great?"

"Fabulous," he said through gritted teeth.

The waiter returned with their drinks, providing a welcome break in the conversation. He answered a few questions, took their food orders, and disappeared into the crowd.

"So how are things at Wagner's?" Pinto asked his mother in an effort to steer the conversation away from his ex. When he and his siblings were young, she'd ruled the house with an iron fist as a stay-at-home mom, but after their father died, she'd gotten a job at an insurance office where she'd worked up the ranks from file clerk to office manager.

His mother made a noise. “He’s a pig, but he knows not to mess with me.”

That didn’t surprise him in the least. What his mother lacked in size, she more than made up for in attitude and tenacity. A few years ago, some prick made the mistake of trying to snatch her purse while she was loading groceries into the trunk of her car. After she wrestled it back from the would-be mugger, she chased him down the street while beating him over the head with it. Given the amount of shit she kept in there, it was a wonder the guy didn’t suffer a concussion.

A short time later, the sound of sizzle filled the air, and the waiter arrived with a giant tray filled with plates. He distributed them about the table, somehow managing to remember who ordered what. When the tray was empty, he asked whether anyone needed anything else, promised to return with more refills for their drinks, and headed back for the kitchen.

That was the signal for everyone to shut up and eat. It had been an unwritten rule while growing up in the Pinto household, right along with eat quickly, because with five kids, if you didn’t eat fast, you might not get enough to eat, especially if his younger brother Dominic was at the table. Even now, the guy could eat damn near half his body weight in one sitting.

Following family tradition, Sadie dove into her meal as if she hadn’t eaten in a week, while Stephanie ate a bite of her chicken diablo, deemed it not quite spicy enough, and added a few drops of habanera sauce.

As his mother unwrapped her silverware, she eyed the steaming plate of food in front of Fiona. “That’s an awful lot of food for someone your size.”

“It is, but whatever I can’t finish tonight will be lunch later this week.”

“That’s good. You’re skinny now, but you’re getting to that age when your metabolism starts to slow down. Once that happens...” She puffed her cheeks. “It doesn’t take much to end up with a rear the size of Rhode Island.”

Pinto almost choked on his enchilada. “Ma! What the hell?”

“What? I’m only speaking from experience. If you think that’s bad, just wait until you have kids. Your hips will never be the same. Isn’t that right, Stephanie?”

His sister’s mouth dropped open. “What the heck is that supposed to mean?”

While Stephanie and his mother bickered, Pinto caught Fiona’s gaze. “Don’t listen to her, Fi. You’re perfect just the way you are.”

But his words fell on deaf ears. Gone was the woman who’d eaten his lasagna without a care in the world. His mother had driven a stake right into the heart of that mindset. Now she looked concerned that the food on her plate would go straight from her stomach to her ass.

She caught the waiter’s attention and asked, “Can I get a to-go box, please?”

CHAPTER 11

“WELL, THAT WAS FUN.” Fiona didn’t bother to mask the sarcasm in her voice now that they were back in the privacy of Joe’s car. “And here I thought teenagers were vicious.”

“I’m so sorry.” Joe fastened his seat belt and started the car. “She’s usually not like that, at least not with people she doesn’t know.”

Fiona snorted. Unladylike, but at this point she really didn’t care. That dinner had been an unmitigated disaster. Now all she wanted to do was go home, change into something more comfortable, make sure her ass wasn’t actually approaching the size of Rhode Island, and put this godforsaken day behind her. “Your mother hated me before she even met me.”

Joe’s jaw muscles flexed. He released the emergency brake and put the car into gear. “I swear it’s not you. It’s—”

“Gina. Yeah, I know. Smart, beautiful, perfect Gina, whom I’ll never measure up to in your mother’s eyes no matter what I say or do.” That bothered her a lot more than it should, but she refused to dwell on it. “So

what's the story with the love of your life? The real story—I'm not in the mood for BS.”

Silence hung heavy in the air as Joe drove out of the lot. He stared straight ahead, his body tense, his eyes flat and unreadable. Ahead, the traffic light went from green to yellow, and he punched the gas to make it through the intersection before the yellow changed to red.

After what felt like forever, he blew out an audible breath. “She’s the daughter of an old family friend. I’ve known her for as long as I can remember.”

“Let me guess: high school sweethearts.” Just saying that out loud made her stomach twist like a pretzel.

To her surprise, Joe shook his head. “We knew each other in high school but we ran in different circles. Then she went to college, I joined the Navy, and we kind of lost track of each other. It wasn’t until one of the times I came home on leave that we reconnected. One thing led to another, I asked her out, and we just...clicked, you know? It felt like we were meant to be together.”

“This is beginning to sound like a Hallmark movie.” And why on earth did that trigger an irrational spike of jealousy in her? She had no claim over Joe. They weren’t romantically involved in any way, shape, or form. And yet the thought of him with another woman was making Fiona see red.

“It wasn’t perfect,” he said. “There were months when I was away on missions and had to go radio silent. It was hard on both of us. But then I’d come home, and it wouldn’t take long for things to go back to the way they were before.”

Fiona shifted in her seat. “So what changed?”

Joe adjusted his grip on the wheel. “I got sent to—well, where I went isn’t important. I was gone for six months with no means of communicating with

anyone back home. It sucked, but it gave me a lot of time to think about what I was doing, and what I really wanted to be doing. Most important, it gave me time to decide what I wanted my future to look like.” His jaw muscles flexed again, while his eyes remained fixed on the road. “Once we were stateside, I booked the first flight home. I had it all planned out: a dozen white roses, a big-ass ring, and a one-kneed proposal at the restaurant where we went on our first date. Sappy, I know, but I wanted to do it up right so she’d say yes.”

The trace of a smile on his face faded, and his voice turned cold and bitter. “Then I walked through the door and found her curled up on the couch with a guy who was supposed to be my best friend.”

Fiona’s breath caught in her throat. “What did you do?”

“I got the hell out of there before I did something stupid that would have landed me in jail and jeopardized my military career. It was tempting, though. I almost gave in. To this day, a part of me still wishes I’d beaten the living shit out of Doug.”

She’d never been one to advocate violence, but she certainly understood the sentiment. She couldn’t even imagine how she would have reacted to that kind of shock. “Is that why you’re on a dating moratorium?”

He nodded, his expression on the verge of apologetic. “Don’t get me wrong, I don’t blame all women for what happened with Gina, but I thought it was a good idea to take an extended break from the dating scene. I didn’t want to inflict my anger and trust issues on anyone who didn’t deserve it.”

She’d felt the same way after leaving Dennis. Not so much the anger, but he’d definitely given her trust issues, plus a boatload of insecurities. She was making progress in sorting them out, but God only knew when she’d finally work through them all. “Does your mother know why you separated?”

He nodded again, his right hand wrapped around the gearshift, while the

left continued to hold the steering wheel in a death grip. “Ma was pretty upset when everything blew up. For a time, she was even mad at Gina. But she and Gina’s mom have been best friends since they were little girls, so it didn’t take all that long for my mother to find it in her heart to forgive her. Once that happened, she expected me to follow suit.”

“I’m guessing that didn’t happen.”

“You would be correct.” Joe changed lanes and passed a slow-moving minivan with Arkansas plates. “I can tolerate a lot of shit, but cheating isn’t one of them. And none of that three strikes bullshit either. If they cheat, it’s over. No exceptions.”

She couldn’t agree with him more.

The passing streetlights highlighted the tension bracketing Joe’s eyes and the corners of his mouth. It was hard to get over that kind of betrayal. It cut you all the way down to the bone and laid waste to your sense of trust. One day you might find it in your heart to forgive, but forgetting was a whole other matter.

Silence filled the air between them as the last of her anger dissipated. It wasn’t fair to get mad at Joe for the way Mrs. Pinto had treated her. He couldn’t control his mother any more than she could control Dennis. Hell, they’d agreed to this fake relationship just to deal with other people’s bad behavior. And now that she knew what to expect, she could prepare for whatever came her way the next time. It wouldn’t be a day at the beach, but if she could wrangle a room full of unruly students, then she could handle one middle-aged woman for a few more days.

Joe exited the highway and hooked a right onto the street that led to their apartment complex. “Look, I understand if you don’t want to deal with my

mother anymore. How she treated you was totally wrong. But you can still call me whenever that dickhead shows up at your apartment.”

She appreciated him giving her an out, but she wasn't ready to take it, at least not yet. “Thanks, but you're not getting rid of me that easily. We made a deal; I'll keep my end of the bargain. Just be aware I won't be so nice if she treats me that way again.”

“I'd pay good money to see that.” The ghost of a smile warmed his mouth before his expression turned serious. “I really am sorry about the way Ma acted. She hasn't mentioned Gina in ages; I thought she'd given up on the idea of us getting back together. Next time, I'll make sure she behaves herself around you.”

At the light, Joe turned in to their apartment complex, and just when Fiona thought she could put this day behind her, she stiffened at the sight of Dennis's unmarked patrol car parked between two SUVs. That part of the lot wasn't very well lit, but she could just make out the shadow of a man seated behind the steering wheel.

“Your ex is back,” Joe said.

“I know.”

“Ignore him.” He swung into a spot in front of their building. “If you stare at him while you're with me, he'll think he still has a chance.”

“What should we do?”

“The same things we've been doing all night.” Joe cut the engine and reached for his seat belt. “We play our parts and make him believe we're so into each other that we don't even notice he's there. Are you with me?”

His confidence boosted hers and settled the butterflies in her belly. “Yeah.”

“Good.” He winked. “Now wait for me to open your door.”

Though it went against her natural instinct, she stayed in her seat and

watched him round the front of the Mustang. He opened the door and extended his hand, and sparks of electricity zipped through her system as he helped her out of the car. Those sparks cranked up in intensity when his arm slid around her waist, his fingers resting on the flare of her hip in a move that could only be described as possessive.

“Relax, Fi. You need to stay in character if you want him to believe we’re a couple.” His breath was a warm whisper against her ear, and for a fleeting moment, she forgot that Dennis was less than thirty feet away.

Fiona leaned into Joe, the heat of his body a delicious contrast to the cooler December night air. She caught a whiff of his masculine scent, a mixture of clean linen and the spicy remnants of his cologne. It was intoxicating. She angled her head a little closer to him and drew the scent deeper into her lungs.

He stopped when they reached the door to her apartment, and she felt a sense of loss when his arm slipped away from her waist.

“He’s still down there,” Joe murmured. He shifted his body a few inches to the left so she could catch a glimpse of Dennis’s car in the lot. “Are you up for giving him a reason to leave?”

The glint of mischief in his eyes sent a rush of warmth straight through her. Their relationship might not be real, but the chemistry between them was too strong for her to deny. “I’m up for it if you are.”

His smile went from amused to sexual as he closed the remaining distance between them. This close, she could see the flecks of gold in the depths of his chocolate-brown eyes, and the tiny hairline scar just above his right eyebrow.

His fingers delved into her hair, not hard or possessive, but achingly gentle, and she melted into his touch. Their eyes met, and he paused a moment, as if giving her a chance to tell him no.

Like that was going to happen.

Fiona felt a flutter in her chest, not from nerves but from anticipation. Throwing caution to the wind, she reached up, curled her fingers around the nape of his neck, brought his mouth down to hers, and—*oh, yes*. This definitely made up for having to spend the evening with his mother.

A low, primal sound rose from deep in Joe's chest. In the flash of a moment, he took over the kiss, his tongue slipping past her lips and tangling with hers. His fingers tightened in her hair, while his other hand slid around her back and molded her against the hard lines of his body.

He tasted incredible, spicy and rich, and the more she tasted, the more she wanted, until it felt as though the hunger might consume her.

The hand on her back trailed down to the curve of her ass, tucking her even tighter against him and making it increasingly obvious that he was into this just as much as she was. She needed more, craved more, her body buzzing with the need to feel his hands all over her. She was about to suggest they go inside when he broke away and peered down at her, his eyes darkened with desire and his lips swollen from kissing her.

“This is the part where you invite me in,” his deep voice rumbled.

It was hard to process his words when her head was still spinning from the intensity of the kiss. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly as the fog in her brain cleared away. “Oh. Yeah. In.”

Flustered by emotions she had no intention of acknowledging, it took her a few tries to get the door open. Joe followed her into the apartment and locked the door behind him.

No sign of Wanda, which wasn't a surprise. The cat had a tendency to get spooked whenever men came into her domain, a behavior she'd picked up

during her time with Dennis. More likely than not, she was hiding behind the couch or somewhere in her bedroom.

Tires screeched in the parking lot as Joe crossed to the window and peered through a space in the blinds.

“Your ex is gone. I’m pretty sure that was him peeling out of the lot.”

The news gave her a sense of relief, though it also brought her crashing back to reality. This was all a ruse, a means to an end, and she needed to keep that simple fact front and center in her mind. It didn’t matter how great the kiss had felt, or that it had inspired a barrage of thoughts so filthy they would have made Liz blush. Neither of them was in the right place for that to ever happen.

“Does that mean it worked?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so.” Joe straightened. “If he hadn’t believed it, he probably would have waited for me to leave and then knocked on your door.”

The tension in her shoulders relaxed. After all the crap she’d slogged through tonight, the last thing she wanted was to deal with her belligerent ex. Actually, what she really wanted was a glass of wine, a comfortable change of clothes, and Wanda snuggled on her lap while she read a few chapters of her book.

Okay, maybe she also wanted another kiss like the one in the hall. Just thinking about it made her whole body buzz. But that could lead to a world of trouble, so it was probably best for her to keep her hands—and lips—to herself.

“Can I get you a drink? I don’t know about you, but I could sure use something to take the edge off this evening.”

“I wish I could, but I’ve got to get up early tomorrow for work.” The regret in his voice led her to believe that he was telling the truth. He crossed the

room to where she stood, close but not quite touching. “I doubt you’ll believe this, but in spite of everything that happened tonight, I had a good time because you were there.”

It was all she could do not to smile. “You’re right. I don’t believe you.”

He laughed softly. “In that case, would you believe it didn’t suck as badly as it could have because you were there?”

“That seems like a low bar to clear.” Her gaze flicked up to his. “Do you think your family believed us?”

He nodded. “Steph and Sadie liked you a lot, and Ma wouldn’t have given you such a hard time if she didn’t think we were a couple.”

“She really hates me.”

“No, she doesn’t. It’s nothing personal. She just sees you as an obstacle in her quest to get what she wants.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.”

The pair of lines between Joe’s eyebrows deepened. “Are you sure you want to keep doing this? I can tell them you’re busy or something for the rest of the time they’re in town.”

“No, it’s okay. I can handle it. Now that I know what I’m up against, I’ll be ready for whatever your mother throws my way.”

He gave a smile that reached his eyes and warmed her skin from within. Reaching up, he tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear, and it took every bit of her self-control not to lean into his touch. “Thanks again for doing this. You have no idea how much I appreciate it.”

His gaze drifted down to her mouth, as if he were thinking about kissing her again, and a little thrill went through her. She wetted her lips. His eyes turned molten. But just as he started to lower his head, a distressed meow shattered the tension.

Fiona turned her head toward the sound. “Wanda?”

There it was again, louder this time, though it sounded a little muffled.

Joe’s eyes narrowed. “I think it’s coming from your bathroom.”

“But that’s...” Her voice trailed off as she noticed the bathroom door was closed. A chill went through her. “That door was open when I left.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “The litter box is in there.” With an apartment as small as hers, there weren’t many other places to put it.

“Son of a bitch.” And just like that, Joe’s whole demeanor shifted, giving her a glimpse of the man who’d served his country for more than a decade, a warrior preparing for battle. “Take your keys and wait by the front door. I’ll check it out.”

“Should I call the police?” she asked in a whisper.

“Considering the situation with your ex, I don’t think that’s the best option.” His icy gaze scanned the apartment as if searching for potential threats. “If anything happens, I want you to get the hell out of here, okay? Get in your car, drive away, and don’t call the police until you’re a safe distance away.”

He didn’t wait for her response. With silent precision, he moved down the short, narrow hall to the bathroom door. Slowly, he wrapped his hand around the doorknob. For a moment or two, he went perfectly still, his half-drawn breath exaggerating the V of his torso. At last, he opened the door, and Wanda tore out of the darkened bathroom like her tail was on fire and darted behind the sofa.

Joe held up a hand to signal for Fiona to stay put. He gave the bathroom a quick inspection before he disappeared into her bedroom.

When he emerged from the bedroom a minute or so later, his posture had

relaxed a notch. The ice in his eyes had thawed a few degrees, though his scowl remained firmly in place. “If anyone was in here, they’re long gone.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better.” Actually, she was pretty freaked out at the thought of somebody breaking into her home.

He didn’t say anything, just closed the short distance between them and gathered her into his arms. It was exactly what she needed to take the edge off her nerves. They stayed that way for the longest time, until he finally eased back far enough to press a kiss to her forehead.

“Why don’t you take a look around and see if anything’s missing?” His voice was low, soothing. “I need to make a call. I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

He was out the door before she could ask who he was calling and why.

Before she began her inspection, she turned on every light in the apartment and coaxed Wanda out from behind the sofa. Thankfully, the cat didn’t appear to be harmed from whatever events led to her confinement in the bathroom.

With the cat cradled against her chest, purring louder than a jet engine, she inspected the living room and kitchen. Everything appeared as it should, with nothing broken or missing, not even the electronics that could be pawned for quick cash. The ornament Liz had given her was still in its gift bag on the counter, while a small stack of outgoing mail sat on the bar separating the kitchen and living areas. And yet she still couldn’t shake the sense of violation. Somebody had been in her apartment, going through her things. It made her angry, as well as scared. Had her apartment been chosen at random, or was she specifically targeted?

She moved to the bedroom and found more of the same. The emergency cash she’d hidden in an old jacket pocket was still where she’d left it. Her

favorite earrings were on the nightstand beside the bed. Maybe the burglar had been scared off before he could pocket any of her valuables.

Or maybe she'd accidentally shut the bathroom door, and she was getting worked up over nothing.

Feeling ridiculous, she blew out a breath and turned to leave the room. She strode past the bed, toward the old wooden dresser she'd bought at the nearby thrift store, and—

Fiona froze in her tracks. Her focus narrowed on the jewelry box on top of the dresser, and the hairs along the back of her neck stood on end.

“Everything all right?”

The sound of Joe's voice behind her nearly had her jumping out of her skin.

“Sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.”

She turned to face him, and having him near made her feel safe. “It's okay. I'm just a little skittish. I've never had my home broken into.”

Empathy softened his eyes. “Is anything missing?”

“Not that I noticed, but...” She caught her bottom lip between her teeth. “Someone messed with my jewelry box.”

Joe gave her a look. “Messed with it how?”

Fiona paused a moment to think of a way to explain it without sounding totally paranoid. “See how both of the drawers are fully closed?”

He nodded.

“I never shut the bottom one all the way. It broke years ago, and I glued it back together, but it's been a pain ever since. So now I just let it stick out a little.”

Joe's dark eyebrows drew down. “Are you sure that's what you did tonight?”

“Positive.”

“Have you looked inside to see what’s missing?”

“Not yet. I noticed it right before you came in. Do you think I should touch it?” She eyed the box. “I mean, what if the burglar’s fingerprints are on it?”

Joe reached into his pocket and took out one of those multi-tool pocketknife things that men seemed to like so much. He extended the small knife and used it to slide both drawers open.

It didn’t take long for Fiona to inspect the box’s contents. She frowned. “I don’t get it. Nothing’s missing as far as I can tell. Why break in and not take anything?”

In a way, she found it oddly insulting that none of her stuff was worth stealing.

Joe craned his neck to peer into the box. “Is your jewelry real or costume?”

“A little bit of both.” Oddly enough, her favorite pieces, the ones she wore the most, were costume. “What do you think it means?”

“It’s hard to say. People break into homes for all sorts of reasons. Some need money; others do it for the thrill. Sometimes, they have an axe to grind with whoever lives inside. Is it possible that your ex was involved? He was in the vicinity when the break-in occurred.”

She paused to ponder the possibility, and then shook her head. “Don’t get me wrong; Dennis is a jerk. A controlling, mean-spirited jerk. But he’s also a cop who takes his job pretty seriously. I can’t see him doing something like this.”

Joe shrugged. “You never know when it comes to exes. Breakups do strange things to people.”

Fiona caught her bottom lip between her teeth again. “Should I call the police?”

“It’s up to you. Considering there aren’t any signs of forced entry and

nothing's missing, there's only so much law enforcement can do. On the other hand, it wouldn't hurt to document the incident, just in case something comes of it later."

The only evidence of a break-in was an oddly closed jewelry box drawer and an animal locked in the bathroom. The apartment hadn't been ransacked, and nothing had been stolen. The police would probably assume she was a crazy cat lady in need of attention.

Still, she couldn't shake the inexorable sense of violation. She felt vulnerable in her own home. It churned in her gut like broken glass, and she had no idea when or if the sensation would abate. What if the burglar returned in the middle of the night while she was sound asleep? Or worse, when she was naked in the shower, alone and completely defenseless?

As if sensing her growing unease, Joe wrapped an arm around her shoulders and gathered her close. She turned to him and rested her head against the muscular wall of his chest, grateful for the warmth and security his powerful body offered.

He pressed a kiss to her hair. "Why don't you pack a bag? You can stay at my place tonight."

CHAPTER 12

PINTO WOKE THE NEXT morning with a crick in his neck from crashing on the couch.

After the lousy night Fiona had endured, he'd insisted she sleep in his bed. It didn't take a genius to realize the break-in had rocked her sense of security. The least he could do was ensure she felt comfortable and safe while sleeping in a strange place.

The sun wouldn't rise for another thirty minutes, but he could already hear the sounds of activity as his neighbors began a new day. Not that it ever got totally quiet at the apartment complex. There always seemed to be something going on, with people coming and going, doors slamming, kids running around, and cars driving in and out of the lot. Every so often, somebody threw a big party, but things usually didn't get crazy enough to warrant a call to the cops.

Trying his best not to add to the noise, Pinto got up, stretched, started a pot of coffee, and turned on the water in the shower. He'd placed a set of work clothes in the bathroom last night so he wouldn't wake Fiona while getting

ready for work. If given the choice, he would have taken the day off, but new recruit training was scheduled through the rest of the week, and they needed a qualified medic on site in case any of the newbies got hurt.

Shaved, showered, and dressed in all black, he followed his nose to the kitchen, where a freshly brewed pot of coffee beckoned to him like a siren song. Pinto filled a mug, took a sip, grimaced, and drank some more. He'd made it stronger than usual this morning, because he needed that extra boost of caffeine to kick his ass into gear.

He was halfway through his breakfast bar when the bedroom door opened. Fiona crossed to the bathroom, eyes sleepy, hair tousled, sexy as hell in a white T-shirt and plaid pajama shorts that clung to her curves. Seconds later, he heard the sound of running water, and his brain nearly short-circuited at the thought of her naked and wet. It triggered a memory of that kiss by her front door last night, and every nerve in his body lit up like a Roman candle.

Get a grip, he told himself as he swallowed another bite of his bar. It wasn't the first time a woman had stayed the night or used his shower. Granted, it was the first woman in a fair amount of time, but he was an adult who damn well knew how to keep his hormones in check. Their entire relationship was built on deception, and the more he reminded himself of that inconvenient fact, the better.

Still, it took a bit of effort to tear his gaze away from the bathroom door. He switched on his phone and scrolled through his social media accounts, searching for something—anything—to distract himself from the hot, naked woman in his shower.

The water turned off, and a short time later Fiona emerged from the bathroom, hair damp from the shower, wearing tight jeans and a dark-red blouse—crimson or maroon? Fuck if he knew where it landed on the color

wheel. All he knew was that it made her pale-blue eyes stand out even more than they normally did. It was mesmerizing.

He downed another swig of coffee. “How’d you sleep?”

“Okay, I guess,” she said with a shrug, though the shadows under her eyes told a different story. “Better than I would have at my place.”

If she’d stayed in her apartment, he seriously doubted she would have slept at all.

After she’d packed a bag last night, they’d compiled a list of possible suspects for the break-in. It was a very short list. She didn’t have any friends or family members with money problems or drug habits. Aside from the occasional irate student or parent, she didn’t have any enemies, and it seemed unlikely that any of them hated her enough to break into her apartment.

Personally, his money was on Dennis, though he couldn’t figure out the motive. If he’d wanted to scare her, he would have trashed the place, and if he’d wanted to steal a particular item, Fiona would have noticed it missing.

There was also the possibility that her home was targeted at random, but the lack of forced entry and the fact nothing was stolen led him to discount the idea.

“Can I get you something for breakfast?” he asked. “I don’t have any Diet Cherry Coke or Pop-Tarts, but you’re more than welcome to anything I’ve got in the kitchen. Glasses and plates are in the cabinet by the stove.”

A flicker of surprise crossed her face. “You remembered what I eat for breakfast.”

“How could I ever forget?”

She looked as if she were fighting a smile. “You say that as if there’s something wrong with Pop-Tarts and Diet Cherry Coke.”

“Hey, I’m not judging. Eat whatever floats your boat.” He stuffed another

bite of bar into his mouth so he wouldn't keep going and say something stupid.

Fiona opened the fridge and bent at the waist to peer inside, treating him to an unobstructed view of her denim-covered ass. He nearly groaned out loud. She reached inside, took out a bottle of water and an apple, and closed the door.

"I've been thinking," she said as she unscrewed the cap. "Maybe I was wrong about the jewelry box drawer."

Pinto mentally sighed. He'd seen this kind of denial before, a subconscious rationalization because it was easier to live with the idea of being absent-minded than admit your sense of security had been violated. And though he didn't want to be the one to shatter the illusion, it was more important for her to take the potential threat seriously.

"How about the cat?" he asked. "Do you think Wanda locked herself in the bathroom?"

Fiona caught her bottom lip between her teeth, a nervous habit she probably wasn't even aware of. "Maybe I closed it by accident."

"Has that ever happened before?"

Her shoulders slumped. "No."

Pinto finished the last of his coffee. "Then what makes you think that's what happened this time?"

"I don't know." She blew out a breath. "It just doesn't make sense. Why would anyone go through the hassle of breaking into my place and not vandalize or steal anything?"

"I wish I knew the answer." A part of him wanted to let her believe this was all one big misunderstanding, but that was the security equivalent of a parent allowing a child to eat candy for dinner. Sure, it made the kid happy in the

short run, but it promoted an unhealthy behavior that would eventually bite them both in the ass. “Criminals don’t always do things that make sense.”

Pinto rinsed his plate and mug and loaded them into the dishwasher. He glanced at the clock on the microwave and frowned. If he wanted to get to work on time, he’d have to leave in the next ten minutes. Today was the final day of simulations, and he hoped that Troy would make it through the course without killing any more friendlies.

On the bright side, once his shift was over, he was coming straight home. His family planned to stay at the parks until they closed, and by the time they got back to their hotel, they’d be too exhausted for a visit. That would give him time to make sure Fiona was back to feeling safe in her apartment. Which reminded him...

He turned to face her. “I almost forgot. A buddy of mine will be calling you later this morning. His name’s Aidan, but everyone calls him Hatch. He’ll want to know when he can come by to replace the lock on your door and install a security system.”

A note of annoyance narrowed her eyes as she swallowed a bite of her apple. “Gee, thanks for making that decision for me.”

That certainly wasn’t the response he’d expected, and it put him on the defensive. What was the problem? He was only trying to help. But then he thought about it from her point of view and realized that a woman who’d left a controlling jackass wouldn’t want another guy stepping in to assume the role.

Great. Now he felt like shit, because he never wanted to be *that guy*. “Look, I’m sorry. I should have asked you first. After last night, I just wanted to do something to help you feel safer.”

The anger in her expression diminished. “I appreciate you wanting to help.

But next time—”

“I’ll ask, I promise.” He paused a moment. “Do you want me to call Hatch and cancel?”

Her lips flattened into a thin line as she briefly considered the offer. “No, it’s okay. I’ve been thinking about getting a security system but I haven’t had time to look into it. Just let me know how much it costs and I’ll pay you back.”

“No, you won’t,” he said with a shake of his head. “Hatch owes me a favor, so the install won’t cost a thing. The rest is on me.” Lucky for him, Six Points extended a generous discount to all company employees, so the cost for equipment would be minimal.

Fiona paused, the apple a few inches from her mouth. “Why does he owe you a favor?”

“Let’s just say what happens in Tampa stays in Tampa.” He grinned, determined to keep his big mouth shut, because he’d promised his friend never to tell another soul about that crazy weekend on Florida’s west coast. “If you want, I can have him install a few motion-activated cameras that’ll record whoever comes near your door. We have a few at the office that are so small you can’t even tell they’re there.”

She thought about it while she ate another bite of her apple. “I suppose that’ll come in handy the next time I think something’s amiss in my apartment.”

The uncertainty in her voice tugged at his heart. Filled with the need to assure her, he touched her upper arm, and his heart skipped with an increasingly familiar jolt of awareness. She must have felt it as well, because her eyes widened and her lips parted, and it took every last ounce of his self-control not to kiss her.

“Don’t ever doubt yourself, Fi. Your instincts are too damn good.” He kept his voice low and calm. “There won’t be a next time, because the new locks will keep them out. And if they’re dumb enough to try, the cameras will show us who they are.”



IT WAS A BREATH of fresh air to hear that she wasn’t being overly dramatic or paranoid. That had been Dennis’s go-to response whenever they’d had a disagreement.

Fiona wanted to believe Joe. About everything. That she hadn’t imagined the signs of a break-in, and there wouldn’t be a next time. Still, breaking old habits and insecurities was easier said than done. She forced a smile. “I wish I had your confidence.”

“Well, we’ll have to work on that, won’t we?”

He gave a smile that warmed his eyes and made her feel tingly inside. It triggered a rush of inappropriate thoughts that were sounding better by the second. To keep herself from acting on any of them, she bit into her apple.

“I was curious about something,” he said as he scooped his keys off the counter.

Fiona swallowed the bite of food, and then reached for the water bottle. “Oh, what’s that?”

“I couldn’t help but notice that your place wasn’t decorated for the holidays. Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he added. “I was just a little surprised.”

She turned her head from side to side as if taking stock of his apartment. With the exception of a few Christmas cards and a handful of gift bags holding presents for his family, his apartment looked as it probably did every

other day of the year. “No offense, but your place doesn’t exactly look like Santa’s workshop either.”

Her response didn’t seem to faze him in the least. “When I was in the Navy, I never had time for that stuff, and after things blew up with Gina, I didn’t feel much like celebrating. Besides, I’m a guy; we’re not into decorating. What’s your excuse?”

“I don’t have one,” she simply said as she went to the kitchen and tossed the apple core in the trash. “I usually decorate every year. But when I left Dennis...let’s just say I could have planned things better. At the time, all I knew was that I had to get out of there, because I couldn’t stand the thought of spending another day in that house. So I only took what I could fit into my car: clothes, jewelry, a few personal items, and, of course, Wanda. Unfortunately, I didn’t have enough space for my Christmas decorations.”

Sympathy softened his expression. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

She lifted one shoulder in what was meant to be a casual shrug. “It is what it is. There are only a few things I regret not taking. My Christmas collection is one of them, but it’s not like I can do anything about it now.”

Something dark and dangerous flickered in Joe’s eyes. He opened his mouth but whatever he meant to say was cut off by the chiming of Fiona’s phone. She glanced down to check the screen and saw notifications for incoming text messages, one from Dennis and one from Liz.

She ignored Dennis’s message and opened the one from Liz: *I got donuts. Where are you?*

Crap, she’d totally forgotten their plans for this morning. She typed a response: *I’m at Joe’s.*

Are you naked?

Why would I be naked?

Why not?

Fiona bit the inside of her cheek to hold back a laugh because if she laughed, Joe would want to know why, and no way was she explaining this. *Someone broke into my apartment last night. I was freaked out, so Joe let me crash at his place.*

Seconds later, there was a knock at the door.

“That’s probably Liz,” Fiona said as Joe crossed the room and checked the peephole.

He opened the door to reveal Liz on his doorstep, wearing running tights and a Nike long-sleeved shirt, an outfit that totally clashed with the box of pastries in her hands.

“Greetings, I come bearing donuts. Mind if I come in?” She held up the box. “We were supposed to do breakfast this morning. Is that coffee I smell?”

His mouth curved with amusement. “The coffee’s gone but I can always make more. Are there any Boston creams in there?”

“No, but if you let me come in, I’ll let you choose between the maple bacon and powdered Bavarian.”

“Deal.” He opened the door wide enough for her to enter.

As she stepped over the threshold, she handed him the box and made a beeline for Fiona.

“Why didn’t you call me last night? Are you okay? How about Wanda—and your apartment?”

The concern on her friend’s face made Fiona feel bad about not telling her earlier. “I’m sorry. I guess I was a little freaked out and not thinking clearly. I’m fine. Wanda’s fine. I don’t think anything’s missing, but I’m going to take a closer look this morning to make sure.”

“How did they get in? I didn’t see any damage to your door.”

“They probably picked the lock or used a master key,” Joe said right before he bit into the powdered Bavarian.

Fiona eyed the pastry in his hand. “Didn’t you already eat a breakfast bar?”

“Yep,” he said around a mouthful of pastry. “But there’s always room for donuts.”

She wished she had the kind of metabolism that allowed for a second breakfast. As it was, just looking at his donut was making her jeans feel tight.

“I bet it was Dennis,” Liz said, scorn unmistakable in her voice. “That rat bastard probably thinks it’ll scare you into moving back in with him.”

“I don’t know; it doesn’t feel right. If he did it to scare me, he would have trashed the place or hurt Wanda.” Probably both. The thought sent a shiver down her spine. “I still don’t understand why anyone would break into my apartment and not steal anything.”

“Did you check your laundry basket?” Liz asked. “The burglar could have been one of those freaks who likes to steal women’s underwear.”

Fiona’s upper lip curled back. “Why would anyone do that?”

“Beats me.” Liz reached into the donut box and selected the maple bacon. “Criminals do all kinds of weird shit. I was watching this show the other night—*America’s Craziest Criminals*—and they were talking about this guy who broke into a house wearing nothing but a cowboy hat. He stuck his junk between two slices of bread and—”

“Please stop.” Fiona held out a hand. “I’d rather go to the grave without hearing the rest of that story.”

Joe chuckled. Behind him, the coffeemaker brewed a fresh pot. “Maybe the burglar got spooked and left before he could do any damage. I was mostly keeping an eye on your ex when we pulled into the lot. It’s possible that

whoever broke in saw us coming and slipped away before we even got out of the car.”

Liz swallowed a bite of her donut. “Do any of your students—present or former—have an ax to grind?”

“There’s always a few, but even if they figured out where I live, they’d probably just punch holes in the walls or drop an upper decker in the bathroom.”

Joe shot her a look. “I can’t believe you know what that is.”

“I teach middle school. You should be more surprised if I *didn’t* know what that is.”

Fiona’s phone chimed again. She glanced at the screen and saw a notification for another message from Dennis. Knowing him, he was upset over her lack of response to his first message. Not ready to deal with him, at least not yet, she switched off her phone and stuffed it into her back pocket.

“You might want to look for cameras.” Liz licked a glob of maple frosting off her thumb. “For all you know, they could have hidden one in the bathroom vent so they can watch you shower.”

Everything inside Fiona recoiled. “They can do that?”

Joe frowned, which she interpreted as confirmation. “I’ll ask Hatch to search the apartment for hidden electronic devices. If there are any, he’ll find and remove them.”

The confidence in his voice convinced her stomach to unclench. It was nice having a fake boyfriend who knew a thing or two about home security. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He glanced down at his watch and the frown returned. “I hate to do this, but I’ve got to go to work. Feel free to stay here as long as you like. I left a spare set of keys and a remote for the security system on the

hook by the door. The button on the right arms the system; the one on the left shuts it off.”

She nodded. A part of her wanted to ask him to stay, but it wasn't fair for him to miss work because of her insecurities. “Got it; thanks.”

“No problem.” Joe watched her for a few long moments, his gaze lingering on her mouth before drifting up to her eyes. He tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Call me if you need anything.”

She watched him leave, enjoying the rear view almost as much as the front.

“So,” Liz said the instant they were alone. She picked up the donut box and offered it to Fiona. “You spent the night at Hot Guy's place. Joe—I know,” she quickly added. “But he will forever be Hot Guy in my heart. Now I want to hear every sordid, sweaty detail, and don't you dare leave anything out.”

Fiona stared at the box, her resolve crumbling faster than a stale cookie. Oh, what the hell. This was a special occasion. It wasn't every day her apartment got broken into.

She peered into the box and selected a chocolate glazed. Before taking a bite, she said, “Nothing happened.”

Liz stared at her as though she'd just tried to sell her swampland in the Everglades. “And here I thought we were friends.”

“It's the truth,” she insisted around a mouthful of donut. “I slept in the bedroom, and he slept on the couch.”

“You could have invited him in. You know, so you'd feel safer.”

“You know where that would have led.” A few possibilities sprang to mind and sent a rush of heat through her body.

“Of course I do.” Liz flashed a grin. “So why on earth didn't you travel down that dark, delicious path?”

“Well, let's see.” Rocking back on her heels, Fiona held up her free hand

and started ticking off reasons. “He’s a friend, he’s my neighbor, he doesn’t think of me like that, and even if he did, I’m not ready to jump back into the dating pool.”

The look on Liz’s face said she didn’t buy any of those reasons. “Friends and neighbors hook up all the time.”

“And if things go wrong, which they usually do, it gets really uncomfortable.”

“That’s a rather glass-half-empty assumption to make.”

“After Dennis, can you blame me?”

“No, but not all guys are scum like Dennis.” Liz crossed to the kitchen, picked up the mug Joe left on the counter for her, and filled it with coffee. She doctored it with milk and sugar, and sat across from Fiona. “For the record, Hot Guy definitely thinks of you like that. It’s obvious by the way he looks at you.”

Fiona’s pulse quickened. “And how’s that?”

“Like he wanted to eat you instead of that donut.” Liz’s expression softened. “Honey, I get it. Officer Douchebag did a number on you. You deserve a good guy, a decent guy, and I think Hot Guy’s one of them.”

In her heart, she wanted to believe that, but it was hard to get past the mountain of mental baggage in her head. “How can you be so sure?”

Liz paused to sip her coffee. “Did he make a move on you last night when you were all freaked out and vulnerable?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean anything.”

“Of course it does. If he was some sleazebag who only wanted a quick, easy score, he would have made a move. But, instead, he slept on the couch. Did you lock the bedroom door before you went to sleep?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Yes or no?”

Fiona ate the last bite of her donut. “No.”

A grin stretched over Liz’s face that would have put the Cheshire Cat to shame.

“What?” Fiona bit out.

“I’m just curious,” her friend said. “Did you leave the door unlocked because you trusted him not to come in, or because you hoped he would?”

CHAPTER 13

THROUGH A MIXTURE OF luck, skill, and sheer determination, all the recruits passed the simulations, even Troy, though Pinto suspected he'd gotten a few helpful hints from Luther.

The next week would be spent in the fitness center, where the recruits would work in teams of two to learn close combat techniques and defensive tactics, including how to disable and restrain assailants armed with guns, knives, chemical agents, or blunt force objects. They'd also learn de-escalation techniques, because defusing the situation was often a better solution in a civilian environment.

"Jacobsen, you're with Samuels. Rosario, you're with Vogel. Calibuso, you're with Garrett." As Pinto finished rattling off tomorrow morning's assignments, he noticed that one of the recruits had raised her hand.

"What is it, Rosario?"

She was a tall woman, just shy of six feet, with a slender, athletic build and long, black hair she kept in a braid that trailed halfway down her back. Her resting expression was calm indifference, though he suspected she was

continuously taking stock of her environment. “Me and Ronny couldn’t help but notice that you keep pairing us together.”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Well, yeah, there is. If we’re going to be working with the guys, then we need to be training with them as well, not walled off into our own protective bubble.”

They were the first women hired by Six Points for their personal security division, and incorporating them into the training program was a bit of a work in progress. There had been a few bumps along the way, but both women had performed on par with the men, with Rosario earning one of the highest scores on the shooting range.

Samuels slanted Rosario a look. “No offense, but we’re a lot bigger than you.”

Now there was an understatement. The guy was built like a fucking Mack truck, with muscles on top of muscles, and a neck that was thicker than his head. He had pale skin and a shaved head with thick brows over deep-set eyes, and a heavy, square jaw that would break your hand if you ever punched it.

Undeterred, Rosario craned her neck to meet Samuels’s steely gaze. “And so will some of the guys that we go up against in the field. We need to be able to carry our own weight. And we can, if you give us a chance and stop acting like we might break.”

Garrett’s upper lip curled up in a sneer. “You think you can take one of us down?”

“I know I can take you down,” Rosario shot back, and a chorus of “Oooohs” filled the room. “Step into the ring and I’ll show you.”

Garrett scoffed, a ballsy move for a guy who’d barely made it through the

obstacle course in the allotted time. “I don’t hit women.”

“Then what are you going to do if the hostile is female?”

Pinto had encountered that particular scenario on multiple occasions and had the scars to prove it. He hated having to hit a woman; it went against all his instincts. But in their line of work, treating women as if they were helpless was a good way to get killed.

“She’s got a point,” Jacobsen said.

Calibuso nodded. “Ten bucks says Rosario can put him on the mat.”

“Make it twenty and you’re on,” Samuels countered.

Pinto tilted his head toward Ryan, one of the owners of Six Points Security, and dropped his voice to a murmur. “Think we should put a stop to this?”

“Nah, where’s the fun in that? Besides, she’s right. These guys can’t pull a punch just because the hostile is female.”

“True, but we haven’t evaluated their combat skills yet. There’s no way of knowing how this will play out. He’s bigger, got more muscle mass. If Rosario doesn’t really know what she’s doing, she could end up getting hurt.”

To be fair, it took more than brute strength to win a fight. Regardless of size, a man or woman could overpower a much stronger opponent with proper technique, agility, and speed. And from what he’d seen so far, Pinto wouldn’t screw with either of these women. Rosario was a Marine veteran who carried herself in a way that suggested she knew how to fend for herself. Vogel previously worked in military intelligence. Which organization, he had no idea, but it wouldn’t surprise him to learn she knew six ways to kill a man with a pair of eyebrow tweezers.

Ryan didn’t seem concerned. “Rosario ran with the big boys and saw combat overseas. I don’t think she’d poke the bear if she didn’t think she could handle it. We’ll tap the brakes if things start to go off the rails.”

“So what’s it gonna be, Garrett?” Rosario taunted. “I’ve got the guts to step into the ring. Do you?”

More *ooohs* from the peanut gallery left Garrett with little room to maneuver. Now his manhood was at stake.

“Fine,” he ground through gritted teeth. “But I don’t want to hear any bitching when you get hurt.”

Pinto insisted they wear protective gear to reduce the risk of injury. He didn’t want anyone going home for the holidays with black eyes, broken bones, or missing teeth. Once they were ready, they stepped into the ring and stared each other down like two gunslingers in the middle of the street at high noon. Garrett was a good four inches taller and outweighed Rosario by at least fifty pounds. But she didn’t appear intimidated. To the contrary, she seemed to be looking forward to the fight.

Ryan stood between the pair. “You know the rules. If you hear the whistle, everything stops. Got it?”

Each voiced their understanding and went to their respective corners.

The bell rang, and Garrett charged out of his corner. Rosario ducked his swing, pivoted, and delivered a kick to the side that sent him stumbling.

Within a matter of seconds, their combat strategies became apparent. Garrett fought like a street brawler intent on inflicting maximum damage, while Rosario’s style was more along the lines of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Badass*: dodge or deflect, and then counterstrike. Rinse and repeat as necessary. Each time, she targeted vulnerable areas, wearing him down with each passing strike.

Going low, Garrett hooked an arm around Rosario’s waist and slammed her back against the corner post. He angled his lower body to avoid a shot to the groin and drove a fist into her side. Rosario grunted, pain etched on her face,

and responded with a knee to Garrett's ribs, knocking the air out of his lungs and sending him tumbling backward. She followed up with a shot to the chin, and a kick to the chest that knocked him to the ground.

Calibuso let out a whoop. "Pay up, bitches!"

A whistle pierced the air as Ryan climbed into the ring and inserted his muscular frame between the two fighters. His features hardened, providing a rare glimpse of the cop he once was before joining his family to form Six Points. "All right, that's enough. You proved your point. In fact, you proved it so well that I'm changing the assignments. Vogel, you'll be working with Calibuso. Rosario, you're with Garrett. That's it for today. I'll see you bright and early tomorrow morning."

Vogel and Calibuso didn't seem to mind the change, but Rosario and Garrett each looked as if they'd just found out they'd been scheduled for an impromptu colonoscopy.

Tomorrow should be pretty interesting.

"You think that's a good idea?" Pinto asked as the recruits headed for the exits.

"Sooner or later, they'll have to work together. We might as well find out if that's going to be a problem." Ryan pushed off from the wall. "I'll see you in the morning. Get plenty of rest, and make sure your medical bag is stocked."

Once he was alone in the fitness center, Pinto switched on his phone. There was a message from Hatch, letting him know that Fiona was now the proud owner of shiny new locks and a kickass security system. He replied with a *thank you*, grateful to know that Fi would be able to sleep at night without having to worry about some creep breaking into her apartment.

And yet a part of him that was becoming harder to ignore liked the idea of her spending another night in his bed, preferably with him. Doing all sorts of

naked, sweaty things. Just thinking about it made his blood pressure skyrocket. But like it or not, that wasn't part of their agreement, so he'd settle for keeping her safe.

There was one more thing that he wanted to do for her, but it was beyond his skill set. Well, technically, he could do it, but it would most likely land him in jail because he lacked the finesse to pull it off without getting caught. So he scrolled through his contacts and called the only person he knew who could turn his idea into a reality.

Essie answered the call on the second ring. She sounded breathless as though she'd been running, but her voice sounded calm. "Hey, Pinto. It's been awhile. What's up?"

"I need to call in a favor." At the rate he was going, he'd be tapped out of favors by the end of the week. Not that it mattered. Fiona was totally worth it. He'd even be willing to owe a favor or two if it made her life easier. "I've got a situation where—"

"Hold that thought." Essie cut him off. She said something too low for him to make out, and seconds later, the sound of multiple explosions carried over the phone.

"Essie, are you okay?"

Another explosion, and then he heard Essie shouting in a language he didn't understand.

"Oh yeah, I'm fine." She'd switched back to English. "Just taking care of business for a client. Now, what can I do for you?"

Curiosity nearly ate him alive, but he knew she wouldn't divulge any details, so he didn't bother to ask. Instead, he laid out exactly what he needed. Given the skills Essie had acquired during her years as a covert

operative for the United States government, this should be a walk in the park for her.

“That’s it?” Essie sounded incredulous. “If you want, I could eliminate the problem altogether. Save you some trouble in the long run.”

He didn’t want to know what she meant by that statement, though he had a pretty good idea. Being a spy required a moral compass with a fair degree of flexibility. “Thanks, but I think I’ll pass.”

“Your choice; let me know if you change your mind.” She coughed to clear her throat. “Given the nature of your request, I assume you’d like this done as quickly as possible.”

“If it’s not too much trouble.”

She made a sound that suggested his answer amused her. A man’s voice speaking in what sounded like Russian carried over the phone, and she fired off a response in what he assumed was the same language. “Sure thing, Pinto. I’ve got a few loose ends to tie up with this job, but I should be back in the States by tomorrow. Is that soon enough for you?”

He smiled. “Perfect.”



FIONA WALKED AWAY FROM the checkout lane with a cart full of toys that her sister and brother-in-law would hate but her nephews would absolutely love.

It was her sacred duty as the cool aunt—actually, the only aunt—to spoil them on Christmas. The boys, ages five and seven, were at the stage where they loved any toy, so long as it was loud and/or messy. She’d satisfied both requirements with a toy electric guitar for Ben and a Spiderman web slinger that shot Silly String for Elias. If she got them giftwrapped and in the mail by

tomorrow, they stood a good chance of making it to her sister's house in time for Christmas.

Fiona dug into her purse for her keys. She'd gotten gift cards for the rest of her family. It was easier that way. Less postage to pay, and less worries about something getting lost or damaged in transit. They could buy what they wanted at their favorite stores, and she wouldn't have to worry about her gift being the wrong size, the wrong color, or just plain wrong.

While she was at it, she also got a present for Joe. Nothing much, she didn't want him to get the wrong idea, but she considered him a friend—okay, maybe a bit more than that, but she wasn't quite ready to examine those feelings yet—and all of her friends got something for Christmas.

As if on cue, her phone vibrated with an incoming message from Joe. She checked the screen and smiled as she read the message: *Hey, Fi. How did things go with Hatch?*

She stepped out of the flow of foot traffic and typed a quick response: *Great! Hatch is a sweetie.*

Probably not the way a guy like Hatch would want to be described, but it was the truth. He'd listened to her concerns about security and installed a system that would keep her safe and let her know if anyone so much as breathed within ten feet of her doors and windows. He'd also checked for hidden electronic devices, and the fact he'd found none meant she could shower without fear of being secretly recorded.

Her phone chimed with another message from Joe: *Glad to hear it. I'll stop by later.*

Smiling, she tucked her phone back into her purse. With school officially on winter break, she had the rest of the afternoon to do as she pleased. Maybe she'd stop by the thrift shop and see if they had any holiday decorations that

would look good in her apartment. Her Christmas budget was nearly depleted, but perhaps she could score a bargain or two that would spruce up her place for the holidays. Then she'd go home and get everything ready for her trip to the post office tomorrow morning.

She pushed her cart through the automatic exit doors, and her pulse jumped at the sight of Dennis's unmarked police cruiser parked alongside her vehicle.

Adrenaline surged, although her body was frozen, trapped between fight and flight. The way she saw it, she had two choices: retreat to the store and wait for him to leave—and who knew how long that would take—or deal with the problem head-on. Usually, she would have chosen the former, but she was tired of avoiding him, of screening her calls, of not going to places she enjoyed because she didn't want to risk running into him. Most of all, she was tired of giving him that kind of power over her.

She cast a glance around the packed parking lot, taking in the steady stream of foot traffic coming in and out of the store. To her left, an employee collected carts, while a woman nearby loaded bags into the trunk of her car. Considering how much Dennis disliked loud, messy, public altercations, this many witnesses would certainly ensure he remained on his best behavior.

Might as well get this over with. She hitched her purse strap higher on her shoulder and forced her feet to start moving. At her approach, Dennis stepped out of his vehicle and leaned against the door as if he hadn't a care in the world. His slacks were pressed, his white shirt crisp, his hair neatly trimmed. He projected an image of honesty and virtue, a model citizen for others to emulate.

Good thing she knew better.

He flashed a million-dollar smile that only made her want to smack him. "Fiona, it's good—"

“Did you break into my apartment?” she blurted, and felt an odd sense of satisfaction when the smile slid away from his face.

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I saw your car in the lot last night. Someone broke into my apartment. You do the math.”

Dennis scowled. “I’m a police officer. My job is to uphold the law. Do you have any idea how insulting that question is?”

That wasn’t a denial, and it made her wonder whether Joe’s suspicions were correct. “Then why were you there?”

“We need to talk.” He stepped toward her, and her heart rate jumped a few notches.

“We have nothing to discuss.” She tried to steer her shopping cart around him, but Dennis blocked her path. Nerves skittering, she shot him a look that usually made even her most hardened students quiver in their seats. “Get out of my way.”

“Not until we’ve talked.”

It was times like these when she seriously regretted not keeping pepper spray in her purse. Then again, if she hosed him with the spray, he’d probably have her arrested for battery on a law enforcement officer, and then she’d end up on the evening news and lose her job.

Still, she adjusted her grip on her keys, slipping a couple between her fingers because his aggressive body language was making her nervous. “I don’t care what you say, or do, or promise. You are who you are, you’re never going to change, and that’s not what I want in my life. We are never, ever getting back together. I don’t know how I can make that any clearer for you. Now leave me alone before I call 911 and start screaming.”

Dennis propped his hands on his hips and glared down at her with

exasperation. “Do you really think that asshole will make you happy?”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes, I do. Joe’s smart, and kind, and he treats me with dignity and respect, like I’m an equal in the relationship.” Now that she thought about it, her fake relationship with Joe might be the healthiest one she’d ever been in, and how messed up was that?

“What, you actually think he wants a relationship with you?” Dennis laughed as if that were the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard. “The only thing a guy like that wants is a hot piece of ass. The second he gets tired of you, he’ll drop you like a bad habit.”

The comment touched on one of her insecurities, but she refused to let it show. “What makes you think I don’t want him for the exact same reason?”

“I know you better, maybe even better than you know yourself.” Smile smug, he moved toward her, and she angled the cart to keep him out of her personal space. “You need a man who can give you stability, a man who can keep you safe.”

“You never kept me safe,” she said. “You kept me under your thumb.”

Anger creased the corners of his eyes, a crack in the veneer of his civility. It sent a shiver through her. She’d seen that look plenty of times before, usually right before things got ugly.

“Fiona!” a woman’s voice called out.

She glanced over her shoulder and spotted Renee Castellano, the math teacher whose classroom was two doors down from hers, headed toward her from a few rows over. Two teenaged girls trailed in her wake, matching mortified expressions on their faces.

Relief loosened the tightness in Fiona’s chest, because she knew Dennis wasn’t dumb enough to make a scene in front of witnesses.

Squaring her shoulders, she pushed the cart around him and opened the

trunk of her car. “Goodbye, Dennis. Don’t come near me again, or I’ll file a complaint with the department.”

CHAPTER 14

MUCH TO FIONA'S DISAPPOINTMENT, the thrift store's selection of Christmas decorations had been thoroughly picked over. There hadn't been a single item she wanted for her new holiday collection. But she'd found a good deal on baking supplies, so she stopped at the grocery store on her way home and got to work on a massive batch of holiday cookies.

Determined not to let a lack of decorations, or the confrontation with her jerk of an ex, put a dent in her Christmas spirit, Fiona took the last batch of cookies from the oven and set them on the rack to cool. In all, she'd made three batches: gingerbread, peanut butter, and, her personal favorite, chocolate mint with dark chocolate chips. It was her first time baking since she'd left Dennis. Her cookbook was still at his house. But she'd made the cookies so many times she practically knew the recipes by heart, so it wasn't really any big loss.

Her phone sounded with an alert from her brand-spanking-new security system a second or two before she heard a knock at the door. Curious, she

swiped at the screen, and she couldn't help but grin at the sight of Joe in the hall.

Okay, maybe this was becoming something more than just a relationship of convenience. At least it was to her. She'd always considered Joe physically attractive, but now that she'd gotten to know him as a person, she felt something far deeper, more intimate. Without a doubt, their relationship had moved beyond the boundaries of friendship. Perhaps, once his family was back in New Jersey and Dennis stopped being such a pain in the butt, they could explore this thing they'd started.

Fiona crossed to the foyer to open the door, and like every other time she laid eyes on him, her heart did a little flip.

Still in the clothes he'd worn to work, Joe looked dark, dangerous, and blatantly masculine. Temptation personified.

He smiled, a slash of white in his five o'clock shadow. "Did you get an alert before I knocked?"

"Yes, I did, and I checked the camera before I opened the door. Thank you again. You really should let me reimburse you for this."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Don't be ridiculous. I feel better knowing you're protected when I'm not around."

There it was again—that warm, soft, fuzzy feeling that started deep in her chest and radiated out to the rest of her body. It happened a lot when he said stuff like that.

He tipped his head up and sniffed the air. "Are those cookies I smell?"

"Yep, I made three batches." She opened the door a little wider so he could step inside.

Joe followed his nose to the small galley kitchen, where every inch of counter space was covered with bowls, containers, cookie sheets, and baking

racks.

He stared for a few moments. “That’s a shitload of cookies.”

“I couldn’t decide which recipe to use, so I ended up making all three.”

“From scratch?”

“Well, I cheated and used a box mix for the gingerbread, but the other two were from scratch.”

A smile teased the corners of his mouth. “I should probably try them. You know, for quality control purposes, if that’s okay with you.”

“Be my guest.”

He picked a peanut butter cookie from one of the containers, took a bite, and let out a moan that sent her mind straight to the gutter. “Damn, these are good. You never told me you could bake.”

Fiona flushed at the praise. “You never asked.”

Joe polished off the peanut butter cookie and sampled one of the chocolate mints. “Holy crap, these remind me of those Girl Scout cookies. What do they call them? Oh yeah, Thin Mints, but these are way better. If you ever decided to sell them, you could make some serious bank.”

She watched him eat another chocolate mint before sampling one of the gingerbreads. “How can you eat like that and look like that?”

“Like what?” he asked around a mouthful of cookie.

“Like...” Flustered, Fiona made a vague gesture with her hands. “I don’t know. Like somebody carved you out of marble. If I ate like that, I’d have to buy new clothes every month.” As it was, just looking at all these cookies was making her feel puffy.

Joe’s gaze swept over her body. His mouth curved up on one side. “I’m sure we could find a way to work the calories off you.”

A few suggestions sprang to mind and sent a flush of heat through her

body. Was he flirting with her? Because it sure as hell seemed like he was flirting with her, and she liked the way it made her feel.

She was seriously considering flirting back when the sound of Dennis's ringtone sent her crashing back to reality.

"I take it your ex is still being a dick," Joe said, his voice carefully controlled.

"We had words earlier today." She reached for the phone and sent the call to voicemail. There was nothing more for them to discuss, and she refused to let that jerk intrude on the good time she was having with Joe. "He was waiting for me in the parking lot when I came out of the store this afternoon."

Joe's eyes iced over. "How did he know where to find you?"

"I have no idea. It's like he has some sort of sixth sense when it comes to my whereabouts." Her eyes widened as she thought of one possibility. "Do you think he installed some sort of tracker in my phone or on my car?"

Just thinking about it creeped her out. For all she knew, he could have done it back when they were still living together. But considering some of the other things he'd pulled, tagging her like a rhino on the Serengeti seemed fairly tame by comparison.

"I wouldn't put it past him," Joe said. "Has your phone's battery been draining faster than usual?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"Any weird apps that you don't remember downloading?"

She shook her head.

"Do you have any apps that have access to your location data?"

"Um...I'm not sure. Does Google Maps count?"

He nodded and extended his hand. "If you don't mind, I'll take a look and see if I can find anything suspicious."

She gave him the phone without hesitation, and then placed the cookies on the cooling rack into a container. She was meeting a few of her colleagues for lunch tomorrow, and she planned to give some of the containers as gifts. But now that she knew how much Joe enjoyed them, she'd set aside at least one container for him.

Joe ate another cookie while he swiped and tapped at the screen. "I don't see any obvious tracking apps, but you allowed your social media accounts access to your location data. Any of your friends can use them to see where you go and when you get there."

Her stomach lurched. She'd blocked Dennis from her social media accounts, but they had a few mutual friends who might be willing to share information with him. "Can you undo it?"

"Sure, just give me a minute." A few more swipes and taps, and he handed the phone back to her. "All set. If you want, I can bring it to work and have the tech team give it a more thorough inspection."

"Thanks. I might take you up on that if he does something like this again."

"No problem. I'll check your car when I go downstairs." The ice in his eyes melted. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to help."

"Don't be. It's not like you can babysit me twenty-four hours a day. Besides, it actually felt pretty good to tell him off."

Joe smiled. "You're incredible, Fi. Don't listen to anybody who tells you otherwise."

Something shifted in his expression. The muscle along his jaw flexed. He leaned in to cup her cheek, his thumb lightly stroking her skin, and the simple contact made her tingle in all the right places.

Dark and intense, his gaze caught hers, and it felt as though time had frozen. She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. The air around them crackled

with energy. Wild thoughts flashed through her mind, filling her head with bad ideas that sounded better and better by the second.

He moved closer, his face an inch from hers, his masculine scent invading her senses and chipping away at her resolve.

“What are you doing?” Her words came out on the heels of a breathy exhale.

“What does it look like?”

She swallowed hard against the lump in her throat. “This isn’t part of our arrangement.”

“I’m open to altering the deal,” he said, his voice loaded with sensual promise. “Does that work for you?”

Oh yeah, that worked a lot better than she’d expected. But she couldn’t seem to get the words out, so she simply nodded in agreement.

A wolfish smile spread over Joe’s face as his fingers slid into her hair.

Heat radiated between their bodies. Anticipation raced through her veins. At last, he brushed his lips over hers, a perfect mix of soft and firm that she felt all the way to her toes. Head spinning, she reached up to grab fistfuls of his shirt and hung on for dear life.

A low, rough rumble rose from deep in Joe’s chest. His mouth moved slowly, thoroughly, deliberately, as though he savored every last second, and heat sizzled through her veins. Tilting his head, he deepened the kiss, and her lips parted beneath the insistent pressure of his. He tasted like sin, seductive and decadent, with a lingering hint of sweetness from the cookies he’d just eaten. The more she tasted, the more she wanted to taste, until the need hummed in her blood as though it were a living thing.

Joe wrapped one arm around her, pressing her against the muscular frame of his body, and he felt beyond incredible. He was warm and strong and

damn, he smelled great, and for reasons she couldn't begin to understand, he found her attractive.

Put it all together, and it was one hell of a turn-on.

He moved from her mouth to the curve of her neck, and a soft moan slipped past her lips when his teeth grazed a spot she hadn't even realized was that sensitive. As he did it again, his hand cupped her breast, and it was a wonder she didn't combust on the spot.

A loud chime from Joe's phone nearly had her jumping out of her skin.

Contact broken, he glanced at the screen, muttered a curse, and let out a frustrated sigh. "I'm sorry, but I need to answer that. It's my sister. I've been waiting to hear from her so we can finalize plans for tomorrow. Do you mind if I put her on speaker?"

Hell yeah, she minded. If she had her way, they'd ignore the call and pick up right where they'd left off. But she understood what his family meant to him, so she sucked it up and said, "Not at all."

Hands braced on the counter, he paused a moment to pull himself together. Then he swiped at the screen to accept the call, and his expression completely transformed. "Hey sis, how are things going at the mouse house?"

"I saw a lion!" His niece Sadie's high-pitched voice carried over the speaker.

Joe smiled.

It was adorable, how much he loved his little niece.

"Wow, that must have been really cool. I'm jealous. What else did you see today?"

The question launched Sadie into a rapid-fire recap of all the animals she'd seen at Animal Kingdom, followed by a list of every ride she'd ridden with her mother and grandmother.

“I hope your mother took tons of pictures,” Joe said, still smiling, when she finally finished.

“I’ll send you a few later tonight.” Stephanie’s voice came over the phone. She sounded tired, which wasn’t surprising, considering she’d spent the day traipsing around Disney’s largest theme park. “Right now, we’re in line for the Kali River Rapids. If there’s any time left after that, we’re going on the safari again.”

“The rapids are so much fun,” Fiona said, thinking back to the last time she visited Animal Kingdom a few years ago. “Get ready for a good drenching.”

Lucky for them, temperatures were fairly mild today, with a high in the mid-seventies and not a cloud in the sky. After a long day at the park, getting splashed would feel downright refreshing.

“Oh hey, Fiona.” Stephanie’s voice perked up. “How’s it going? I hope we didn’t interrupt anything fun.”

The memory of what they’d just been doing flashed through Fiona’s mind and cranked up her internal thermostat by a good ten degrees. Even now, she wanted him. Badly. It terrified and thrilled her.

Averting her gaze, Fiona blurted, “I made cookies this afternoon. If your brother doesn’t eat them all, I’ll bring you some.”

Sadie let out a squeal that either voiced her excitement over the prospect of cookies or was an attempt to make dolphins beach themselves along the coast.

“Which park are you hitting tomorrow?” Joe asked as he hooked an arm around Fiona’s waist and eased her back against his chest. Dipping his head, he nuzzled her neck, and her brain fogged over when he zeroed in on that one really sensitive spot.

“Hollywood Studios,” Stephanie said. “From what I’ve heard, they have a

lot of cool stuff there. Any suggestions for which attractions we should see first?”

Joe lifted his head and said, “*Star Wars*,” at the same time Fiona said, “*Toy Story*.”

Fiona laughed, and then wriggled out of Joe’s grip because it was almost impossible to form a coherent thought when he was doing that thing with his teeth. Needing to clear her lust-addled mind, she moved to the counter beside the stove, reached for one of the empty holiday containers, and started to fill it with cookies. “I guess it depends on which movie franchise you prefer. There’s also a *Frozen* sing-along show that’s a lot of fun. Oh! And Muppets. You can never go wrong with the Muppets.”

“It’s a lot of ground to cover in one day,” Joe said. “You might be too tired for us to meet up for dinner tomorrow night.”

Stephanie scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous, you big dope. The whole point of coming down here was to visit you.”

“Hey, I’m just putting it out there. We’re looking forward to seeing you guys too.” Joe crossed to where Fiona stood, picked up one of the containers, and followed her lead with the cookies. “By the way, where’s Ma?”

“She’s taking a break at one of the cafes while we ride the rapids. All this walking wore her out.”

Joe chuckled. “Tell her Fi and I said hi.”

“Will do. Oh, we better go. The line’s moving. I think we might make it onto the ride this time.”

“Sounds good. You guys have fun. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

As soon as the call ended, Joe switched off his phone and tucked it into his pants pocket.

His focus shifted back to Fiona, and the mix of need and lust in his eyes

made her feel a whole lot of things she'd almost forgotten how to feel. "Now, where were we?"

As he started toward her, a security alert sounded from her phone on the counter by the fridge.

Joe froze in his tracks and glared at the phone like he wanted to beat it with a hammer. She understood the feeling. "Christ, what now?"

Fiona checked the video feed and saw Liz at the door, a bottle of wine in her hand. She'd forgotten their plans—okay, that wasn't true. She'd remembered up until about ten minutes ago, when her hormones hijacked her brain and wiped out every rational thought.

As if sensing their gaze, Liz glanced up at the camera and gave a finger wave. At any other time, Fiona would have welcomed the visit, but now...not so much.

"If we ignore her, will she go away?" Joe asked.

"I doubt it." As if on cue, Liz knocked at the door, and Fiona mentally groaned. "She has a copy of the new key. If she thinks something's wrong, she might come in to check."

Joe sighed. "I better go."

"You don't have to."

"Yeah, I do." Resignation filled his voice and dampened the lust in his eyes. Bending his head, he kissed her again, and then snatched another cookie. "If I don't leave now, I won't leave until morning."

CHAPTER 15

FRESH FROM THE SHOWER, Pinto threw on clean clothes and shoved his feet into shoes. Traffic had sucked on his way home from work, which had seriously put him behind schedule.

He ran a comb through his short dark hair, checked his reflection in the mirror, and scowled. His five o'clock shadow looked more like ten thirty, but he'd run out of time for a shave. Fiona should be at his apartment any moment for their second dinner date with his family.

Hopefully she preferred her men scruffy, because he had plans for later, after his family was back at their hotel and he had Fiona all to himself.

Speak of the devil—he heard a knock at the door, and he nearly tripped over his own damn feet as he hurried out of the bathroom.

It was all he could do to keep the churn of emotions under control. He hadn't felt this strongly about a woman in a very long time, if ever, and the realization unnerved him. And yet he was dying to see where this went, because even though he'd been burned in the past, his gut told him that this could lead to something truly spectacular.

Pinto opened the door and nearly swallowed his tongue at the sight of Fiona in a red dress that hugged her figure in all the right places and made him wish they were staying in for the night. Her glossy blonde hair hung loose in flowing waves, while thigh-high black leather boots made her legs appear to go on forever. No makeup—not that she needed it. She was gorgeous inside and out.

It took a bit of effort for him to regain the power of speech. “Nice outfit.”

“Thanks; I wanted to wear something festive, but it’s not quite cool enough for my big, fuzzy holiday sweaters.”

He glanced down at the gift bag in her right hand. “Is that for me?”

“Yes—well, some of it is. I brought cookies for you and your family.”

Smiling, he opened the door wider and stepped back to let her inside. As she passed, he caught a whiff of her perfume, an intoxicating mix of jasmine and citrus that fit her perfectly.

He followed her to the kitchen, where she took out two containers and set them on the counter.

“I didn’t know if anyone in your family had a peanut allergy, so I only put gingerbread and chocolate mint in their tin. Yours has all three.”

“Is that why my tin’s bigger?” Curious, he opened the container, and the sugary aroma filled his senses and made his stomach grumble. If they weren’t about to meet his family for dinner, he would have eaten a few right then and there.

A smile teased the corners of Fiona’s mouth. “No, your tin’s bigger because I like you better. Plus, I’ve seen how many cookies you can put away in one sitting. I’m willing to wager you eat more than all three of them combined.”

Totally unrepentant, he grinned. “It takes a lot of calories to maintain this level of cuteness.”

Fiona shook her head, but he could tell she was trying hard to hold in a laugh.

All kidding aside, his eating abilities paled in comparison to some of his friends and coworkers at Six Points. Like Jackson, who once ate an entire extra-large double-everything stuffed crust pizza and a dozen chicken wings when he returned from a mission in Central America. In one sitting. Sure, the guy was huge and built like a tank, but if Pinto ever ate that much food, he'd probably sleep for a week like a hibernating grizzly.

Unable to resist for even one second longer, Pinto set the tins aside, backed Fiona up against the counter, and kissed the living daylights out of her. He loved the way she softened against him, her breasts pressed against his chest, while her fingers slid into his hair. Her lips parted to give him access, her tongue stroking his in a way that damn near drove him wild. Eyes closed, she let out a soft, throaty moan, and it triggered an ache that he felt in his blood, in his heart...all the way to his soul.

Everything inside him demanded he toss her over his shoulder caveman-style, carry her to his bedroom, and do all sorts of wicked things with her until they were both too tired to move. The urge was almost overwhelming. As it was, half of the blood in his brain had already migrated south of the beltline. But they were meeting his family in about an hour, so he dug deep and summoned enough discipline to end the kiss.

Fiona stared up at him, her face flushed and her eyes a little glassy. "Well, a simple thank-you would have sufficed, but that was much better."

Smart, beautiful, with a good sense of humor. And she baked a mean batch of cookies. Christ, he was in so much trouble, it wasn't even funny. If she enjoyed his two favorite things as much as he did, he might marry her on the spot.

“We should probably go,” he said. “I’m getting ideas that will make us late.”

She arched one eyebrow. “What kind of ideas?”

“Ones I shouldn’t be thinking about until we’ve redefined the parameters of our agreement.” Not to mention, they were making his jeans uncomfortable, and the very last thing he wanted to do was sport wood in front of his family.

Fiona’s throat moved when she swallowed. “When do you propose we have that discussion?”

“How does on the way home from dinner sound?”

She smiled. “That works for me.”

“Good.” Giving in to the urge, he dipped his head and stole another kiss. “We better get going. If we’re late, I’ll never hear the end of it.”

They arrived at Smokey Moe’s BBQ with five minutes to spare. As usual, the place was packed, but his family had arrived early and placed their name on the list for a table. While they waited, Sadie told them all about their day at Hollywood Studios, rounding out the recap with a spirited rendition of a song from *Frozen* that was now stuck in Pinto’s head.

“Looks like you guys got a bit of sun today,” he said. They’d also apparently forgotten, or hadn’t bothered, to wear sunscreen, because their skin all had the bright-pink tint that came from too much exposure.

His mother waved a dismissive hand. “A little sun is good for your health. It’ll fade to a tan by morning.”

For their sakes, he hoped she was right. Otherwise, they were in for a long, uncomfortable drive back to New Jersey.

“Don’t worry; I’ve got a big bottle of aloe at the hotel,” Stephanie said. “I’ll make sure everyone slathers themselves as soon as we get back.”

His mother gave Fiona a look. “You could use some sun. You’re awfully

pale for someone who lives in the Sunshine State.”

Pinto slanted his mother a warning look. “Ma...”

“It’s okay.” Fiona gave his hand a light squeeze. She smiled, though it seemed a little forced. “My skin’s a lot fairer than yours. I blame my Nordic ancestors. If I’m out in the sun for more than ten minutes, I go from pale to redder than a stop sign.” She looked down at Sadie, made a funny face, and added, “Nobody wants to see that.”

Sadie giggled, and her mother ruffled her hair.

The hostess called his mother’s name, and then led the group to a table with long bench seats and a view of the giant pig statue that served as the restaurant’s mascot. She handed out menus and let them know that their server would come by soon to take care of them.

“I like your dress, Fiona,” his sister said from her side of the table, and Fiona’s whole face lit up.

“Thank you.”

“It’s kind of formal for a place like this, don’t you think?” his mother asked.

Fiona’s smile faltered. “Well, I don’t get to wear it very often, but I wanted to wear something nice to mark the occasion.”

“You look beautiful, Fi. The dress is perfect.” In fact, he couldn’t stop thinking about how much he wanted to peel it off her body. With his teeth.

So much for not sporting wood in front of his family. On the bright side, at least he was sitting down so it wasn’t noticeable.

“It reminds me of that dress Gina wore to Valerie Fugali’s wedding. You remember that, right? She caught the bouquet.” His mother sighed, her expression wistful. “I was so sure you were going to be next.”

“What’s good here, Joey?” Stephanie asked as she opened her menu, and

Pinto silently thanked his sister for changing the subject.

“Pretty much everything on the menu is good, but their ribs are outstanding.” The restaurant wasn’t as big and fancy as the ones on the tourist side of town, but Moe made up for that with great food at affordable prices and a friendly atmosphere that made everyone feel welcome. Over the past couple of years he’d eaten there, he’d yet to have a bad dining experience.

The waitress arrived to take their drink orders, starting with Stephanie and working around the table.

“Which beers do you have on tap?” Fiona asked, and then chose one of the local pale ales the waitress recommended.

His mother tsked.

“I’m sorry, is there a problem?” Fiona asked in what Pinto assumed was the voice she used when a student was trying her patience. On the surface, it sounded calm and collected, but if you listened carefully, you could detect the underlying note of tension.

“It’s not good to drink beer with dinner.”

“It’s barbeque, Ma. People drink beer with barbeque all the time.” Pinto glanced up at the waitress. “I’ll have what she’s having.”

His mother’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Your father started with a beer at dinner. You know how those nights ended.”

Usually with his father blind stinking drunk, on the recliner, screaming at the television. Unless, of course, he or one of his siblings managed to piss the old man off. Then there would be hell to pay.

Growing up, Pinto had regarded the old man’s drinking as a cautionary tale. Sure, he still drank, but he kept a tight leash on just how much alcohol he

consumed. He never drank to get drunk. And he'd seen no indication that Fiona had alcoholic tendencies.

An awkward silence stretched over the table. Even Sadie looked uncomfortable.

"So, Fiona," Stephanie said. "When do classes start back up for you?"

Fiona jumped at the question like a lifeline. "Teachers report back the Wednesday after New Year's. The kids are scheduled to come back on Thursday, but attendance will probably be light until the following Monday. How about you, Sadie? When do you go back to school?"

The little girl's eyes widened. "Um...I don't know."

"She's going back the same time you are," Stephanie said.

"I bet you're looking forward to telling your friends all about your trip to Florida."

That got a big grin out of his niece.

The waitress returned with their drinks, took their meal orders, and promised to be back soon with their food. While they waited, they talked about everything and nothing of importance, enjoying one another's company while avoiding sensitive topics. He'd forgotten how exhausting that last part could be. There were times when it felt like stepping through a minefield of old resentments, disappointments, and unresolved conflicts.

The ring of his mother's phone cut through the chatter. A swipe of the screen, and she answered the call.

"Hello?" A few seconds passed before his mother's whole face brightened. "Gina! What a surprise. It's so nice to hear your voice. You'll never guess who's sitting across from me."

Oh, for fuck's sake. Pinto didn't believe for one damn second that this call wasn't planned ahead of time. There was no way in hell that Gina just

happened to call while they were meeting for dinner. He glared at his mother, who largely ignored him, as he reached for Fiona's hand.

"I didn't know she'd do this," he said.

"Of course you didn't." Her voice was clipped. "But is it really that much of a surprise?"

No, he should have seen it coming from a mile away, and he mentally kicked himself for not doing anything to avert it. He shot a look to his sister, who was shaking her head in apparent annoyance. For the most part, Sadie seemed oblivious, her focus fixed on a picture she was coloring with crayons.

All the while, his mother continued to chat with his ex-girlfriend as though Gina was her favorite person in the whole world, and Fiona didn't exist.

"Oh yeah, sure, he's right here. Hold on." His mother held the phone out to him, her finger over the mic. "Gina wants to talk to you."

Of course she did. It was all part of whatever his mother cooked up to get them back together.

Pinto stared at the phone as if it were a live grenade. "That's okay. I'm good."

His mother's face pinched. "Don't be rude, Joseph. I taught you better than that. She just wants to say hello and wish you a Merry Christmas."

Fucking wonderful. His chances of getting through this unscathed were about as good as a snowball on Daytona Beach. He didn't want to talk to his ex, not now, not ever, and especially not when the woman he truly cared about was sitting right next to him.

But if he didn't take the call, his mother would have an epic meltdown in the middle of a crowded restaurant that would probably go viral online or end up on the local news. Maybe both. And then she'd hold a grudge about it until she drew her last breath.

“I’m sorry,” he softly said to Fiona, and then turned to his mother. “Give me the damn phone.”

“Language!” she said, and then handed him the phone, a triumphant look on her face.

“Excuse me,” he said as he stood. No way was he having this conversation in front of Fiona. He stalked to a quiet spot near the emergency exit and put the phone to his ear.

“Hello, Gina.”

“Hi, Joey. It’s good to hear your voice after all this time. How have you been?”

“Fine.” Silence stretched out over the line. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected, but all he felt were the cold remains of what had once been a passionate relationship. They had a long history stretching back to his youth, with a ton of shared memories. But right now, he didn’t feel much of anything besides the need to get back to Fiona.

“Did I call at a bad time?” Gina asked.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“We can talk later if you want. I’ve missed you, Joey. We really need to—”

“There’s nothing for us to talk about, Gina. If you want forgiveness, fine, you’ve got it, but I’ve moved on with my life.” He switched the phone to his other ear. “Look, I’m sorry, but I’ve got to go. Merry Christmas, Gina. Take care of yourself.”

He hurried back to the table, where the waitress had dropped off their food. His family was chowing down on ribs and pulled pork, but Fiona was nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Fi?” he asked.

His sister gave him the “You dumbass” look. “She said she was going to

get some air, but I'm pretty sure she left, because she took her purse with her."

His guts twisted. "And you let her?"

"What was I supposed to do, tackle her to the ground and hold her there until you're finished talking to your ex-girlfriend?"

"I was trying to—" He heaved out a breath and shot his mother a death glare, which, yep, she totally ignored. There were so many things he wanted to say, but they'd have to wait until he made things right with Fiona. "We'll talk when I get back."

As he strode away, he heard Stephanie say, "I told you it was a horrible idea. You never listen to me."

Pinto found Fiona standing outside, typing away on her phone. "What are you doing out here?"

Her fingers stopped moving as she gave him a look that could freeze an erupting volcano. "I'm going home. My ride should be here any minute."

As if on cue, a blue Hyundai sedan pulled up to the curb.

Pinto's heart dropped down to his shoes. "Please don't go. I know my mother can be—"

"No." Her voice cracked like a whip. "I'm not giving her, or you, or anybody else the power to make me feel unworthy. I made that mistake with Dennis, and I made it the other night with your mother. I'll be damned if I repeat it again."

"You're right. I'm sorry." He dragged a hand through his hair. "I'll talk to her. She won't do it again."

Fiona shook her head. "It's too late for that. I'm way too angry. If I stay, I'll end up saying something that I won't be able to take back. So I'm going

home. To my cat. Enjoy the rest of your time with your family. And don't worry about Dennis. I'm a big girl; I'll deal with him on my own."

She got into the back of the car and fastened the seat belt. As the car pulled away, her gaze met his, and the sadness dulling the light in her eyes gripped his heart like a vise.

Behind him, the restaurant door swung open, and he caught a whiff of his mother's perfume before she even started talking.

"There you are. Where did Fiona go? Your meals are getting cold."

Pinto counted slowly to ten before he turned to face his mother. For a moment, he considered giving her some bullshit excuse, like Fiona wasn't feeling well or she'd gotten a call about a family emergency. But fuck it, he wasn't in the mood to play nice. "She got tired of being treated like dirt and went home."

His mother's mouth fell open. "Who treated her like dirt?"

"Seriously?" Pinto heaved out a huff of disgust. "Is that how you want to play this?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He almost walked away right then and there but decided at the last second to be an adult and establish some boundaries like he should have a long time ago. "You've been taking swipes at Fiona from the moment you laid eyes on her."

Her hands went to her hips. "I've done no such thing."

It was all he could do not to laugh. "If I'd lied like that when I was a kid, you would have washed my mouth out with a bar of Irish Spring."

She made a sound of indignance. "I was only trying to help. It's not my fault she can't handle constructive criticism. If she's that overly sensitive, then you're better off without her."

“She wasn’t being overly sensitive. You were being a bully. Big difference,” Pinto bit out. “You don’t get to decide what’s best for me. I’m not a child anymore.”

“No, you’re not, but you’re still my son. It’s my responsibility to look out for your best interests. You haven’t been the same ever since that terrible fight with Gina.”

Calling what happened with Gina a fight was like calling the sinking of the *Titanic* a minor boating accident. “It wasn’t a fight; it was a betrayal. She fucked my friend.”

It was a crass way to describe it. Normally, he wouldn’t talk that way when his mother was within earshot, but he wanted to remind her, in no uncertain terms, what caused his relationship with Gina to implode. He was tired of her acting as though his ex was the injured party. One way or another, that ended today.

Given his family history, the slap wasn’t unexpected. Nevertheless, it stung. “You know better than to talk like that!”

“Oh, and how exactly would you describe it? She cheated on me. With my best friend. *For months.*” The same friend who’d sworn to watch out for her while Pinto had been up to his armpits in blood and bullets half a world away. *Thanks a lot, buddy.*

Exasperation bracketed the corners of his mother’s mouth. “It wouldn’t have happened if you hadn’t left her alone for so long.”

Momentarily struck speechless, Pinto glared down at his mother. He’d heard that bullshit excuse before. As it was, he’d inflicted it on himself a time or twenty. But he’d reached the understanding that there were plenty of other ways to address discontent in a relationship. Hell, he would have preferred an email or text message breakup over what he found when he got home.

“Are you honestly making excuses for the woman who cheated on your son? Do you have any idea how messed up that is? I was serving my country. Risking my life. Are you saying that was wrong for me to do?”

“That’s not what I said and you know it.”

“Then explain it to me, like I’m five years old, how her cheating on me while I was out of the country on active duty was my fault.”

A small group of patrons leaving the restaurant stopped to watch their live-action train wreck. One of them pulled out her phone.

“Don’t even think about it,” Pinto barked. “Keep moving.”

One of the guys in the group looked as if he wanted to say something, but then Pinto gave his best don’t-fuck-with-me glare, and the group started walking toward the parking lot.

His mother’s chin jutted up. “She feels horrible about everything that happened and wants to apologize. You really should talk with her. You made such a beautiful couple.”

“Jesus Christ.” Pinto stared straight down at his shoes and did another slow ten-count. If he didn’t stop grinding his teeth soon, his molars would be reduced to shards by the end of this conversation. “I don’t care if she’s sorry, and I don’t care what she has to say. Cheaters don’t get second chances. Period. No exceptions.”

“But if you’d only—”

“I said no. That’s it, end of story.”

Her eyes narrowed the way they did whenever she didn’t get her way. “I swear, you’re just like your father.”

The comment hit him harder than the slap, just as she’d intended. “If I was anything like him, I would have hit you back.”

She had the nerve to try to slap him again, but he clamped his hand around

her wrist before the blow landed.

“I’m a grown-ass man in my thirties. You don’t get to hit me anymore. Try it again and that’ll be the last time you ever see me.”

Shock widened her eyes and made the furrows along her forehead deepen. “You’re serious.”

“Goddamn right I’m serious.” He released her wrist and backed up a step, just in case she tried to get slappy again. “I should have been serious about this a long time ago, so you acting like this is on me. From now on, I’m putting my foot down. This is my life, Ma. I make the decisions. You don’t get a vote.”

“But Gina—”

“How many times do I have to tell you that I don’t give a damn about Gina?” Exasperated, his voice got louder, but at this point, he didn’t care if anybody overheard him. “I know you and Mrs. Barone have this weird obsession about me and Gina getting married and spitting out babies so you can be grandmas together, but that is never going to happen. *Never*. I don’t care what she’s doing, or how great she looks, or whether she’s interested in me or not. I don’t even care if she won the Powerball, because I only have eyes for one woman and it ain’t her.”

His mother made a frustrated sound. “You could do so much better.”

“No, actually, I couldn’t. Fiona’s everything I want in a woman, and I think she’s sexy as hell.” He ignored his mother’s cringe. “Not that it matters. She could have crawled out from under a bridge and I’d still think she’s hot because she’s even more gorgeous on the inside. She’s the only woman who’s made me feel alive since I moved down here from Jersey. I’m sorry if you can’t understand that, but I’m not going to stand here while you make snide remarks about her.”

“Is that a threat?” his mother spit out.

“No, it’s a simple fact. I would never expect or ask her to take your abuse. She doesn’t deserve it, and I won’t stand for it. Treat her with the respect she deserves, or you won’t be seeing either of us.”

The indignation on his mother’s face crumpled. “All I want is the best for you, Joey.”

“That’s all well and good, but you don’t get to tell me who to love.”

He hadn’t meant to say all that, and the weight of his words hit him like a brick between the eyes. Did he love Fiona? Why yes, he most certainly did. Now that he seriously thought about it, there wasn’t a shred of doubt in his mind. Somewhere along the line, he’d fallen hard for his upstairs neighbor. It didn’t matter that they’d known each other for only a short period of time. He wanted Fiona in his life, in his heart, in his bed, and he wanted all of that to start as soon as humanly possible.

“I love you, Ma, but you’ve got to start treating me like an adult. I need your support, not your judgment. That means respecting my decisions, regardless of whether you agree with all of them.”

His mother stared at him for what felt like hours, the lines of her face tight with tension. At last, lips pressed tightly together, she gave a curt nod. “I’m sorry. I won’t interfere in your private life anymore. If Fiona makes you happy, then I’m happy.”

She didn’t sound or look anywhere close to happy. Actually, she looked like she’d swallowed a bug, but this was a huge step for his mother and he’d celebrate the small victory.

Closing the distance, he wrapped his arms around her. He couldn’t change the past, but perhaps they could repair the damage to their relationship. It

wouldn't be easy, and it wouldn't happen overnight, but he was willing to put in the work if she was.

When she pulled back, she gave a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "You better go and make things right with your girlfriend. She must have been pretty upset to leave like that."

No shit. He'd have to come up with a pretty good grovel to make up for tonight. He dug into his wallet, handed his mother a few bills to cover dinner, and took off for his car.

CHAPTER 16

“SEE, WHAT DID I tell you?” Liz said as they watched the end credits roll. “It was even better than the last one.”

While the rest of humanity crowded the stores in search of last-minute holiday gifts, Fiona and Liz had watched the latest movie in the *Deathslayer* franchise, starring Hollywood’s biggest bad girl of the moment, Sierra Page. You couldn’t stand in a supermarket checkout lane without seeing her face on the cover of at least one tabloid magazine. Love her or hate her, she was one heck of an actress with a knack for choosing prime movie roles, and this one was no exception.

All around them, people filed out of the theater, but Liz had heard there was a mid-credits scene that hinted at the plot for the next installment of the series.

Fiona dipped her hand into the bucket and tossed the last remaining bits of popcorn into her mouth. “I don’t know. I mean, it was good, I really enjoyed it, but I kind of liked the last one better.”

To be fair, her opinion was likely skewed by her mood. She’d been in a

funk ever since she left the restaurant last night. It didn't help that she hadn't heard a peep from Joe. No texts, no phone calls, not even a knock at the door—a stark contrast to Dennis's fire hose of harassment. Deep down, she'd hoped he'd make an effort to smooth things over between them. But actions spoke much louder than words, and his were deafening.

“Are you crazy?” Liz stared at her as though she were a few fries short of a Happy Meal. “Ryan Fitzhugh had his shirt off for most of the movie. That alone made this one better.”

The credits were interrupted by a short scene featuring the Deathslayer discovering a glowing blue object in the bowels of a cave, racing back to her horse, and charging toward the orange glow of a sunset.

“That's it?” Liz said when the credits resumed.

“That must be the orb of Giftin.” Fiona picked up the popcorn bucket as she stood. “Gideon said something about needing it to complete the Scepter of Invincibility.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot about that.”

Fiona tossed the bucket and her drink cup into the trash can by the exit. She hadn't planned to go anywhere today. Actually, all she'd wanted to do was huddle beneath the covers with Wanda and the television remote and have a good old-fashioned pity party. But then Liz had come over and insisted she get dressed and join the land of the living. She supposed she should thank Liz for that. Her heart still ached, but spending time with a friend had taken her focus off the pain. “You want to grab dinner? My treat.”

“Sure. What are you in the mood for?”

Before Fiona could answer, her phone vibrated to alert her of an incoming call. The number on the caller ID didn't belong to anyone she knew, but whoever it was had called at least two other times today. More likely than

not, it was a telemarketer who wanted to speak with her about her car's extended warranty.

Only one way to find out. She swiped at the screen to answer the call. "Hello?"

"Hi, Fiona. It's Helen Pinto, Joseph's mother."

The sound of that woman's voice made her stomach drop down to her shoes. Her first impulse was to pretend it was a wrong number, end the call, and switch off her phone, but that was the coward's way out. She was sick of hiding behind closed doors, voicemail, and fake boyfriends. For better or for worse, it was time for her to face her problems head-on.

Fiona drew a deep breath and summoned the voice she used when dealing with petulant children. "Mrs. Pinto, what a surprise. If you've called to insult me some more, I'm afraid I have neither the time nor the inclination to listen."

Beside her, Liz's eyes popped wide. She mouthed, "His mother?"

Fiona nodded, and then held up one finger to signal she needed a minute to finish the call.

Mrs. Pinto's sigh filtered through the tiny speaker. "I suppose I deserve that. Actually, I called to...apologize."

Okay, she hadn't seen that one coming. "Excuse me?"

"I said I apologize. I was unnecessarily harsh with you, and that was wrong."

Stunned, Fiona blinked a few times. She felt like she'd slipped into some sort of alternate dimension where up was down, black was white, and Mrs. Pinto was nice to her. Maybe the older woman had been visited by three spirits last night. "No offense, but what brought about this sudden change of heart?"

Another sigh. “My son made it clear, in no uncertain terms, how much you mean to him. And if I want him in my life, I have to respect his wishes.”

Had Joe really said that? Fiona’s heart skipped a beat. “What about Gina?”

“What I think about Gina is irrelevant.” Mrs. Pinto’s Jersey accent thickened. “I shouldn’t have treated you the way I did. It was wrong, and I’m sorry for treating you the way I did.”

A petty part of her wanted to hold a grudge, but she’d learned a long time ago that grudges were nothing but wasted energy. It didn’t matter that Mrs. Pinto was likely apologizing under duress. They both cared deeply about the same person, and that was enough for her to accept the offered olive branch. “Apology accepted. I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

“You have no idea.” Mrs. Pinto laughed, but the sound lacked humor. “Be kind to my son. He’s a good man; he means the world to me. I hope we can start over the next time we see each other.”

Considering how things ended last night, there might not be a next time, but she wasn’t about to share that information with his mother. Talk about awkward. So, instead, she just said, “I’d like that.”

One thing was for sure: she and Joe needed to have a serious conversation about the state of their relationship, and where things went from here. She liked Joe. A lot. More than liked, but she wasn’t ready to examine those feelings too closely until she knew exactly where they stood.

“Did you just make nice with that woman?” Liz asked, a degree of outrage in her voice, when Fiona ended the call.

“Yes, I did. She apologized and I accepted.” Fiona tucked her phone back into her purse. “Holding onto anger isn’t good for your health. Besides, it’s Christmas. Peace on Earth, goodwill toward men, and all that happy stuff, right?”

Liz made a noise that made it clear she would have handled things differently, most likely with a lot of creative insults and cursing. “You’re a better person than I am. I would have told that old bitty to take her apology and stuff it right—”

The rest of whatever Liz intended to say was cut off by the chime on her phone that signaled an incoming text. As she read the message, her shoulders slumped. “Crap, Jeremy called in sick. I’m gonna have to pass on dinner. Can you give me a ride to the bar?”

“Sure thing. If you want, we can grab takeout along the way.”

An hour later, Liz was busy at the bar, while Fiona was on her way home. She could have stayed to chat with Liz between customers, but she needed some quiet time to figure out what to say to Joe the next time their paths crossed.

One of her neighbors must be having a party, because all the parking spots anywhere close to her apartment were taken. After a bit of searching, she found a spot out by the leasing office, gathered her things, and closed the car door with a swing of her hip. She stopped by the boxes to pick up her mail—mostly junk, and what looked like a Christmas card from her Aunt Jenny—and crossed the cul-de-sac to her building.

Holiday music carried from one of the apartments, while a nip in the early evening air hinted at the possibility of cooler weather. Fiona tried—and failed—not to notice Joe’s Mustang parked in front of the building. But what caught and held her attention was the soft glow of lights peeking around the outer edges of the blinds inside her apartment.

Heart in her throat, she froze in her tracks, her neck craned up at the lights. She distinctly remembered turning them off before going to the movies with Liz. She checked the security app on her phone, momentarily relieved to find

no alerts, but her pulse skipped when she noticed the system had been manually taken offline thirty minutes after she'd left the apartment.

If she called the police and they found no signs of a break-in, she'd feel like a total idiot. But if she walked into her apartment and came face-to-face with an intruder, she might end up hurt...or worse. Neither option sounded appealing.

Of course, there was a third option. Though given the state of their relationship, and the fact she'd flatly told him that she didn't want his help anymore, she wasn't sure how well her request would be received. But now wasn't the time to worry about things like that. She was a big, fat chicken when it came to the possibility of a stranger breaking into her home. Besides, they really needed to talk, so why not kill two birds with one stone?

Decision made, she made a beeline for Joe's apartment and knocked on his door. He answered within seconds, looking painfully gorgeous in low-slung jeans and a midnight blue T-shirt that molded to his chest and biceps. He gave a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes, and her pulse kicked up another notch.

"Hey Fi, what's up?"

First things first. "I think somebody's in my apartment. Could you check it for me, or would you rather I call the police?"

Concern creased his brow. "What makes you think someone's in there?"

"The lights are on, and my alarm was disabled."

Something flickered in the depths of his eyes, but she had no idea what it meant.

"Let me put on some shoes and I'll come check it out with you."

Neither said a word as they walked up the stairs, but she could practically feel the weight of all the things they needed to say. At the door, Joe held out

his hand, and she gave him the keys.

He unlocked the door, but instead of going in, he stepped aside and gestured for her to take his place.

“Trust me,” he said before she could ask any questions.

Not sure what to expect, apprehension crept up her spine as she slowly pushed the door open. She took a tentative step inside, and her jaw dropped open.

It looked like Christmas had blown up inside her apartment, complete with lighted garland around the windows, stockings hanging from the breakfast bar, and a fully decorated tree. But what really blew her mind was that all the decorations were hers, right down to the stocking with Wanda’s name written on it and the big, floppy reindeer plush draped over the back of her recliner. Wanda sat on the seat of the recliner, her tail flicking with irritation over her favorite perch being occupied by a stuffed animal.

Warmth flooded Fiona’s heart, banishing the earlier tightness. She couldn’t remember a time in her life when she’d been too stunned to speak. Pushing past the lump in her throat, she asked, “How did you convince Dennis to give it all back?”

The twinkling multicolored lights on the tree glinted off Joe’s dark hair. “There wasn’t any convincing. It was more like a liberation.”

She gaped at him. “You stole it?”

“Hey, I didn’t steal anything,” he said, his hands raised and palms turned out in a gesture of innocence. “I’m pretty sure it was elves. But it’s probably best if you don’t ask for details. You know, for the sake of plausible deniability.” He grinned like a kid who’d just gotten away with something, which was likely the case. “Let’s just say one of Santa’s elves owed me a favor.”

Wide-eyed, she stared at the tree, complete with the star she'd bought after moving out of her parents' house and into her first apartment. Many of the ornaments had been gifts from friends, colleagues, and former students, each irreplaceable and holding a special place in her heart.

Still, there would be a price to pay. "When Dennis finds out—"

"He won't. All of it was still in their storage containers. If he was going to decorate for the holidays, he would have done it by now."

"That might be the case, but he's bound to notice they're missing." Like the next time he parked his car in the garage. Two stacks of plastic containers and the box that stored the artificial tree took up a significant amount of space in there.

"No he won't." Joe's grin widened to a smile. "The elves took everything out of those containers and left the containers exactly as they were in the garage."

So Dennis wouldn't discover the theft unless he actually looked inside them, or maybe if he picked one up and noticed it weighed a lot less than it should. He'd find out eventually, but that could be months—maybe years, if she was lucky—down the road. Whenever it happened, there'd be hell to pay, but she'd cross that bridge when she got to it.

Overcome with emotion, it took a great deal of effort to get words past the lump in her throat. "I—I don't know what to say. You have no idea how much this means to me. Thank you doesn't seem like enough."

"Are you happy?"

Fiona nodded. "Very."

"Then that's all I need to know."

Taking stock of her apartment again, she marveled at the gift she'd been given and the incredible man who'd made it possible. "Did you put this up by

yourself?”

“Well, I’d like to take all of the credit, but the elves helped. They even made their own contribution to your collection.”

Her gaze swung up to where he gestured, and she saw a small sprig of mistletoe hanging from a small hook in the ceiling.

Tilting her head, she looked into his eyes and found friendship, genuine desire, and the promise of something far deeper and longer lasting. It ignited a host of emotions within her that burned too brightly to deny.

Giving in to the need, she stood on her tiptoes and kissed him with everything she had.

A primal sound rose from his throat. Every muscle in his body tensed. In the blink of an eye, he pulled her in tight against his hard lines and took control of the kiss. His tongue stroked hers, hot and demanding, triggering a mind-blowing explosion of heat, desire, and longing.

Fiona’s heart raced at a fevered pace as her fingers delved into his hair. She lost herself in his taste and his touch, her heart pounding with the insatiable desire to take everything this man had to offer.

One of his hands slid down her back and settled on the curve of her ass. The hard press of his erection dug into her belly, and it thrilled her to know she had that kind of effect on him.

Joe broke the kiss and peered down at her, his breathing harsh and uneven and his dark eyes molten with hunger. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

She paused, reveling in the sheer excitement rushing through her veins. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt this alive. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

The smile that spread over his face promised all sorts of wicked things. His fingers gripped the hem of her shirt, and she raised her arms long enough for

him to pull the fabric up and over her head. He tossed it aside, and then his mouth was on hers again, electrifying and demanding, and it stole her breath away.

Without breaking the kiss, he lifted her up as if she weighed nothing, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. He crossed the room and lowered them to the couch, him sitting on the cushions and her straddling him.

“Bed,” she murmured against his mouth, her heart beating a mile a minute.

“Next time. I like seeing the lights on your skin.”

His hands slid up her back. He unfastened the clasp, and then the bra was gone, and the cool air against her breasts was replaced with the warmth of his hands and the wet heat of his mouth.

A low moan slid from her throat as her hand cupped the back of his head. “No fair. You still have all of your clothes on. I want to see you too.”

The next few minutes were a frenzied stripping of clothes, most of it scattered all over the living room floor, and her mouth went dry at the sight of Joe fully naked and fully aroused. She’d seen him before in running shorts and not much else, but Joseph Pinto in all his glory was truly a sight to behold.

Somewhere along the line, she ended up on her back with Joe stretched out alongside her, his mouth and hands everywhere at once, igniting little fires until it felt like her whole body was ablaze.

Wanda, either disgusted or offended by their brazen displays of affection, hopped off the recliner and scampered out of sight.

Joe chuckled. “I think we broke your cat.”

“She’ll get over it.” Fiona slipped her hand between their bodies and wrapped her hand around him.

A guttural groan rose in his throat. “If you keep that up, it’ll be over before

it gets started.”

“I’m willing to take that risk.”

“I’m not.”

He cut off her response with a soul-scorching kiss, followed by soft, slow, open-mouthed kisses down the length of her torso, pausing a moment to nip the swell of her hip before resuming his leisurely journey. Lower still, and her muscles tensed when he settled between her thighs.

He raised his head, his gaze catching hers. “Have you done this before?”

She pushed out a shaky laugh. “Of course I’ve had sex.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

His fingers brushed the sensitive skin along her inner thighs, leaving liquid fire in their wake. If he didn’t get inside her soon, she might spontaneously combust.

“Has anyone ever tasted—”

“No.” Heat flooded her face, even though there was no logical reason for her to be embarrassed. When she was younger, she’d been too self-conscious to let a man do that to her, and Dennis—she slammed the door shut on the rest of that thought. No way was she letting him into her head while she was with this amazing man.

Joe’s fingers stilled. “Do you want me to stop?”

“God no.”

He made a sound that was half growl, half groan, all masculine satisfaction. He moved back up her body and kissed her again—hotter, deeper, endlessly tender—while his fingers slipped between her legs, caressing her in all the places that drove her out of her mind. When she made a soft sound of impatience, he blazed a path back down her body, lowered his head, and licked her.

A rush of pure pleasure swamped her senses.

She moaned. He cursed, and then licked her again.

Her back arched off the couch cushions.

Every thought in her mind dissolved in the wake of pure pleasure. Joe's focus locked right onto ground zero, his tongue doing this swirling thing that made her eyes roll back in her head. Hot, tight, aching with need, her fingers tangled in his hair as her hips rocked against him. She didn't care how wanton she looked, didn't care about the inarticulate noises she made with each decadent sweep of his tongue. She was so damn close; she could feel the pressure building and spiraling inside her, tighter and tighter, straining for completion. It was too much yet not nearly enough, and she never wanted it to end.

Joe slipped two fingers inside her wet heat, and her whole universe imploded. Her head dropped back; her mouth fell open. Spots danced in front of her eyes, the climax so intense it bordered on pain.

She couldn't say how long it lasted. Gradually, the feelings subsided, leaving her dazed, happy, and limp.

"Are you still with me?"

The sound of Joe's voice pulled her back to reality. She forced her eyes open and found him staring down at her, his gaze hot and possessive. At some point, he'd covered himself with a condom.

"Inside me. Now."

He laughed softly. "Yes, ma'am."

He kissed her as he thrust inside, and he made a harsh male noise that was somewhere between ecstasy and agony. Eyes closed, jaw clenched, he paused a few seconds to collect himself, and then said in a low, rough voice, "You feel so fucking incredible."

Needing more, she ground her hips against him, and he made the noise again. “Don’t stop now.”

“I wasn’t planning on it.”

Slow, deliberate, he pulled almost all the way out of her and drove back in again, and she didn’t even try to hold back the moan.

His smile returned, more wolfish than before. “You like that, huh?”

“God, yes.”

“Good. I’ll do it some more.”

His mouth took hers, hot and hungry, as his hips took up a rhythm that sent sizzling sparks through every nerve in her body. Her hips rocked in time with his, and she felt the pleasure building again with each powerful stroke.

“So close,” she said, her head thrown back against the armrest and her fingers digging into his shoulders. “Just a little—” She tilted her hips up a bit higher and a spike of pure pleasure washed over her. “Oh God, yeah, right there. Harder.”

Thank God for men who followed directions. He increased the strength and speed of his strokes to hit the right place at the right angle, with the perfect amount of friction. Molten heat poured through her veins as everything else in the world faded away but the feel of his body, his breath on her skin, and the intense burst of euphoria that overwhelmed her senses with mind-numbing bliss.

As she finally remembered how to breathe again, Joe’s muscles tensed beneath her fingertips. He let out a deep, gravelly growl, like the rumble of a volcano on the verge of eruption. Head down, eyes squeezed shut, hips pumping like there was no tomorrow, every muscle and tendon in his body strained as he rode the waves of his release.

Still basking in a haze of elation, her hands idly glided over the sweat-

slicked planes of his back. So much muscle, so much strength. He was warm, and hard, and real, and, for some reason, totally into her. What else could explain his willingness to commit a little light burglary for the sake of her Christmas decorations?

His face was buried in the crook of her neck, his breath hot against her skin. “I think I just had a heart attack.”

She laughed. “That’s a shame. I had plans for later.”

“Oh?” He lifted his head, his brown eyes soft and dreamy. “What kind of plans are we talking?”

“Well, to begin with, I wouldn’t mind moving to the bedroom. My bed’s a lot more comfortable.”

“I don’t know. I really like the way your skin looks under the lights.” He grazed his teeth over the sensitive skin on her neck, and a delicious tremor ran through her. Voice husky, he asked, “Got any cuffs in your room?”

The question caught her by surprise. “Handcuffs?”

“What other cuffs are there?”

“Well, there are shirt cuffs,” she said and then made a strangled noise when he moved his mouth lower and sucked a nipple into his mouth. Her pulse throbbed in every erogenous zone, and she supposed they could wait a little longer before moving off the couch. “But I assume that’s not what you’re referring to.”

“That would be correct,” he murmured against her breast. “Got any?”

“No. Why would I?”

“You never know when they’ll come in handy.” Pulling back, he peered up at her, a sinful grin on his face. He slid his hands under her butt and lifted them both off the couch. As he carried her toward the bedroom, he said, “I’ve got plans as well, but I guess the cuffs can wait for another time.”

CHAPTER 17

THE SUN WOULDN'T RISE for another hour, but Pinto woke out of habit, which was good because he had to be at work by seven, and I-was-too-busy-getting-laid-to-set-the-alarm-on-my-watch wasn't on the list of acceptable excuses for being late.

Trouble was, he didn't want to get out of bed, not with Fiona nestled against him, her hand on his chest and her scent all around him, comforting and enticing. He smoothed one hand along her bare back, and she made a soft, contented sound in her sleep that shot straight to his heart.

The connection between them was undeniable. Their chemistry was off the charts. He couldn't help but think of how they'd spent last night, and how badly he wanted to do it again, as soon as humanly possible.

And next time, he'd make damn sure they didn't run out of condoms.

The thought of calling in sick was sounding better by the minute. He hadn't used any of his personal time off since that trip to the Bahamas back in May. Nobody would bat an eye if he claimed to have eaten some bad takeout food and was too sick to go to work.

Too bad his conscience wouldn't shut the hell up about duty and responsibility. He blamed it on his Catholic upbringing. If he called in sick, one of his coworkers would have to work a double—or worse, come in from their day off—to cover his scheduled shift. Not to mention, he respected his bosses too much to leave them in the lurch. And as the only trained medic on the payroll, it was important for him to be on site in the event one of the newbies got hurt during training and needed immediate medical assistance.

Like it or not, he was going to work.

Careful not to wake Fiona, he slipped out of bed and padded naked to the living room, where the Christmas lights were still on because they'd never gotten around to turning them off last night. Wanda was curled up on the recliner, her paws twitching in her sleep.

Pinto found his pants on the floor by the tree, right next to the pile of shoes and socks, while his shirt was balled up on the coffee table. No sign of his boxer briefs. He checked under the tree, between the couch cushions. No luck. Where the hell did they go?

At last, he spotted them on the recliner, where Wanda was using them as a pillow.

“Wake up, girl,” he whispered as he gave the cat a gentle nudge.

Wanda cracked her eyes open and stared at him with a look of disdainful indifference. Her tail flicked back and forth, but she made no effort to move.

Fuck it, he didn't have time for this shit. He'd go downstairs commando.

He'd jammed one leg into his jeans when he heard Fiona's voice behind him.

“Isn't it a little early to be doing the walk of shame?”

She stood in the bedroom doorway, her hair tousled, eyes sleepy, not wearing a stitch of clothes. Without a doubt, it was the sexiest goddamn thing

he'd ever seen and his body responded accordingly. If he didn't have to leave for work in less than thirty minutes, he would have dragged her back to bed, figured a workaround to the condom conundrum, and not come up for air until noon.

But he'd also detected a note of vulnerability in her voice, and that simply would not do.

"The walk of shame implies I'd have something to be embarrassed about." He buttoned his jeans and tugged the zipper up.

Unable to resist a second longer, he closed the short distance between them, cupped her face with his hands, and kissed her until every muscle in his body ached with the need to have her. In hindsight, it wasn't the brightest idea in the world, because now he'd have to take his shower cold.

When he finally came up for air, he gently touched his forehead to hers. "Last night was the best night of my life. I wish I could stay and do it all over again, but I've got to go to work."

"I understand," she said. "I don't like it, but I understand."

That was all well and good, but having her so close—and naked—was doing a number on his self-control. If he didn't leave soon, he wouldn't leave at all, and he needed this job to keep a roof over his head.

Still, there was one more thing he needed to address before he could walk away. "I want this—us—to be real, Fi. No more playing. No more pretending. Are you on board with that?"

"What about your dating moratorium?" she asked.

"It was never meant to be permanent." He grinned to mask his nerves. If she turned him down, this was going to be the longest, suckiest day at work ever. "You make me feel things that I haven't felt in a really long time. And I'm not just saying this because we had sex, though the sex was out of this

world. I think we're at the beginning of something great, and I'm dying to see where it takes us. Are you with me?"

She stared at him for what seemed like forever, and it felt as though his heart was in his throat. Then she blinked, and a smile warmed her face, and his entire world shifted on its axis.

"Yes."

Halle-frigging-lujah. He kissed her again, because why the hell not? If he skipped the shave and ate breakfast in the shower, he might still make it to work on time. And if he was late, he'd take the ass chewing with a stupid grin on his face.

"I should be home around six thirty, seven tops." Probably closer to seven, because he was stopping at the store for condoms. Lots and lots of condoms. "Why don't you come by my place around eight? I've got some friends coming over for a holiday get-together. You'll like them, I promise."

"Are you sure?" Insecurity flickered over her face. "I don't want to intrude."

Pinto scoffed. "You'd never be an intrusion, Fi. Come meet the gang. It'll be fun. There's going to be food, and drinks, and you'll get to experience my third favorite way to relax."

"Only the third?" She arched one eyebrow. "Dare I ask what the other two are?"

"Number two is pizza and a cold beer while watching the Devils play on home ice." He pitched his voice lower. "I don't think I need to tell you what's in the number-one spot."

A blush flooded her cheeks. "You did seem rather relaxed last night."

"You ain't seen nothing yet." After one last kiss, he moved back a step before his hormones hijacked his brain. "So what do you say? See you at

eight?”

She nodded. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”



FIONA CHECKED HER REFLECTION in the mirror one more time, torn over whether her shirt made her look festive or like a dork.

First impressions were everything, and she wanted to start out on the right foot with Joe’s friends. She’d gone with black slacks and a forest-green shirt with the words “Let’s Get Lit” framed by holiday lights on the front. A gift from Liz a few years ago, it was cheerful but not sickeningly sweet, and she hoped it would set the right tone.

After one last swipe of mascara, she slipped on her favorite pair of low-heeled black boots and made sure Wanda’s bowls were full. Wine bottle in hand, she went downstairs, where she noticed a man and woman walking toward Joe’s apartment. The guy was enormous, well over six feet, with a muscular frame and tattoos adorning much of the dark skin on his arms. He wore cargo pants and a plain white tee with the sleeves pushed up past his elbows. The fluorescent hall light glinted off his shaved head. A case of beer rested under one arm.

Slender yet athletic, the woman was stunning, dressed in all black with her long, brown hair pulled back into a simple ponytail. Her skin was fair, her makeup subtly applied to bring out the best of her well-defined features. A grocery store bag loaded with assorted snacks hung from her right hand.

The man smiled at her as she reached the landing.

“Good evening. You must be Fiona,” he said, his baritone smoother than silk.

It was a statement rather than a question, and it caught her completely off guard. “Yes, and you are?”

“I’m Jackson, and this is my lovely wife Essie. It’s nice to finally have a face to go with the name.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so she went with an awkward wave and a simple, “It’s nice to meet you.”

Before anyone could knock, the apartment door opened, and Joe greeted them with a smile that lit the depths of his eyes and sent warm tingles through her. The dark jeans he wore were faded at the stress points, while his red Henley shirt hugged his torso. His gaze caught hers, and the tingles ratcheted up a notch.

“Hey, you made it. I wasn’t sure you’d survive the long journey from up north.”

She laughed. “It was tough, but I somehow managed. I even remembered the wine, though I’m not sure we’ll actually need it.”

“Eh, you can never have too much booze. I see you already met Jackson and Essie. Come on in, and I’ll introduce you to the rest of the gang.”

He shook hands with Jackson, hugged Essie, and then pulled Fiona in for a kiss that dissolved every thought in her head and came close to making her drop the wine bottle.

“Jeez, get a room,” a man inside the apartment drawled.

“Ignore them; they’re harmless,” Joe told her, and then said in a much louder voice, “He’s just jealous because somebody let the air out of his girlfriend.”

Fiona wasn’t quite sure what she’d expected, but the casual atmosphere fit Joe to a T. She followed him inside, where she greeted Hatch and was introduced to Navarre. They weren’t nearly as muscle-bound as Jackson, but

they both had a rugged quality about them that many women would find appealing. There wasn't an unfriendly face in the bunch, and Fiona quickly found herself relaxing as though she'd known them for years.

"So you all work together?" she asked.

"Everyone but Essie," Jackson replied as he loaded the beer into the refrigerator. "Though she helps us out every now and again when we need her expertise."

He didn't specify Essie's field of expertise, and Fiona got the impression it was best not to ask. On the outside, Essie seemed like a normal person, but there was something alight in her piercing blue eyes that led Fiona to question that assumption.

Six people in one tiny apartment made for close quarters, but the guys moved around with a practiced efficiency that suggested they had these types of gatherings with a fair amount of frequency. Beers were handed out, corn popped in the microwave, while somebody slid a tray of pizza bites into the oven. Joe opened a drawer and handed Fiona a corkscrew, and by the time she got the cork out of the bottle, two wine glasses had appeared on the counter in front of her.

"If you don't mind, I'd love a glass," Essie said with a smile.

"Sure thing." Fiona poured two glasses and gave one to the other woman. As they clinked their glasses, one of the guys corked the bottle and put it in the fridge.

"What movies did you pick for tonight?" Hatch asked as he emptied a bag of nacho chips into a huge plastic bowl.

"It better not be another one of those *Leprechaun* movies," Jackson said.

Fiona gave a questioning look. "*Leprechaun*?"

"You've never heard of them?" Joe said it with the same level of disbelief

one might use when responding to a person who said they'd never heard of *Gone with the Wind*. "It's only one of the best bad movie franchises ever made. The first six films are timeless classics, but the last two weren't as much fun because they cast a different actor to play the leprechaun."

"Trust me; your life was better not knowing of their existence," Hatch said, and Joe tossed his beer cap at him.

"Don't listen to them, Fi. They have no taste in movies." Joe drank a mouthful of beer. "Tonight's selections have a holiday theme: *Violent Night*, *The Gingerdead Man*, *Krampus*, and, if anybody's still awake by then, *Night of the Comet*."

A couple of the guys groaned.

"*Gingerdead Man*? Really?" Navarre sounded incredulous. "Where do you find this shit?"

"My guess is he digs them up from the bowels of the internet," Jackson drawled.

"Says the guy who made us watch *C.H.U.D.*" Joe laughed when Jackson flipped him off.

It was fun watching Joe and his friends interact. They gave each other tons of grief, but it was obvious that none of it was meant in a mean-spirited way. It was more like some sort of male bonding thing, but with alcohol and questionable movie choices.

Hatch took the pizza bites out of the oven and set them on the stove. "Did you tell her the rules?"

Fiona froze, her wine glass a few inches from her lips. "There are rules associated with watching bad movies?"

"Of course there are rules. We're not savages, you know." Joe gave her a playful wink from where he stood in front of the sink. "There are three rules

to movie night.” He ticked them off with his fingers. “One, there must be sufficient quantities of booze and snacks for everyone to enjoy. Two, no critically acclaimed movies are allowed, though we have made the occasional exception if the awards were related to special effects or makeup.”

“And three,” Navarre said as he reached into his back pocket and took out a bottle of bright-red polish. “The first person to fall asleep gets their nails done.”

“The only person exempt from that last rule is Essie,” Jackson said, “’cause she just did her nails the other day and she’ll kill any of y’all who even think about messing them up.”

Essie raised one hand to show off her recent manicure. “Like I’d fall asleep in front of these hooligans.”

“Don’t worry; I won’t let them paint your nails either,” Joe said. “First timers are exempt from that rule.”

“Since when?” Navarre asked.

“My house, my rules.” He gestured to the living room, where a motley assortment of chairs flanked the couch and recliner to provide enough seats for everyone. “Better grab a seat. The first movie’s about to start.”



ON-SCREEN, MEMBERS OF THE Engel family battled a demonic jack-in-the-box. Pinto drank the last of his beer and set the empty bottle on the coffee table in front of him. He glanced at Fiona, asleep on the couch, and his heart churned with a mix of emotions, some crystal-clear, like affection and happiness, while others were more difficult to identify.

She’d made it through the first two movies, long enough to watch Hatch get his nails—fingers and toes—painted red. Once the guy fell asleep, he was out

like the dead—he didn't even wake up when Navarre tugged off his boots and socks. Jackson and Essie left before the third movie started, and by the time Krampus claimed his first victim, Fiona had drifted off to sleep.

Clearly, she was uncomfortable with her chin tucked against her chest. Every so often, she'd stir in her sleep, as if trying to find a better position that wouldn't put a crick in her neck.

Carefully, Pinto stretched one arm around her shoulders and tucked her against his side. She made a soft sound of contentment as she nuzzled her cheek against his chest, and she felt so damn good he nearly groaned out loud. His senses sharpened with heated awareness, taking in the sultry scent of her skin and the soft warmth of her body seeping through the thin cotton of his shirt. Then a faint sigh pushed past her lush lips, and he completely lost track of what was going on with the movie. He wanted another taste of those lips...and more. So much more. Just thinking about it made him ache.

But it was more than physical attraction. He enjoyed talking with her, being with her, even if it was just sitting on the couch and watching a terrible movie. When he looked at her, he saw his future, and he wanted that future to start as soon as possible.

“Damn, you've got it bad.” The sound of Navarre's voice broke through the fog and dragged him back to the present.

His first impulse was to deny it, but what was the fucking point?

“She's everything,” he simply said, because he couldn't find the words to adequately express how he felt inside.

The corners of Navarre's mouth tipped up as he slowly shook his head. “And then there were two.”

CHAPTER 18

“ARE YOU SURE YOU want to leave early?” Pinto asked as he loaded his mother’s luggage into the back of her silver SUV.

His mother stood beside him, hands on her hips, looking more tanned, rested, and relaxed than he’d ever seen her. “You saw the weather reports. As it is, we’ll be lucky to make it home before the blizzard hits.”

His family had decided to cut their vacation short due to an arctic blast that would dump a ton of snow on the Northeast. The storm was expected to wallop New Jersey early on Christmas morning, that afternoon at the latest, but if they left now and took turns driving, they’d get home before the blizzard buried the state under a mountain of the white stuff.

There were times when he missed the change of seasons. It was hard for him to get into the Christmas spirit when everything was green. But he didn’t miss freezing his ass off, and shoveling snow, and he sure as hell didn’t miss thawing his locks so he could get into his car in the morning.

Florida was far from perfect. There were hurricanes, alligators, cockroaches the size of your fist, horrible traffic, nonstop construction, and ridiculous

levels of heat and humidity. But for better or for worse, this was his home now. He had a good job that paid good money, a group of friends who were as close as family. *And Fiona.* Just thinking about her warmed him from the inside out. He could lose everything tomorrow morning and still consider himself the luckiest bastard on the planet so long as she was by his side.

Pinto picked up his sister's suitcase and hoisted it into the trunk. "Christ, what have you got in there, rocks?"

Stephanie snorted. "You wish. Maybe Santa will bring you some muscles so one little suitcase doesn't give you a hernia."

A giggle slipped past his niece's lips, even though she obviously wasn't happy about leaving Disney a couple of days early. But she hadn't cried or pitched a fit, and he gave her points for that.

Pinto crouched so they were eye level and gave one of her pigtails an affectionate tug. He saw a lot of trips to New Jersey in his future, because he didn't want to totally miss out on watching this little girl grow up. "Merry Christmas, Sadie. Thank you for coming to visit. It was the best present I ever got."

"Merry Christmas, Uncle Joey." Sadie threw her arms around his neck, and he stood to give her one last spinning hug before they hit the road. For all he knew, she might be too old for this kind of thing the next time he saw her, so he better enjoy these simple moments while they lasted.

He pressed a kiss to the little girl's cheek as he gently set her down.

"Be careful on I-4," Pinto told his sister, who was driving the first leg of the journey. "Traffic's going to suck until you get past Deltona, then make sure ___"

"I know." She cut him off. "You already told me twice, you big oaf."

"Yeah, but you suck at listening." He grinned, and then dodged her attempt

to thwack him upside the head. He gave her a hug, asked her to send him a text every few hours to let him know they were safe, and moved on to his mother.

With the sunglasses on, he couldn't see her eyes, but the splotches in her cheeks suggested she'd been crying. No surprise there; she'd always gotten emotional during goodbyes.

"Are you sure you don't want to wait the storm out here?" he asked, and his mother nodded.

"We'll be fine; don't worry." As they hugged, she kissed his cheek and then wiped away the smudge of lipstick with her thumb. "It was great to see you, Joey. I couldn't have asked for anything more for Christmas. Give my best to Fiona."

"I will."

Fi had offered to cancel her holiday plans with Liz and come with him instead, but he'd insisted she enjoy some time with her friend while he saw his family off. She already had enough stress in her life, and even though his mother had warmed to Fi, he didn't see the point in pushing his luck with another family visit.

After a few more rounds of goodbyes, his mother, sister, and niece piled into the SUV and drove out of the lot. If the traffic gods smiled upon them, they'd reach I-95 without any problems and, weather permitting, a drama-free drive the rest of the way. Traveling through the night, and on the weekend, should help them avoid some of the worst traffic issues. Still, he'd worry about them until he received that final text confirming they made it home safe and sound.

Watching them leave filled him with mixed emotions. They drove him crazy, but he loved them just the same, and it would be too long and not

nearly long enough until he saw them again.

When their taillights disappeared from sight, he walked back to his car and headed for home. He was tempted to swing by Spiny Norman's, where Fiona was spending time with her friend, but he didn't want to be like her ex and invade every aspect of her life. Everyone needed personal space. Besides, he'd have her all to himself tomorrow night, and he planned to make her so damn happy she'd never want to leave his side.

Pinto moved into the far right lane and merged onto the expressway.

It amazed him, how quickly she'd come to mean so much to him. She dominated his thoughts, turned him on, and made him look forward to the end of each day when he got to spend time with her. He didn't know what he'd done to deserve a woman like her, but he thanked his lucky stars that she'd come into his life.

He was halfway home when flashing blue lights filled his rearview mirror.



NEARLY ALL THE TABLES at Spiny Norman's were filled with rowdy patrons enjoying a few beers while watching football on the wall-mounted screens. Every so often, one or more of the tables would erupt into cheers, groans, or a round of high fives, depending on how their team of choice was performing. Liz's brothers were tending bar, while the waitresses went from table to table to make sure everyone was happy.

Fiona sat at one of the tables with Liz, who wasn't supposed to be working today but still helped whenever it got really busy. They wouldn't see each other again until after Christmas, so they'd agreed to celebrate a couple of days early.

She watched as Liz tore through the wrapping paper of her gift faster than a kindergartner hopped up on Red Bull. Liz tossed the paper aside, pulled open the box and—

“Oh, my God, I love it!” Liz held up the T-shirt that read *Feminist is my second favorite F-word*. “I’m so wearing this tomorrow. Thank you!”

“You’re welcome. And thank you again for the new Miriam Carter book. I didn’t even know she had a new one out. I can’t wait to read it.”

Her hardcover collection had been another casualty of her breakup with Dennis. She’d taken a few of her most cherished books, but there hadn’t been enough room in her car for them all. Over the past few months, she’d bought a few replacements, but it would take time—and money she currently didn’t have—to restore her collection to its former glory.

This was shaping up to be her best Christmas in years. She had her own place, her cat, a fulfilling career, the best friend a girl could ever ask for, and a guy who was too good to be true.

Just thinking about Joe made her smile, and it had nothing to do with the orgasms he gave her last night after the last movie ended and the guys cleared out. Okay, maybe a little, but there was more to their relationship than sex. Her feelings for him were the real deal, soul deep, and grew stronger with each passing day.

For the first time in months, it felt as though the pieces of her life were falling into place.

Then the door to Spiny Norman’s swung open, and the sight of Dennis threw a cold, wet blanket on top of her warm, fuzzy feelings. As he stepped inside, his gaze searched the room, and she felt the full weight of his stare when it landed squarely on her.

Liz made a sound of disgust. “Fucking hell, does he ever give up?”

“Apparently not.”

“I have a baseball bat behind the bar.” Liz dug a coin out of her pocket. “Flip you for who gets to use it.”

“I’m not beating him with a bat,” Fiona said, though she had to admit the idea held a certain appeal. She’d be lying if she claimed to have never entertained a few dark fantasies. “And neither are you.”

“Fine.” Liz sighed to express her disappointment. “I’ll have Jeremy do it. He has a better swing anyway.”

Fiona watched as Dennis approached, a predator wearing a polished disguise, and she wondered for the thousandth time what on earth she ever saw in him.

When he got to within five feet of their table, she stopped him dead in his tracks with a terse, “What do you want? And the answer better not be me.”

He had the gall to look hurt. “It’s almost Christmas, Fiona. Can we please talk? Alone?”

He had a bachelor’s degree in criminal justice, a master’s in political science, and a PhD in emotional blackmail, his favorite form of manipulation. He wielded it with a ruthless efficiency that came with years of experience.

Liz wasn’t buying it for one hot second. To the contrary, she was rapidly morphing into the human equivalent of a lioness protecting her cub. “If you think that I’m letting you get within—”

“It’s okay, Liz,” Fiona said. “We can talk right here. In public. Five minutes, and not one second more.”

He didn’t look happy about the time limitation but nodded anyway.

“I also got a canister of bear spray. Effective within thirty feet.” Liz was speaking to Fiona, but her gaze was locked squarely on Dennis. “If he makes

you even the tiniest bit uncomfortable, just give me a nod and cover your eyes, and I'll hose him to within an inch of his life."

"I'll keep that in mind." She watched Liz leave, grateful to have such a fierce advocate in her corner.

Dennis claimed her seat across the table, his larger frame dominating the small space, and Fiona watched him with wary eyes.

"Why are you here, Dennis? There's nothing left for us to say."

"I don't believe that for one minute." His eyes softened the way they used to during the honeymoon phase of their relationship. "We have something special, babe. It's not too late for us to reclaim it."

Fiona leaned back in her chair. "I'm tired of having this conversation. I've told you again, and again, and again, but you just don't want to listen."

"That's because I know I'm right. We've had so many great times together, like that cruise to Cancun and the week in Jackson Hole. Remember how much you loved horseback riding in the Grand Tetons? We can do that again, whenever you want." He reached across the table for her hand.

When she slipped her fingers from his grip, a spark of anger lit his eyes. He tamped it down so quickly she almost missed it, but it was there. It was always there.

"Look, I've been doing a lot of thinking about us, about our future. I screwed things up, I know, and I'm so damn sorry. I can't say that enough. But if you just come back, I promise to make it up to you and be a better man."

He knew all the right words and exactly how to say them for maximum effect. The Fiona of six months ago might have fallen for it, but not today, or any other day. She refused to repeat her mistakes.

"I'm sorry, but I don't have those kinds of feelings for you anymore."

“That’s not true,” he insisted. “Deep down, you still love me. I can see it in your eyes. Why don’t we go back to your place so we can have this discussion in private?”

Fiona shook her head. No way was she going anywhere with this man. “Dennis, it’s two days before Christmas. I’m trying hard not to be rude, but you need to move on with your life.”

He stared at her, his expression unreadable, for a few long, uncomfortable moments. “It’s because of that neighbor of yours, isn’t it?”

“My feelings for him have no bearing on my feelings for you.”

His lips compressed into a white line, and a little bit of the Dennis she knew peeked through his veneer of civility. “He’ll leave you eventually; it’s what guys like him do. And then you’ll be all alone, just you and that cat. Is that what you really want?”

Fiona crossed her arms over her chest. The only thing missing from his remark was a crack about her age. “Are you trying to convince me that you’re a better alternative to some ridiculous hypothetical scenario where I end up a crazy cat lady? Seriously, that has got to be one of the dumbest things you have ever said to me.”

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t call me dumb.”

“Then don’t say dumb things.”

Dennis opened his mouth, but whatever he intended to say was interrupted by the ring of his phone. He glanced down at the screen. “It’s work. I need to answer this.” He put the phone to his ear. “Heckler.”

She didn’t bother trying to decipher the conversation. It wasn’t her business, she really didn’t care, and everything on his side comprised of one- or two-word sentences, so there wasn’t much point in it anyway. But

something in the way he said, “Oh, really,” made the hairs rise on the back of her neck.

He ended the call less than a minute later and tucked the phone into the case attached to his belt.

“Duty calls.” His chair scraped the floor as he stood. “I’ll stop by your place after work tomorrow so we can talk more.”

Fiona let out an exasperated huff. She should have just pounded her head against the table. It would have done as much good. “There’s nothing for us to—”

Too late. He was already out the door.



PINTO’S GAZE FLICKED DOWN to the speedometer, relieved to see that he wasn’t driving faster than the posted limit. So why was he being pulled over? Granted, Ford Mustangs were notorious cop magnets, but there weren’t any red lights or stop signs for him to run on the expressway, and as far as he could recall, he hadn’t cut anyone off or made any illegal lane changes. Maybe one of his taillights was broken.

Pulling over onto the shoulder of a road with cars zipping by at seventy-plus miles per hour didn’t sound like a good idea, especially with the sun starting to set. Instead, he turned on his hazard lights to let the cop know that he planned to pull over as soon as he reached a safe place, which would be the upcoming exit less than a half mile away.

There wasn’t much on the quiet county road, just a convenience store and what looked to be an abandoned auto repair shop. Last he’d heard, there was a massive development under construction a few miles away, and it wouldn’t take long for stores to move in to satisfy the newly created demand.

Pinto hooked a right into the parking lot of the repair shop. As soon as the Mustang rolled to a stop, he cut the engine and rolled down the window. To assure the cop that he wasn't a threat, he gripped the top of the steering wheel with both hands. With luck, the stop wouldn't be for anything serious and he'd be back on the road in no time.

A minute or two later, the officer approached Pinto's window, a flashlight in his left hand and hard lines carved into his stony face. He was a young guy, thirty at the most, tall with a heavysset build and the beginnings of a beard that wasn't growing in well. "Do you know why I pulled you over?"

"No, sir." Nothing good ever came from offering suggestions. He'd learned that lesson the hard way. Still, he kept his tone polite and respectful, because the last thing he wanted was to spend the rest of the night in a holding cell.

The cop scowled. "License, registration, and proof of insurance."

Pinto handed him the information. Without saying a word, the cop stalked back to his vehicle, leaving him to wonder what the hell this was all about.

While he waited, he checked his messages, and he couldn't help but grin at the sight of Fiona's name on the screen. He tapped on the message, and his grin broadened to a smile.

Just wanted to say hi. Hope things went well with your family.

He typed a response: *It did. Thanks for asking. Have fun with Liz.*

He'd just hit Send when the officer returned, the scowl still firmly in place. "Step out of the vehicle."

This couldn't be good. "Is there a problem, Officer?"

"There will be if you don't step out of the vehicle."

Pinto's pulse kicked up a notch, because none of this seemed like a normal traffic stop. For starters, he knew he hadn't been speeding, and the cop had yet to mention a single infraction he'd committed to warrant the stop. But

rather than argue, he got out of the car, tucked his phone into his back pocket, and tried to ignore the ball of dread that had formed in the pit of his stomach.

“You got anything in the vehicle that I should know about?” the officer asked.

“No, sir.”

“Then I suppose you wouldn’t mind if I took a look.”

Alarm bells went off in Pinto’s head. He’d heard horror stories about illegal substances being planted by law enforcement during these types of searches. “With all due respect, you can search my car if you have a warrant. Otherwise, I do not consent to a search of my vehicle.”

“It sounds like you’ve got something to hide.”

“Not at all, sir, but like I said, I do not consent to a search of my vehicle.”

The cop’s eyes narrowed. “Turn around and put your hands on the car.”

What the hell? “Am I under arrest, and if so what’s the charge?”

“I said turn around and put your goddamn hands on the vehicle.” The cop placed a hand on his service weapon, the message all too clear. “I’m not going to tell you again.”

The situation was rapidly escalating into dangerous territory. Not following the officer’s command could land him a resisting arrest charge—or worse—so Pinto turned around and pressed his flattened palms against the Mustang.

“Am I going to find any weapons?” the cop asked as he patted him down. He removed the phone from Pinto’s back pocket and placed it on the roof of the car.

“No, sir.” There wasn’t anything else to find. His wallet and keys were still in the car.

The cop made a sound of contempt. “Don’t move until I tell you.”

How long he stood there, he honestly couldn’t say, but his arms were numb

by the time a second police vehicle pulled off the road behind the first, its flashing lights combining with those of the first to create a strobe effect. It appeared to be an unmarked police cruiser, because the flashing lights were mounted on the dash instead of on the roof. Somebody stepped out of the vehicle, but the lights made it difficult to see the person clearly. As the officer drew closer, he came into focus.

Fucking hell. He should have known this was where things were heading.

“I got you a present for Christmas,” the first cop said, a distinct note of humor in his voice.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.” Officer Dennis Heckler shook the other cop’s outstretched hand. He wore a blue polo shirt over khaki pants, with a dark jacket to conceal his badge and gun. “Is your cam on?”

The cop shook his head. “Nah, piece of shit’s been on the fritz all afternoon.”

“That’s a damn shame.” Heckler’s focus shifted to Pinto, his gaze sharpening like a predator that just spotted its favorite prey. “You’ve been messing around with what’s mine.”

This was probably a really good time for Pinto to keep his big mouth shut. He was outnumbered and unarmed. Too bad his New Jersey upbringing wouldn’t let him just sit there and take the abuse. “She hasn’t been yours for a long time, bro. You don’t get to choose who she—”

The punch to the kidney wasn’t unexpected, but it still hurt like a motherfucker. Pinto clenched his jaw and held in the grunt, determined to deny the bastard the satisfaction of knowing how much that hurt.

“Perhaps you didn’t understand me.”

Heckler delivered another blow to the kidney, and a bolt of searing pain shot up into his guts. More likely than not, he’d be pissing blood tomorrow.

“This is your first and final warning, asshole. There’s not a place you can go in this state where I can’t reach you. If I ever see you with my woman again, I won’t be nearly as gentle.”

A baton blow to the back of Pinto’s legs sent him crashing to his knees. A kick to the ribs knocked the air from his lungs. But it was the blow to the back of his head that made everything go black.

CHAPTER 19

PINTO FELT WORSE THAN he looked, and he looked like death warmed over. The bruise under his left eye had developed a sickly yellow tinge, while an angry red welt marked the side of his face where he'd smacked the pavement. His whole body ached, his bottom lip was swollen, and his ribs felt as though somebody had beaten them with a mallet. On the bright side, he still had all his teeth, and he was pretty sure his nose wasn't broken.

Head pounding like a pile driver, he braced one arm against the break room countertop and silently willed the coffeemaker to brew faster. Just a few sips of liquid caffeine and he'd feel a whole world better. At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

He'd expected some sort of escalation from Fiona's ex, but not to this degree. Next time, he might end up in jail or the hospital. Or the morgue. At this point, he wouldn't put it past the asshole. And if Heckler was willing to do this to Pinto, what would he do to Fiona once he finally got it through his thick head that she wasn't ever coming back to him?

His phone pinged with an incoming message. After coming to, he'd sent

Fiona a text to let her know he'd had an altercation with Heckler and to warn her to be careful.

Are you okay? was her response.

I'm fine, he typed, intentionally vague, because he didn't want to freak her out. But he did want her to be on alert so he added: *Stay away from Dennis. He's dangerous. Don't answer the door if he knocks. We'll talk more when I get home from work.*

That prick was sadly mistaken if he thought his warning would keep Pinto away from her. If anything, it only reinforced his resolve to make sure Dennis Heckler never got his hooks into her again. Now he only needed to find a way to convince the cop to leave Fi alone and move on with his life.

The sound of masculine voices drifted down the hall, and seconds later, Austin Flint walked into the break room. He looked more casual than usual in jeans and a red Six Points polo shirt, most likely because it was the day before Christmas and he didn't have any client appointments on the schedule.

"Morning, Pinto, you're here early—" The rest of the sentence died in Austin's throat, while a pair of deep grooves formed in the space between his black eyebrows. "What the fuck happened to you?"

"Long story."

Truth be told, he didn't remember everything that happened to him last night. His memory got pretty hazy after the shot to the back of his head. When he regained consciousness early that morning, well before the sun came up, he was alone in the auto repair shop parking lot, his wallet gone and the screen of his phone covered with spider web cracks. By some miracle, his car was still there, probably because any would-be thieves didn't know how to drive a stick. But the Mustang's interior was thoroughly trashed, and the rear windshield was shattered. He had no idea whether Heckler was

responsible or whether the damage occurred later, while he was passed out on the pavement.

Somehow, he'd managed to drive himself to work, where he cleaned himself up and changed into the spare set of clothes he kept in his locker.

Austin made a buzzer sound. "Wrong answer. I can't have you working with the public when you look like you've been through a wood chipper. Who worked you over and why?"

He'd come up with a host of plausible scenarios to explain his current state, but he found it impossible to look his boss in the eye and lie his ass off. He was raised better than that. "I'm having some issues with a cop. He's pissed because I'm friends with his ex."

"Friends or *friends*?" Austin punctuated the latter with air quotes.

Pinto leaned against the counter and tried not to cringe at the pain in his ribs. "Like I said, it's a long story."

"I've got time. How about you enlighten me?"

"I'd rather not, sir. It's personal." He knew guys who had absolutely no problem with airing their dirty laundry to anyone willing to listen, but he preferred to keep that kind of shit close to the vest.

Arms crossed over his muscular chest, Austin glowered at Pinto. This was his turf, and as the top of the chain of command at Six Points, he didn't take kindly to subordinates telling him no. "That's all well and good, but when your personal life interferes with your job performance, it becomes my business."

Pinto drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, because copping an attitude with his boss would land him in the unemployment line. Overall, Austin was a damn good boss. He wanted what was best for his business, but he also

seemed to genuinely care about his people, a rare trait for employers nowadays.

While the coffee finished brewing, Pinto filled Austin in, from his first encounter with Dennis Heckler outside Fiona's apartment to last night when he'd been beaten and left unconscious.

To his credit, Austin didn't explode until after Pinto finished speaking. "Why the hell didn't you say something about this earlier?"

"It's not work related."

The muscle along Austin's jaw flexed. "Tell me that you at least went to the hospital."

Pinto shook his head and felt a wave of disorientation. "It's just a few bumps and bruises."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Austin muttered, and then bellowed, "Hey, Wade!"

Seconds later, his younger brother appeared in his usual all black, his large powerful frame filling the open doorway.

The rumor mill at Six Points was chock full of stories about Wade, from how he got that ragged scar on his face to what he did to the guy who put it there. Some said it was the gruesome handiwork of a drug lord, while others claimed he got it in a bar brawl at Daytona Beach during Bike Week. He was a walking, talking urban legend, though he didn't seem nearly as volatile since he got back from his trip to Mexico. He even had a girlfriend now, and it sounded pretty serious. Still, the guy radiated menace, and Pinto usually tried to avoid popping up on his radar.

Wade took one look at Pinto and scowled. "Who did you piss off?"

"I'll fill you in later." Austin cut in before Pinto could answer. "Can you call Hope and get her to come over? He needs to be checked out."

"No, I don't."

“Don’t fucking argue with me,” Austin snapped. “I don’t want to have to fire somebody the day before Christmas. You either get checked out here or at the hospital. Your choice.”

Understanding the futility in arguing, Pinto bit his tongue and nodded. Like it or not, his boss was right. He felt like shit, and as a medic he knew better than to ignore his injuries. Still, the knuckle-dragging part of his psyche hated accepting help or admitting weakness, especially to another guy.

Less than an hour later, Dr. Hope Chandler arrived at Six Points and gave him an examination so thorough it put TSA to shame.

“How’s the patient?” Austin asked when they emerged from the vacant office they’d used as a makeshift exam room.

“Well, without the proper medical equipment, I can’t give an accurate diagnosis,” she replied as she tugged off a pair of blue latex gloves. “But based on my exam, he looks to have suffered a concussion, fractured ribs, bruised kidneys, multiple abrasions and contusions—including one shaped like a footprint on his back. I’d recommend he go to the hospital for tests to evaluate the full extent of his injuries, but the patient is uncooperative in that regard.”

“I’m fine,” Pinto insisted for what had to be the hundredth time. “All I need is a little rest.” And about forty aspirin. His head was still killing him.

Hope sighed as she shot him a look. “You’re a medical professional, so you know the drill: lots of water, plenty of rest, no heavy lifting or strenuous activity for the next few days, and over-the-counter medication as needed for the pain. If the blood in your urine doesn’t clear up after forty-eight hours, for God’s sake go to the damn hospital, or at the very least call me.”

“Thanks for coming, Doc,” Wade said, and his eyes softened like they always did whenever Hope entered his orbit.

“No problem.” She gave a smile that warmed her eyes. “Walk me to my car?”

“Of course.”

Wade put his hand on the small of her back as they exited the room, leaving Pinto alone with a seriously pissed-off Austin.

Tension thickened like a fog in the room. Pinto’s heart thudded in his chest as Austin’s eyes bored into him.

“How long have you worked here?” Austin asked in a voice that could crumble a building’s foundation.

Pinto swallowed hard. He’d seen his boss pissed off before, but never had that anger been focused squarely on him. “About a year and a half, sir.”

“Then you’ve been here long enough to know better.” Austin heaved out a breath as he rubbed the side of his neck. “Damn it, Pinto, you’re one of my best men. More than that, you’re part of the family. I trusted you to keep my wife alive; don’t think I’ll ever forget that. If shit like this ever happens again, I expect to be informed immediately. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Family was more than blood. He’d learned that lesson in the Navy. It filled him with pride to know that Austin considered him part of his.

“Good. Now let’s figure a way out of this mess before it goes nuclear and we end up in a war with the whole damn police department.”



AT HOME, FIONA PEERED through the blinds, disappointed because Joe’s car hadn’t appeared in the parking lot since the last time she checked a few minutes ago.

He should have been home an hour ago, and he hadn’t sent her a message to let her know that he was running late. It wasn’t like him, and it made her

worry that something had happened, especially after his earlier warning to watch out for Dennis.

They'd made plans to spend Christmas Eve together. Nothing fancy, just Chinese takeout and some quality time curled up on the couch while they watched a holiday movie. Okay, there'd certainly be more than that. She hadn't worn her sexiest bra and panties, both red, like her blouse, for nothing. She'd also bought a nice bottle of wine and a few extra sprigs of mistletoe. If the evening went as she'd planned, they wouldn't even make it to the end of the movie.

The heavy rumble of an engine caught her attention, and she spotted a big black pickup truck pull up to the curb in front of the building. The passenger door opened and her heart skipped a beat when Joe climbed out. Head bent, he said something to the driver right before he closed the door, and he turned toward the building as the truck drove away.

Maybe his car broke down. That would explain why he was late.

Fiona crossed to the foyer and opened the door, anticipation building as the sound of his steps in the stairwell grew closer. At last, Joe came into view, and the ugly bruises marring his face nearly knocked the breath from her lungs. "Oh my God, what happened?"

"It's not as bad as it looks."

"Really? Because it looks pretty painful." She opened the door wider. "Get in here and tell me what happened."

"There isn't much to tell." Pain flickered over his features as he eased down to the couch and stretched his long legs out in front of him. "I got pulled over yesterday on my way home from Disney. The cop must have been buddies with your ex, because he made me wait on the side of the road until Dennis showed up. Things went downhill from there."

That explained why Dennis had left the bar in such a hurry. “That bastard. I can’t believe he did this to you.”

“Well, to be fair, I think they might have taken turns.”

“You *think*?” Her voice shot up half an octave.

“I can’t say for sure,” Joe said. “I passed out after a blow to the head. By the time I came to, they were gone.”

For a moment or two, she simply stared at him, too shocked and outraged to speak. “This is insane. What the hell is the matter with him? He’s supposed to protect the public, not beat people up like some thug in a dark alley.”

It went against everything an officer of the law was supposed to stand for. If he was willing to go this far, he might kill Joe the next time.

The thought of there even being a next time made her blood run cold.

Back when they were a couple, Dennis had faced more than one accusation of excessive force. At the time, she’d dismissed the allegations as groundless. After all, some criminals were willing to do or say anything to avoid serving time in prison. Plus, the internal investigations had cleared him of any wrongdoing. But now she wasn’t so sure, and that uncertainty sent a shudder through her.

Joe patted the cushion to his left, and she reluctantly settled beside him. Every movement he made seemed to cause him pain, and the last thing she wanted to do was add to his discomfort.

“Please tell me you pressed charges against him.”

“It wouldn’t do any good. I can’t prove he did this to me. When push comes to shove, it’s my word against his, and who do you think they’re going to believe?”

He was right, damn it. It made her feel powerless, and feeling powerless pissed her off. “We can’t just let him get away with this.”

“He won’t. The people I work with are going to help me deal with Officer Heckler, but it’s going to take some time.” He shifted position and sucked air through his teeth.

“This is my fault. He did this because you’re with me. Maybe if we stopped seeing each other—not permanently, just long enough to make him think—”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily,” Joe said. “Like it or not, we’re in this together.”

Her lips pursed. “I’m not going to be responsible for you getting killed.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“You can’t say that for sure.”

“Yes, I can.” His voice softened with obvious affection as he stretched one arm along the back of the couch. “Now come here.”

Fiona shook her head. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Trust me; it’ll be worth it.”

His smile cracked her resolve. Even battered and bruised, the man was drop-dead gorgeous.

“The only thing that got me through today was knowing I’d see you tonight. Please, I need to touch you.”

It was the *please* that did her in. How could she possibly say no? Mindful of his injuries, she snuggled against him and winced when she heard his breath hitch.

Joe rested his cheek on the top of her head and let out a sigh of contentment. “There, I feel better already.”

He felt warm and solid, and she wanted to press closer, but she didn’t because she didn’t want to cause him more discomfort than he was already experiencing. His fingers idly stroked her shoulder, sending sparks of awareness through her body.

“I’m not turning my back on you just because your ex treated me like a piñata. You mean too much to me.”

She smiled at that. Little by little, she relaxed against him, soothed by the low timbre of his voice and the masculine scent of his skin. “I don’t understand why he’s doing all this. When I left, he didn’t even try all that hard to get me back. Then he pops back into my life out of the blue, swearing we’re meant to be together.”

“Is it possible you have something he wants?”

“Like what? I didn’t take anything of his, just Wanda, my clothes and jewelry, a few personal items, but I left a lot of it…” Her words trailed off when an earlier conversation popped into her mind.

Joe’s hand stilled. “What is it?”

She looked up at him. “Dennis wanted me to return a locket that he’d given me for my birthday. At the time, I thought he was just being petty, but now I can’t help but wonder if there was more to it.”

“Do you still have it?”

She nodded. “I was planning to mail it back to him, but I forgot to bring it with me on my last trip to the post office. It’s in the padded envelope on the bar.”

“Do you mind if I take a look at it?”

“Not at all.” Fiona stood and crossed to the bar separating the dining and living areas. She tore open the envelope, took out the necklace, and brought it back to Joe.

He held it up to the light, the oval locket dangling from a small loop attached to the thick silver chain. The front was enameled, with a yellowish background and a garish floral design. “It looks like something my Aunt Annabelle used to wear.”

“Dennis said it once belonged to his grandmother. That’s why he wanted it back.”

“No offense, but it’s frigging ugly. And it weighs a ton.”

“I know.” At the time, she didn’t want to act rude or ungrateful by admitting she didn’t like it. If she had, there would have been hell to pay. “I only wore it a few times, and then I put it in my jewelry box and kind of forgot it was in there.”

“And he never asked for it back until recently?”

Fiona nodded.

Joe unfastened the clasp and opened the locket to reveal an old picture of her and Dennis from that time they went to New England for his cousin’s wedding. “Did you choose the picture?”

“No, it came with that one in it.”

“Do you mind if I take it out?”

“Not at all, but why?”

“Just a hunch.” He removed the picture and set it aside, and then gently peeled off the black felt that was glued to the back. His lips curved up a fraction. “Do you have any tools with a thin edge, like a razor blade or a small screwdriver? If you don’t, I can get one from my apartment.”

“I have an X-ACTO knife. What do you need it for?”

“There’s a hidden compartment but I need something with an edge to pry it open.”

He held the opened locket out for her to see. Sure enough, there was a thin groove along the inner part of the locket that almost looked ornamental. Intrigued, she raced to the kitchen and dug through her junk drawer until she found the small craft knife. She brought it to the couch and handed it to Joe.

“Thanks.” He slid the knife into the groove and carefully pried the metal

plate off. There were a few scrapes of metal against metal, and moments later, he extracted what appeared to be a small black piece of plastic. “Got it.”

“What is it?” she asked.

He held it lengthwise between his thumb and forefinger to give her a better view. “It’s a micro SD card, like the ones they use in cell phones and drones.”

She stared at it for a few seconds. “How did I not know that was there?”

“Well, like you said, it was far from your favorite piece of jewelry. I wouldn’t be surprised if it never belonged to his grandmother. He probably bought the ugliest thing he could find in the hopes you’d put it in the jewelry box and forget all about it. He just didn’t count on you coming to your senses and leaving his sorry ass.” Joe turned the card over in his hand. “Whatever’s on this must be pretty important for him to hide it in something of yours.”

Fiona’s thoughts tracked back to the break-in and the drawer of her jewelry box that the burglar had fully closed. “Do you think the person who broke into my apartment was searching for that?”

“It’s a distinct possibility.”

Her heart stuttered. The urge to toss the memory card down the garbage disposal was strong, but not nearly as strong as her desire to learn what information it contained. “Would you happen to have something that can read this?”

“No, but the techs at Six Points do. If you want, I’ll bring it in and have them take a look at it.”

“Do you trust them?”

“With my life,” he replied without hesitation.

“In that case, please bring it in. I want to know what’s so damn important and whether we can use it against him.” One way or another, she was going

to make Dennis pay. He'd crossed a line when he assaulted Joe, and now she was going to teach him a lesson that he would never forget.

Joe tucked the card into his new wallet and put the wallet in his back pocket. Then his gaze flicked up to hers, and the heat in his eyes made her tingle in all the right places. "I had plans for tonight, but they're going to have to wait until my ribs heal a bit."

Unable to resist, she scooted closer. "What kind of plans?"

A low rumble rose from his throat as he leaned in to kiss her. It was hot and intense, with lots of tongue, and it ended way too soon.

"I made a list and checked it twice, but if I do any of it in my current state, I'll probably end up in the emergency room."

"That's okay. We'll have plenty of time for that later."

She changed their dinner order from pickup to delivery and queued up the Christmas movie. Careful not to jostle Joe's ribs, she nestled against him, comforted by the warmth of his body and weight of his arm around her shoulders.

As the Griswold family trudged through the snow, Fiona's heart swelled with emotions she was no longer afraid of acknowledging. Joe had come to mean so much more to her than just the hot neighbor downstairs. He made her happy, turned her on, and gave her hope for the future.

For the life of her, she couldn't say when it happened, but somewhere along the line, she'd fallen in love with Joseph Pinto.

CHAPTER 20

“SO, WHAT DO YOU think?”

Pinto watched as Navarre inspected the Mustang’s interior through the opened passenger-side door.

To protect the vehicle from the elements over the Christmas holiday—and to make sure it didn’t get vandalized any more than it already had—Austin had allowed him to park the car inside the warehouse portion of the Six Points building. After today, he’d need to find a new place for it, because Wade needed the room to work on one of the company vehicles.

Navarre straightened, his thumbs hooked in the belt loops of his black cargo pants. “Well, your dash is cracked, the stereo’s gone, the front seats are trashed, one of the airbags is missing, the rear windshield is completely shattered, your driver’s side taillight is broken, and I think a cat pissed on the back seat.”

That explained the smell. He’d been wondering where the hell it came from. It was so bad that even during the short drive to work on Christmas Eve, he’d had to roll the windows down. “Is it worth fixing?”

He really wanted the answer to be yes. He loved that fucking car. But because of its age, he hadn't insured it for comp and collision, which meant he was on the hook for all of the repairs.

Navarre ran a hand through his sandy-brown hair and scratched the back of his neck. If anyone could fix it, it was him. A classic car enthusiast, he spent his spare time restoring old clunkers to their former glory. His most recent project, an early 70s Plymouth Barracuda, had looked as though it was held together by duct tape and chewing gum when he bought it at the auction house last year. Now it looked like something out of a *Fast and Furious* movie.

"Sure, it's worth fixing. She's mechanically sound; most of the damage is cosmetic. I'll make a few calls to the scrapyards. This make and model has a habit of wrapping itself around trees at a high rate of speed. It shouldn't be hard to find enough parts to restore the interior. While you're at it, you might as well replace the back seat, 'cause I don't think you're getting that smell out any other way." Navarre moved to the front of the car and dropped the hood. "The only thing you might want to order brand new is the airbag; I wouldn't recommend fucking around with one from the scrapyard."

"How much will that cost?" Pinto asked.

"I don't know," Navarre said with a shrug. "I'll have to look into it. All I can say is it's usually not cheap. If you order the part, I can do the install. That'll save you some bucks."

Okay, that didn't sound too bad. He had some money saved up, not as much as he'd like, but it might be enough to cover the costs. If not, his credit card was going to get a workout. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it."

"Don't thank me until she's good as new. And you're helping with the repairs."

“Fair enough.” He was better at patching up people than cars, but he was willing to learn whatever he needed to know to get the job done. “When can you start?”

“That depends on how soon I can get my hands on the parts. I’ll check around this afternoon and let you know what I find. In the meantime, what are you doing for wheels?”

Pinto gestured to the Mustang. “You’re looking at it.”

Navarre stared at him as though he’d just sprouted wings and a tail. “No offense, but your car reeks.”

“No argument there, but rental cars cost money that’s not in my budget. If you’ve got a better idea, I’m open to suggestion.” At this point, he was willing to try anything to keep his eyes from watering while driving.

Arms crossed, Navarre nodded in acknowledgment. “If you’re not going to use it, we can yank the back seat now and chuck it in the Dumpster. That ought to cut down on the smell.”

“Works for me.” He’d still need to buy a roll of plastic sheeting on his way home to cover the shattered rear window. Maybe a case of Lysol while he was at it. He had a feeling the stench wouldn’t completely disappear with the back seat.

An alert on Navarre’s phone chimed. “We better get moving; meeting’s in five.”

Judging from the agenda, this was going to be a busy meeting. Normally, Pinto wasn’t invited—a lot of the topics were above his pay grade—but his predicament with Fiona’s ex was a major point of discussion.

After rolling down the metal bay door, Pinto and Navarre went into the main building and down the hall to the conference room. Austin was at the head of the table, swiping and typing away on his tablet, while Nina and

Larissa sat to his right, their heads bent toward each other as they viewed something on Larissa's laptop.

Nina looked up as they entered the room, a smile lighting her face. "Hey, guys. Did you have a good Christmas?"

"Absolutely," Pinto said, and that was the truth. Sure, his ribs ached every time he drew breath and the bruise around his eye had deepened to a vivid shade of purple, but he got to spend the whole day with Fiona, and that was all he needed for things to be right in his world.

He pulled out a chair, and Navarre took the one beside it. "And how was the Flint family Christmas?"

"Pandemonium," Austin said, his eyes still glued to the tablet. "I'm amazed the house is still standing."

Larissa scoffed. "Oh, it wasn't that bad."

Austin's gaze slanted to her. "You're not the one who had to pry the turkey out of the dog's mouth."

"Since when do you have a dog?" Navarre asked.

"We don't." Austin didn't explain, and the tone of his voice made it blatantly clear that it was best not to ask. "Where's Jackson?"

"He and Wade are with the recruits," Pinto said. "Today's their last day of training."

Technically, there wasn't any actual training today, just a bunch of congratulatory shit to get them all pumped up. Then they'd receive their first field assignments for what would hopefully be a successful career at Six Points.

The conference room door opened and Ryan Flint walked in with his younger brother Ty, arguing over whether the Bucs were going to make it to

the playoffs. It was coming down to the wire this season, but considering who they were playing this week and next, Pinto figured they had a good shot.

“Hey man, how are you feeling?” Ty asked Pinto as he passed.

“Aside from my ribs, I’m doing well.” Thanks to the wonders of modern medicine, two nights of restful sleep, and a steady regimen of cold packs, much of the swelling around his rib cage had subsided. It still hurt to cough, sneeze, or breathe deeply, but not as badly as before. It would take some time to fully recover, but as long as he followed doctor’s orders and didn’t do anything stupid, it would be weeks instead of months.

Ryan claimed the empty seat by Pinto and set his phone on the table. “We drove out this morning to where the cop pulled you over. You didn’t say there was a convenience store across the street.”

“I didn’t think it was important.”

“Every detail is important. The guy at the counter was working that day. He saw what they did to you but doesn’t want to come forward because he’s afraid of what the cops might do to him.”

“Can’t say that I blame him.”

One corner of Ryan’s mouth went up. “He was, however, willing to send me a copy of the footage from the store’s parking lot surveillance camera. It’s grainy, but it’s there. Want to see it?”

Dread knotted Pinto’s stomach. “Not really, but I suppose I should.”

Watching himself get beat like a narc at a biker rally wasn’t anywhere on his list of favorite things. But he didn’t remember everything that had happened to him, and he needed to fill in the gaps.

Ryan swiped at the phone to pull up the video and angled the screen so Pinto could watch.

He was right. The video quality sucked, grainy black-and-white with no

audio, but it captured every punch, kick, and swing of the baton that had left Pinto bloody and unconscious. His battered body might be on the mend, but watching how it got that way was nearly as painful. It also fed his desire for payback, a sharp, incessant clawing inside that he knew would not go away until it was satisfied.

“Can you send me a copy of that for the file?” Larissa asked.

A muscle ticced in Ryan’s jaw as he nodded. Back in the day, he worked in law enforcement, so it came as no surprise to see how much he despised crooked cops. “That ought to be enough to get him and his buddy charged with aggravated battery.”

“How long would that put him away?” Pinto asked.

“Fifteen years if they get convicted and the judge is a hard-ass. But if they hire decent defense attorneys, they’d stand a pretty good chance of pleading down to misdemeanor battery, or get into one of those diversion programs to avoid jail time altogether. Hell, if the police union fights hard enough, they might even be able to keep their jobs.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“I know.” Ryan’s voice hardened. “But that’s the legal system we have to work with.”

Pinto drew a deep, cleansing breath and clamped down on his anger. Taking his frustrations out on any of the people who’d come here to help him was not only stupid, it was counterproductive. “So what you’re saying is that we need more to make sure he gets put away.”

“A few extra nails in the coffin wouldn’t hurt. Larissa, you got anything that might help with that?”

The sound of typing stopped as Larissa glanced up from her laptop. “The SD card was encrypted.”

“How long did it take you to break it?” Austin asked. “An hour?”

“Don’t insult the woman,” Ryan said. “I bet she got it in thirty minutes or less.”

“No way,” Ty said. “Twenty, tops. Navarre?”

“I’ll play the role of eternal pessimist and say one hour and two minutes.”

Pinto bit back a laugh. “What is this, *The Price Is Right*?”

Not seeming offended in the least, Larissa snorted. “Care to take a guess before I satisfy their curiosity?”

Pinto paused to mull it over and realized he had absolutely no idea how long that kind of thing took. “Five minutes.”

“Suck-up,” Austin said.

“Damn straight.” It never hurt to kiss the ass of the woman who might save your bacon. Larissa’s skills behind a keyboard were the stuff of legend at Six Points. He wasn’t about to tempt fate by intentionally getting on her bad side.

Larissa’s chin tilted up, looking as dignified as one could muster while wearing a Captain Marvel T-shirt. “If you really must know, it took ninety-seven minutes.”

“Wow, you’re slipping in your old age.”

“I’ve got your slipping right here.” She flipped Austin off. “Cracking an encryption is like guessing a password. Guess enough times, and you’ll eventually get it right. Lucky for me, the encryption key was relatively short and simple. If he’d invested in a half-decent program, I’d still be trying to break it.”

Larissa’s gaze went back to the laptop; the sound of typing resumed.

Austin leaned forward. “Well?”

“Oh, you want to know what’s on the card?” Larissa smiled sweetly. “I thought you just wanted to jerk my chain.”

“Is this the part where we have to suck up like Pinto?” Ryan asked.

“No, it’s the part where I show just how awesome I am.”

With the press of a key on her laptop, the lights in the room dimmed. Another click and the wall-mounted television came to life, displaying what appeared to be the screen of Larissa’s laptop.

And just like that, Larissa transformed from a sister giving her big brothers crap to a hard-edged professional who took no prisoners. It made Pinto happy that she was in his corner. “There was only one file on the card, which made my job a lot easier.”

She selected one of the tabs on her task bar, and a video filled the screen and began to play.

It was police body cam footage, taken at night. With the camera lens facing forward, the officer’s face wasn’t visible, but the voice unmistakably belonged to Officer Dennis Heckler. As he approached the door of a hotel room, he noted that he was responding to a domestic disturbance call. He knocked on the door with the backs of his knuckles, identifying himself as a law enforcement officer. Knocked again when nobody answered. He raised his fist to knock a third time when the door cracked open and a white man in his sixties demanded to know what he wanted.

Nina Flint straightened in her seat. “That’s Benjamin Trask.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “I’d recognize that sleazy son of a bitch anywhere.”

If Pinto remembered correctly, the senior senator from Florida had recently cruised to re-election, despite allegations of having business ties with a Russian oligarch who owned a ton of real estate in south Florida.

The body cam footage continued to play. The video and audio were remarkably clear. Trask was blind, stinking drunk, and the battered, half-

dressed woman curled up on the bed in the hotel room looked ridiculously young—late teens, early twenties at the most.

“Isn’t he married?” Austin asked.

“Yes.” Disgust filled Nina’s voice. “He and his wife just celebrated their thirty-year wedding anniversary at the Grand Floridian. He ran on a platform of being tough on crime and bringing traditional family values back to America.”

On-screen, Heckler escorted the young woman out of the room and interviewed her in the hall, where she declined medical assistance and refused to press charges. Hell, she even refused to say what happened, only that things had gotten out of hand and she couldn’t remember how her shirt got torn or how she got the black eye. While she talked, she finger-combed her tangled red hair and wiped away the dark makeup that had smudged beneath her eyes.

Heckler allowed her to leave a short time later when a cab arrived to take her home. Then he knocked on the senator’s door again, and the camera cut off as the door opened.

Larissa clicked a command to make the screen go dark and the lights brighten. “According to the time stamp on the video, this incident took place roughly three and a half years ago, but I was unable to locate a corresponding police report. As far as I can tell, the media never caught wind of it.”

“But Heckler kept the cam footage.” Pinto’s gut churned with sympathy for the young woman, disdain for the senator, and anger at Heckler. “I wonder what he’s getting in return for keeping this quiet.”

“From what I can tell, it started with cash and went from there. The day after this video was recorded, there was a five-thousand-dollar deposit into Heckler’s checking account.”

“That’s it?” Pinto scoffed. “What a cheap date.”

“Oh, that wasn’t the end of it. There have been subsequent deposits for the same amount, each month around the first of the month, until November of this year.”

“The sleazy senator finally cut him off?” Pinto asked, and Larissa nodded. “No wonder he wants the video back. He needs it to force the rich asshole to resume his monthly hush-money payments.”

“That’s not all,” Larissa added. “I did some digging and learned that Trask plays golf with one of the bigwigs at FDLE. How much you want to bet he’s been pulling some strings to bury Heckler’s excessive force complaints?”

Fucking hell, this was way bigger than anything Pinto imagined. “Where do we even go with this? With Heckler being so well-connected, if we go to the police, they’ll just bury it with the rest of the bodies.”

“Don’t forget we’re also dealing with a US senator with a mean streak and a shitload of power,” Ty said.

Pinto leaned back in his chair. His darkest instincts demanded retribution, the kind that included blood and bruised knuckles, but that wouldn’t solve the problem. If anything, it would make things worse. They needed a solution that delivered a justice that both men sorely deserved. “How about we take it to the press? This seems like the kind of thing they’d love to sink their claws into.”

“If we go that route, we’ll have to be careful about which reporter we contact,” Ryan said. “If we choose someone who’s an ally of Trask, they’ll give him the source of the information right before they bury the story. It’s also important to frame it in a way that highlights Heckler’s abuse of power as much as the senator’s shitty behavior.”

“Do you think Vicky might know a reporter we can trust?” Austin asked.

“I’ll find out when I get home. She’s familiar with the ones on the entertainment beat, but she might know a few who specialize in the political arena.”

“Thank you,” Pinto said, his heart filled with gratitude. “You have no idea how much I appreciate all this.”

“Don’t thank us until they’ve been booked and fingerprinted. We still need irrefutable proof that Heckler’s extorting Trask.”

“The deposits aren’t enough?” Pinto asked.

Austin shook his head. “Not in a court of law. Best-case scenario, the senator testifies against him, but I wouldn’t count on that happening. And without a smoking gun, Heckler might squeeze through the door of reasonable doubt.”

He was right, damn it. It pissed Pinto off. There had to be a way to prove the payments were meant to buy Heckler’s silence.

The beginnings of a plan formed in his mind. He didn’t like it one damn bit, but it might just be their only way to get the evidence they needed.

CHAPTER 21

FIONA POUNDED ON DENNIS'S front door with the memory of how Joe looked on Christmas Eve front and center in her mind.

She could have rung the bell like a civilized person, but it felt really good to imagine she was pounding on Dennis's head. Besides, she had a role to play and an important mission to fulfill.

It was her first time back to the house since she'd left all those months ago. On the surface, things appeared totally normal, just like her ex. But upon closer inspection, she noticed the settlement cracks in the stuccoed walls and the aphids eating away at the hibiscus bush beneath the living room window. No one had bothered to pressure wash the walkway leading up to the house, and a thin layer of grime now covered the textured concrete.

Taking it all in, she felt a mixture of relief and the need to leave as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Her quality of life had dramatically improved once she got the hell out of this house. And pretty soon, it would get even better.

The sound of movement from inside the house made her heart rate kick up

a few notches. Seconds later, the door opened.

Dennis smiled at the sight of her, his mask of civility in place. “Fiona, what a surprise. I didn’t—”

He ducked when she tossed the locket at him. It whizzed over his head and bounced off the wall behind him.

“You asshole!”

Outrage narrowed his eyes. “Are you insane? I’m a law enforcement officer.”

“Oh, what are you going to do, arrest me for assault with a deadly necklace?” She hitched the strap of her purse up higher on her shoulder, her phone tucked in the outer pocket. Before she’d stepped out of her car, she’d called Joe so he could listen in—and intervene if things got dicey. “You’re lucky I didn’t take a blowtorch to your precious locket after what you did to Joe.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh please. I saw your footprint on his back. Or was that your cop buddy’s handiwork?”

The little vein on the side of Dennis’s forehead was starting to stick out, which was good, because she wanted him mad and not questioning her motives.

“I’m not going to dignify that accusation with an answer.”

Determined not to show weakness, Fiona jutted her chin, but it was hard when her instincts screamed for her to get the hell away from this man. “Then we have nothing further to discuss. Don’t call me, don’t knock on my door, don’t send anything to me in the mail, and don’t come to the school unless it’s for official police business.”

Dennis glanced back to where the necklace landed, and something too

vicious to count as a smile curled the corners of his mouth. “Not a problem. Have fun with your pussy boyfriend. And don’t even think about crying to me when he dumps your crazy ass.”

He slammed the door before she could rattle off any of the insults she’d filed away for occasions just like this.

Hands on her hips, Fiona stared at the door, annoyed that she hadn’t gotten the last word but happy because she’d accomplished what she came here to do. Ignoring the big black pickup truck with the dark tinted windows across the street, she walked back to the curb where she’d parked her car.

Now that the excitement was over, she noticed the tremble in her hands, and it took two tries for her to fit the key into the ignition. She’d never done this kind of thing before, and she hoped her performance had been convincing enough to keep Dennis from wondering why she’d suddenly decided to hand-deliver the only thing he truly wanted from her.

Halfway down the street, she glanced at the rearview mirror and saw the pickup pull away from the curb and drive in the opposite direction. She wasn’t sure which of the Flint brothers was behind the wheel—the window tint was too dark to see inside—but knowing Joe sat in the passenger seat had given her a much-needed confidence boost.

She drove to a convenience store a few miles away, where the truck was parked at the pumps. Austin—she was pretty sure it was Austin; the Flint brothers looked an awful lot alike—was busy filling the tank. As she pulled alongside, the truck’s passenger door opened, and her heart stuttered like it always did whenever she caught sight of Joe.

Today he wore jeans and a gray shirt that molded nicely to his torso. A pair of sunglasses covered the fading bruise around his eye. He gave Austin a subtle nod right before he climbed into her car.

The door clicked shut, and just having him this close made her whole body hum. Without saying a word, he leaned over the center console and gave her a kiss that almost made her forget to keep her foot on the brake.

“I take it that means I did well,” Fiona said, more than a little dazed when he finally pulled back.

“You were fucking phenomenal. I’m so proud of you.” His eyes were warm and filled with affection that heated her from within. He kissed her once more before relaxing into his seat.

She followed his directions to the Six Points building, located in a sprawling industrial complex not too far away. Once inside, he reached for her hand and led her down a long corridor to an office that looked like a hacker’s paradise.

A floor-to-ceiling framework of shelves took up an entire wall and was loaded with an assortment of electronic equipment, their little lights blinking at varying intervals to indicate who knew what. On the other side of the room, two empty office chairs sat in front of an L-shaped desk with a bank of computer monitors that made it impossible to see more than the top of the head of the woman tapping away at the keyboard.

As Joe raised his hand to knock on the doorframe, the woman called out, “Come on in and make yourselves comfortable. Things are about to get interesting.”

She looked up as they entered the room, her pale skin a sharp contrast to her shoulder-length auburn hair. Vibrant green eyes teeming with intelligence peered through cat-eye glasses, while her long-sleeved shirt with a snarling grizzly on the front warned others not to poke the bear.

Her gaze flicked over the monitor. She smiled. “Hi, I’m Larissa. You must be Fiona.”

“The one and only.” Nerves jittering, Fiona gave a little wave. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Larissa turned her attention to Joe and concern took the edge off her features. “The bruising around your eye’s gone down a bit. How are you feeling?”

“Better, thanks. Do you have any good news for us?”

“Oh, yeah. This guy’s definitely not the type to let any grass grow under him.” Larissa reached for the large, insulated travel mug on her desk and took a sip. “Officer Shady must have loaded that memory card into his phone the minute you left his house. He’s already accessed the data and watched the video twice.”

No surprise there. Dennis had always been impatient. Not having access to the card must have been driving him out of his mind. It made her all the more convinced that he’d been the one who’d broken into her apartment.

“Did he check it for viruses first?” Joe asked.

“Of course not. He assumed nobody had touched it since he tucked it away in that locket. In his mind, it was perfectly safe.” Clearly enjoying herself, Larissa radiated confidence. “Not that it would have mattered. There isn’t an antivirus program around that would have caught what I buried in the video file.”

Fiona made a mental note never to get on this woman’s bad side. “So now what happens?”

“Well, while we wait to see what he does next, I’ll download everything that’s on his phone and see if we can use any of it against him.”

“Holy crap, you can do that?”

“It’s her superpower,” Joe said. “You should see what she does to people who really piss her off. It’s the stuff of legend around here.”

Larissa leaned forward in her chair, her eyes fixed on the screen. “Your boy just took several screenshots from the video and sent them to someone.”

“Any idea who it was?” Fiona asked.

“Not yet, but I’ll find out. Oh wait, now he’s dialing that number. This ought to be good; let me turn up the volume.” She pressed a key and the call carried over the laptop’s speaker.

“I told you not to call this number.” Senator Trask sounded pissed.

“It’s important, Benny.” There was no respect in Dennis’s voice, only the haughty tone of a man who believed he held all the cards. “Or would you prefer I just go ahead and leak that video to the press?”

“It’ll hurt you as much as me.”

“Your face is on camera, not mine,” Dennis countered. “I can always modify my voice so it’s unrecognizable.”

“He’s got him there,” Larissa said.

There was a long stretch of uncomfortable silence before the senator finally spoke again. “What do you want?”

“You know exactly what I want. This month, and you might as well send me the January installment while you’re at it. I expect the full amount in my account no later than tomorrow morning. If you’re late again, I’ll make sure you’re the lead story of every news outlet in the nation.”

The call abruptly ended.

Joe let out a low whistle. “Please tell me you recorded all that.”

Larissa shot him a look over the top of her glasses. “This isn’t my first rodeo. Criminals tend to be sloppy and predictable. Makes my job a lot easier.”

Something deep in Fiona’s chest loosened as she let out a shaky breath. It wasn’t over, not by a long shot, but she felt a spark of hope that Dennis

would finally face some consequences for his actions. “So what happens next?”

Leaning back in her chair, Larissa took another sip of her drink and set the mug on her desk. “In the interest of plausible deniability, it’s best I don’t answer that question. Go home, relax, maybe watch a movie, and take comfort in the knowledge that Officer Heckler is going to have some really bad days in the near future.”

After thanking Larissa, they left the room. Joe reached for Fiona’s hand, his fingers interlocking with hers, and the simple connection soothed her soul in a way that nothing else could.

“How long do you think it’ll take for things to start happening?” she asked as they crossed the lot to her car.

He shrugged. “I wish I could give you a definitive timeline, but this is uncharted territory for me. From what I understand, the press will want to verify a few key pieces of information before they present the news to the public. My best guess is that it’ll take a week, maybe two for that to happen.”

Not as fast as she’d like, but she could live with it, so long as Dennis finally paid a price for being an awful excuse for a human being. And he would. Given the evidence against him, it was only a matter of time.

At the car, Joe leaned against the door and gathered her into his arms. He felt so warm, so strong and solid, and her body hummed from his touch. She softened against him with a sigh and rested her cheek on his chest.

“It’ll be over soon, I promise,” he said, his breath a whisper against her hair.

Tilting her head, she peered up at him and embraced the warm, fuzzy feeling that started deep in her chest and spread through her body like wildfire. What had started out as a simple arrangement between two people

who barely knew each other had grown into something far deeper than anything she could have ever imagined. He was more than her friend, more than a lover.

When she looked at him, she saw her future.

“My place or yours?” she asked, and then arched against him when he stroked a hand down her back.

“Yours. It’s still decked out for the holidays, right?”

She nodded. New Year’s Eve was only a few days away, but she wasn’t quite ready for the Christmas season to be over. “You don’t mind?”

“Why would I mind? It makes you happy. As far as I’m concerned, you can leave it all up until Valentine’s Day if you want.”

“That would clash with my Valentine’s Day decorations.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You have Valentine’s Day decorations?”

“Well, not anymore. They’re somewhere in the bowels of Dennis’s house. But I don’t want any of that stuff. I’m going to get new stuff that I can make new memories with.” She grinned up at him as the possibilities unfurled in her mind. “Maybe I’ll even buy some sexy lingerie. Would you like that?”

A wolfish smile warmed the angles of his face and elicited a pulse between her thighs. “Lingerie is always nice, but I’d much rather see you naked.”

EPILOGUE

MONTHS LATER...

Jury selection began today for the trial of an Avalon Springs police officer accused of blackmailing Florida Senator Benjamin Trask. If convicted, Dennis Heckler faces up to fifteen years in prison. Reporter Taylor Roberts is on the scene in downtown Orlando, where the trial is expected to last a week. Taylor, I hear security has been tightened around the courthouse in anticipation of this high-profile—

Pinto switched off the television and went back to the kitchen, where a pan of shredded beef enchiladas was baking in the oven. It amazed him how quickly the wheels of justice turned when a powerful person was the victim. The senator was slated to testify at the trial, which, in addition to a mountain of bank records and a shakedown phone call that went viral online, should all but guarantee a guilty verdict for the now-former police officer.

Heckler and his cop buddy were also under investigation for the beating of an unarmed motorist. The video, which also went viral, triggered a public

outcry, and three other people had come forward to share similar experiences. The motorist, whose face was blurred in the video, had yet to be publicly identified, and thankfully no one in Pinto's family had recognized his car.

When the oven timer dinged, Pinto set the pan of enchiladas on the counter to cool.

The senator hadn't escaped unscathed. To the contrary, calls for his resignation had been growing ever since the police body cam footage aired on every major news outlet. And when the woman in the video came forward to share her side of the story, the calls had grown even louder. Whether his political career survived the firestorm was anybody's guess, but he'd already been stripped of his committee assignments and his wife had filed for divorce.

Pinto stepped to the pantry, took out a bag of chips, and filled a basket. He set it on the table with a bowl of salsa. Now that the news coverage of Heckler was over, he expected Fiona to come down to his place in five... four...

He smiled at the knock on his door.

After wiping his hands on the dish towel, he crossed to the foyer. He'd given Fiona a key to his place weeks ago, but she still insisted on knocking. If he had his way, that would change soon.

As always, the sight of her took his breath away. Tonight, she wore a blue jacket over a red sweater and those black stretchy pants that hugged her body like a second skin. The black boots made her a few inches taller, while her silky blonde hair hung loose past her shoulders.

Wasting no time, he pulled her inside, nudged the door shut with his foot, and kissed her the way he'd been fantasizing about all afternoon.

"Hello to you too," Fiona said, sounding breathless, when they finally came

up for air.

It was all he could do not to kiss her again, but if he did, it would lead to a lot more than that, and the rice would end up burnt. “Dinner’s about to go on the table. Would you like beer or wine?”

She glanced over his shoulder at the pan on the stove. “Beer; I can get it while you take care of the food. I assume you’d like one as well?”

“Yes, please.”

While he got busy loading plates with food, Fiona got two bottles of beer from the fridge and popped the caps.

“Smells great.” She gave him a smile as he set two plates of enchiladas and rice on the table.

Pinto took the seat across from hers and raised his beer bottle in a toast. “To justice being served.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Fiona clinked the neck of her bottle against his.

As they shared a meal, they also shared their day, trading bits and pieces of what happened in their lives since they parted ways that morning. He loved hearing about her experiences with her students, and she seemed to enjoy the latest news about his friends and colleagues at Six Points.

Pinto waited until they finished their meals to bring up a topic that had been on his mind for the better part of a week.

“I’ve been thinking. Relax, it’s nothing bad,” he added when concern flickered over her face.

“Then what is it?”

Pinto mentally cracked his knuckles before diving into the pitch he’d spent the last few days refining. “My lease expires the end of next month. If I renew, the rent’s going up fifty bucks. That’s a lot for a place this small.” He paused to down another mouthful of liquid courage. “But I talked with one of

the leasing agents the other day, and she said there's a two-bedroom opening up around that time. The rent's two hundred a month more than what I'm paying now. It's a big increase, but it's actually a lot more affordable when two people are splitting the cost."

Fiona paused, her beer bottle inches from her lips. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Probably." Ignoring the jump in his pulse, he met her gaze and barreled on. "From a financial standpoint, it only makes sense. As it is, we're at each other's apartments so much we're practically living together. The available unit's on the other side of the pool, so you'd be even closer to Liz. And this way, Wanda wouldn't be stuck all by herself when you spend the night with me."

The hint of a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. "So it's all in Wanda's best interests?"

"No, it's because I love you, Fi. You're smart, you're strong, you're sexy as hell, and every day I fall more in love with you than I was the day before. So come on; what do you say?"

Fiona set the bottle on the table. "Well, for starters, I love you too."

No matter how many times he heard her say the words, it always sent his pulse straight into overdrive.

"Unfortunately, my lease doesn't end for another four months," she continued, and his hopes deflated like a balloon. She got up, crossed to the kitchen, and loaded her plate and silverware into the washer. "But I also talked with an agent about transferring my lease to a bigger apartment. You know, so I can get the litter box out of the bathroom. She said there was one that would be available next month, but I'd need to act quickly because someone else expressed interest in leasing it."

God, he loved this woman. “You don’t say.”

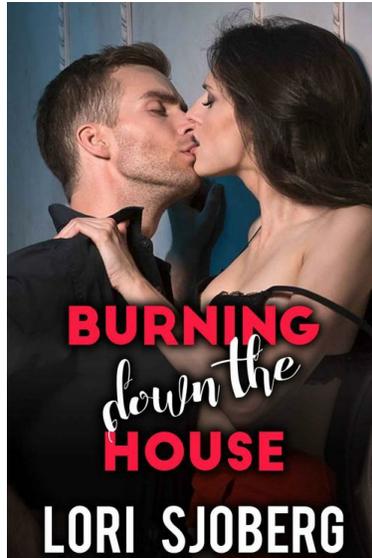
She grinned. “It’s going to cost me an extra two hundred a month, which means I’ll need a roommate to help cover the costs.”

Pinto followed her into the kitchen and caged her between his body and the countertop. He leaned in close to nip her earlobe, and she made one of those soft, throaty sounds that never failed to drive him wild. “It’s going to be hard to find someone willing to share a room with a litter box.”

“Hmm, you’re right. I hadn’t thought about that.” She leaned back a little and met his gaze, and the searing heat in her gorgeous blue eyes made every muscle in his body tighten. “I suppose that means my new roommate will have to sleep in my room. And share my bed. You wouldn’t happen to know anyone who’d be open to that sort of arrangement, would you?”

Right before he claimed her mouth in a kiss, he murmured, “I can think of one.”

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