

THE DARK

Sigra



The Dark Side
RPD, Book One

Cee Bowerman

CLBooks, LLC



Copyright © 2023 CLBooks, LLC

All rights reserved

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by: Sweet 15 Designs
Professionally edited by: Chrissy Riesenber

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Cee Bowerman Master Book List](#)

[Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series](#)

[The Rojo, Texas Universe](#)

[Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series](#)

[A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR](#)

[PROLOGUE](#)

[1.](#)

[2.](#)

[3.](#)

[4.](#)

[5.](#)

[6.](#)

[7.](#)

[8.](#)

[9.](#)

[10.](#)

[11.](#)

[12.](#)

[13.](#)

[14.](#)

[15.](#)

[16.](#)

[17.](#)

[18.](#)

[19.](#)

[EPILOGUE](#)

[COMING SOON](#)

[About the Author](#)

Cee Bowerman Master Book List

The Rojo, Texas Universe

Texas Knights MC (completed)

Home Forever
Forever Family
Lucky Forever
Love Forever

Texas Kings MC (completed)

Kale
Sonny
Bird
Grunt
Lout
Smokey
Tucker
Kale & Terra (Novella)
John & Mattie
Bear
Daughtry
Hank
Fain

Grady
Stoffer
Luke
Clem

**Conner Brothers Construction
(completed)**

Finn
Angus
Mace
Ronan
Royal
Tavin
Chess

**Rojo, TX
(completed)**

Rason & Eliza
Atlas & Addie
Jazmyne & Luc
Kari & Levi
Noah & Tallie
Nick & Cindy
Marcus & Reagan

**The Tempests
(completed)**

Wrath
Creed
Loki
Styx
Thorn
Freya
Sin

**Lonestar Terrace
(in progress)**

1005 Alamo Way

Cee Bowerman's Stand Alone Series

Time Served MC (in progress)

Boss
Hook
Chef
Preacher
Captain
Bug
Santa
Kitty
Rodeo
Stamp
TS in NY
Hammer

Soda – COMING AUGUST 1ST, 2023

The Four Families (in progress)

Rico
Zach – COMING AUGUST 15TH, 2023

Springblood (in progress)

One More Day
Fly Away with Me - COMING JULY 15th, 2023!

The Donovans (in progress)

Drink It Up
Pull It Up
Pretty It Up
Curl It Up
Build It Up

Rojo PD
(in progress)

The Dark Side

The Rojo, Texas Universe

In Chronological Reading Order

Home Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 1

Forever Family: Texas Knights MC, Book 2

Kale: Texas Kings MC, Book 1

Sonny: Texas Kings MC, Book 2

Bird: Texas Kings MC, Book 3

Grunt: Texas Kings MC, Book 4

Lout: Texas Kings MC, Book 5

Smokey: Texas Kings MC, Book 6

Tucker: Texas Kings MC, Book 7

Finn: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 1

Kale & Terra: a Texas Kings novella

John & Mattie: Texas Kings MC, Book 8

Angus: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 2

Bear: Texas Kings MC, Book 9

Lucky Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 3

Daughtry: Texas Kings MC, Book 10

Mace: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 3

Hank: Texas Kings MC, Book 11

Fain: Texas Kings MC, Book 12

Love Forever: Texas Knights MC, Book 4

Rason & Eliza: Rojo, TX, Book 1

Ronan: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 4

Grady: Texas Kings MC, Book 13

Atlas & Addie: Rojo, TX, Book 2

Royal: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 5

Stoffer: Texas Kings MC, Book 14

Jazmyne & Lucius: Rojo, TX, Book 3

Wrath: The Tempests, Book 1

Luke: Texas Kings MC, Book 15

Tavin: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 6

Kari & Levi: Rojo, TX, Book 4

Creed: The Tempests, Book 2

Noah & Tallie: Rojo, TX, Book 5

Loki: The Tempests, Book 3

Styx: The Tempests, Book 4

Thorn: The Tempests, Book 5

Chess: Conner Brothers Construction, Book 7

Clem: Texas Kings MC, Book 16

Freya: The Tempests, Book 6

Sin: The Tempests, Book 7

Nick & Cindy: Rojo, TX, Book 6

Marcus & Reagan: Rojo, TX, Book 7

Reading Order for the Tenillo Guardians Crossover Series

Boss: Time Served MC, Book 1

Sin's Enticement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 1 by Ciara St James

Hook: Time Served MC, Book 2

Executioner's Enthrallment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 2 by Ciara St James

Chef: Time Served MC, Book 3

Pitbull's Enslavement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 3 by Ciara St James

Preacher: Time Served MC, Book 4

Omen's Entrapment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 4 by Ciara St James

Captain: Time Served MC, Book 5

Cuffs' Enchainment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 5 by Ciara St James

Bug: Time Served MC, Book 6

Rampage's Enchantment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 6 by Ciara St James

Santa: Time Served MC, Book 7

Wrecker's Ensnarement: Ares Infidels MC, Book 7 by Ciara St James

Kitty: Time Served MC, Book 8

Trident's Enjoyment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 8 by Ciara St James

Rodeo: Time Served MC, Book 9

Fang's Enlightenment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 9 by Ciara St James

Stamp: Time Served MC, Book 10

Talon's Enamorment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 10 by Ciara St James

Time Served In New York: Time Served MC, Book 11

Ares Infidels In New York: Ares Infidels MC, Book 11 by Ciara St.
James

Hammer: Time Served MC, Book 12

Phantom's Emblazonment: Ares Infidels MC, Book 12 by Ciara St.
James

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Reader,

Welcome back for the first book in the newest second-generation series about the men and women of the Rojo Police Department!

I was raised by a police officer and am friends with quite a few, so I am very happy to be writing about the good men and women who dedicate their lives to serve others. As usual, the professions of my characters take a back seat to their real story - how they fall in love and find their forever. However, there will be bits and pieces of their jobs throughout the series, and I'm going to reference some stories I heard through the years about the craziest calls and wildest cases. When I was a kid, I dreamed about becoming a police officer, but then again, I also dreamed of living in a bookstore and having a talking cat. Obviously, neither of those things came to pass, but I'm happy to write about them now in one form or another.

I hope you enjoy this book and fall in love with Damien like I did and enjoy catching up with some of your favorite Rojo residents while you do. As always, I love to hear from you after you read my books, so make sure to find me on Facebook - there are a couple of groups where my readers like to chat, and I love to be part of the conversations.

Just in case you haven't found me online yet, here's a list of groups to look for that coincide with my different book series.

For all things Rojo, join the [Texas Queens MC](#) group. If you love the Time Served MC, join the [Tenillo Guardians](#) group. If you enjoy my mafia series, The Four Families, join the [Covenant of Ascent](#) group. To hang out and chat about vampires, shifters, and witches, join the [Springblood with Cee Bowerman](#) group. I hope to see you in one (or all) and hear about your favorite parts of Holly and Damien's love story.

Happy Reading!

Cee

PROLOGUE

ALMOST FIVE YEARS AGO

DAMIEN

I walked up beside my little brother and bumped him with my shoulder as I joked, “You know, you don’t have to be so dramatic about it the next time you want to take a few days off work.”

“You made it!” Darnell smiled at me and then looked forward again.

“I tried to time it so that I missed all the action, but I’m here,” I said as I followed his gaze and looked through the window in front of us. “Which one is yours?”

“He’s with the nurse right now,” Darnell said as he pointed at the petite woman on the other side of the room who was wrapping a squalling infant in a blanket. “Tiffany didn’t want me to leave him alone, but I needed a second to get myself together so I came out here a few minutes ago.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fucking terrified, brother.”

“You’re gonna be a great dad, man. No worries there.”

“I hope so.” We were both quiet for a few minutes as we watched the nurse soothe the baby, and then Darnell said, “Do you really think I can do this?”

“Hell yeah, I do. You learned how to be a dad from the best. If he was standing here right now, he’d tell you that this is everything he and Mom wanted for both of us. You have a beautiful wife who loves you to pieces and now a handsome son that you can teach to be a good man just like you. I’ll be close by to help anytime you need it.”

“I know you will,” Darnell said softly. “I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Already? Damn.”

Darnell laughed as he turned to look at me. His expression was somber as he rested a hand on my shoulder. “If anything ever happens to me, will you help Tiffany raise him?”

“I can’t believe you feel like you have to ask that. Of course I will.”

“She and I already talked about it, but I wanted to make sure you were okay with it before we made it official.”

“Official?”

“Yeah. I’ll talk to the lawyer that drew up my will when I joined the force and get him to add that to the paperwork.”

“You know this better just be on paper, right? You can’t finagle this and then sweep Tiffany off to some Caribbean island to spend the rest of your days in the sun while I change diapers.”

“Shit. How did you figure out our plan?”



HOLLY

“The results came back, and everything looks fine,” my little brother Roscoe said with a grin. “It’s been ten years.”

“That means I’m all clear. No cancer to be found.”

Roscoe took my hand and rubbed his thumb over my knuckles as he stared down at our joined hands. “That doesn’t mean things will *always* be clear, but for now. . .”

“Roscoe, I’m not Mom.”

“I know that, dork.”

“I know you chose to be a doctor so you could save me since no one could save her, but you’re not going to have to do that.”

“You think I became a doctor to save *you*? Pfft. I did it so I could fill my garage with luxury cars and pick up hot nurses.”

“How’s that working out for you so far?”

“The nurses, yes. The cars, not even close.”

“You’re still a baby doctor. Someday, in about a million years, you’ll be a big boy doctor with your own practice. You’ve still got time to fill a garage full of cars.”

“Speaking of babies . . .”

“I’ll talk to the receptionist and get a copy of my report so I can give it to the agency, and then we’ll go from there.”

“You should mail a copy to Dipshit.”

I laughed softly, finally able to see the humor in my failed marriage, and then said, “You know, after we split up, I realized just how well that name really suited him.”

“He wasn’t worthy of you, and we all knew it.”

“If you ask him, I am the one that’s not worthy since I can’t have children.”

“We’re living proof that kids don’t have to be yours biologically to deserve a good home and all the love in your heart. Someday, children will come into your life, and you’ll show them that just like Dad and Papa did for us.”

“Someday,” I whispered, ever hopeful that I’d have a family of my own. I pushed that dream aside for a second to take the opportunity to harass my little brother when I said, “As the second in line for the throne in our branch of the Hamilton family, it falls to you to create a new generation of heirs to take the crown.”

Ros rolled his eyes and let go of my hand, knowing that the serious part of the discussion was over now that I’d found a target. “There are too many nurses and not enough time, big sister. That task is going to have to fall to one of the other kids.”

“If we don’t get started soon, Gamma’s going to start putting her magic potion in the water like she did all those years ago.”

“We all know that their libidos had everything to do with all that procreation and nothing to do with magic,” Roscoe argued. “Gamma’s a sweet innocent woman, and I won’t have anyone disparaging her character.”

Roscoe and I started laughing, knowing without a doubt that the woman we called Gamma, Martha Forrester, wasn’t nearly as sweet and innocent as we liked to pretend. If there was a way to spike the drinking water so she could have more babies to dote on, she’d find it and use it until she and Grammy, her best friend Sandra, had another bustling generation of Knights and Kings running around.

And maybe, *hopefully*, I’d have some of my own to add to that mix.



NINE MONTHS AGO

HOLLY

“Ms. Hamilton?”

“One second,” I whispered as I slowly pulled my arm out from under my

sleeping son's head and then watched him for a second before I slipped out of bed and hurried toward the door. Once I was in the hallway with the door closed behind me, I whispered, "Let me go downstairs so I don't wake anyone up."

"Not a problem," the woman, whose voice I recognized as Jericho's caseworker from Child Services, sounded as tired as I felt. I wondered why in the world she was calling me so early in the morning. "I knew I'd likely be waking you, but I wanted to talk to you before I called anyone else."

"What's going on?" I asked as I put my left hand on the newel post and used my momentum to swing my body around toward the kitchen like I'd been doing since I moved into this house more than twenty-five years ago.

"Jericho's birth mother was admitted to the hospital yesterday afternoon and gave birth to twins right after midnight."

"Okay . . ." I let my voice trail off, my sleep-addled brain not firing on all cylinders just yet. Suddenly the reason for Mrs. Colton's call struck me like a bolt of lightning, and I was instantly wide awake. "Did she ask you to call me?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, she won't be able to raise these children for the same reason that she wasn't able to take care of Jericho. She asked that I make arrangements for them."

"I wasn't ever told why she gave Jericho up for adoption," I reminded Mrs. Colton.

"Since this case is a little different than Jericho's, I'll be able to explain all of that to you. Would it be possible for you to come to the hospital to meet with me and Ms. Dakin?"

"What time?" I asked as I stopped in the middle of the kitchen, so flustered that I wasn't sure what to do. I sensed someone behind me and turned around, relieved when I realized it was just Papa.

"Is everything okay?" he asked quietly before he put his hand over his mouth to cover a yawn.

I shrugged as Mrs. Colton said, "How soon can you get here?"

"Um . . . one second," I stammered before I took the phone away from my face to answer Papa. "It's Jericho's caseworker. She said that his birth mother wants to meet with me."

"What? Why?"

I put the phone back up to my ear and asked, "Is she wanting me to adopt her newborns?"

“Newborns?” Papa asked in shock, his voice echoing through the silent house.

“Twins,” I whispered as I motioned for him to be quiet so he didn’t wake everyone up.

“Holy shit,” Papa whispered, voicing the same words that were going through my mind.

“I can be there in . . .,” I paused, glancing at the clock on the stove.

“I’ll get dressed and let your dad know what’s going on before I move Jericho into our room,” Papa said before he walked away.

“I’ll be there within the hour,” I said firmly.

Once Mrs. Colton and I agreed that we’d meet in the hospital cafeteria, she hung up, and I let the phone drop down to my side.

My dad came around the corner with a shocked look on his face and said, “Your papa told me what was going on. Are you going to . . . Wow. Twins?”

“I think so. Maybe?”

“Are you ready to take on two more babies, Holly?”

“Is anyone *ever* really ready?”

“True. I know your house is supposed to be finished next week, but you can stay here with the kids as long as you need to. Your papa and I will be more than happy to help you.”

“Let’s see how things go before I make any decisions.”

“You’re right. It needs to be official before we begin to prepare.”

“Prepare? Oh no! I don’t have anything I need. Shit. Clothes and car seats and . . .”

“You have a family that will pull together and make sure you have all of that. I’m going to lay down with Jericho until he wakes up, and then I’ll make a few phone calls. You’ll have everything you need to get started by lunchtime.”

“You’re right. When I got Jericho, everyone was so helpful and now . . . twins, Dad. Twins. Little girls.”

“I know, baby,” he said as he pulled me into his arms.

“I’m the luckiest woman in the universe. You know that, right?” My dad’s soft laugh resonated through his chest as I snuggled close, this comfortable spot one of my safe places since my life turned upside down when I was a young girl. Tears streamed down my cheeks and dampened his T-shirt as I explained, “When Mom was dying, I thought my life would never

be worth living again, but then you and Papa showed up and brought us all back here with you. Then, when I was sick, I thought I'd never be a mom, but Jericho came along, and now my dreams are coming true."

"I've loved every minute you've been in our lives, Holly, and so has Papa. We're going to love your girls just as much as we've loved you kids since the day we met. Now . . ." My dad put his hands on my shoulders and looked down into my face as he grinned. "Dry your tears, get dressed, and let your papa drive you to the hospital. FaceTime me the second you see my new granddaughters."

"I will."

"I love you, doodlebug."

"I love you, too, Dad."



DAMIEN

I sat straight up in bed when there was a sudden banging on my apartment door and reached for my gun that was on the nightstand before my feet even hit the floor. I stubbed my toe on a box of shoes and bounced off the door jamb before I righted myself and hurried down the short hall into the living room of my new place, ready to confront whoever had the balls to wake me up in the middle of the fucking night.

I stood beside the door and covered the peephole as I called out, "Who is it?"

"It's Raines," a voice replied.

"What the hell?" I muttered as I leaned over and moved my hand to peer outside. When I saw that it was really my brother's partner standing on my stoop, I let my hand holding the gun drop down and threw open the security lock. I hadn't even opened it all the way before I asked, "What's wrong?" Raines looked devastated as he ran his hand over his mouth and slowly shook his head. "Is it Darnell? What happened?"

"It was a car accident, Damien. Darnell and Tiffany . . . I'm so sorry."

"What?" I asked, my mind refusing to believe the unspoken words I saw written all over his face. "Where did they take them? Which hospital?"

Raines shook his head, and I saw tears fill his eyes before he whispered, "They're both gone, man."

"No," I refused to believe that my brother was dead. "There's been a mistake. They're visiting Tiffany's mom . . . The kids!"

“Simon and Juni weren’t in the car,” Raines said as he rubbed his eyes.
“They must have left them with her.”

“No no no!” I whispered as I shook my head in denial. “They can’t be dead. There’s . . . They just can’t.”

“I’m sorry, Damien, but it’s true. Darnell and Tiffany are gone.”

1.

DAMIEN

I leaned forward and rested my elbow on my desk, pushing the stack of file folders precariously close to my laptop where they bumped the edge and brought the screen back to life. I rested my chin in the palm of my hand and watched Juni and Simon who were currently enraptured by the characters on the screen. One of my favorite parts of the movie was coming up, and I couldn't wait to see their reaction. Every time they were given a choice of what we watched, they chose this old favorite. Robin Williams was a genius and had been a favorite of mine since I was a kid. I was happy to share it with my niece and nephew now.

Since the first time they'd seen it, Simon had been obsessed with board games, dying to find one that would bring the jungle to life in our living room. He spotted a pair of dice in a store a few days after they watched the movie for the first time and had held onto them ever since, rolling them over and over again in the hopes that animals would suddenly appear. Juni had started behaving like a crazed monkey, defying gravity every chance she got - whether it was trying to swing from the curtains or perching on the counter to steal food out of the cabinet.

Their antics kept me laughing, and every day was a new adventure. If I could go back in time, I'd kick myself every time I said I didn't want kids because parenthood was a boring wasteland that would ruin my life. There was nothing boring about being a father to these two, and I had a feeling there never would be. Now, that didn't mean I was ready to have any of my own soon, if ever. *That* hadn't changed, even though I couldn't imagine my life without Simon and Juni in it. The last nine months had been a whirlwind for all of us as we adjusted to the absence of Darnell and Tiffany in our lives, but we were gradually settling into a routine that worked for the three of us.

It was such a drastic change from the life I had before that I found myself

amazed that I'd made it through with my sanity intact.

Fresh from a breakup with my longtime girlfriend, another cop on the force, I'd just moved into a new apartment right before I got the news. The kids had luckily been in Rojo with Tiffany's aunts, Tasha and Monica, when the accident happened. At the last minute, they'd decided to keep the kids for a week to give Darnell and Tiffany some time alone. Tasha told me that they had plans to go house hunting that week, and she wanted to make it easier on them by keeping the kids, giving them more time to visit with their grandmother who'd been ill for months and unable to travel.

At first, I'd tried to take care of Simon and Juniper by myself, breaking the lease on my smaller apartment and moving my still mostly-packed possessions into Darnell and Tiffany's larger one across town. I'd taken a leave of absence from work while I adjusted to my newfound parenthood role and settled Darnell and Tiffany's estate. Tasha and Monica, along with their three grown children, Remney, Saylor, and Camden, had been instrumental in helping me acclimate, visiting as often as they could, but it just wasn't enough. I was floundering, and the kids weren't doing much better because I had no idea how to help myself, let alone the children who needed my help more than anything.

I went to sleep as the bachelor fun-uncle who thought Twinkies and Kool-Aid were a balanced breakfast for children and woke as a man trying to swim through his own sea of grief while helping a pair of small children navigate a world without the two people they'd depended on since the second they were born. I thought I was muddling through it until early one morning, sitting in a booth of a diner I frequented with my brother when our busy schedules aligned, I saw what I was doing to my niece and nephew.

Simon's eyes were haunted and his fingernails ragged from his nervous picking. Juni's curly hair was so knotted and snarled that I'd considered just cutting it all off. Their skin, normally a golden caramel, was sickly pale, and they had dark circles around their eyes. I wasn't sure whether those were from their erratic sleep schedule or their unhealthy diet, but I knew it wasn't normal for seemingly healthy children to change so drastically in such a short amount of time. I had let my grief consume me, and in turn, it was consuming them as well.

I immediately picked up the phone and called Tiffany's Aunt Tasha. I let the tears I'd been holding at bay for weeks roll down my face as I finally admitted that I couldn't do this alone and needed the help that she'd offered.

Within a week, our apartment was packed and we were on the road to Rojo, Texas, the town where Tiffany had grown up and where her children would now do the same.

As the final credits started rolling, Juni let out a loud yawn. She slid off the couch and darted over to the mini trampoline I'd bought for her to work off some of her excess energy, knowing that if she didn't move soon, she'd be asleep. She grabbed the bar and started jumping, screeching like the monkeys in the movie had done while Simon pulled the blanket from the back of the couch as he curled up.

"Bedtime, little monkeys," I said as I shut my laptop. "Tomorrow's a big day, and we've gotta wake up early."

"I'm going to school!" Simon shouted as he jumped off the couch and started dancing around the living room, making his way toward the bedroom they shared, for once not arguing that he wanted to stay up a while longer.

"Big girl!" Juni yelled, still bouncing away. I walked over and picked her up, causing her to squeal loudly when I buried my face in her neck and made growling noises. Through her laughter, she sputtered, "Big girl!"

I settled Juni on my hip and agreed with her. "You are a big girl. You get to go to school too."



"They both did great, Mr. Harris. Juni wasn't a big fan of naptime, but she settled down after a few minutes."

"What about Simon?"

"He had a great day and has already made a few friends," Merida Conner, the director of the daycare that Tasha and Monica had found for the kids, said as she led me down the hall.

"Sorry I called so many times today. I'll try to do better tomorrow," I promised.

"Call as often as you want. It's an adjustment for all of you, especially since this is the first time they've ever stayed in a school setting. Do you have your log-in so you can check the camera feed?"

"I do. I'm not really sure about the safety of that, though," I admitted. In my line of work, I saw some of the worst kind of people - people who would take the innocence of a group of playing children and warp it into something

a normal person couldn't even imagine. "It bothers me."

"If you'd like some reassurance about the safety of our network, I'd be glad to put you in touch with the people who set it up. One of them is a computer wizard, one is a tech security professional, and the other is, well, he's just a genius."

"How did you find them?"

"Their children went to daycare here and now we have their grandchildren with us," Merida explained with a wide smile. "They have a vested interest in the security and safety of our children *and* staff."

"That does make me feel a little better about it," I admitted.

When Tasha, Monica, and I had toured this private facility, Ms. Conner had asked a million insightful questions about the kids. She'd been surprised to hear that they'd never attended daycare before we moved, but Tasha explained how their mother had stayed home with them until she died. She then told her how she had been watching them since we'd moved to Rojo while I got settled into my new role as detective at the police department. Somewhere along the way, Ms. Conner's demeanor had changed from surprise to sympathy.

A door opened at the end of the hall, and a man I recognized from the department walked out holding two baby carriers with ease in addition to packing a huge backpack slung over his shoulder while a little boy held onto the leg of his pants.

"It's completely unfair how you can carry them both like they weigh nothing," Merida said as we got closer to Noble Hamilton. "You're probably the kind of guy that refuses to make more than one trip when you're carrying in groceries, aren't you?"

"No sense in doing extra work," Noble said with a grin as he stopped in front of us. He nodded at me before he said, "Detective Harris, I didn't know you had kids."

"I didn't realize you did either."

"This is my nephew, Jericho, and his sisters, Jada and Jiana. I'm on pickup duty today since my sister had an appointment."

I smiled at the little boy before I peeked at the babies in the carriers. They were identical except for the color of plastic glasses they wore, and I thought that was probably the cutest thing I'd ever seen.

Merida bent forward to run her hands over their dark curls, and the babies gave her gummy grins. The little boy let go of Noble's pants and threw

himself into her arms for a hug. She hugged him tightly and then nudged him back toward his uncle before she stood up. Addressing the three children, she used sign language as she said out loud, "I'll see you tomorrow, sweetheart."

"You will? I can't wait," Noble said with a grin, intentionally misconstruing her words, causing Merida to roll her eyes. "I had no idea you wanted to see me again so soon."

"Don't try to be cute, Noble Hamilton. Jericho is the only man in your family that's got my heart."

"That smarts, woman," Noble teased. He looked at me and asked, "How did you get your kids in here?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's got connections," Merida said mysteriously. Finally, she explained, "His children are related to the Cole family."

"Oh, that's cool. If Remney hadn't broken my heart, we might be related," Noble said as he reached for the little boy's hand.

Merida laughed. "Get out of here, Noble. Jericho, keep your uncle out of trouble, okay?"

The little boy agreed and waved his chubby little hand as he started walking past us toward the front of the center. "Bye bye, Meri!"

"Jericho is one of Juniper's classmates, and they instantly took to each other. I believe they even tried to share lunch today," Merida explained.

"I'm glad she made a friend too," I said as we neared the door. "How does who my kids are related to have anything to do with enrollment?"

"This is a privately-owned facility. It's not open to the public," Merida explained. "You have to have some sort of familial connection to enroll your children here. It's not quite as strict as it used to be, though. The facility was actually opened to take care of the children who were born into families that belonged to a few of the motorcycle clubs in this area. Since then, others have been allowed to enroll, but it's on a case-by-case basis."

"An MC? I had no idea Tasha was related to a bunch of bikers."

"From what I can remember, she's not related to them but close friends with one of the Tempests, a family that's connected to the Texas Kings MC."

"I'll have to ask her. Does it make me a horrible person that I'm glad this place is so exclusive?"

"Not at all. Every parent wants the best for their children, and that's what we strive to give them."

"Good. After all they've been through, that's what they deserve."

2.

HOLLY

“I understand that you only plan to get married once, and you want everything to be perfect, but the wedding is four days from now. Even if we *could* get the flowers you want, there’s no way the florist would be able to finish everything in time.”

I listened to the tearful bride explain that her fiancé had let it slip that his first wife had carried a bouquet of white roses in *their* wedding and how she thought that would bring bad luck to their relationship. I resisted telling her that the man's second wife had a bouquet made solely of tiger lilies, the same flower she wanted everything changed to now.

I only knew that information because the man was one of my most loyal customers. In the last ten years, I’d planned *five* engagement parties where he was the intended groom and two weddings that were absolutely beautiful and went off without a hitch . . . just like this third one would as soon as the bride realized she was going to have roses whether she liked it or not.

I loved my job and was extremely proud of the work my crew and I did, but there were some situations that made me feel just a little bit jaded. Instances like this one, with the perpetual groom and the woman who thought she’d be the one to tame him, set my teeth on edge. That didn’t mean I wouldn’t cash their check at the end of the day, it just made me wonder if there really was someone out there for everyone.

But then again, when I saw the way my fathers looked at each other with love in their eyes even after all these years, I remembered that the risk would be worth the reward. That is, if I could ever find a man who looked at me like that. Years ago, I thought I had one - the man who loved me like I made his world complete. Until I didn’t.

He wanted one thing that I couldn’t give him no matter how much I wanted to - a child of his own. Of course I wanted the same thing, but it

wasn't meant to be. When the doctor recommended that I have a total hysterectomy to avoid the chance of the cancer spreading, I was crushed. Inconsolable. Devastated.

And, to add insult to injury, I was divorced within a year.

I glanced over at the framed picture on the corner of my desk and smiled, ignoring the ranting woman on the other end of the line to admire my beautiful children. Jericho, Jiana, and Jada might not be of my blood, but they were *every bit* of my heart.

"What do you think I should do?" the bride wailed, pulling me back into the conversation.

"Here's an idea . . ."



"If she calls crying again, I'm not sure I'll be able to control myself," Taylor Coffee, my cousin and one of the owners of Wild Flowers, the flower shop I always used for my events, said as she leaned her hip against the counter and glared at me.

Cora Dean, her partner in the business, laughed before she reminded her, "That's why I'm the one that's supposed to answer the phone."

"I think that's a good idea. When Taylor gets on a roll, she's unstoppable. She always has been, whether it's giving someone a piece of her mind or creating a breathtaking work of art out of a simple flower arrangement. That's why I know she'll make these changes stunning just like everything else she does."

"Suck-up," Cora muttered before she lifted her mug and took a sip of coffee.

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Taylor threatened.

"How about a 15 percent increase in the agreed amount for the wedding bouquets?"

"I think adding anemones to the bride's bouquet would be stunning," Taylor said, suddenly changing her tune.

I laughed along with Cora this time before I said, "I thought you might."

"I'll go see what we have in stock," Taylor said as she pushed away from the counter and headed into the back room. "I might have to go to the greenhouse, so I'll be gone for a minute."

“Take your time. Cora just made a fresh pot of coffee, and I’m not going anywhere.” The phone rang just as the bell over the front door jingled, and I waved Cora aside to help the customer in her stead. She picked up her notepad and walked toward the back room just as I caught sight of the breathtakingly handsome man walking into the store. I felt my stomach flip when he smiled, and then my heart melted when I caught sight of the children walking beside him. The little boy had a frown on his face as he looked around the store, realizing there weren’t any toys to be had, but smiled when he spotted me. The little girl had a mischievous look that made me fall in love instantly. When she grinned at me, I couldn’t help but smile back, the handsome man with her nearly forgotten. “Well, hello.”

“Hi,” the little girl said as she waved her chubby hand.

“Stay right beside me, Juni,” the man told her with a warning tone. He looked up and assessed me, taking in everything he could see above the counter before taking in the rest of the room.

“Can I help you?”

“Do you sell plants here or just flower arrangements?”

“What kind of plant are you looking for?”

The man sighed as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a withered leaf. He held it out to me and grimaced as he said, “This one.”

I couldn’t stop the laugh that burst forth and then realized he was not laughing with me. I reached out and took the leaf, trying to be a little more somber as I asked, “You don’t know what kind of plant it is?”

“It’s the kind that was in a really pretty pot on my neighbor’s porch until the kids decided that they wanted to play in the dirt and pulled all the leaves off.”

“Oh.” I could tell that the man was irritated, so I tried really hard not to smile when I noticed that there was a smudge of dirt on the boy’s cheek and some caked around his daughter’s fingernails. “Let me get someone that can help you.”

The man sighed as he looked at the refrigerated display cases behind me. Finally, he said, “I guess I’ll probably need some regular flowers as an apology too.”

“We can take care of that,” I assured him. As I was turning around to go find Cora or Taylor, I saw the little girl slip away toward the shelves that held the vases and other glassware that was for sale. “She’s getting away.”

“Huh?”

“Your little girl. She’s over . . .”

“Shit! Juni!” the man said as he spun around and looked for his daughter. As he started walking toward her, he muttered, “I swear I’m gonna buy a leash.”

I watched the man walk away, admiring the view for a second until I pulled myself together and went to find someone that could help. Cora was standing in the doorway with the phone in her hand and a smile on her face as she watched the man walk away.

“Go talk to him,” she whispered.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because . . . Well, he’s obviously married.”

“He isn’t wearing a wedding band.”

“You noticed?”

“You didn’t?”

I sighed. “He’s here for help with a plant, and I can’t do that for him.”

“But you could flirt with him.”

I could tell Cora knew something so I said, “Why are you pushing that so hard? *You go flirt with him.*”

“Just admit you’re seeing someone, and I’ll get off your ass.”

“I’m not!”

Cora scoffed, “Whatever.”

“Okay, you clearly know I am.”

“Mmhmm.”

“As a matter of fact, I have a date tonight, so *you go talk to him,*” I said as I thrust my hand out and gave her the sad little leaf. “He has questions.”

“Honey, we all have questions,” Cora said sarcastically as she inspected the leaf. “My biggest wonder is why you insist that you and this guy are dating when you haven’t let anyone in your family *know about him*, let alone meet him.”

“I have to think about the kids. I can’t bring someone into their life unless I know for sure that he’s going to stay.”

“And unless you know he’s not a total asshole.”

“I think he is,” I blurted and then put my hand over my mouth.

“Then why are you still seeing him?”

“I don’t know.”

Only a few other people knew about my online dating profile and the

adventures it had brought me. My little sister Tati, or Tot, as the family called her, had gotten together with her friends, Opal and Lola, who were younger sisters of my friends, and they'd secretly created a profile for me, our cousin Emerald, and my friends Jewel, Leia, and Lexi.

We'd been resistant at first, but after a few glasses of wine, we made a pact to at least give online dating a chance and see what was out there. We'd each met a handful of men and found most of them to be lacking in one way or another. There had been some really humorous dates along with some catastrophes, but we'd managed to keep things casual.

I hadn't kept it a secret from Van that my dating profile was still active, and he'd seemed irritated that I refused to take it down. That should have been my first red flag, but I'd ignored it. I'd been on a few other dates since the first time we went out, but they'd gone horribly, so he'd sort of become my fallback. In the last few days, I'd come to the decision that I wasn't willing to try anymore, at least where he was concerned, and planned to break things off with him at dinner tonight.

"You know he's an asshole, and you keep seeing him? Why?"

I thought about that for a second and then asked, "Wait a minute! How did you know I was dating someone?"

Through her laughter, Cora said, "As if anything in this town stays a secret."

"Seriously. How did you find out?"

Cora admitted, "Mallory and Dixie heard it from Lotus and Scout who said they found out when they overheard Lola and Opal discussing your horrible taste in men."

"I just can't even with you people," I muttered. "I should have moved away when I had the chance."

"What I want to know is what's so wrong with this guy that you're afraid to tell the family?"

"I don't have to tell the family because they apparently already know!"

"You didn't answer the question," Cora persisted. She smiled suddenly, and I realized that the gentleman and his children were back at the counter. "I know exactly which plant you need, sir. Did you happen to bring the pot with you? If not, I can . . ."

"I brought it. Can you make it look exactly like it did before so she can remain blissfully unaware?"

"I don't know what it looked like before, but I'll try."

“Your neighbor will surely appreciate the effort,” I suggested when I saw his forlorn look.

“I think the only thing that could make her happy at this point is for me to move away.”

Cora, always one to enjoy a story, especially if it included juicy gossip, leaned onto the counter and propped her chin in her hand. “I don’t recognize you, so you must be new in town. Who’s your neighbor?”

“Uh . . . her name is Margaret Wilson. She’s not a big fan of mine, and she *really* doesn’t like the kids.”

“Does she get along with your wife?”

The man raised an eyebrow at Cora’s probing question before he answered, “If I had one, I doubt she would.”

“Interesting.” She smiled at the kids before she asked, “Since you two like playing in the dirt, do you want to come to the greenhouse with me to get this potted?”

“The pot’s in the back of my truck. I’ll go get it and . . .”

“You stay put and let Holly help you choose an apology arrangement for your neighbor. The kiddos and I will take care of the pot,” Cora said as she walked around the counter and held her hands out to the kids. “Come on, you two. Let’s go get dirty.”

The man watched Cora walk off holding hands with his children and then looked over at me in shock and said, “I’m not sure what to think about that. They just walked off with a stranger and never even looked back to make sure it was okay with me.”

“Cora’s got a way with kids,” I explained with a shrug. “We’re part of a very big extended family, so she’s been surrounded by them her entire life. You should see her with mine. When she walks into the room, they forget I exist.”

The handsome man’s eyes stole a glance at my hand before he met my gaze again. “Is she your sister or sister-in-law?”

“No, more like a cousin,” I hedged, not willing to try and explain the connection between our families to a virtual stranger. It took me longer than it should to realize that he was probing to see if I was single.

Not for the first time, I regretted that I was technically off the market. Well, sort of. If someone asked Van, he’d probably say I was taken, but I wouldn’t . . . technically. Yes. I was. I am. Dating someone. A cultured, driven, professional. A handsome, educated, intelligent . . . No, I had to

break it off with him. I couldn't settle for a man like Van.

A man who has mushy, wet, fish lips when he kisses me and soft hands with a better manicure than mine. A man who managed to make me shudder at the thought of doing anything more than just kissing. A man who has a more vigorous facial routine than any woman I know and wears loafers with tassels. A man who doesn't own a single pair of jeans, thinks that khakis are casual wear, and wondered why I was shocked when he told me his housekeeper irons his boxers. A man who only tips 10 percent to the server no matter how attentive they are and constantly drives in the left lane on the highway. A man who insists on eating his hot wings and pizza with a knife and fork, won't eat the center of a cinnamon roll because it's 'too mushy,' and refuses to put butter or salt on his popcorn when he goes to the movies because he doesn't like to get his fingers dirty.

On paper, Van was perfect as far as his professional life and ambitions, but in reality, he bored me to tears. Quite honestly, I spent half the time we were together wondering how in the world no one had stabbed him yet and the other half wondering if my dad could get me a lenient sentence when I inevitably did.

I was still wondering why I was going to waste another perfectly good evening having dinner with a man who caused more irritation than attraction and was just a straight pain to be around when I realized that the gorgeous man in front of me had asked a question.

"I'm sorry," I said apologetically, shaking off my thoughts. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you'd like to have dinner with me."

I sighed and shook my head. "I can't. I have plans."

The man scoffed before he said, "Sure you do."

"What?"

"You can't have dinner with me because you already have plans."

"I do."

"For the rest of your life?"

His tone of voice was so testy that I couldn't help but get defensive, and when that happened, my go-to was sarcasm. "You're proposing so soon? But we're just now having our first argument."

The man scoffed again, and before I could retort, my phone rang. I hurried over to get it out of my bag and then had to dig around to find it, listening to Stewie Griffin's annoying voice yelling, "Mom! Mom! Mama!

Mommy!” over and over the entire time. Funny ringtone or not, I knew that Merida would only call if it was something serious, and that meant my conversation with the handsome man was over. One of my kids needed me, and that trumped everything else.

3.

DAMIEN

“Are you sure . . .”

Monica, Tasha’s wife, put her hand up and interrupted me, “You need a night off.”

“I don’t think . . .”

This time it was Tasha’s turn. “Go out and explore your new surroundings. Meet new people.”

“And for God’s sake, please get laid. You’re starting to depress me,” Monica said with a grin that belied her words. “Do we need to start making a list of eligible women in this town? Believe me, we know more than a few.”

I suddenly thought of my conversation with Merida Conner a few days ago. “That reminds me of a question I have for the two of you. I didn’t realize that the daycare you found for the kids wasn’t open to the public. Merida said that it was started by a motorcycle club?”

“Look at his face,” Monica teased. “Isn’t he cute when his nose wrinkles up like that?”

Tasha playfully slapped her wife’s arm as she shook her head. “Don’t tease him! You have to admit that the thought of a bunch of bikers starting a daycare may sound a little bizarre to the general public.”

“If you met their kids, you wouldn’t be surprised at all. They were a wild bunch, and the ones they’re bringing into the world will be just as wild, I’m sure.”

“That’s just what Juni needs - more crazy influence. That girl’s got so much energy that if I could figure out how to bottle it, I’d never be tired again.”

Tasha laughed and agreed, “None of us would - and you’d be a billionaire.”

“I remember Phoebe joking that the Kings had no choice but to open their

own facility since their children had been politely asked to never come back to any of the other ones in town,” Monica mused.

Tasha shook her head. “As if Sam and Carlie’s twins were any better. Those two were just . . . How they’ve both avoided prison is a miracle.”

“And Zoey’s a cop now!” Monica exclaimed.

“Zoey Duke?” I asked, thinking of the officer I’d met on my first day and seen several times in the weeks since I’d started at RPD.

“That’s her. Technically, she’s not a Kings’ kid. She’s a Knights’ kid, but they’re all the same, really. They’re so intertwined, no one can even remember who’s really related to who.”

“I’ve seen bikers around town wearing cuts that say Texas Kings MC and a few that have a different MC logo on them.”

Monica nodded. “The Texas Knights MC. Zoey’s dad is their president. Your chief is a member, and has been since . . . Well, since before we met him.”

“Chief Cardenas is a biker?” I asked incredulously.

“He is. That should tell you that they’re not all like the media portrays them.” Tasha grinned. “Some of them are, but we count them as friends and love them anyway.”

“So, that’s how you got the kids into the daycare? You know the bikers?” I asked.

“Yes, through our old friend Phoebe. She married into a branch of their family, and her best friend is Bird’s sister. He’s the president of the Texas Kings MC.”

“Believe me, Damien, the kids are safer at that daycare than at any other place in town. Remney, Saylor, and Camden all went there until they started school. Juni and Simon are in good hands,” Tasha assured me.

“That’s a relief. I was worried that they’d have trouble adjusting, but other than a few tears when I left them on their first day, they’ve been fine. If anything, they’re excited to go.”

“I’m glad,” Tasha said with a sad smile. “Tiffany wanted to stay home with them, and she’d even mentioned homeschool but . . .” Tasha sighed and then shook off the frown before she said, “The kids are safe and happy, and that’s all that matters now.”

Trying to find a lighter subject, Monica said, “Speaking of which, they’ll be safe and happy here while we spoil them rotten, and *you* need to have a night to yourself.”

Knowing that they were just looking out for me, I agreed. “I’ll go somewhere and have a burger and a beer before I go home. Will that make you happy?”

“If you want a good burger, go to Grazie’s,” Monica said firmly. “The Stache Burger is my favorite.”

“That settles it. Grazie’s it is.”



HOLLY

“Are you feeling okay, Van?” I asked my date. I still couldn’t call him my boyfriend and realized that I wouldn’t ever. This had to end, and soon, because his petulant expression combined with his dramatic sighing were enough to make me wonder how hard it would be to strangle a full-grown man with his own tie. I reached for my phone to ask Google but stopped when Van spoke.

“What are you thinking about right now?”

I looked up from where I’d been studying Van’s perfectly pressed and starched button-up shirt and gave him a smile as I said, “Just letting my imagination run wild.”

“I’m sitting right here in front of you, trying to hold a conversation, and you’re off daydreaming in La La Land,” Van said before he sighed. Again. “When we matched, I thought that our time together would be more productive than it has been.”

“Productive? Is there a quota I didn’t know about?”

“A quota? Do you even . . . nevermind. We’re getting off track.”

“We are?” I turned away so he couldn’t see the look on my face as I silently cursed myself for not arranging a rescue call just in case the date went badly. I’d been determined to give Van a chance, but I realized now that wasn’t going to happen. No amount of wishful thinking would turn him into the kind of man whose voice made me smile or touch made me weak at the knees.

For some reason, an image of the handsome man I’d met at Wild Flowers a few days ago came to mind. He was everything I wanted but knew that I shouldn’t. His entire demeanor was strong and . . . Was being competent a trait anyone else found sexy or was that just me? He looked like the kind of

man who could go from fixing his son's bicycle to braiding his daughter's hair in an instant.

His hands looked strong with wide, blunt fingertips. His fingernails were short and well-maintained but not manicured and shiny like Van's. He looked healthy and fit without looking as if he spent hours a day in the gym, and his skin looked soft and natural, unlike Van's shiny, over-moisturized face. My thoughts drifted again as I remembered how mesmerizing the play of muscles were in the man's forearm and how his fingers looked strong and gentle . . .

My inner voice scoffed as I asked myself, *“Really, Holly? His fingers looked gentle? That's not even a thing.”*

“You're doing it again,” Van snapped as he set his wineglass on the table hard enough to surely endanger the stem.

He was such a wine snob that I was surprised he'd even taken a sip, considering the server didn't bring the bottle out for him to inspect. It had taken everything I had not to roll my eyes at his reaction when I'd ordered a beer to go with my dinner. I sipped on the ice cold brew while he swirled the wine around in his glass and sniffed it as if he were in an upscale restaurant and not a place known for its novelty burger that was held together with a screwdriver of all things.

“What exactly am I doing that irritates you so badly?”

“We've been seeing each other for almost two months now, and I've tried to find a delicate way to say this, but I've come to know you well enough that I suspect you'll laugh it off or say something sarcastic in response.”

“Just say it.”

“This isn't going to work if you aren't able to make more time for me, Holly.”

“Okay.”

“Okay? That's not even an answer.”

“Technically, counselor, you didn't ask a question.”

I knew I wasn't imagining it when I saw Van's shoulders go back just a hair as a self-satisfied smirk replaced his irritated expression. “That is something else I need to speak to you about.”

“What?”

“As the new assistant district attorney, I will have social obligations that will need to include you.”

“I don't think . . .”

“That leads us back to what I said, Holly. If this is going to work, you need to make more time for me.”

“We both have busy lives, so we’ve just had to take our time when we could find it, but that leads me to . . .”

“I took time out of my life to make plans with you, which you canceled last minute,” he argued.

“Is that what you’ve been huffy about? Because I had to cancel our dinner plans Tuesday?”

“Yes. It’s nice of you to finally acknowledge how inconvenient that was for me.”

“I didn’t realize it because I honestly don’t care.” The look of shock on Van’s face was almost comical. “You’re irritated that my daughter had an ear infection?”

“I’m irritated that you thought it was okay to cancel dinner because of that. You’ve mentioned that your family lives here in town, so obviously, you always have a sitter available. I rearranged my schedule to have dinner with you only to be put off as if it was nothing.”

My mouth was hanging open in shock, and I snapped it closed so hard that my teeth made a horrible clicking noise before I asked, “You don’t think my daughter’s comfort and welfare is more important than your busy calendar?”

“It’s not that. I’m sure your kids are great. I’d know that if you’d ever introduce me to your family,” he hinted.

I couldn’t help the snort that came out right before I burst out laughing. I tried to control myself and cleared my throat a few times before I let him have just a pinch of the brutally honest tirade that was racing through my mind. “And you’ll *never* have the opportunity to meet them.”

“That makes no sense. I’m going to obviously have to . . .”

“The fact that you say ‘have to’ rather than ‘dying to’ really hammers that nail into the coffin.” I thought about it for a second and then said, “No, you don’t know. Obviously. Because if you did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation in the first place.”

“The conversation about your disregard for . . .” I cackled, and it sounded deranged even to my own ears. “I think we should assess how this is going to work out between us.”

“There’s no point in having that discussion,” I said as I motioned for the waitress. When he started to argue, I put my hand up to stop him and looked

up when our waitress got to the table. “Can you have the kitchen pack my meal to go, and bring the ticket for my order to me at the bar?”

The waitress glanced uncomfortably from me to Van and back again before she nodded and said, “Yes, ma’am.”

“What are you doing? We need to talk about this, Holly.”

“No. We don’t. I tried, Van. I really did. I kept telling myself that if I’d just take a little more time to get to know you, I might find some redeeming qualities. You *should* be perfect for me, but the problem is that I just . . .”

“Your profile didn’t mention that you were so hot and cold. I’ve invited you to my house numerous times, but you always have an excuse as to why you can’t come over.”

“When you text me at seven to ask me to come over for dinner, I’m always going to decline. By then, I’ve already eaten, and I’m busy getting my children ready for bed.”

“Somehow, our conversation always circles back to your children when I’m the one that needs your attention right now. I feel like this conversation isn’t going to be productive at all,” Van said as he stared daggers into me. “When you’ve had a few minutes to calm down and think it through, you’ll realize just exactly what you’ll be missing if you get up and walk away from this table, Ms. McClane.”

“What *I’ll* be missing?” I laughed bitterly before I picked up my beer and took another sip. “Buddy, for such a smart guy, you’re really stupid.”

“Excuse me?”

“That’s not even my name! You work for the DA and think I’m going to believe you didn’t try and look up my record? Really? Holly *is* my first name, but my middle name isn’t Gennaro, and my last name isn’t McClane. A quick Google search or just one iota of pop culture knowledge would have told you where I came up with that alias.”

“I meant to ask you about that after I wasn’t able to find anything other than movie references, but the conversation never came up. We’re such a good match, I didn’t consider it important enough to dwell on. If this progresses the way I want it, you’ll take my last name anyway. Obviously you and I would make a perfect match and someday we’d make a perfect family. With your coloring and mine, we’ll make beautiful children who will look wonderful beside us in the media shots that will be put out when I . . .”

“Hold up there, Ricky Carmichael. You’re racing down the track at warp speed and somehow haven’t realized that you’re about to hit the berm.”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“It’s a motocross analogy. I wouldn’t expect you to understand. It’s obvious that we don’t know *anything* about each other, or you’d know what I mean by the berm and why I referenced Ricky Carmichael. To sum it all up, you don’t know my name, and I didn’t realize you were a racist prick. This conversation is over. I’m out of here.” I pushed my chair back and started to stand, but Van grabbed my arm. “Now would be a good time for you to get your clammy hand off of me and say goodbye.”

“I’m not finished talking to you.”

“Listen, fucker,” I growled as I yanked my wrist out of his grasp. It wasn’t often that I reverted back to my rough and tumble teenage years when I was considered one of the guys and acted accordingly. That side tended to come out when I was angry or backed into a corner. The first half of my childhood was spent in pampered decadence, but the second half was when the fun started. That was the part that taught me how to deal with men who crossed the line. “We’re done here. No, not just here, we’re *permanently* done.”

“I have not wasted weeks cultivating this relationship only for you to flip a switch and turn into gutter trash at the drop of a hat. You will *not* speak to me in that tone again.”

“Gutter trash? Sweetheart, just because you couldn’t dig deep enough to find out my real name so you could look into my past doesn’t mean I didn’t take the time to look into yours. If anyone’s trash, it’s you. No amount of ironed underwear or prissy wine knowledge is going to make you anything other than a narcissistic asshole who has done nothing but step on people to get to the top. I tried to tell myself that was a good thing - you’re driven, you look toward the future and do whatever needs to be done to reach your goals, but that’s not really it, is it? Your self-assured, snobby, rich guy demeanor is all an act, and you’re terrified that the mask will slip and someone will see what you really are - a tiny little racist prick who thinks that my blonde hair and blue eyes are the most important things I’d ever pass down to my children. I’m not even going to try and explain how bigoted that is or why it enrages me like it does because I’m not going to waste another minute on your dumb ass. You need a therapist, not a girlfriend. I, on the other hand, need to have a drink so I don’t end up in jail for shoving that basket of rolls up your ass. I’m going to leave now, and if you ever see me out in public, pretend like you don’t know me because that’s what I’m going to do to you.”

“I *will* see you again, Holly. As you mentioned, I’m a highly motivated, driven man. I know what I want, and I pursue it until it’s mine. You have a pre-made family, and I haven’t probed about that, but I can deal with it. As for your extended family that you’ve worked so hard to keep me away from, we’ll work through that together when the time is right. Enjoy your little fit, and I’ll be in touch when you’ve had time to get over it. I’ll expect an apology before we can . . .”

“Remember how I said you don’t even know my real name?”

“We’ll discuss that later when you’ve calmed down.”

“No need to discuss it later, Van,” I argued with laughter in my voice. “I’m more than happy to tell you right now. My name is Holly Hamilton, daughter of Marcus Hamilton. Yes, *the* Marcus Hamilton who you’ve unsuccessfully gone toe to toe with in the courtroom multiple times. The fact that I’m his daughter should explain why your obsession with eugenics when discussing the fairytale family you’ve imagined made me so fucking angry. Now, since you know who I am and where I come from, I’m sure you understand that your insistence on seeing me again is laughable.”

Van sat quietly for a second, the expression on his face calculating before he smiled. “The fact that Marcus Hamilton is your adopted father is . . .”

“If you say it’s anything other than terrifying, I’ll know for sure that you’re an idiot. My dad is not one you want to go up against professionally *or* personally.”

“He’d make a wonderful ally.”

I burst out laughing and said, “When I tell him about this conversation, he’ll become an enemy, and as for what you said about pursuing me - have at it, little man. The men in my family will eat you for breakfast, but they’re not the ones you should worry about. The women are *much* more intimidating. Keep that in mind and have the life you deserve, prick.”

I grabbed my purse off the chair next to me and walked off without so much as a backward glance, weaving through the tables toward the bar area where I found an empty stool to sit and have a drink while I sent out a mass text in the hopes that one or more of my friends were available to hang out so this entire night wasn’t a bust.

We’d either sit around and laugh about how much dating sucks, or we’d find out Van’s address and burn his fucking house down. I was more than okay with either of those scenarios.

4.

DAMIEN

I wiped my mouth on my napkin as I turned to see who had sat down next to me. It was Holly, the woman from the flower store, and she looked livid. Her brows were furrowed, and she had her lips firmly pressed together as she furiously typed away on her phone. It started to buzz over and over, and she kept typing, probably having some sort of intense conversation that might explain her ire.

The manager of the restaurant, a woman I'd admired often as I watched her bustle around talking to employees and customers, waved the bartender away and came to stand in front of the woman next to me. She leaned forward so she could rest her elbows on the bar and propped her chin in her hand as she asked, "Are you calling for a rescue, or do I need to?"

"Do I look like I need a rescue?" Holly asked testily.

"You look like you need a drink," she replied as she reached under the bar for some shot glasses before she turned around to search the bottles for something to serve her friend. She finally found what she was looking for and spun around with a grin. "I've got just the thing."

"I shouldn't have anything with the mood I'm in," the blonde beauty hedged as she shook her head. "I'll just have a . . ."

"Bullshit. You'll have a shot with me to celebrate telling off that uptight prick. He's condescending to me and my employees every damn time he comes in."

"I'm sorry, Emma."

"It's not your fault," she replied as she poured the shots. She slid one across the bar, ignoring her friend's refusal, as she asked, "I guess that's the guy you've been seeing?"

"I don't even want to know how you found out."

"Was it a secret?"

“I thought so.”

“So, your family doesn’t know about him?”

“You’ve met him. Do you think he’s been around my family?”

“Obviously not. He’s not walking with a limp, and he’s got full use of both of his hands. If I took a guy like that home, my uncles would have already found a way to bury him in a field somewhere.”

“And your uncles are *much* more well-behaved than mine.”

“Really? You don’t think the Dukes are as scary as the rest of them, huh?”

“I have no illusion that they wouldn’t work together toward a common goal, but I think they’re much more open-minded than my uncle and the rest of my extended family.”

“Keep thinking that, honey,” the manager scoffed. She poured another round and then raised her eyebrows in question when she saw me watching. I shrugged, so she grabbed another shot glass and poured me one too. When she slid it across the bar toward me, she warned, “If you say anything man-like and stupid, one of us . . . probably her . . . will make you eat that shot glass.”

“I should probably keep my mouth shut for my own safety, but I have to know - what exactly are the parameters of man-like and stupid?” I’d felt Holly’s gaze on me since the manager noticed me eavesdropping, so I turned and raised my eyebrows expectantly, waiting on her answer. “Give me an example.”

“Well, with the way I feel right now, breathing qualifies,” Holly said drolly as she lifted her glass.

I lifted my glass at the same time the other woman did and then caused both of them to laugh when I took a deep breath and held it, widening my eyes dramatically as I let my cheeks puff out. I blew it out and smiled as their laughter drifted off. “Let me propose a toast.”

“That’s probably not a good idea,” the manager muttered.

Holly raised an eyebrow in challenge and purred, “Oh, please do.”

“To women who aren’t afraid to speak up and make sure they’re heard, strong enough to follow through with anything they set their mind to, and confident enough not to give a fuck about anyone else’s opinion.”

“*That* is what a real man sounds like,” Holly said with a grin as she clinked her glass against mine and then her friend’s. “Good job.”

Holly’s phone buzzed, and she picked it up to read the text as she turned

her shot glass over and rested it on a napkin. “That’s enough for me. As it is, I’ll have to sit here for a while to make sure I’m sober enough to drive home.”

A waitress appeared beside Holly and asked, “Do you want to eat your food here at the bar instead of taking it to go?”

Holly glanced at my half-eaten burger before she shrugged and answered, “Yes, thank you.”

“Um, your . . . um, the man at the table is insisting that I leave your food on his ticket.”

The manager laughed and said, “You know what? Go ahead and leave her meal on his ticket and add five shots of Jager and a 20 percent tip. If he has a problem with that, call me over and I’ll explain the charges.”

“He’s gonna shit,” Holly chuckled as the waitress hurried off

“Well, if he gives us any problems, we’ve got this big strong man here to protect us.” Holly and the manager started laughing, and I stared at them in shock, feeling as if they were laughing at me. “No offense, my friend, but you’d have to know our histories to understand that we don’t need any help in that department.”

“Self-defense is mandatory in our families. You learn it from a very young age or you end up suffocating at the bottom of a dogpile.”

“Survival of the fittest,” the manager explained.

“Are the two of you related somehow?”

“Sort of.”

“A little bit.”

I tilted my head at their non-answers and chuckled. “Is that a yes or a no?”

“Both,” they said in unison and started giggling again.

“You explain it while I make my rounds. Don’t leave out the part about missing mothers, surprise siblings, and all the drama that caused. It’s quite a story,” the manager assured me with a mischievous grin. Her smile disappeared as she reached across the bar and rested her hand on Holly’s arm. “If you need me, just wave, and I’ll be here.”

“Thanks, Emma.”

Another waitress appeared and set Holly’s plate in front of her. I smiled when I saw that we’d ordered the same thing - a huge burger held together by a screwdriver sticking out of the top. Instead of watching Holly get started, I went back to my own meal and waited for her to take a second to explain.

I had to reach down and discreetly adjust myself after the third throaty moan Holly let out while enjoying her food. Finally, she looked over at me and sighed as she said, “I’ve eaten here a million times since I was a kid. I’ve literally tried everything on the menu, but this is still my favorite.”

I chuckled, remembering the funny menu listings and their descriptions. “Since you know this place so well, I’d guess you’d know the best things to order no matter what a person is craving.”

“True. Is this your first time?”

“It is.”

“You have to try everything at least once, but I can almost guarantee this burger is going to become your favorite.”

I wanted to use that as an opportunity to ask her to come back here with me soon, but I wasn’t going to risk it since she blew off my first invitation. At first, I’d thought it was because I was Black, but now I realized it had been because she was seeing someone. Now that she wasn’t, I was going to swoop in and take this chance to get to know her so that I could be first in line when she was ready to date again.

“So, tell me the story about how you’re sort of, but not quite related to the manager here.”

“Emma. Her aunt and uncles grew up with my dad and uncle. Her . . . I guess you’d say unofficially adopted grandma, Sandra, also sort of unofficially adopted my dad and his brother when they were young. So after my brothers and I came to live with them, we all became part of the family.”

“Unofficially.”

“Yes.”

“Where do the missing mom and surprise siblings come in?”

“Well, I wasn’t there for this part, obviously, but I heard about it later. Let me see if I can get this straight on the first try and *really* confuse you.”

“Should I take notes?”

“Let’s see if you can keep up.” Holly took a deep breath and then put a finger up each time she mentioned a new name. “Sam, Zeke, Jace, and Kari were the only children of their father. Their mother disappeared when they were young, and their dad raised them alone. When they were adults, a man named Tucker followed his friend, Sonny, to town and then Tucker’s girlfriend, Drea, who’s still his wife to this day, figured out that Tucker was the older brother of the Duke children because *his* mother had also disappeared when he was a child. Do you follow me?”

“There are two options here: either they had the same mother who was prone to run or they had the same father who killed off his wives and hid their bodies while he pretended they’d run away.”

Holly burst out laughing and said, “You must be a true crime junkie like me if your mind instantly went to someone covering up a murder.”

I shrugged, knowing it was much more than that. “Which is right?”

“The mother was prone to run. Now, what brings Emma into the equation, since she’s not one of Tucker’s kids or the Dukes’ kids, is that *her* mom was one of the daughters that the runner had after she left Rojo and found a new man.”

“Emma’s grandmother was a bigamist who left her children spread out around . . . just Rojo or are we talking multiple jurisdictions?”

Holly tipped her beer at me and grinned. “Definitely a true crime junkie.”

“It’s a little bit more than that. I’m a detective.”

“A private detective or a *detective*?”

“I work for Rojo PD.”

“Interesting.”

Holly seemed a little put off by that, and I wanted to redirect the conversation so she didn’t slip away. “I’m assuming it was multiple jurisdictions because this town is too small to get away with all that.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Holly took a sip of her beer and then explained, “Her first two families were in Texas, but I think the third was in DC or something.”

“And how exactly did they meet?”

“I don’t know that part, but Emma’s mom and two sisters suddenly appeared on Kari’s front porch, and then they were all a family.”

“That was unofficially adopted by a woman named Sandra . . .”

“And her husband Tink.”

“Sandra and Tink, the same people you consider your grandparents.”

“Yes. One set of them. I have two.”

“Just two? Shouldn’t you have at least four?”

“Technically, I should have . . .” Holly’s voice trailed off as she looked up and silently counted. “I have no idea, really, but suffice it to say that Sandra and Tink are one set and my other set of grandparents, unofficial, of course, are Martha and Smokey.”

“Okay. That’s as clear as mud.”

“To add another layer, the woman who owns this restaurant is the daughter-in-law of Martha and Smokey because *both of her husbands* are part of their family.” I must have looked confused because Holly burst out laughing before she said, “Stumped you on that one, didn’t I?”

“Husbands, plural? Like first husband and then second husband? I feel like that should be right, but if it is, then it wouldn’t be so funny.”

“Two,” Holly said as she lifted up two fingers. “She has two husbands. I can’t even find a halfway decent boyfriend, let alone a husband, and Maria has *two*. It’s completely unfair.”

“Maria’s a saint,” Emma said as she walked over and stopped behind the bar to chat again. “I love John and Mattie, but if I had to put up with two men at once for any length of time, I’d end up in prison.”

“Maria must not have had any brothers, or she’d have realized that before she went into the relationship,” Holly said before she finished off her beer and then slid the empty bottle across the table toward Emma. “Beer me, please.”

“Are you driving?” I asked.

“What are you, a cop?” Holly asked with a giggle before she put her hand over her mouth and hiccupped. “Wow. It’s been a while, and my tolerance is way down.”

“You did have two double shots of liquor, and you’re working on your fourth beer,” Emma pointed out.

“Fifth,” Holly said, pointing toward the cooler behind Emma. “Please.”

“You’re gonna feel it in the morning, especially if your girls show up and start throwing them back with you.”

“They are all unavailable at the moment, so it’s just me, myself, and Shiner.”

“We’ll find you a ride,” Emma promised as she slid a fresh beer over.

“Adam, Heath, and Joshua are on their way up. One of them can take me home.”

“Are those your brothers?”

“Cousins,” the women said at the same time. And then, as if they’d rehearsed it, they said, “Sort of.”

I laughed along with them but then I couldn’t help but ask Holly, “How long were you and the boyfriend together?”

“Not once.” When I tilted my head in question, Holly explained, “We’d been talking online for a while before I finally agreed to meet him for dinner.”

That was about six weeks ago and I've seen him in person once or twice a week since then."

Emma scoffed, "If you consider *that* a boyfriend, you are sadly mistaken."

"I agree with Emma. That's a casual acquaintance, not a boyfriend."

"On paper, he was the *perfect* boyfriend. Very driven and successful and very, very, *very* busy."

"How does that make him perfect?" I asked, confused.

"If *you* were my boyfriend, how often would you expect to see me?"

"Every day? At least every other day? Go out to dinner at least once a week, spend the weekends together . . ."

Holly shook her head. "Nope. That would never work."

"Why wouldn't that work?"

"Ain't nobody got time for all that," Holly scowled as she waved her hand dismissively. She picked up her beer and after a long drink said, "I've got a business to run and kids to raise. The last thing I need is someone else I have to take care of. I am not ironing anyone's boxers."

I had just taken a sip of my tea and choked when I sputtered out a laugh. I was still coughing when Emma asked, "Who the fuck irons their boxers?"

Holly used her thumb to point over her shoulder where her 'boyfriend' had been earlier. "That guy."

"No wonder he's so fucking uptight. I'd think that would chafe. Especially if you used starch," Emma pondered.

I shuddered as I agreed, "Right?"

I had finally cleared my throat and was taking another sip when Holly caused me to choke again by saying, "I only wear underwear when I have on pants. I go commando if I'm wearing a skirt. Easy breezy, if you know what I mean."

Emma was still laughing as she sputtered, "You're drunk."

"I believe I might be." Holly held up her hand and squinted as she put her thumb and finger about an inch apart. "Just a little bit, though."

"Watch her while I call some Forrester brothers to make sure they're on their way," Emma ordered before she walked off.

"How drunk are you?"

Holly slowly turned to look at me. Her eyes roamed up and down before she said, "Almost drunk enough to make a colossal mistake."

"You think I'd be a mistake?"

“Absolutely,” Holly said with a sigh.

“Why?”

“You are sexy as hell, but I could never go there.”

“Go where?”

“To the dark side.”

“What?”

“I just can’t, even though a handsome man is my kryptonite. I just don’t have time to deal with everything it would take to date someone like you.” I sat there, stunned, with my mouth hanging open as she shook her head and sighed. “It’s a pity, though, because you seem like a really fun guy.”

“A man like me? I’ve dealt with a lot of shit in my life, but I don’t think I’ve ever had a woman I’m interested in be quite so passively racist to my face before.”

“Huh? I’m the last person anyone could ever accuse of that,” Holly said emphatically.

“Then what the fuck was that shit?”

“What shit? You think that I’m a racist because I won’t date a man like you?”

“Obviously.”

Holly laughed so loudly that the other patrons at the bar stopped talking and looked at us. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding.”

“Then how exactly do you explain . . .”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you or anyone,” Holly said as she stood and pointed her finger at me. “You can think whatever you want about me, mister, but you clearly don’t know me at all, and after that bullshit, you’ll never get the chance.”

“Why would I want to, knowing the color of my skin is the only reason you’ve got for not dating me?”

“Yeah. Sure. Let’s go with that. That’s me. I’m a horrible person who will only associate with white people. You, on the other hand, no matter the color of your skin, are a prick.”

5.

HOLLY

I smiled down at my daughters when I heard Jiana squeal happily and saw that the two of them were taking in their surroundings, happy to be out of the house and exploring our neighborhood again now that the weather had finally warmed up. I had taken the afternoon off before last minute preparations began for Papa and Dad's wedding in a few days. I thought today would be the perfect opportunity to spend a little time in the sun while I went to visit my best friend who was recovering from surgery.

The girls were strapped into the wagon I used all the time and grinned up at me before they looked away again. This had been the best thing I'd received at the baby shower my friends and family threw for me. Since then, it had been my go-to shower gift.

I smiled when I thought of how I'd made the comment that I probably wouldn't need to use it for long because life would get so much easier once the girls started walking. The veteran moms all had a good laugh at my naivety. Now that the girls were crawling, I knew just how wrong I'd been. I wasn't sure how I would be able to cope when they really got mobile. It was already difficult keeping Jericho contained, but when the girls joined him, I'd be outnumbered and outgunned.

As if he were trying to prove my theory, Jericho tried to tug his hand out of mine and take off, but I soon realized it wasn't just to run away, it was to run toward the three girls who were camped out on the porch of the house where we were headed.

"Hi, Holly!" Aspen, my best friend's daughter, said as she hopped up and started our way, the other young women trailing behind her. I let go of Jericho's hand, and he rushed her way. She was right there to swoop him up when he stumbled on the uneven grass. She spun him around before she propped him on her hip. "He's getting heavier."

“I haven’t measured him lately, but he outgrew his shoes overnight and his clothes are getting tight. He must be going through a growth spurt.”

The other girls who’d been sitting on the porch joined us, and my daughters started to squirm, ready to be held too.

“Can we get them out of the wagon?” Lorelei, my friend Adam’s daughter, asked as she bent down to touch Jada’s hand.

I nodded as Seraphin Westland, my friend Sin’s teenage daughter, leaned in to give me a hug. “It’s good to see you, sweetheart! When did all of you get in?”

“Yesterday,” she explained as she pulled away to pick up Jiana.

“Are you going to my house to visit Mom?” Aspen asked me before she blew a raspberry on Jericho’s cheek, causing him to giggle.

“I am. Is she awake?” Aspen nodded. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s pretending she’s fine, but she’s in a lot of pain. Dad’s with her now. He’s cooking dinner while she reads.”

“Are you guys going to stay for a while after the wedding or . . .”

I stopped when Aspen shook her head. “Dad has a meeting next week that he can’t miss, and he’s taking me with him so Mom can focus on getting better. Will you . . . I can’t even ask because she’ll kill me.”

“I will watch over her for you. I promise.”

“I know you will. Adam promised he would, too, and Brighten’s just down the street, so I know she’ll be around.”

“You know she’ll have plenty of people popping in to check on her,” I reassured the young woman.

“Can we take the kids to the playground?” Seraphin asked.

There was a park near the entrance to our neighborhood with a ton of playground equipment and swings that the girls loved. I knew that these girls were more than capable of taking care of my kids, and since it was so close by, I didn’t have to worry about them crossing any busy streets to get there.

“Sure. I’ll be hanging out with Emerald, and I’ve got my phone if you need me.” I leaned over and kissed my son before I did the same to my daughters, adjusting their caps before I stepped back. I signed as I spoke to my daughters, knowing that the girls who were watching them would understand I was really talking to them. “Keep your hats on and be good girls, okay?”

“We’ll make sure they do,” Lorelei assured me. “See you in a little bit.”

“Do you want the wagon?” I asked. When the girls shook their heads, I

shrugged, knowing how heavy the squirming girls could be but not willing to argue since the teenagers were doing me a favor. “Call if you need me to bring it over.”

“We will,” Seraphin called out over her shoulder as they crossed the street carrying my children.

I watched them for a few seconds and then pulled my phone out of my pocket and took a picture as they walked away, knowing that I’d cherish the memory as the young women and my own children got older. I smiled as I thought of how much my Gamma and Grammy would love a copy and made a mental note to print copies for them. I finished my trek to Emerald’s front porch and left the wagon at the bottom of the steps.

I pulled her front door open, and before I walked in, I called out, “It’s me. Is everyone decent?”

“Not a day in my life,” Hunter said from the kitchen. “Come on in.”

I walked through the empty living room into the kitchen and was surprised to see Hunter alone. “Hey there. Where’s Em?”

“I convinced her to lay down for a while. I was hoping she’d take a nap, but no luck so far.”

“How’s she doing?”

“She’s stubborn,” he complained.

“As if that’s anything new,” I commented. I walked over and gave him a side hug before I asked, “What are you making us for dinner?”

“The queen requested lasagna.”

“Aspen said you’re leaving in a few days.”

“Yeah. I’ve got a business meeting I can’t miss, and things are a little uncomfortable with Sherry since I’ve been here so long already. I need to see if I can salvage that before it’s too far gone.”

“Why didn’t she come with you?”

Hunter blew out a frustrated breath. “I asked her if she wanted to come down several times, at least to visit for a day or two, but she’s got to work, and honestly, she’s not comfortable with this whole situation.”

“Which situation? The one where you’ve been staying in your ex-wife’s house while you take care of her?”

“That sums it up.”

“You know she’s going to have to get used to this dynamic, or it’s going to make for some very awkward situations, right?”

“I know.” Hunter sighed. “We’ll have to see how it goes once I’m home,

but I don't have high hopes."

"In her defense, it *is* a little weird that you stay here when you come to Rojo, but it works for all of you, so she's just gonna have to cope."

"She's not very good at that." I nodded slowly, knowing that Hunter wouldn't let his girlfriend get in the way of the friendship that he and Emerald still shared even after their divorce. "It might be easier if Emerald was seeing someone, but she hasn't had much luck in the dating game lately."

"I hear that."

Hunter laughed. "I heard about your scuffle with the ADA. How's that working out for you?"

"The only one that's happy about Van's insistence in trying to woo me back is Taylor because she's making a killing off the arrangements he keeps sending."

"At least someone's reaping the benefits of your failed relationship."

"It wasn't really a relationship. I was always keeping my options open, hoping that Mr. Right might swoop in and carry me away."

"You know, Jordan and Micah are both single."

"Hush. As if I'd go there."

"If things stay on the same path they're on now, I'll be single soon."

"Ew. Gross," I said, pretending to gag. "After I throw up, I'm going to hang out with Em for a while. The girls took my kids to the park, so I may just crawl into bed with her."

"Now that is something I can get behind," Hunter teased, wiggling his eyebrows. "If you do, I want to watch."

"I meant to take a nap, weirdo," I chided as I pushed at his shoulder. "Keep an eye out toward the park for me."

"Of course," Hunter agreed before he turned back to his work. "Call me if things get interesting."

I flipped him off over my shoulder as I walked away and heard him laughing as I started up the stairs to visit my friend. Once I was outside her bedroom, I tapped gently on the door, hoping I wouldn't wake her if she did happen to be sleeping. When she called out for me to come in, I realized I should have known better. The woman thought she was invincible, and it made the people who loved her crazy.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" I asked as I opened the door.

Emerald was sitting up in bed with her injured arm propped on a pillow beside her and her e-reader in her other hand. She laid the e-reader on the

bed next to her leg and grinned before she said, “I meant to stop three chapters ago, but then things got steamy.”

I kicked my shoes off and got into bed beside her before I picked up the e-reader and looked at the screen. “If it’s that good, I’ll have to remember to put it on my TBR.”

“With the hundreds of other books you don’t have time to read?”

“Exactly.”

“Where are the kids?”

“The girls took them to the park.” I leaned back and rested my head on the pillow before I said, “Lay down and let’s chat like we used to when we were young.”

“We’re still young.” I raised an eyebrow and Emerald laughed. “Youngish.”

“I’m almost 40.”

“I’m 41. What of it? I’m in my prime, dammit,” Emerald argued as she laid down and turned to face me, her casted hand pointing toward the ceiling.

“When we were in our prime, your bones weren’t so brittle that you broke them on someone’s face.”

“You should have seen the other guy,” Emerald boasted through her smile.

“Thanks for coming to my dad’s rescue,” I told her again, referring to how she and a few of our friends had helped defend my dad from my little brother’s biological family just a few days ago.

“He’s been my uncle a lot longer than he’s been your dad.”

“True, since you’re so much older than I am.”

“Hag.”

“Skank,” I retorted.

“You know you love me.”

“I barely tolerate you most of the time.”

“I thought you reserved that kind of indifference for the boring men you date.”

“That was harsh.”

“The truth often is,” Emerald said with a sigh as her eyes started to droop. “I’m going to nap now, not because you told me to but because you’re so freaking boring.”

“Back at ya,” I said before I yawned and let my eyes flutter closed. “I can’t go to sleep. My kids will be back any time now.”

“Let Hunter take care of them. It will remind him how hard it is to have babies underfoot.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Sherry has been trying to convince him to have kids.”

“At his age? Hell no.”

“He’s the same age as you.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot you’re a cradle-robbing cougar.”

“I hate your face.”

“Shut up and go to sleep.”

“When we wake up, are you going to tell me about the hottie you got into it with at Grazie’s the other night?”

“Maybe.”

“Adam said you were so pissed off that you could barely speak coherently.”

“That was the alcohol.” I opened my eyes, and as if she could feel my stare, Em opened her eyes and grinned. “I would ask how you knew about that but . . .”

“I know everything, sweetheart.”

“I guess that comes with old age.”



DAMIEN

We were almost to the city limits by the time the man in the passenger seat had his clothes changed. When I glanced over, I saw that he was eagerly looking around at the familiar countryside.

He had been vibrating with excitement since I picked him up, constantly checking the rearview mirror to make sure no one was following us and reveling in the scenery while he rediscovered his freedom.

“How long have you been in prison?”

“A lifetime.” Transporting the freshly released inmate, Hawk Forrester, from the prison gates to a wedding in his hometown was my assignment today. Since I was the low man on the totem pole, the powers that be, namely the lead detective, Luc Vance, hadn’t given me much choice in the matter. Not that I would have told him no since I did want to make an impression, however, hauling around a criminal wasn’t how I’d planned on doing it. “I have to ask, man. Who did you piss off badly enough for them to force you to drive all the way down to pick me up before you turn around and

go right back to Rojo?”

“I’m the rookie, so I get the shit work until another new guy comes along.”

“And they sent you down here on your off-time? That’s *really* shitty.”

“It’s a favor for Captain Vance. He’s my . . .”

“Count Chocula is your boss?” I slowly turned and stared at the man for a second, wondering what sort of backward ass town I’d moved to. I had just managed to work my head around what the gorgeous blonde had said when I asked her out and now this guy thought he was funny. I had turned my attention back to the road when the guy chuckled and said, “I’m not saying that to be shitty or racist or whatever you’re thinking. We’ve been calling him that, among other things, since I was a kid.”

“Really?” I asked, pretty sure they didn’t call him that to his face.

“He’s family.” When I scoffed, Hawk said, “Let me break it down for you. Luc is married to Jaz. Jaz is the baby sister of some of my dad’s best friends, Lout and Marcus Hamilton.”

Marcus Hamilton was the attorney that had been in Vance’s office when he called me in to ask me to pick up Hawk Forrester, but then he had to rush off when his partner was attacked. “Vance is related to them?”

“He married into the family. You’re probably gonna need a pencil and paper to track this, but let me try to explain. Luc married Jaz. Jaz’s older brother is Lout. Lout is married to Aunt Willow, my mom’s sister.”

“That’s not all that hard.”

“Okay, let me throw you another one. Have you met the chief?”

“I sure have. Chief Cardenas.”

“Okay, the chief has four kids, right?”

“Yes. I’ve seen pictures in his office and met his daughter who works in dispatch.”

“I’m related to two of the chief’s kids, and so is Luc.”

“Huh?”

“My cousin Em is the birth mother of the oldest daughter and youngest son, Esme and Ben Cardenas. So, I’m technically a cousin to them, and Luc is their uncle.”

“Shit. You were right about the pencil.” I mulled it over for a minute and then asked, “Does the chief know you blast his family information all over the place?”

“I’m not blasting anything they haven’t already announced. My cousin

Em along with Nick and his wife, Cindy, and their kids, Esme and Ben, did a commercial for one of the adoption agencies in town. It was playing on the local stations when I got sent to prison.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Marcus and Reagan, the men whose anniversary party we’re about to crash, filmed one with their kids too.”

“I’m taking you to a wedding,” I corrected.

“It’s an anniversary party.”

“No. I’m pretty sure the captain said it was a wedding. That’s why he sent the suit for you and told me to wear a tie.”

“Who’s getting married?”

“Your attorney.”

“No shit? I thought they were married all this time.”

Something Hawk had said earlier struck me, and I held up my hand. “Wait a minute. Marcus Hamilton has kids?”

“Yeah. Why wouldn’t he?”

“He’s got a reputation for . . . ruthlessness.” That was an understatement if I’d ever heard one. The man was known for being on top of his game in the courtroom, and I’d heard the other detectives complaining that they had to follow protocols to the letter in case Hamilton defended the perp they arrested. One minor slip-up, and he’d get his client off and make the detective and the entire department look like fools.

“I can see that,” I agreed. “But sometimes, the most ruthless people are the ones you want on your side.”

“So, he and his fiancé adopted?”

“He and Reagan have been together longer than I’ve been alive, so I just assumed they were already married. The wedding is probably just a technicality. I guess Holly, Roscoe, and Ranger came along when I was 5 or 6. I was about to graduate when they got Tot and Noble.”

“I work with Noble.”

“He’s also your captain’s nephew.”

“Holy shit. No wonder everyone lost their mind when Noble was one of the first to respond to that call about his . . . dad?”

“Marcus?”

“Um, no. The white one.”

“Reagan.”

“Why did the cops get called on Reagan?”

“He was attacked by his youngest son’s parents. Marcus’s niece, and I guess one of your . . . I have no idea. It was a Forrester. A bird of some sort.”

“A guy or girl?”

“Guy.”

“Crow or Phoenix?”

“Crow! He was part of it, too, along with some guy named Adam.”

“Was Crow hurt?”

“No.”

“What about Adam? He’s also a cousin.”

“Jesus,” I blurted out through a bark of astonished laughter. “How many are there?”

“At last count, I think it was somewhere around 930.” I must have looked shocked because he backtracked, “I’m just fucking with you. I have no idea, man. I would need to make a list.”

“So anyway, the youngest son’s birth parents attacked Reagan.”

“I think you might have it twisted. Noble is their youngest son, and his birth parents can’t attack anything. Well, at least his dad can’t.”

I was curious about why, but that was not my business. “Nope. This boy is white. Still a minor.”

“Marcus and Reagan have another kid?”

“Yep. And he fits right in with the whole bunch because he was whooping ass and taking names too. Got his bloody shoe print off the shirt of one of the perps.”

“Damn. So, they’ve got six in their brood now.”

“I guess *that’s* how you’ve got so many cousins.”

“They just seem to multiply. My parents have seven kids, and two of my uncles have nine.”

“Wait a minute. You said you had a cousin named Holly, right? That’s Noble’s sister?”

“Marcus and Reagan have two daughters - Holly and Tot.”

“Holly . . . Hamilton?”

“Uh, yeah. She’s Marcus and Reagan’s oldest.”

“Blonde, blue eyes, quick temper?”

Hawk laughed. “That’s Holly.”

“You’re fucking kidding.”

“Why?”

“Does she have kids or does her sister?”

“Tot doesn’t have any, but Holly does. She adopted three little ones while I was inside. I haven’t met them yet.”

“Oh man. I fucked up.”

“How?”

“She made an offhand comment right after she blew off my invitation to dinner, and I might have taken it the wrong way.”

“What kind of comment? I can’t imagine Holly insulting anyone who didn’t deserve it. Did you react badly when she turned you down?” I could feel Hawk’s gaze on me, and when I glanced at him, I could tell he was assessing me, getting ready to defend his cousin or whatever the hell she was to him.

“She said she couldn’t go to the dark side.”

Hawk burst out laughing. “Dating a cop would definitely be doing that, but then again, her brother and a few of the other guys have taken up the badge, so I guess everyone’s slowly getting used to it.”

“But I thought she meant . . .”

“You thought she wouldn’t date you because you’re Black?” Hawk asked, still laughing. “That’s funny, considering one of her brothers, her little sister, and dad are all Black. So’s her best friend. You could have called her a lot of things, but that is something she probably can’t get over, considering she’s the first one that’s gonna call out some asshole for acting that way.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Damien said as he shook his head and furrowed his brow. “Maybe.”

“Obviously, she’ll be at the wedding.”

“Well, I’d hope so since they’re her parents.”

“You know, for a cop, you’re not so bad, Damien,” I admitted.

“Well, Hawk, for an ex-con, you’re not so bad yourself.”

6.

DAMIEN

I tried to look for Holly as I carried a fresh round of drinks to the table I was sharing with Monica, Tasha, and a few of their friends, but the place was too crowded. People from all walks of life were in attendance at the wedding reception, which wasn't surprising considering Hawk and I were lucky to find a chair when we slipped into the chapel - it was that packed.

I'd recognized more than a few people as I looked around during the ceremony, but I saw even more here now. In the time I'd gone from the table to the bar, I'd seen the mayor of Rojo two-stepping with a tattooed biker, one of my landlords taking a shot with the kids' new pediatrician, and the cheerful girl I bought my coffee from every morning after I dropped the kids off at daycare along with two tattooed Vikings conversing in sign language with a man in a cowboy hat.

Hawk wasn't kidding when he said his extended family was made up of all kinds of people or when he mentioned there were hundreds of them. Men, women, and children of all skin tones and levels of society mingled together, and it seemed like they were all happy to be here and excited to hang out with each other. I knew that Monica and Tasha had been on cloud nine all week since their old friend Phoebe was in town with her children and *all* of her extended family who I had yet to meet.

I noticed a man approaching the table from behind the ladies. I couldn't help but stare because I knew him from somewhere but couldn't place where we'd met before. When he caught my eye, he put his finger up to his lips and then grinned as he leaned between Tasha and Monica with his arms over their shoulders.

"How are my ex-mothers-in-law doing this evening?" the young man asked. Tasha and Monica's faces lit up as they turned toward him, and he was almost pulled off his feet when Monica threw her arms around his neck.

Tasha got in on the action, and the three of them laughed as they all talked over each other. Once he was able to extricate himself from their arms, he walked around the table and motioned at the chair beside mine. When I nodded, he sat down, resting his arms on the table as he leaned forward so the women could hear him over the music.

I wondered if I'd seen a picture of him at Monica and Tasha's or maybe in some of Tiffany's things I'd packed up before the move. He mentioned that he was married to one of their daughters, which surprised me, because I had no idea either of the young women had ever been married.

"Did you ladies jump the fence and get yourself a boyfriend while I was gone?" the man asked with a grin.

Tasha rolled her eyes as Monica raised one eyebrow and said, "If we were ever going to change our stripes, he'd be the perfect man for us."

"You wound me," the guy said as he leaned back with one hand over his heart. "I thought for sure that if I couldn't convince Saylor to take me back, I'd have a chance with the two of you."

"Saylor got over you years ago, and you know it," Tasha said with a dismissive wave.

The guy sighed and leaned closer to me as if he were going to tell me a secret and said, "She dumped me for my older brother. I'm still reeling from the heartache."

"They were in eighth grade," Monica explained. "Rocky spent an entire summer mowing our lawn and doing anything he could to hang around our house hoping one of the girls would notice him. They were just happy to have him there because taking care of the yard was one of their chores."

"A guy's gotta do what he can to get in there, you know what I mean?"

I laughed. "Did you at least get paid for all your hard work?"

"Not a dime. Do you think I should sue? I'll have to ask Uncle Marcus what the statute of limitations is in a case like that."

"Marcus Hamilton is your uncle?"

"One of the many."

"His father is our friend, Kale Forrester. You met Rocky's sister Rain earlier," Tasha explained.

"So, Holly is your cousin?"

"Eh. Sure," the guy said vaguely.

"I've been looking for her, but it's pretty crowded."

"Everyone will move to the dance floor in a few minutes, so it might be

easier to find her then.”

Tasha clapped her hands in excitement and asked, “You’re playing tonight?”

“We are. Holly hired us as the entertainment because our booking fee is pretty cheap, and we were all she could afford.”

Tasha and Monica laughed, and I knew I must be missing something, but none of them explained. “I think our dads are going to join us for most of it, and maybe some of the other guys too. We’re trying to convince Phoebe to sing a few songs, but she’s resisting.”

“I’ll fix that,” Tasha said as she stood up. She nudged her wife’s shoulder and said, “Come on. Let’s go find Pheeb and convince her to sing our song.”

“I’ll hang out here with . . .”

“Damien!” Tasha exclaimed. “I never even thought to introduce you. This is my . . . um . . . nephew.”

Rocky laughed. “Kind of like how Marcus is my uncle?”

“Something like that,” Monica said with a laugh. “His brother was married to our niece Tiffany.”

Rocky’s smile faded, and he gave a short nod before he said, “I was sorry to hear about Tiff.” He looked over and said, “Your brother too. He was a good guy.”

“He was. The best,” I agreed.

“Damien is raising Tiff and Darnell’s kids. He moved them here a few months ago to be closer to family,” Tasha explained. “We’re slowly but surely introducing him to everyone and trying to bring him into the fold.”

“Has Gamma met the kids yet?”

“I’m not sure,” Monica answered.

Rocky raised one eyebrow and said, “Ten seconds with Gamma and they’ll be all hers, and so will he.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” Tasha said with a laugh. “They’re with my mom tonight, but I’ll make sure and take them to see her soon. Sandra too.”

“We’ll be back in a minute,” Monica assured me as she picked up her drink.

I watched as the women took off to find their friend and leaned back in my chair before I took a sip of my beer. I had just turned to ask my new acquaintance a question when three men walked up and sat themselves around the table.

“Nice to see you could finally join us,” Rocky said drolly. “And how cute. All three of you are dressed up in little matching outfits.”

“We had to go do a retrieval, and it took longer than we expected,” one of the men said as he set a bottle of whiskey down in the middle of the table. He looked at me and asked, “Want a shot?”

“Sure,” I said with a shrug, again pondering the diverse crowd here. The men were wearing long sleeved T-shirts that said ‘K&K Retrieval,’ and they looked like they’d had a *really* rough night. “You look like you could use one.”

“Well, we finally found a car we’ve been looking for and got it all hooked up to the truck when a guy came running out of his house with a shotgun screaming at us to give his shit back. We weren’t inclined to do that and had to call the cops for backup while we finished loading up. Turns out he not only didn’t want to lose his car, but he *really* didn’t want anyone to know what was in the trunk.”

The men looked uncomfortable, and one finally grabbed the bottle and twisted off the lid before he took a long swig. As he passed the bottle to the man beside him, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and then let out a long sigh. “I’m pretty sure this isn’t what I signed up for.”

“Was it full of drugs or what?”

“Nope. No drugs,” the third man said as he took the bottle being passed to him. Before he took a drink, he said, “There was a body in the trunk.”

“Oh fuck,” Rocky said with wide eyes as he and I both leaned closer to hear the tale.

“Yep. His ex-wife. He had killed her a few days ago and was packing up to leave town when we got there. He said he had planned to dump her on the side of the road somewhere once he got out of state.”

“We had to wait until Nick got there, and Luc showed up too. Since the guy admitted he’d killed her, there really wasn’t much of an investigation going on, but they had to sign off on it and give us the order to take the car to the crime lab rather than the impound lot.”

“Shit,” Rocky said as he took the bottle and threw back a sip. He passed it to me and I resisted the urge to wipe the rim before I took a drink.

I had just passed the bottle back to the first guy when Rocky introduced me. “Guys, this is Damien . . . uh.”

“Damien Harris.”

“Yeah. He’s Camden and Saylor’s cousin or something. He belongs to

Tasha and Monica.”

The first guy nodded and introduced himself as he stuck his hand out to shake mine. “Jonas Dean.”

The next man shook my hand and said, “Cooper Aldredge. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Zane Duke.”

I shook the man’s hand and asked, “Any relation to Zoey Duke?”

“That’s my sister. How do you know her?”

“I had to interview her for a case I’m working on,” I explained. “I’m a detective at RPD.”

Jonas laughed and pointed at Rocky. “Look at you, man. Been back in town ten minutes and you’re already associating with riffraff.”

“I meet all sorts of people in my travels. I might even tiptoe over to the dark side now and then. Hell, Zane’s twin sister and your twin brother moved there permanently.”

I tilted my head in question, curious since that was the same thing Holly had said about dating me. “The dark side?”

“My family has a love-hate relationship with law enforcement even though a few of us have been sucked into that line of work,” Rocky explained.

“Why do you call it the dark side?”

“Like Star Wars. You know - a whole bunch of minions working for one guy who’s all about enforcing his rules and regulations.” Rocky laughed as he explained, “When Nick took the chief’s position, my dad bought him a Darth Vader helmet.”

“My dads and a bunch of the other guys dressed as stormtroopers and delivered it to him at the station along with a box of donuts,” Jonas explained through his laughter.

Zane took the bottle from Cooper as he said, “Bear dressed up as Chewie and pretended his hands were cuffed. It was fucking great.”

Rocky was still laughing when he explained, “Ever since then, we call anything to do with the police the dark side.”

“I’ve been giving Lawson shit about it since he told me he was trying out for the police academy,” Jonas said with a grin.

“I thought your dads were gonna have a stroke,” Rocky chortled.

“My mom had to talk them off the ledge. She said every family has to have at least one black sheep just to keep things interesting, but she did try to

convince him to take over the restaurant instead since it was a safer job and she was already worried about me.”

“Jonas’s mom owns Grazie’s,” Rocky said as he motioned toward the side of the room where the food tables were set up. “Only place with better food is Gamma’s diner.”

“Gamma’s? I’ve never heard of that restaurant.”

“Martha’s Diner. She’s our grandmother, but everyone calls her Gamma.”

“Oh yeah, the woman I need to be introduced to,” I said, remembering our earlier conversation. My entire body went on alert when I spotted Holly walking toward our table. “There she is.”

I didn’t even realize I’d said anything out loud until Zane asked, “You were looking for Holly?”

“Yeah. I met her a few weeks ago, and then we had a misunderstanding at that restaurant you mentioned . . .”

“You’re the guy Emma was telling Mom about,” Jonas said with a snicker. “Got all riled up and called her a racist.”

“You did what?” Rocky asked, serious now.

“It was a big misunderstanding.”

“Must have been because she does *not* look happy to see you here,” Zane pointed out as we all watched her approach.

“Gentlemen,” Holly said with a nod before she shot me a glare and then turned her attention to Rocky. “It’s about time for the first dance.”

“I’ll gather everyone up and . . .” The sound of drums coming from the stage at the front of the room interrupted him, and Rocky stood up. “Guess that’s my cue. I’ll catch you guys later. Damien, it was nice to meet you.”

“Thanks, Rock,” Holly said before she smiled at the other men at the table. As Rocky walked away, Holly pointedly ignored me when she said, “You guys have fun.”

“Can I talk to you for a minute?” I asked as I stood up from my seat.

“I’m a little busy right now,” Holly said as looked at me with blank disinterest. “Besides, I can’t imagine what you think we might have to talk about.”

“I want to apologize for jumping to conclusions. I took what you said the wrong way, and I’m sorry I accused you of being something that you’re obviously not.”

“Damn. He’s throwing it all out there in front of everyone,” Jonas said as

he lifted his fist to bump mine. I tapped his knuckles, and he grinned. “Come on, Holly. Give the guy a chance to explain.”

“Mind your business, Jonas.”

“You’re family, sweetheart. This *is* my business,” Jonas retorted. “Besides, everyone’s heard all about how you ripped his ass up at the restaurant that night. It’s not often we get to see that temper of yours nowadays. His ass is probably still smoldering.”

“She can be ruthless with that tongue of hers, and not in a good way either. Just saying. I’ve been on the receiving end of more than a few of her ass chewings, so I would know,” Zane popped off, causing Holly to aim her glare at him instead of me. He ignored it, obviously not as worried as he pretended to be, and explained, “She used to babysit us sometimes and had absolutely no sense of humor.”

“You set my hair on fire, Zane,” Holly snarled.

Zane waved his hand dismissively and retorted, “It grew back!”

“I should have let your sister beat you to death,” Holly said before she looked at Jonas. “Are you going to dive into this, too, or . . .”

Jonas touched his nose with one finger and said, “Not it.”

“See? No sense of humor,” Zane chortled.

Cooper laughed. “She likes me best.”

“Because she doesn’t know that you’re the one who stole her dirt bike,” Zane tattled with an evil grin. He gasped dramatically and put one hand over his mouth before he said, “Oh no! How could I let that slip?”

Holly’s eyes got wide, and her mouth dropped open in shock as her cheeks filled with color. “You little shit!”

“I didn’t steal it, I *moved* it!”

“Into a tree,” Zane chuckled. “It was fucking great.”

“I should have drowned all of you when I had the chance,” Holly snapped. She pointed her finger at Cooper and hissed, “I’ll get you back, asshole.”

“You ride dirt bikes?” I asked.

“That’s all you got out of the conversation, detective?” Holly asked. “A crime was committed, and I’d like to press charges.”

“Hey! Let’s not get out of hand here,” Cooper argued.

“I’d love to help you, but depending on how long ago it happened, the statute of limitations might be . . .”

“It was last summer,” Holly interrupted.

“In that case, I think we should talk about it whenever you’ve got a few minutes,” I said, knowing there wouldn’t be an investigation but grabbing the opportunity to talk to her again. “Not over dinner because now I understand what you meant about the dark side, but a working lunch wouldn’t be a bad thing, right?”

Holly glowered at me as the men around the table taunted her. I wasn’t sure if they were helping or not until she finally said, “I’ve got meetings scheduled all week, so I don’t know when . . .”

“What about breakfast tomorrow morning?” It looked like she might be willing to bend a little bit, so I decided to push it. “I’ve been told that your Gamma’s diner is the best place in town, and I haven’t been there yet. Maybe you could help me figure out what to order?”

“The bread pudding with chocolate sauce,” Zane said and then let out a loud ‘oof’ when Jonas slapped his chest. “Sorry. Holly, you should help him pick.”

“My kids have play therapy in the morning, so I can’t meet you until after I drop them off.”

“I’m free all day. My kids are with their grandma for the weekend.”

“What time do you drop off the kids?” Jonas asked.

Holly didn’t even look at him when she answered, her eyes still assessing me as she came to a decision about giving me a chance to talk to her alone.

“Ten o’clock.”

“So, you two should meet at ten thirty?”

I nodded as Holly answered, “I can do that.”

“It’s a date!” Zane cheered.

“It’s not a date,” Holly corrected him. She looked at me with a serious expression and explained, “I’ve given up dating because I have horrible taste in men, so just know that this is *not* a date.”

“I hear you loud and clear. It’s not a date.”

“Good. I’ll see you in the morning,” Holly said before she looked at the men around the table. “I hope you get your dicks stuck in your zippers the next time you go pee.”

“Well, that was a bit harsh,” Jonas complained as Holly stormed off. “I didn’t even do anything.”

“You helped him steal her bike,” Zane reminded him.

“But she doesn’t know that!”

I felt relieved now that I’d found Holly and would have the chance to

make things right, so I sat back down and pulled the bottle toward me. As I unscrewed the lid, I said, "I've gotta hear more about this dirt bike heist - for entertainment purposes only, of course."

"Of course," Cooper agreed with a grin. "Besides, you can't prosecute me because Tay Cardenas helped us, and he's your boss's son!"

7.

HOLLY

“This is not a date!” I reminded myself aloud as I studied my reflection in the visor mirror, making sure my hair wasn’t too wild after playing on the floor with the girls before I left them at the center for their play therapy session. I leaned closer to the mirror so I could wipe a stray speck of mascara away and let out a scream when I leaned back and realized there was a man standing just outside my door.

My uncle laughed loudly, and I glared at him for a second before I flipped the visor up and turned off my SUV. I grabbed my purse from the passenger seat as he opened the door. When I got out of the car, he pulled me to his side for a hug. “You’re so funny, kiddo.”

“You’re not funny at all. You know I hate to be scared like that.”

“But it’s so fun. You always scream like one of those people in a horror movie, no matter how simple the scare is.”

Lout and I walked side by side to the tail end of my SUV, and then I waited next to him as four motorcycles pulled into the full parking lot and slowly drove past us. It struck me then that I’d chosen the wrong time to meet Damien at Gamma’s diner. Sunday mornings were always busy, and not only would the restaurant be full of customers, but the backroom would also be overflowing with my family and friends, every one of which would be all up in my business when they saw me with a strange man.

I thought about calling Damien to change our meeting place but remembered that I didn’t have his number, so that option was out. After a few seconds, I realized there was no need to be worried about him meeting my family because there was nothing going on between us and wasn’t going to be.

I had to keep reminding myself of that when I walked through the door that my uncle held open for me and saw Damien standing off to the side

waiting for a table. He smiled at me, but his smile faltered when Lout stepped up beside me, probably scowling furiously as he seemed to do quite often.

“Be nice, or I’ll call Aunt Willow and tell her you need a timeout.”

“Don’t threaten me, girl. Who’s the cop?”

“I’m meeting him for breakfast, but it’s just casual, not a date.” I didn’t even ask how he knew Damien worked for RPD because my uncle and most of the other men in my family seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to spotting law enforcement. “You should be nice to him.”

Lout looked at me like I had suggested something crazy and asked, “Where’s the fun in that?”

“How has Aunt Willow gone this long without smothering you in your sleep?”

“She’s a nice lady.” Lout stopped in front of Damien and then made a show of looking around the diner. “Looks like there aren’t any tables available. Isn’t that a shame?”

“They put my name on the waiting list and said it shouldn’t be long.” Damien assessed Lout for a second and then asked, “Will you be joining us?”

“That might be entertaining.”

When Lout started chuckling, I bumped him with my shoulder and asked, “Don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“I do,” Lout said with an exaggerated nod. “I’m sure there’s plenty of room in the back. Why don’t you come with me and find a quiet corner for your date?”

Damien put one hand up in denial and said, “Holly said this is just a meeting.”

“We’ll wait for a table,” I said firmly as I moved back to stand beside Damien. “Enjoy your breakfast, Uncle Lout. I’ll make sure and tell Aunt Willow I ran into you and you behaved like a decent . . .”

“She’d never believe you,” Lout said with a dismissive wave. He looked at Damien and ordered, “Come with me, officer.”

“Damien Harris. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir,” he said as he stuck his hand out to shake my uncle’s. “I’m not a patrol officer, I’m a detective.”

“Oh! Isn’t that fun?” Lout said after he let Damien’s hand go. He grinned at me, ignoring Damien, as he said, “He’s not a baby cop, he’s a *brainy* cop like Frozone.”

I sighed as I let my head drop forward. Now that my uncle had that

information, poor Damien would never be able to escape the name calling and insults unless they realized I was not actually dating the man. At this point, we weren't even friends!

"Do you mean Count Chocula, or is there another cop you've nicknamed Frozone?"

Lout's eyebrows raised as he slowly turned to look at Damien again. "Count Chocula?"

"That's what Hawk called Detective Vance," Damien explained.

"When?"

"On our drive to Rojo after his release."

"Hmm. Trapped in a car with one of those Forrester boys, and he's still sniffing around you? Maybe he's not as brainy as I thought."

"I will call Aunt Willow and tell her that I heard you asking someone about wrinkle cream for the fine lines around her eyes."

Lout's jaw dropped in horror as he gasped in shock. He finally got control of himself and retorted, "When did you get so fucking mean?"

As if he sensed there might be a family squabble brewing, Damien jumped in and said, "Is there more seating in the back?"

Lout grinned and reached out to rest his hand on Damien's shoulder. "There sure is, Luther . . ."

"Damien."

"Uh-huh. Come on back, and I'll introduce you to everyone. Holly's gotta go say hi to her girls, but she'll join us in just a minute."

"Lout!"

"Take your time, honey. Fillmore's not going anywhere for a while," Lout threw over his shoulder as he walked away with Damien.

"Somehow, that's way more entertaining when one of them is doing it to someone else," Ava Forrester, a younger member of my extended family who had started running the diner so Gamma could retire, said as she sidled up next to me. When I looked at her smiling face, I couldn't help but glare at her. "What? I'm not even ashamed to admit I'm willing to throw you under the bus so that they stay off my ass."

"Oh, you're dating someone?" In a sugary sweet voice, I asked, "Do your brothers and Uncle Bird know?"

"Give me just a minute to get caught up, and I'll come in and accidentally trip so I can douse you in water so you have to go change," Ava offered.

I looked down at my clothes and thought of everything else I had to do

before I shook my head. “I don’t have time to change.”

“Then I’ll just aim the water at him.”

“I think I’m going to give him a few minutes alone with everyone before I join them.”

“Sink or swim, huh?”

“Exactly.”

“Are you doing that in the hopes that it will scare him enough to find an excuse to leave and never speak to you again or that he sticks it out back there and shows you what he’s made of?”

“What do you mean?”

“That’s like a trial by fire, and you know it. How many times has one of us found someone we thought was perfect but then realized we were completely wrong after just a few minutes around our family?”

“Too many times,” I admitted, remembering how I hadn’t heeded the warning signs when I realized my husband couldn’t stand my family and they felt much the same about him.

“Maybe he’ll get along just fine, and you’ll give him another chance when you realize he’s not just a pretty face.”

“Another?” Emma raised her eyebrows, and I shook my head in disbelief. “Of course you know about that night.”

“I hear things.”

“And you’re going to tell *everyone* about seeing him here as soon as you can get a second to send a mass text.”

“As if you wouldn’t do the same thing. Everyone’s always in each other’s business.”

“True. Speaking of, what happened between Hawk and Crow last night?”

“Girl, I don’t know what’s going on, but I have a theory.”

“Do tell,” I encouraged.

“This is just between the two of us, right?”

I laughed softly before I nodded. “Your secret is safe with me.”



DAMIEN

“How did you meet our sweet little Holly?” Lout asked.

“The first time we spoke was in a flower shop after my kids trashed my bitchy neighbor’s plant, and I had to get it replaced. The second time was at Grazie’s when she sat next to me at the bar after her date went off the rails.”

“Bitchy neighbor?” Lout asked.

“Yeah. I live in a rental, and my neighbor’s not a fan of . . . well, anyone or anything, as far as I can tell. She started harping on me the day we moved in and hasn’t stopped since.”

“My daughter has a neighbor like that. She calls the HOA director every time Em or my granddaughter breathe in her direction. Adam’s got more patience than I do, but after all this time, it’s beginning to wear thin.”

“Adam Evans?”

“You know Adam?”

I chuckled before I answered, “He’s my landlord. This town is getting smaller by the day. Tasha and Monica said . . .”

“How do you know them?”

“They’re my . . . well, they’re my niece and nephew’s aunts . . .” Lout raised an eyebrow, so I continued, “My brother was married to their niece Tiffany and . . .”

“You moved back with Tiff’s kids.”

“I did.”

Lout slowly nodded. “That makes you family in our book.”

“Good. Does that mean I won’t get the third degree when we go into that room?” I asked, motioning toward the doors ahead of us.

Lout laughed before he finally asked, “You’d think it might help, wouldn’t you?”

“Would it help if I said that your niece insists she’s not willing to date me?”

“If you thought that was true, you wouldn’t be here right now pretending that’s not exactly what this is.”

I was still chuckling when Lout opened the door, and I was assaulted by loud conversation, laughter, and kids yelling. He motioned for me to walk ahead of him, and I was just a few steps inside the large room when a young boy’s voice called out, “Code Blue!”

It was suddenly quiet and every head turned our way right before Lout burst out laughing and bumped knuckles with the boy. “Good eye, Conner. Way to watch out.”

“Papa Tink and Papa Smokey taught me how to spot ‘em ages ago,” the young man said as he studied me from head to toe and then shrugged as if he’d somehow found me lacking.

Conversation around the room picked up again, and I realized that none

of the people in here thought I was a threat either. It was very humbling, to say the least.

“That’s my boy,” an older man called out from a table nearby.

“They said I’d make a great lookout,” the boy boasted.

“If we ever need one, I’ll keep you in mind,” Lout assured him as he motioned toward the table of men nearby. “Come on, I’ll introduce you to the family.”

Somehow that seemed like a threat, but at this point, I didn’t have a choice, so I followed him. We had to weave around some kids running wild, and I stopped short when a little girl skidded to a halt in front of me and demanded, “Up!”

“Hi there,” I said as I looked down at her. She stared at me like I was crazy for not obeying her order and then repeated herself. I looked around for support, not sure I should pick up a stranger’s kid, but the child was insistent, poking my thigh with one finger before she said it again.

“She doesn’t bite too hard,” a teenage girl said before she picked the tot up and thrust her toward me. Aiming a stern look at the little one, the older girl ordered, “Be nice, Lyric.”

Once I had her in my arms, the bossy little girl smiled sweetly and said, “Hi.”

“Hello.”

She smiled as she rested a hand right above my ear before she started rubbing my hair. “Soft.”

“Mr. Thorn! Come join us while you wait for Holly,” Lout ordered as he pulled out a chair. I tried to set the little girl on her feet, but she wrapped her legs around me and scowled, so I walked over with her in my arms.

“Don’t mind the spider monkey. She just likes the way your hair feels. She does the same thing to Noble every time she sees him,” the man that had called out earlier informed me. “I’m Grunt Parker, and this gentleman next to me is Kale Forrester, and that’s his brother, Clem. He’s special and not in a good way. Those old farts over there are Smokey Forrester and Hank Grissom.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said as I sat in the chair Holly’s uncle pulled out for me.

“And you, Mr. Thorn,” Smokey said pleasantly.

I smiled as I corrected the man. “It’s Damien Harris, not Thorn.”

“Sure it is,” Lout said with a dismissive wave. “I caught this guy up front

sniffing around Holly. She won't have anything to do with him, so you know what that means."

"Shit. I guess he's a keeper," Hank grumbled.

"It's about damn time," one of the older men, I thought his name was Smokey, boasted. "You got sticking power, son?"

"Either that or he's dumb as a box of hair," his son, Kale, said. A young boy ran up and whispered something in the man's ear, and I watched his head fall forward before he let out a tortured sigh. "No. You cannot do that out back. There are rules and shit when you're out in public, Koda."

"But Cabbage . . ."

The man growled like a wild animal, but the kid wasn't the slightest bit intimidated. "You're not gonna have a pissing match with Conner, Koda. It's an expression, not a challenge."

"Ah, Cabbage," the man's brother whined as the boy ran off to join the little lookout I'd met a minute ago. "You're just mean."

"One of these days, I'm gonna fuck you up for teaching the kids to call me that."

"It was hard for us to choose. Iceberg, Spinach . . ."

Grunt's voice trailed off when Hank interrupted, "I liked Butterhead."

"I voted for Arugula," Smokey chimed in.

"Romaine might be a good choice," I said without thinking. The man's cold gaze landed on me, and I had to suppress a shiver. Even the little girl in my lap realized it was a mistake for me to chime in. She sighed as she softly patted my cheek, then hopped down, landed on her feet, and threw her hands up. She turned and grinned as if she were a gymnast that had just dismounted and was turning to face the judges.

"Perfect ten, sweetheart," another man said as he walked up. Lout reached up and took the baby the man was holding before he gave the little girl a high five. When she took off, he glared at Lout and said, "Stop buying our granddaughter Slytherin shit, or I'll fucking shoot you."

"Liberty didn't like her outfit?"

"I had to listen to her rant about it for half an hour, but you knew that would happen. Don't try to deny it."

"Luke, you can't tell me you're not Slytherin," Clem said as he shook his head.

Luke looked disgusted as he asked, "How about I'm just a grown ass man who doesn't give a fuck?"

“I’m Hufflepuff,” Kale boasted.

“Bullshit!” Hank argued. “I’m Ravenclaw, but you guys . . .”

“I’m definitely Gryffindor,” Lout interrupted. He looked at the new arrival and smiled. “Your wife told me so.”

Luke let his head fall forward in defeat as the men around us argued, and I felt the urge to admit, “I’ve never read the books or seen the movies.”

The men around the table expressed their shock and outrage as Luke lifted his head and grinned at me. “Luke Evans.” He reached his hand out, and we bumped knuckles before his face fell to a blank expression, and he asked, “Who the fuck are you?”

“That’s Harry O. Tophet, Holly’s boyfriend,” Grunt explained, coming up with *that* name out of thin air.

Everyone around the table seemed as confused as I was until Smokey slapped the table and laughed out loud, “Good one! Hell yeah!”

“Frozone!” Kale said loudly, startling the baby that had been sleeping in Lout’s arms.

“I get it now,” I mumbled, understanding that calling me by other names was an initiation of sorts. Or maybe it was a habit, considering Luc Vance had been in their family for years, and they still called him different names. That explained why they were intent on finding them for me.

“Good job, fuckface,” Lout growled at Kale as he tried to soothe the baby. His tone changed abruptly as he bounced the baby in his arms and crooned, “It’s okay, Vanilla Bean. Biggie’s got you, baby.”

“Gentlemen,” Luc Vance, my direct superior at RPD said in greeting as he pulled a chair over and nodded toward Hank, Smokey, and Grunt. He scowled as he sat and looked at Kale, Clem, Luke, and Lout. “Assholes.” He finally looked at me and nodded before he said, “Harris.”

“That’s not his name anymore,” Clem argued. “You know that can’t be his name.”

Luc sighed as he rolled his eyes. “Of course. Are we going the Black cop route or . . .”

“He’s obviously Satan. Did you *hear* his first name?” Lout asked.

“Lucius isn’t much better,” Kale added.

“And how did you get on their radar?” Luc asked, ignoring the men.

Lout had the baby settled, so he answered, “He’s dating Holly.”

Luc snorted out a laugh and grinned at me. “Sweep her off her feet and run far, far, *far* away. I hear Australia’s a beautiful place, but that might not

be far enough, and they'll let most of these assholes into the country anyway."

"Nope. Can't go to Australia," Kale said sadly. "New Zealand either."

"I can go anywhere I want," Lout boasted.

"Only because you've never been caught," Luc grumbled. He looked back at me and repeated, "Run."

"The two of you have got to quit taking off with my kid," a woman proclaimed as she walked up to Lout and took the baby out of his arms. "I was talking to Holly and Ava, and you disappeared."

"Did you think we'd been kidnapped?" Luke asked.

The woman rolled her eyes before she leaned down and kissed Lout's cheek. "I'm going home. Love you."

"Love you, too, Pearly," Lout said before he kissed the baby's head. "Biggie loves you most, Libbie Lou."

"I don't think so, asshole," Luke growled. He smiled when he looked at the woman and said, "You'll be at the house for dinner tonight?"

"Of course," the woman said as she walked around the table, touching each man's shoulder as she made her way to her target. She leaned down and kissed Grunt on the cheek before she smiled at him and said, "Bye Pop. Love you."

"Bye, sweetheart. Come by and visit your Gigi. She mentioned that she hasn't had nearly enough time with that baby lately. Libbie's gonna grow up before we get to hold her again."

"I'll come by this week. I promise."

Luke ran his hand over the baby's dark curls before Pearl leaned closer so he could kiss Libbie on the head. I heard him whisper, "I love you more," and was shocked that such a gruff man could be so sweet.

It was obvious that these men had known each other for ages, and like Holly had explained that night in the restaurant, they were family whether they were related by blood or not. In Luke and Lout's case, they shared a grandchild.

"Cabbage, I just want you to know that I was playing, and I didn't mean to . . . Well, I kind of did mean to but . . . Can I call Stache to come pick me up now?"

"What did you do?" Kale asked with a frown.

"Nothing *too* serious. It's not a felony or anything."

"Shit. You're gonna be the death of me, boy," Kale said as he pushed

away from the table and stood up. “Show me what you broke.”

“Or set on fire,” Clem added.

“Or blew up,” Lout put in.

“Or . . .” Grunt started to chime in, but Kale flipped him off.

“All of you can fuck off. I’m out.” He reached for the little boy’s hand and said, “Show me what you did so I can fix it, Koda.”

“That’s a sight to see,” Smokey said with a grin. “Watching you boys with your own kids was fun, but now there are grandkids, and the real fun is just beginning. It’s like you’re being punished twice for the shit y’all pulled over the years, and I’ve got a front row seat.”

“I’ve got years and years left before that happens to me,” Clem boasted. “Roar’s only 23 and . . .”

“He’s a fucking musician, dumbass,” Hank growled. “I’m surprised all of those boys don’t already have kids popping up all over the world.”

“Nope! Before they went on tour the first time, we took them over to Mom and Dad’s, and they got the same birds and bees talk she gave us when we were young,” Clem explained with an exaggerated shudder. “Traumatized every fucking one of them, and I’m pretty sure they’re all still virgins to this day.”

“It was just as funny as when she talked to all of you,” Smokey chuckled.

“That was great,” Grunt said as he snickered.

“I have a question.”

“The first of many, I’m sure,” Grunt said with a jovial grin.

Lout scoffed, “Shouldn’t you read us our rights first?”

“Not that kind of question. How old is he?” I asked, motioning toward the little boy walking hand in hand with his grandfather.

“Five, I believe,” Smokey said. “Maybe six now.”

“How does he know what a felony is?”

“Oh, that’s easy. A felony is something that’s gonna get him in the most trouble. For most kids, that would be losing their electronics, but for him, that means house arrest. He’s not happy if he’s cooped up. He wants to be outside running wild or right in the middle of everyone’s business if we’re working in the shop. If he commits a felony, he’s stuck in the house,” Smokey explained.

“That’s probably just as much punishment for the adults,” I mused out loud. “I have to take Juni for her daily run, or she’ll start eating through the sheetrock.”

The men around the table laughed knowingly and then suddenly sobered.

“You’re still here,” I heard Holly say from behind me. I couldn’t tell if she was happily surprised or resigned that I was going to stick around. “Hi, guys. Have you been good while Damien waited for me?”

“Of course,” the men chorused in unison.

“Well, I guess since you made it this long, you deserve a reward,” Holly grumbled.

“La la la la!” Lout sang loudly as he put his hands over his ears. “I don’t want to hear about that shit, Holly!”

“I meant I’m going to let him buy me breakfast before he runs off screaming,” Holly said, rolling her eyes at her uncle before she smiled at the other men. “Y’all have a good day.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I assured her. “Do you want to eat back here with your family or go up front?”

“If we stay back here, they won’t let either of us get a word in edgewise,” Holly mused as she looked around the table at the grinning men.

“Then let’s go up front and find a booth,” I suggested. I turned and, to the table at large, said, “Gentlemen, it’s been . . . Well . . . It was nice to meet all of you. I’m sure I’ll see you again soon.”

“No, you won’t,” Holly argued.

“Same time next week?” I asked the group.

Smokey’s smile was almost blinding as he said, “If she hasn’t run you off yet, you’re welcome to join us.”

“I’ll see you next weekend, if not before.”

“No, he won’t.”

“I will,” I playfully argued.

“Cocky little bastard, isn’t he?” Luke asked.

Smokey nodded as he said, “All the best ones are. Look at you guys.”

8.

DAMIEN

As we walked back into the main area of the diner, Holly grabbed a full coffee carafe from the wait station and paused at each table we passed to top off customers' cups. When we finally got to the corner booth, she slid in and filled the two coffee mugs that were turned upside down on the saucers there. As I sat down across from her, the younger woman she'd been talking to earlier came by and took the carafe from Holly without a word.

"Does everyone in the family fill coffee as they walk through the dining room?"

"I've seen both of my dads carrying a coffee pot, and even though Papa is not the most pleasant server, he'll do in a pinch. Almost all of us have worked here at one time or another, whether by choice, necessity, or as punishment."

"Punishment?"

"Bussing tables, washing dishes, and cleaning bathrooms are not the glamorous jobs of a teenager's dreams."

"Did you ever work here as punishment?"

"Once or twice," Holly answered with a mischievous grin. "What was your first job?"

"Cleaning kennels at the animal shelter. Well, that was more of a punishment at first, but I enjoyed being around the animals so much that I applied for a job after my time was served and worked there through college."

"What did you get in trouble for?"

"You first."

"One time, Leia, Lexi, Emerald, and I lied to our parents about where we were going to spend the night and went camping."

"Camping? You snuck out to go camping?"

“Yes, we did.” I could tell she was lying, and she knew it, but she tried to keep it going until finally she burst out laughing and admitted, “We went to a bonfire at the river and drank way too much keg beer and cheap wine then spent the night in the back of Adam’s truck. When we got home the next day, the hangover wasn’t nearly as bad as the hundreds of mosquito bites we had. In my opinion, that was more than enough punishment for our stupidity.”

“But your parents didn’t see it that way?”

“Not at all.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

I winced and then said, “I know it’s normal for teenagers to do stupid shit, but I see it in a completely different way when I imagine how I’d react if Simon or Juni pulled a stunt like that.”

“It’s hard to imagine your kids at that age, I know, but it already terrifies me.”

“I used to tease my brother about how he was going to pay for all his teenage sins when the kids got older, but I guess that’s on me now, huh?”

“Your brother? Why would he . . . Are those kids I saw with you your niece and nephew?”

“They are. They were. I mean, they still are, but now they’re my kids.” I took a deep breath and steeled myself for the pain the next few words always caused. “My brother and his wife were killed in a car accident, and I’m raising their children.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Holly whispered as she reached over and put her hand on top of mine. She squeezed it gently, and I realized she had tears in her eyes. “When did that happen?”

“About nine months ago.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Simon was almost 4, and Juni was a year and a half. The hardest part of it is knowing they won’t remember Darnell or Tiffany other than through the pictures we have and the stories we tell them.”

“You may have lost your brother, but he’ll live on through them.”

“I see him in them all the time, especially when Simon says something he thinks is funny and gets the giggles or Juni starts doing zoomies around the house so she doesn’t fall asleep. Darnell was always telling horrible jokes that weren’t funny to anyone but him, and he had more energy than three

people put together.”

“Jericho does the same thing every night. He kicks it into high gear so he doesn’t fall asleep and miss something.”

Holly’s eyes lit up when she talked about her son, and I remembered how Tiffany had gotten that same look when she told me about something one of the kids had done. I wondered if I got that look now when I told someone about their antics.

The mood was broken when the waitress stopped at our table and tossed an order pad and pen down next to Holly’s arm. “I’m in the weeds. Write down your order, and I’ll put it in.”

“I can help you . . .”

As she walked off, she said, “No. We’ll get caught up. I’ll be back in a sec.”

Holly picked up the pen and asked, “What can I get for you today, sir?”

“What’s good?” I asked, glancing around for a menu.

“Everything.” When I looked doubtful she said, “I promise. Everything on the menu is delicious. They’ve been using my Gamma’s recipes for years and years. Even though she’s not here every day anymore, the kitchen knows how to replicate her recipes since she insists that she be the one to train them. Tell me what sounds good, and I’ll tell you if they serve it.”

“Biscuits and gravy?” I asked.

Holly smiled as she nodded and asked, “Bacon or sausage?”

“Both?”

Holly laughed and wrote it down before she asked, “Eggs?”

“Scrambled with cheese,” I said firmly. “That’s the only way I like them.”

“Excellent choice. Juice?” I glanced down at my coffee and shook my head. Holly wrote down her order and pulled the ticket off the pad before she slid everything to the end of the table and caught the waitress’s attention. After the woman came by and grabbed the ticket, Holly turned to me and asked, “Are you really going to come back next weekend?”

“I am. Are you going to come with me?”

Holly sighed as she shook her head. “I usually stay home on Sundays and get ready for the next week, but the kids had play therapy this morning, so I had to get out.”

“What is play therapy?”

“My daughters were born prematurely and have hearing and vision loss.

They have cochlear implants, but it's important that we not solely rely on that technology and the entire family learns sign language as a backup form of communication. RPS has a . . ."

"RPS?"

"Rojo Pediatric Specialties." Holly explained. "They have sign language classes for older children and adults, but the easiest way to teach the smaller children is by doing fun things. They sing songs and do other activities that help them associate the words with the signs, and that adds to what they learn when we talk to them."

"Is your son deaf too?"

"No, but he needs to learn to communicate with his sisters so he goes to the classes with them."

"That's good. Do you know sign language?"

"I'm a work in progress, but I learn new words every day."

"Teach me something simple. Something your kids will understand when I talk to them." Holly's eyebrows rose in question, and I smiled. "I'm manifesting my own good fortune. That's a thing, right?"

"You consider meeting my kids your good fortune?" Holly asked, her expression intense.

"Of course I do. They're part of you, and I want to get to know you, so getting to know them is important." I thought about what I'd just said and asked, "Did that make any sense at all?"

"Too much," Holly mumbled as she studied my face. "When you asked me out the first time, what was your motive?"

I blew out a breath and looked out the window as I thought about my answer. I had a feeling that Holly was on the precipice of making a decision about seeing me again, even after she'd been adamant that she didn't date. If I answered incorrectly, she might pull back and change her mind, but I wasn't one to lie, so I needed to tread carefully while being honest.

"When my brother died, I'd just gone through a breakup. When my ex found out about Darnell and Tiffany, she came over to check on me. It was . . . comfortable? I don't know if that's the right word, but that's sort of how I felt. It was easy to ignore the reasons for our breakup because I had so much going on and was trying to wade through my grief. I was moving my stuff into my brother's apartment so the kids would be in a familiar place when they came to live with me. She helped me get settled in, and I thought that . . . Hell, I don't know what I thought, but she made it clear that raising

someone else's children wasn't on her agenda. She was focused on her career and wasn't ready for kids, and I suddenly had two of them. We didn't get back together after all. As soon as the kids came to me, it was really over between us."

"That was a lot to take in all at once, I'm sure."

"But it didn't answer your question, did it?" I asked as I forced a smile, trying to lighten the mood.

"Not really, but it did give me some insight into what you went through."

"I struggled. A lot. Suddenly, it wasn't all about me and my grief; it had to be about Simon and Juni. I didn't see that at first, but when I did, I knew I needed to make a change - and not just moving here but in the way I looked at my future. When I saw you behind the counter of that flower shop, I thought you were the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. You checked me out . . ."

"I did not." I raised one eyebrow, and Holly laughed softly before she admitted, "Okay, maybe for a second or two."

"You did, but then you saw the kids, and your eyes lit up. I didn't matter anymore. Your smile was for them, and I thought that made you even more beautiful." Holly's eyes were wide now, and her mouth was open in shock. She covered her mouth before she looked out the window and took a deep breath. "I thought it was wonderful that you saw them as little people and not a burden you had to deal with when you talked to me. I wanted to see you smile at me the way you smiled at them, so I asked you to dinner."

"And I blew you off."

"A little bit, but you had a boyfriend."

Holly rolled her eyes and scoffed. "*Not* a boyfriend. I was dating a guy. Sort of."

"But he's why you turned me down."

Holly started to say something but then shook her head and leaned back as the waitress neared our table with our plates balanced on her arm.

"One of these days, I'm going to go rogue and just start throat-punching people," the woman said as she slid my plate in front of me. She set Holly's plate down and then sat down beside me, pushing my plate farther down the table so I'd move over. She sighed as she pulled a fork out of her apron and leaned across the table to cut a bite off of Holly's pancakes. "Your *cousin* is a menace, and I'm going to have to ban him from the restaurant."

"Which one and, you know that won't fly," Holly said, ignoring the fact

that the woman was eating off her plate as she spread butter on the top pancake and then rolled it up like a tortilla and dipped the tip into a ramekin of syrup before taking a bite.

The girl had moved from Holly's pancakes to her home fries, and after she swallowed the bite in her mouth, she motioned toward the plate and said, "That's community food. I was feeling a little starchy."

"Starchy?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's that feeling you get when you want to go on a killing spree but have to settle for eating instead."

"My go-to is bread. Any kind of bread. If I'm busy stuffing my face, I can't hit anyone," Holly said as she waved toward the woman. "Damien, this is my cousin Rylee. Her dad is Kale, one of the . . ."

"Cabbage?" I asked with feigned innocence, causing both women to laugh loudly.

"That's the one," Rylee sputtered through her laughter. "He was so pissed when Clem taught Koda to start calling him that."

"I thought Terra was going to kill *everyone* when Koda started calling her Stache, but now she thinks it's kinda cute.

"Stache?" I asked.

"The burger you had that night is named after her," Holly explained.

"Your mom has a mustache?" I asked jokingly.

"Dad thought she did before he met her, but when he finally saw her, he realized she was beautiful inside and out. They were pen pals."

"Are you going to work at all today or what?" the other waitress asked before she said, "Scoot over, hag," and sat down beside Holly. She reached into her apron and got out a roll of silverware before she used the fork to cut herself a piece of Holly's pancake. "That last run damn near killed me. Between your fucking brother and that uptight bitch who was sitting in your section, I almost lost it."

"What did Koda do?" Holly asked before she elbowed the woman's arm away from her plate and leaned forward to take a bite. She stopped right before she put the rolled-up pancake in her mouth and said, "Ava, Damien. Damien, another cousin."

I looked from one girl to the other and compared them. Rylee had caramel-colored skin and hair like Juniper's - dirty blonde with tight curls. It was obvious Rylee was mixed race, but Ava was pale with jet black hair and bright blue eyes.

As if she understood my confusion, Rylee explained, “My dad’s Kale, and her dad is Bird.”

I tilted my head as I thought it through, then asked, “So, Bird’s kids are named after birds? Hawk mentioned one named Crow and another named . . . Lark?”

“They’re all birds. My name means ‘birdlike,’ and my mom thought that put a funny spin on things.”

“She had so many kids, she ran out of bird names,” Holly explained. “There was talk of calling her Maggie, short for Magpie, but she went with Ava instead, thinking she would be the last baby and it would wrap things up perfectly. Then she got pregnant again and had to come up with something else!”

“So, there’s a kid named Magpie in your family?”

“No. My little sister is named Raven. My older ones are Lark and Wren, and my brothers are Hawk, Crow, and Phoenix.”

“My parents named all of us so we have the same initials,” Rylee said before she reached over and picked up Holly’s coffee. She took a sip and sighed before she took another one and said, “Rain, Remington, Rocky, Ransome, and then me.”

“Remington is called Ruf, and it fits him perfectly,” Holly said before she frowned and took her coffee cup away from Rylee. “Y’all work here. Go get your own shit.”

I pushed my plate toward the center of the table, and Rylee looked at it and then up at me. “Are you finished?” When I nodded, she slid the plate over between her and Ava and started in on what was left of my breakfast.

“Do you eat everyone’s leftovers, or am I special?”

“Oh, God no,” Ava said with a shudder before she picked up my last slice of bacon. “You’re here with Holly, and she’s very discerning in her tastes, so we’re going with the assumption that you don’t have any communicable diseases.”

“At least this one’s got a personality,” Rylee mumbled. She jerked back and glared at Holly before she said, “Why did you kick me?”

Holly raised an eyebrow and stared at her cousin. I thought I should intervene before they forgot about the carb buffet in front of us and asked, “So, how are you Holly’s cousins if she’s . . . I can’t even track the family tree there.”

“Her uncle is Lout, and he’s married to our Aunt Willow.”

“So . . .”

“So, we’re cousins.”

I shook my head as I stammered, “Okay.”

“Don’t try to figure it out. Just roll with it,” Holly said before she pushed her plate over so the girls could finish it off. “If you meet someone in this town, just assume they’re related to me somehow, no matter how obscure the trail might be.” Holly shrugged before she said, “When things get really crazy, I just remind myself that I was adopted, so the craziness isn’t in my DNA.”

“No, baby, for you, it’s a choice,” Ava teased.

“That’s nice. Since my brother died, the only relatives I have left are my niece and nephew.”

“He’s raising them,” Holly said before she took a sip of coffee. Without thinking, she handed it to Ava when she held her hand out, and I had to bite back a laugh when Ava took a sip and then passed the cup to Rylee. “They’re adorable kids. His son is in class with Jericho.”

“You’re a single parent who is raising your orphaned niece and nephew?” When I nodded, Rylee and Ava both laughed before Rylee continued, “Gamma’s gonna love you.”

“Gamma’s not going to meet him because there’s obviously something wrong with him,” Holly proclaimed. I raised my eyebrows, and Holly shrugged. “I haven’t found it yet, but there’s gotta be something.”

“Maybe he’s just a good guy,” Rylee argued.

“I’m *never* attracted to good guys. You know that.”

I grinned. “You’re attracted to me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“It was implied. There’s gotta be something wrong with him because you find him attractive.”

Holly nodded at Ava and agreed, “Exactly!”

“Have you ever killed anyone?” Rylee blurted.

I shrugged and answered sarcastically, “Not *this* week.”

“See? He’s perfect!”

Holly glared at Rylee and asked, “Shouldn’t the two of you get back to work?”

“We’ve been here since five this morning. Our shift is over, and you’re not the boss of me anyway,” Ava sassed.

“Yeah. What she said!” Rylee chimed in. “Now, when are you going on

an official date together?”

I waited for Holly to answer, and when she didn't, I said, “She’s a little gun-shy, so I thought I’d see if she’d like to come with me to a cooking class on Tuesday evening. It’s at a place just up the street called Stir the Pot. They have childcare there and dinner will be what we cook, so . . .”

“That’s perfect!” Ava cheered. “It’s not a date if you’re surrounded by family, right?”

“What do you mean? Are you guys coming too?” I asked warily.

“No, but our cousin Frankie is the chef that teaches all the classes,” Rylee explained. “So, you can go take a cooking class with him and still not consider it a date.”

“She’s right. And I’ve had your cooking, so it’s not a stretch to say you might learn something.”

“Bite me!”

Ava scoffed and said, “I’d rather take a bite out of you than another bite of that casserole you made for the meeting last week. What was that shit anyway?”

“I can cook!” Holly argued.

“Not successfully,” Rylee mumbled. “Seriously. What was that?”

“It was a freezer meal Dad made for me, but I sort of . . . Well, I . . . Shit.” Holly sighed and then admitted, “I forgot to turn on the oven when I put it in, and I was running out of time, so I microwaved it instead.”

“See! She can fuck up a frozen dinner. She’ll be there,” Ava assured me as Rylee pulled her phone out of her apron. “Do it for the children, Holly.”

“That’s low, even for you.”

“That settles it!” Rylee proclaimed. “I sent Frankie a text, and she’s got a spot reserved for you. She’s even going to put you and Dante at the same station.”

“It’s Damien,” I corrected.

Rylee waved her hand dismissively. “Right.”

9.

HOLLY

“I know that when you walk in with a cup of piping hot bribery, I should just walk away, but I can’t because you haven’t given it to me yet,” Janis Grissom, a sort of but not quite cousin in a very distant way, said as I leaned against the counter a few feet away from her. I took a sip of my coffee and then sighed in bliss as I closed my eyes and savored the rich goodness, knowing that would irritate Janis even more because I was still holding the one I bought for her in my other hand. “Gimme, hag.”

“I’m not handing over the goods until I’ve got your word that you’ll hear me out.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? You don’t even know what I’m going to ask.”

“The last time you tried to butter me up, it was to get me to make penises out of pickles, and you were trying to insist it wouldn’t ruin my career.”

“It didn’t! Look how much business you got from the ladies who attended that bachelorette shower!”

“Penis pickles. Pickle penises. Whatever! Those fucking things took me hours to perfect, and then when I was serving, I had to listen to all of those women giggling incessantly. Ugh. I’m not falling for it again, Holly, so don’t give me that look. I had nightmares about being chased by dick-shaped pickles for weeks. And don’t even get me started on the kolaches I had to make look like uncut dicks.” Janis shivered and said, “I can go get my own fucking coffee.”

“But I had Piper make your special brew.”

Janis’s posture got even straighter as her eyes flicked to the coffee and back again. “With the triple shot?”

“She gave you a quadruple shot and two extra pumps of caramel. She even salted the caramel on top of the whipped cream just the way you like

it.” I could tell Janis was about to cave, so I said, “She used half and half instead of regular milk.”

“I only promise to listen, not take the contract,” Janis hedged.

“It’s a simple children’s party, Janis. No penis pickles. I swear.”

“Give me the coffee, bitch.”

I slowly extended my arm and put the coffee within her reach, and as soon as she had a grip on the cup I yanked my arm back, not willing to risk injury if she somehow got the idea that I was getting between her and her addiction of choice. I watched her smile as she slowly took the lid off and leaned over the cup to breathe in the scent of the fresh coffee. It was all I could do not to laugh out loud at the sheer joy on her face.

“Every time I see your reaction to a good cup of brew, it makes me want to throw up a little bit.”

“Hmmm?” Janis hummed, probably not paying attention to me at all.

“I’m sure that I know what you sound like when you’re having sex because I shudder to think what you’d be doing right now if I left you alone with that cup.”

“It’s so good.”

I knew I had her right where I wanted her, so I rushed to give her the details that I would send over along with the contract as soon as I got back to the office. “Penis Pickle had a daughter with Mr. Pickle. Baby Pickle is about to turn two, and it’s her birthday. She wants crustless sandwiches with organic sun butter and fresh strawberry jam on homemade gluten-free bread for fifty children.” I spun around to leave, hoping to escape before Janis realized what I’d just said. “She also wants fresh-squeezed lemonade with strawberries frozen into the ice cubes, so it looks as good as it tastes when you serve it. The party is a beach theme with picnic blankets and a basket of food at each one. There will be at least 100 adults in attendance who will need heavy hors d’oeuvres with wine, and I need an assortment of cupcakes decorated like sandcastles. The party is scheduled for Saturday at one!”

The last words were said frantically as I rushed through the swinging doors that led into the foyer, but I didn’t move quickly enough to avoid the temperamental chef.

“Are you fucking kidding me, Hamilton?” Janis screeched as I heard the swinging door slam against the wall. I let my head fall forward as I listened to our friend laughing from the other kitchen. “Saturday? Five fucking days from now *Saturday?*”

“Yes?” I answered. Sort of.

I turned around and realized that Janis had come closer and was standing right behind me with a murderous look on her face. I screamed and tripped over my own feet, falling on my ass to the uproarious laughter of our friend who had come out of the kitchen to watch her lose her cool.

Janis glared down at me before she extended her hand to help me up from the floor. I stood to my full height and glared back, knowing that any sign of weakness might not get me the answer I wanted.

“Well?”

“Do you have *any* idea how much this is going to cost you?”

“She’s willing to pay anything I ask because she dropped the ball and forgot to schedule her own kid’s birthday party.”

“Damn right she will,” Janis grumbled. She took a sip of her coffee and glared at Dixie Dean, our friend who ran the catering side of her mother’s restaurant, Grazie’s, and shared this part of the building with Janis who ran Crumbs. “Why aren’t you making fucking sandwiches and lemonade?”

“She won’t use us since she found out my mom lives with two men. She said they are *immoral*. Besides, I don’t do fresh bread. That’s your department, so even if I did have time to take this job, you’d be the one baking the bread anyway.”

“Fuck her then. If she thinks she’s too good to associate with you because of your parents, then I’m too good for her. Judgmental bitch.”

“She’s a judgmental bitch with a whole lot of crispy green money to burn. Don’t lose sight of your goal,” Dixie reminded Janis.

“Aren’t you saving to go on a cruise?”

Janis slowly turned and glared at me before she said, “I’ll make the fucking sandwiches, but no funny shapes or any of that ridiculous shit. It’s already wasteful enough to cut the crust off.”

“It would make a really yummy bread pudding, though, so it’s not technically a waste, right?” Dixie asked, trying to help my cause.

“Big fat stacks of money, Holly. I mean it.”

“I’ll send the contract over with the details this afternoon,” I assured her, knowing she’d be shocked at the amount I’d gotten approved for catering. “Start packing for your cruise, sweetheart. I’m helping make it happen.”

“I hate your face.”

“I know. I hate yours too.”

Janis sighed and walked toward the table where she served cake samples

to clients during their wedding planning meetings and then sat and motioned toward the other chairs. “Have a seat, hag. Tell me what’s new in your life.”

I sat down next to her and took a sip of my coffee before I began. “Jericho had a follow-up appointment with his cardiologist and all of his test results looked great. Other than that, things are pretty quiet on the home front.”

“What are you going to wear on your date tonight?” Dixie asked as she sat down.

“I don’t have a date tonight,” I retorted. “I’m taking a cooking class.”

“You’re a shit liar. It’s a date, and you know it,” Janis teased. “He sounds hot, though. Ava and Rylee told us all about him when they came to pick up the pastries for the diner this morning.”

“Why don’t they just rent one of those billboards off the highway? Wouldn’t that be more efficient?”

“I heard it from Frankie first and then got in on the tail end of the conversation when the girls were talking to Janis,” Dixie said as she leaned back in her chair, closed her eyes, and yawned loudly. “He sounds awesome. What’s wrong with him?”

“Maybe there’s nothing wrong with him.”

Dixie opened one eye and studied our friend. “Who are you, and what have you done with Janis?”

“It physically hurt me to say that, but I powered through.”

“That’s what I thought,” Dixie said before she closed her eyes again. “Now, as much as it pains me, this is where I chime in and say Janis might be right. Maybe there isn’t anything wrong with this guy. He’s got all the qualities most women look for in a man - a professional career, a steady income, he takes care of his responsibilities, and he opened his home and heart to two orphaned children when they needed him most. I also understand that he’s not hard on the eyes. He sounds perfect.”

I thought about what she’d said and couldn’t find any argument. Instead, I added, “He’s easy to talk to, he’s intelligent, he’s devoted to the kids, he’s eager to take me out and he’s even expressed interest in meeting my kids and learning sign language so he can interact with Jada and Jiana. And yes, he’s so fucking hot, I’m surprised his clothes don’t combust. I really like him, and I’m very attracted to him.”

“Obviously, he’s a serial killer.”

“Wow. Janis is hitting ‘em out of the park today. Again, it hurts, but I

have to agree. He's definitely a serial killer."

"He had breakfast with Papa Smokey, Grunt, Hank, Kale, Clem, Luke, and my Uncle Lout."

"Well, if he's dead, you don't have to go on your date tonight," Janis said drolly.

"That's the thing. It seemed as if they liked talking to him and even invited him to have breakfast with them next Sunday. He's gonna go."

Dixie lifted her head and stared at me in shock as Janis did the same. All we could do was stare at each other in silence while we considered exactly what that meant.

"Were they *nice* to him?" Janis asked.

"They were calling him names just like they do Uncle Luc, but I don't think they threatened him. If they did, he didn't seem phased by it."

"He's not afraid of them? Any of them?"

"Kale?" Janis asked. "He hung out with Kale and didn't wet himself? And my dad didn't even affect him? You know how Dad can be when one of us starts dating someone new."

"And Papa Smokey. Seriously. Lout didn't even scare him?"

"If I didn't know how improbable it is, I'd almost think they behaved themselves, but we know that couldn't happen. One on one, maybe. You put two or more together and they're . . . well . . ."

"If you ask any of my exes, they'd say they're fucking terrifying."

Dixie looked at Janis and shrugged. "Maybe that's why they're your exes."

"Do you remember that guy I brought home for Christmas break my freshman year in college?" Janis asked.

"The one with the bladder problem?" I asked.

"He didn't have a bladder problem until he sat on the deck and had a cigar with Grunt and my dad. After that, every time he had to be in the same room with one of them, he peed a little."

"He's the one that ghosted you when you got back to school, right?"

"Yep. He even dropped out of the class we shared. I'm not sure what they said to him, but he took it to heart."

"You were gonna break up with him anyway. That's the only reason you brought him home. You were trying to get rid of him," Dixie accused.

"There's nothing wrong with a clean break," Janis said dismissively. "Speaking of clean breaks, how bad do you want to drag that lawyer behind

your SUV until he's just a quivering pile of mush?"

"I'd do it just because of what he's been telling Taylor and Cora to put in the note cards for the floral arrangements he orders," Dixie said, disgust in her voice. "Cora said he's certifiable. She's never met him, but he goes so hot and cold from one day to the next that she's really worried about you."

I wasn't shocked that Cora, Dixie's twin sister, had told her about some of them. I hadn't seen the notes because I'd refused delivery of all of the flowers, directing Taylor and Cora to have them taken to the nursing homes and other places around town instead. But the girls had told me about some of his notes and even sent me screenshots of what they'd written down.

"Taylor said she's kept all of his calls recorded, and she thinks you might need to file a police report."

I shrugged and asked Janis, "For what? He hasn't threatened me. Okay, not directly, but I have to admit that some of the notes are really disturbing."

"Has he come by your house or office?"

I shook my head. "He calls me at least once a day, and I've saved his voicemails even though I haven't listened to any of them. I've been taking screenshots of the texts he sends too."

"You *do* think he's dangerous."

I nodded at Janis and sighed. "He's getting there. He hasn't said anything that's a direct threat but . . ." I picked up my phone and opened his text thread. "I think it implies a threat but . . ."

"Read them to us," Janis ordered.

"They're just . . . I don't know."

"*Holly, this is ridiculous. Our misunderstanding was just that. You're blowing it out of proportion.*"

"Gaslighting," Dixie said firmly. "That's a perfect example."

"*I saw your father in court today, and when I asked about you, he had no idea we'd ever met. You were unimpressed that I wasn't eager to meet your children, but I'm even more unimpressed that you never mentioned me to your family.*"

"*I had a great day in court today. Wish you would stop throwing this little temper tantrum and talk to me.*"

"What a prick."

Dixie nodded in agreement with Janis and said, "He's still chasing you because all the other women he's matched with ran too fast. You should work on your cardio."

I flipped Dixie off before I read, *“I saw your father at the courthouse today. Have you talked to him about our relationship yet? Your family will find out about us one way or another but if you know what’s good for you, you’ll do it on my terms.”*

“I want to let you know that I don’t appreciate the skirt you were wearing yesterday. It was much too short and tight. Get rid of it.”

“What the fuck? He’s following you now?” Janis growled as she sat up straighter in her chair. “Oh, hell no.”

“The rest of that shit was just that . . . shit. That last one, though . . . It worries me.”

“It worries me a little bit too,” I admitted. “The day before I got that text, the only place I went other than the office was the grocery store and of course, the daycare. I would think that if he saw me at the grocery store, he would have stopped me to talk.”

“Does he have any idea who he’s messing with?” Dixie asked.

“He works for the DA, right? Dad and the other guys aren’t exactly strangers with the people in that office.”

“That’s an understatement,” I said, rolling my eyes at Janis. “Neither are the women in our family. Drea went to court two months ago for that incident at the red light.”

“Yeah. She only got probation but . . . I wonder if Van was the prosecutor on Drea’s case.”

“It makes sense if he was. Piper said the prosecutor was so mad, he was spitting nails, and she thought he was going to throw himself on the floor and have a fit. He was pushing for jail time since everything was caught on video and there were witnesses.”

“How could he think she was going to serve time for that?” Janis asked. “The woman was on her phone in traffic. All Drea did was remind her that was unsafe.”

“She reached through the open window and snatched her phone out of her hand before she threw it into the intersection, Janis. And then *after* she kicked a dent in the woman’s door, she threatened to go get the phone and shove it up her ass,” Dixie reminded us.

“In her defense, the witnesses all said that the woman was swerving in traffic and could have really injured someone,” I added.

“She should have yanked that woman out of her window and beat the brakes off the bitch. She might have thought twice about using her phone in

traffic then.”

“And that’s why Janis is gonna end up serving hard time someday,” Dixie said with a fake smile.

I laughed. “That’s why we keep her locked away in the kitchen and only let her out among the innocent people of Rojo when she has a handler.”

“And the handler has a cattle prod and a towel soaked in chloroform,” Dixie added.

“Maybe it’s the people I’m surrounded by that make me want to commit acts of extreme violence,” Janis argued. “For instance, right now I’m trying to figure out if I can fit both of you into the oven or if I’ll have to chop you up first.”

“We have to get Poppy to restrict her Netflix account again. Apparently, she’s diving back into the true crime genre,” Dixie said as she picked up her phone.

“Mark my words. Someday, one of you will need help with something, and you’ll thank me for all my knowledge,” Janis boasted.

“Honey, why would we use something that’s been blasted on Netflix? Obviously, those people were caught. We’d just call the original queens if we need someone to disappear. They haven’t had a television show made about them, and I can guarantee there are some secrets there that we don’t know about.”

“Dixie’s got a point,” I mused.

“In that case, maybe we should tell Gamma and Aunt Sandra about those texts instead of your dad and Uncle Lout. Then, if things go south, your dad can represent them.”

Dixie and I thought about that for a second before she smiled at Janis and said, “That sounds like a good plan.”

10.

DAMIEN

“I know you must be wondering why I called this meeting,” Nick Cardenas, the chief of police in Rojo, said as his assistant pulled the door shut behind her, closing me in the room with another investigator who’d recently joined the department, Eric Parks, and two of our superiors, Freddie Dodge and, of course, Luc Vance. “I’ve been consulting with Dodge and Vance for quite some time about opening a department dedicated to cold cases. We’ve decided to take this opportunity to pull the trigger on that with the two of you.”

“Obviously, Rojo isn’t a booming metropolis with high crime rates or even an abundance of unsolved crimes, but we do have more than a handful of cases that have stumped investigators for years,” Detective Dodge said as he shuffled through the folder in front of him and pulled out a sheaf of papers. He passed one to each of us around the table, and I was shocked to see a list of case numbers that spanned the last thirty years. “There are more than twenty cases on this list. We’ve spoken to the departments in the surrounding counties, and they have compiled lists of their own that are much smaller but still just as important.”

“I’ve taken the liberty of setting up a cold case task force. The budget for this department will mostly come from RPD, but there will be additional funds coming in from the counties that have requested our help,” Chief Cardenas explained. “I don’t have all the details of how the time will be billed out. That’s something that will have to be worked out between the cold case investigative team and our accounting department. Hopefully, it won’t involve too much paperwork or make too many waves.”

“Obviously, since this is a new department, there won’t be a full staff. However, we’ve got some college students who are working toward a few different degrees in this field of work who we’ve interviewed and cleared to

work part-time as interns,” Detective Vance explained. “The entirety of field work will be up to the investigators. The three we’ve chosen to come in will not be doing anything outside the office since they don’t have any field experience.”

“We’ve all been working on these cases for years as we had time, and we’ve closed several now. Obviously, considering the size of that list, we needed to find another solution. The two of you will comprise a dedicated, although very small, department that will focus on cold cases for Rojo and the surrounding counties.” Chief Cardenas looked away and stared out the window for just a few seconds before he looked first at me and then the new detective beside me. “I have a short list of cold cases that are going to stay just that. Cold. Ignored. Unsolved. Understood?”

“Yes, sir,” I agreed easily, trying not to think too much about how he might be involved in those cases. Instead, I was trying to contain my excitement at the thought of diving into the list in front of me. “Parks, your family moved here when you were young, correct?”

“I was in elementary school,” Parks confirmed. “My grandparents have a farm not far from here, and my Uncle Rason has lived here since he graduated from high school.”

Chief Cardenas nodded before he focused on me and said, “You’re new in town, so you might not have figured out the nuances of some of the oldest Rojo residents that . . .”

“He’s dating my niece Holly,” Detective Vance interrupted.

“Really?” Chief Cardenas asked as his face broke into a wide smile. “I didn’t peg you for a masochist, but to each his own.”

“When I showed up at Martha’s for breakfast on Sunday, he was sitting next to Lout at a table filled with Kings.”

“Nuances be damned. He jumped right into the deep end,” Detective Dodge commented with a smile of his own.

“Holly says we’re not dating, Detective Vance,” I reminded him.

“We’re going to be working closely together, so let’s drop the titles,” Nick ordered. “Freddie and Luc are your superiors, and you will respect them as such, but while we’re in an informal setting, you can call us all by our names.”

“Isn’t Chief your first name?” Luc asked.

The chief raised an eyebrow and said, “I know you remember when I was just a little peon like you, Vance.”

“And there he goes calling me names,” Luc grumbled while he kept his smile. He looked over at me and said, “I spoke to your former chief, detective, and he said that you were really good at looking at a case from all angles and once you got your teeth into it, you wouldn’t stop until you’d found the answers you were looking for.”

“There was a triple homicide that they’d been working on for a decade, and it really got to me that the victims’ families didn’t have closure,” I explained.

“We’ve got a few of those you can dig into,” Freddie said as he looked at the list. “We’ll leave the two of you to get familiar with these cases and make sure that all the departments know you’re to have full cooperation.”

“If you have any questions or run into any road blocks, come to one of us,” the chief ordered. He pushed his chair back and stood. Freddie and Luc took their cue and stood up too. “Basically, we’re throwing this shit at you because we’ve been over everything so many times that we can recite half of the information without even referring to the notes. You should figure out how you work best together and just get started.”

“I’m anxious to dive in,” Eric, my new partner, said as he picked up the papers in front of him and tapped them on the table.

“You won’t be in the bullpen anymore. We’ve arranged for you to have an office down the hall so you can spread out and keep everything locked away from prying eyes,” the chief explained. “Go ahead and pack up your desks and meet me in my office.”

Eric and I stood at the same time, and we watched the three veteran officers file out of the conference room. I was still reeling at the changes the chief had announced, and when I looked at Eric, I could tell he was feeling the same way.

“Holy shit,” Eric mumbled. “I was *not* expecting that.”

“Me either,” I admitted. “I’m excited. How about you?”

“I’ve got no words, man,” Eric said as he stretched his arm across the table and grinned at me. I put my hand in his and smiled back, excited for the challenge and happy my partner wasn’t a complete asshole.

“Let’s get started.”



“Look!” Juni shouted when she spotted the large plastic playhouse on the other side of the room. She started squirming to get out of my arms, and I laughed as a young woman opened the half door to let us inside the nursery where Simon and Juni would hang out while I took my cooking class tonight. “Down! Down! Down!”

“This is Juniper Harris,” I said as I set her on her feet. She took off across the room and the woman smiled down at Simon. “And this is Simon.”

“Hello, Simon. I’m Stevie, and that girl over there is Elena. Do you want to hang out with us while your dad takes a class?”

“He’s my uncle, not my dad,” Simon said firmly.

“Okay. What do you want to do while your uncle learns to cook?”

Simon looked around and spotted a kid he knew. He lifted his arm and pointed in that direction, and Stevie smiled as she waved him that way. “Have at it, big guy.”

Stevie and I watched Simon make his way across the room, and I glanced over at the playhouse and found that Juni had already made a friend. “I guess they’ll be fine without me.”

“You’ll be right across the hall. If one of them needs you, I’ll come find you.” Stevie pulled a clipboard off the hook on the wall and wrote the kids’ names down before she passed it over for me to sign.

Once I was finished I asked, “Do I pay you now or . . .”

“It’s included in the class fee. You just go over and let Frankie turn you into the next Food Network star.”

“Not likely. If she can teach me how to make at least one meal without setting the house on fire, I’ll consider that a win.”

“I’m rootin’ for you, buddy,” Stevie said playfully.

“There are my sweethearts,” the other young woman said as she rushed toward us. I realized she was talking to someone behind me, and when I turned around, I found Holly coming through the door. She was pushing a stroller that had two car seats attached, and the same little boy I’d met with Noble, Holly’s brother, was walking next to her. Elena swept the little boy up in her arms and started smothering him with kisses. I couldn’t help but smile at his infectious giggles as he squirmed away. She put him down and then walked over to Holly who had just taken the clipboard from Stevie. “They’ve gotten bigger since the last time I saw them!”

Stevie left Holly with the clipboard and unlatched the seat harness for one baby while Elena did the same for the other and then picked her up. Without

a word to Holly, they walked off with her daughters, leaving her standing there shaking her head.

“Hello to you too!” she called out after them. “I’m fine, thanks. How’s your mom and them?”

“Hi, Holly!” Stevie called out without turning around.

“Does that happen often?” I asked.

“All the damn time. One thing no one tells you before you have children is that once you do, people won’t even notice you standing there because they’re too busy snatching your kids up.”

“I guess you’ve brought them here often enough that those girls know . . .”

“They’re relatives . . . sort of.”

“Another one of those situations, huh?”

“Yes. Elena is my friend Janis’s little sister, and Stevie is her best friend. You met their fathers at breakfast on Sunday - Hank and Clem?”

“Oh. Yeah,” I said as I looked back at the young women who were now sitting on the floor with Holly’s daughters in their laps while other kids played around them. “I guess you’re fine with leaving your kids here then?”

“Absolutely. I used to babysit them, so it’s about time they paid me back. As a matter of fact, if you ever need a sitter, those are two of the girls I’d recommend.”

“You have more than two options?”

“I have a family full of options, but I know you don’t have nearly as many, so I thought I’d share a few.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. “Are you ready to get cookin’?”

“I’m ready. I don’t know if Frankie’s ready for me, though.”

I let out a tortured sigh and said, “I guess we should get over there. Let’s make a deal first.”

“What’s that?”

“We help each other out so we don’t look like the worst cooks in the room.”

“I’m in,” Holly said as she put her hand out to shake mine. “Believe me, I need all the help I can get.”



“It looks like a bomb went off here,” Frankie Stoffer, the younger woman who was teaching the cooking class tonight, said as she stopped at the end of our station. “What have you two done?”

“We’re cooking!”

“You’re supposed to bread the chicken, not your face,” Frankie teased Holly before she reached up to wipe flour off of her cheek. “Did either of you pay attention when I was talking about cross-contamination?”

“We’re going to clean up before we start the salad!” Holly argued.

Frankie looked around and then back at Holly with wide eyes. “When does the hazmat team get here?”

“We’ll take care of it while everyone else is on break,” I assured her.

“I always say that cooking should be fun, but you two have taken it to a whole other level,” Frankie teased. “We’ll be back in twenty. There are more paper towels and supplies in that closet over there. And make sure you wash your hands . . . and face . . . with soap and water, please.”

“She’s such a stickler. Damn,” Holly said under her breath, knowing that the younger woman would hear her.

Frankie smiled as she flipped Holly off and then turned away when another student called her name.

“So, when we’re finished here, let’s find some place to take the kids for dinner,” I suggested as I started to gather up the many dishes we’d used. As I walked over to the small sink at the end of our station, I added, “I don’t know about you, but I’m not eating that concoction we made.” I was looking down at the sink when I heard the oven door open, so I called over my shoulder, “I think she said something about not opening and shutting the oven too many times because it would bring the temperature down.” Holly didn’t answer me, so I finished the dishes, and as I turned around, I saw her shutting the oven door again. “You can look through the window instead of opening the door. I know that much, at least.”

Holly gave me a blinding smile and said, “Good to know.”

I’d seen that smile on guilty perps before, so I studied her face silently, hoping she’d come clean with whatever she was hiding.

“What?”

“What did you do?”

“When?” In my time as a police officer and then even more often as a detective, I’d encountered criminals who were masters at deflection. I knew Holly was guilty of *something*, just not what. “I’ve been right here in the

same room with you for an hour.”

I decided to ignore my gut and continue the conversation. “So, where can we take the kids for dinner? I don’t know which restaurants are kid-friendly yet.”

“Dylan Conner’s restaurant has a great kid menu, and Grazie’s is a good place anytime, of course. Gamma’s diner is great, and there are a few others around town the kids like.”

She still hadn’t answered my question, and I couldn’t help but push the issue. “Pick one, and dinner’s on me.”

“We can eat chicken here.” I raised my eyebrows and looked at the mess we’d made of our station before I looked back at her. “It’s going to turn out just fine. Have faith.”

“I helped you make it. That alone tells me it’s toxic, and we’ll probably end up in the emergency room with food poisoning. I can’t take that risk with the kids.”

“What have you been feeding them since they came to live with you?”

“We lived on sandwiches and fast food for the first month. After we moved here, I started buying those pre-made casseroles at the grocery store until Monica found out and started making freezer meals for us.”

“My dad does that for us too,” Holly interrupted with a bark of laughter. “He said if he left their diet up to me, they’d turn into chicken nuggets with macaroni noodles for hair.”

“Do you want to know a secret?”

“Sure.”

“I can fuck up boxed macaroni and cheese.”

“Oh, I can too! I’m not saying I made the macaroni, just that it was a staple in our diet from various restaurants around town. The girls have been safe because they’re still taking bottles and eating some baby food, but Jericho and I were turning into fast food junkies.”

“That means you’ll understand that when I get a chance to wine and dine you, I’ll be buying takeout or relying on something Monica sent over.”

“Wine and dine me?”

“That’s definitely going to happen, but we need a few dates under our belt first, don’t you think?” Holly’s cheeks turned pink as she huffed and looked away. I took a step closer to her and asked, “You know it’s gonna happen, don’t you?”

“I don’t know anything of the sort,” Holly declared, finally looking me in

the eye again. When I took another step closer, putting me less than a foot away she had to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact. I stared down at her as I slowly let my lips curl into a smile. “Why are you smiling at me like that? You know this is *not a date* right?”

“You keep saying that, but I don’t know if you’re trying to convince me or yourself.”

“You, obviously. Why are you so close to me?”

“So I can do this,” I murmured as I leaned closer and finally touched my lips to hers. She was still for a split second, and then she opened her lips just enough to let my tongue touch the tip of hers. It was like I’d touched a match to tinder, and in the next second, her arms were wrapped around my neck, and I lifted her up in my arms to hold her closer. I heard voices outside the door and knew we were about to be interrupted, so I pulled back and stared down at Holly. Her eyes were closed, and her lips were still parted and swollen from my kisses. I gave her one more peck on the lips and then slowly let her slide down my body until her feet were back on the floor. Before I let her go, I couldn’t resist saying, “Welcome to the dark side, sweetheart.”

The next thirty minutes passed by quickly as Holly did her best to ignore me. During that time, I took every opportunity to touch her or brush against her. When she held a spoon close to her mouth so she could blow on it to cool the sample she was ready to taste, I reached out and wrapped my hand around her wrist and directed the spoon to my own mouth for a small bite and then aimed it at hers so she could finish it.

“Delicious,” I said as I watched her study my lips. When she licked her own, I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward and giving her a soft kiss. When I leaned back, I whispered, “Even better.”

“What happened to my chicken?” a woman a few stations over yelled. I turned and saw her standing in front of the oven with her jaw slack as she stared at the mangled mess on the cooking sheet she held in her hands.

As Frankie rushed over to the appalled lady, I turned around in time to see Holly taking our chicken out of the oven - except it wasn’t the chicken we’d put in there. It was breaded perfectly, spaced evenly on the tray, and looked absolutely delicious - nothing like what we’d made.

“You little devil,” I whispered in shock.

Holly smiled innocently before she retorted, “Never underestimate what a woman will do to make sure her kids have food on the table.”

11.

HOLLY

“Are you feeling okay?” my friend Lexi asked as she swept into my office holding a tray of cups bearing the logo from our friend’s coffee truck.

“I feel fine, why?” I asked as I held my hand out and waited for her to give me a cup.

“No no no. It’s not that simple, sweetheart. You know that,” Lexi chided.

“What? Why would I feel bad? Is there a bug going around I haven’t heard about?”

“I know! I’m late, but I’m here,” Lexi’s sister Leia said as she skidded through the hallway and bumped into the doorframe. As she swept into the room, I saw our friend Emerald’s face on the screen of her phone that she was holding.

“I didn’t realize I had vertigo until I sat through Leia’s mad dash across the parking lot and into your office. Thanks, hag.”

“I didn’t do a damn thing,” I protested as Leia propped her phone up against my purse that was sitting on the end of my desk. She adjusted it so Emerald could see all of us as I told her sister, “Now give me my coffee and explain to me why I feel like I’m on one of those fake reality shows about an intervention.”

“You clearly know you need one or that wouldn’t have been the first thing to pop in mind,” Lexi said knowingly as she passed me a coffee and then gave one to her sister. “So, again, I ask, how do you feel?”

“I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?” I asked.

“We just wanted to make sure that Sabrina’s karma chicken didn’t make you sick,” Leia explained.

“Sabrina who?” I asked innocently. “I ate the chicken that Damien and I made and . . .”

“You lyin’ ho,” Leia said with a grin before she took a sip of her coffee. “She’s doing it with a straight face too. Do you see that, Em?”

“You stole Sabrina Allison’s chicken and pretended it was your own,” Lexi accused.

“Why would I do that?”

“She stole Emerald’s boyfriend, so you stole her chicken? That sounds like some drama off one of those cooking shows.”

Leia laughed. “Like Paula Dean and Martha Stewart going head to head over Paul Hollywood.”

“I’d watch that,” Emerald chimed in. “My money’s on Martha.”

“Oh, hell no. Paula’s country. She’d hunt you down and skin you like a deer,” Leia argued. “Slap a little butter on your ass and then roast you in a pit out back.”

“Martha will shank a bitch,” Emerald joked. “She hangs out with Snoop, and you’ve gotta be cool to do that.”

“I’m with Em. I think Martha would come out on top,” I agreed. “So, you’re staging an intervention because I stole some baked chicken? Oh, how the mighty have fallen. Twenty years ago, this would have been a much different conversation.”

“Not really,” Emerald argued. “We’re not here to talk about chicken. Screw the chicken and fuck Sabrina Allison.”

“See. I knew you’d understand.”

“She didn’t steal her boyfriend. She started the rumor that got the boyfriend to break up with Em, and *then* she stole him. . .”

“Technically, it wasn’t a rumor,” Emerald interrupted Lexi. “I did have a baby before I even started high school.”

“And it was none of her damn business. Besides, even after she found out, she didn’t have to tell the whole world,” Leia said firmly. “I hope she choked on that chicken you made.”

Leia realized what she’d just said when the four of us started laughing. Even though we were all around 40 when we got together, we could laugh over just about anything. Hell, we could make anything sound dirty, even stolen food.

“How are you doing, Em?”

“I’m fine.” The three of us burst out laughing, and Em glared at us from the phone screen. “I am.”

“Who’s lying now?”

“I’m getting better physically, but it’s taking a toll on me to be so inactive. I can barely wipe my own ass because I have to use the other hand, and it’s not trained for that job. I can’t wash my own hair, I can’t carry a laundry basket up the stairs, I can’t cook anything decent, and even if I could, I can’t do the dishes when I’m finished. I can’t even sign my damn name, and don’t even get me started on typing one-handed. That should be an Olympic sport.” Emerald snorted indelicately. “Hell, wiping my ass should be an Olympic sport. It qualifies for the gymnastics category because I have to contort myself in nine directions every time I take a shit.”

“I love you and all, but I’m not wiping your ass for you,” I said firmly as I shook my head. “Not happening.”

“Not it!” the sisters chimed in unison.

“I would if it was a desperate situation. Maybe if she was armless and her hot nurse was on his lunch break or something,” Leia explained.

“Hot nurse? I don’t have a hot nurse. What are you talking about? What did you hear?” Leia, Lexi, and I stared at Emerald with wide eyes as she continued. “He’s just helping out. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Lexi tilted her head to the side and whispered, “Didn’t Hunter leave town?”

At the same time, Leia asked, “Who’s she talking about?”

“Who has been helping you?” I asked bluntly.

“Nunya Bidness. He’s new in town. You’ve never met him.”

“There’s a man helping our Emerald?” Leia teased. “Details, woman.”

“We’re not here about that today. We’re here about Ms. Holly and the Hot One.”

Lexi giggled, “That sounds like a really spicy book.”

“Get back on track, ladies!” Emerald ordered. “Holly, details please.”

“There aren’t any details. We haven’t even been on a date. He knows . . .”

Emerald’s laughter interrupted me, and I scowled at the screen. “He does, does he? Is that why he’s going back to Gamma’s for breakfast with the guys on Sunday?”

“He’s not really gonna . . .”

“Oh, yes, he is. He asked Uncle Nick if it was okay for him to bring his kids, and Uncle Nick said it was just fine, and he’d see him there Sunday morning.” My mouth dropped open in shock, and the girls laughed at me.

“If you’re not dating, then why were the two of you making out in the

kitchen last night?”

“We were not . . .”

“Tsk tsk tsk,” Emerald said, putting her casted hand up and moving her finger back and forth. “Swollen lips don’t lie. Frankie saw them for herself.”

“Why are you three gossiping with the children?” I asked.

“They’re not children anymore, and you act like we’re old enough to be their parents,” Leia argued.

“Technically, we are,” Emerald pointed out.

“Well, you and I are since we started so early,” Lexi agreed. “Can you believe Georgia is 19? I pointed that out to Tink the other day, and I thought Sandra was going to pass out.”

“Esme is 28,” Emerald retorted. “When I think about *that*, I want to pass out.”

“Both of you need to shut up. I remember when they were just babies,” I said with a groan. “There’s no way they’re old enough to drive, let alone vote and all the other things I’m sure they’re doing.”

“I don’t even want to think of things like that.” Leia shook her head and whispered, “Happy thoughts. Happy thoughts. Unicorns. Centaurs. Pegasus.”

“You’re so weird. Most people think about kittens and puppies, and you’re imagining mythical creatures.”

“You know she’s always had horses on the brain, Lex,” I said with a bark of laughter. “When we were kids, she liked horses better than she liked boys.”

“Kept me from getting knocked up didn’t it?” Leia joked.

“Remember when Jewel told Shannon and Grunt that she got pregnant on our camping trip?” I asked, glad to direct the conversation away from the kiss I was trying to forget. “Grunt said, ‘You were supposed to be riding horses, not Micah Tempest!’”

“That was some drama,” Emerald agreed. “I opened the door for all of you, and then Jewel and Leia rushed right through it.”

“Hey! I was 19!”

“Oh, I remember that drama too,” Emerald muttered. “Talk about an explosion.”

“Go big or go home, right?” Leia asked. “I wish Jewel could hang out with us more often.”

“She can’t exactly skip out on patients to come have coffee. We need to

schedule a girls' night soon."

"Let's do it at Emerald's house," Lexi suggested.

"Sure, come on over," Emerald retorted sarcastically. "One of you can wipe my ass, and the other ones can wash my hair, fold my laundry, and do the dishes."

"Maybe not," Lexi hedged. I could tell by her smile that she was joking, especially when she said, "I'll bring over takeout tonight and clean the house, but I'm not going to attempt to do your hair again."

"You don't have to worry about that. My mom's coming over Sunday to take my hair down and give me a new style."

"I'll come over and help," I offered as I reached for my phone. "Let me see if Tati can watch the kids."

"I'll be there too. I'll text Jewel and tell her the plan," Leia said as she picked up her own phone. "And while we're together this evening, we can discuss Holly's hot guy and his mediocre kiss."

"It wasn't mediocre. It was so hot that my panties melted," I mumbled without even thinking. When I realized what I'd just said, I looked up from my phone to find all three women staring at me knowingly. "Fine. We can talk about Detective Hot Pants tonight. I promise."

"And you'll explain why last night wasn't a date?" Emerald pushed.

"It wasn't!"

"Make sure you walk over so you can stumble home later and not have to worry about your car," Emerald ordered.

"Why would I worry about my car?"

"Because we're going to ply you with wine so that you drunk dial Detective Hottie," Leia promised.

"Like that's going to happen," I said with a dramatic eye roll. Little did they know that it *couldn't* happen. I didn't even have the man's phone number, but I wasn't about to tell them that. These freaks would probably be able to find it within minutes anyway, and then I wouldn't have an excuse. "It's going to take a *lot* of wine."

"I'll stop by the store on my way to the gallery," Lexi assured me.

"Tati's going to spend the night and watch the kids for me," I said as I set my phone back on the desk and picked up my coffee. "Looks like it's a date, ladies."

Emerald raised her eyebrows and said, "Obviously, we've got a lot of work to do if you think hanging out with us is equivalent to a date. Believe

me, you're not gonna get any panty-melting kisses from me."

"That's why she's gonna drunk dial Detective Delicious," Leia said as she slipped her phone into her back pocket. "Jewel's in. She said she'll walk over after she gets the boys settled."

"She's walking, too, huh? Are you going to get her liquored up too?"

"You know we don't have to do that. Jewel has never had a filter, drunk or sober. She'll say whatever's on her mind in any condition, but you're so closed off about this whole relationship thing that getting anything out of you is like pulling teeth."

I flipped Emerald off and then waved my hand around at the other women.

"Oh, no, ma'am. That's Detective Delectable's job."



"So, tell me what's going on with this Van guy," Tati, my little sister, said as she strapped Jiana into her car seat. Once my daughter was secure, Tati lifted her foot and pretended to nibble on her toes. Jiana giggled like she did every time, and I couldn't help but smile at her before I looked at Jada.

"I won't touch your feet, sweetheart. I know you hate that," I said while signing at the same time. When I was finished, I lifted Jada's hand so I could kiss her knuckles. Jada smiled, and I made kissing noises as I made my way up her arm. Finally, she giggled but not as exuberantly as her twin. I started signing again as I said, "Love you, sweet thing."

"I'll carry them out while you herd Jericho in that direction."

I smiled at my sister and swooped down to give my daughters one more kiss before I made my way into the living room to find my son. He was sitting in the middle of the floor surrounded by toys, trying to put on his shoe.

"Can I help?" I asked.

"I do it!"

"Can I help you do it?" Jericho sighed and thrust his foot in my direction, and it took everything I had to bite back a grin. "Are you gonna have fun with Poppy and Geepa?"

"Yep!"

"Are you going to be good?"

“Yep!”

“Do you know how much I love you?”

“Yep!”

“Do you want worms for dinner?”

“Yep!” Jericho’s eyes got wide as he started frantically shaking his head. “No!”

“Gotcha!”

“Gotcha!” Jericho mimicked as he started giggling. Once his shoe was on and I had helped him gather up the toys he wanted to take to my parents’, I helped him put on his jacket. Before we walked outside, I grabbed the backpack that held the things they might need during their overnight stay at my parents’ and then took Jericho’s hand again to help him down the stairs. When we got out to my SUV, I helped Jericho into his seat and kissed him until he giggled before I said goodbye and gave the girls one more kiss. After I shut the door, I turned to my sister and handed her the keys. “Are you sure you don’t mind taking care of them tonight?”

“Girl, hush. You know I love these kids, and I am always ready to watch them whenever you need a break, which isn’t nearly often enough if you ask me.”

“If you’re sure y’all are staying at the house with Dad and Papa, I’m not going to stay sober.”

“Good. You deserve some wine with your downtime. You should dig into that app while you’re at Emerald’s so you can find some new matches.”

“Haven’t I been punished enough?”

“Is he still sending you flowers everyday?”

“And texts,” I grumbled.

“It’s so weird that he wants to date you because of Papa. Most men run the other direction once they meet him.”

“He wants Papa on his side in the courtroom, but what he doesn’t understand is that the only side Papa will ever be on is his client’s.”

“I still think you should talk to Papa about him.”

“I’m an adult. The last thing I need is Dad and Papa wading into my dating life.”

“At least tell him why this douche is so insistent on talking to you. If nothing else, he might find it funny.”

“I’ll do that, but I’m sure Van’s going to get bored and set his sights on some other poor woman soon.”

“I don’t think that’s how men like him work,” Tati said, concern in her voice. “He seems like the kind of guy who isn’t used to hearing the word ‘no.’”

“Must be the lawyer in him.” Tati jingled my keys and rounded the hood of the SUV before she called out, “Have fun and tell the elders I said ‘hi.’”

“Of course,” I grumbled. “Let me go get my walker and I’ll make my way over. Hopefully I can remember your message for them by the time I get there. You know how I am.”

“Stubborn and bullheaded?”

I grinned and said, “Right back at ya.”

“Love you, girl,” Tati said before she started the engine. I waved once she was out of the driveway and laughed when she saluted me before she took off down the street toward our parents’ house.

I looked around the yard, making mental notes about what I needed to get accomplished this weekend. The urge to stay home so I could catch up on chores was almost overwhelming, but I knew that if I didn’t show up at Emerald’s, the girls would just come down to mine. With a sigh of resignation, I made my way back into the house to lock up and grab the bottle of wine I’d bought for tonight.

I rarely ever imbibed anymore, but since I knew my kids were safe with family, I might let loose and have a glass. Maybe two.



“The casserole is almost ready,” Lexi called out from the kitchen. “I didn’t let Holly touch it, so we should be alright!”

“I fuck up *one* dinner . . .”

“One?” Emerald asked from the bed where she was sitting and sorting socks. “Just one this week, right? Over the years, I’d say the meals you’ve fucked up would number in the thousands.”

“That’s exaggerating a little bit,” I mumbled.

“Every time I see your kids, I check them for malnutrition,” Jewel said as she breezed into the room with another basket of clean laundry. “I’m always prepared to slip them protein bars to stave off the hunger pains.”

“You’re such a bitch,” I said, glaring at our friend.

“Is Reagan still making you freezer meals, even after the microwave putty

fiasco?” Emerald asked.

“Microwave putty?”

“You weren’t here to experience the horror of food made by Holly.”

Jewel cringed and shuddered. “Remember when she made baked chicken and tried to kill us all?”

“It was beautiful, and I didn’t want it to burn!” I exclaimed, trying to defend myself.

“It was raw. Granted, it *looked* amazing, but there’s that pesky little rule about eating uncooked poultry,” Jewel teased. “I bet you still have pictures of it on your phone, don’t you?”

I stared at her with a blank expression, and she and Emerald started cackling like two damn hens when I asked, “Why am I friends with either of you?”

“Because you didn’t have much choice in the matter. We were the only girls in the family close to your age.”

“How are things going with your stalker?” Emerald asked, changing the subject to something more serious. “Ready for him to disappear yet?”

“All it would take is one phone call,” Jewel reminded me. “Poof! Problem solved!”

“I keep thinking he’ll fade into the distance,” I admitted. “No contact should make him focus his attention elsewhere.”

“Or being ignored will piss him off and make him take things to the next level,” Emerald said as she handed me a stack of socks. As I put them in the dresser, she asked, “How often does he text you now?”

“Only a few times a day, and they’re the sweet, happy texts. Nothing ugly anymore. I think he’s realized that I’m not going to answer and he needs to move on.”

“Where the hell did Holly go?” Jewel asked Emerald as she looked around the room. “I remember our old friend who had a backbone and a no bullshit policy, but I don’t know this girl.”

“He was a total prick, but I sort of feel sorry for him,” I admitted.

“I miss Holly too,” Emerald complained, siding with Jewel. “Maybe this mystery man she made out with . . .”

“We did not make out!”

Emerald ignored me and continued, “. . . will take care of the crazy stalker issue so we don’t have to.”

“We can only hope,” Jewel said wistfully.

“Hey! You’ve got no room to give me any shit, woman. How many times did we offer to help you poison Robert while you were married? Did you take us up on it? No, you didn’t. That’s why you still have to deal with him now.”

“He found me on the dating site,” Jewel admitted. “He’s been texting me lately, swearing he’s a changed man.” When Emerald and I stared at her in shock, she laughed uncomfortably and said, “I thought about going on a date with him, but I decided that’s not a good idea.”

“Okay,” Emerald said softly. “Let’s analyze this, babe. It’s taken you two years to find the old Jewel, and if you let him back in, we’ll lose her again. If you do go back to him, we’ll still be right by your side like we were before, but he’s going to do his best to push us out.”

“He’ll try even harder than he did the first time,” I added. “Are you considering it because you still love him, or are you just sick of being alone?”

Jewel didn’t answer, instead trying to change the subject by saying, “I thought we were talking about Holly’s makeout session, not my lack of male companionship.”

Emerald took the hint and said, “We’ll get some wine in her and have her give Detective Darling a call tonight. Maybe he’ll swoop in on his trusty steed and rescue the damsel in distress.”

“You’ve got to quit reading historical romance, Em,” Jewel said, exasperated. “She’ll call Detective Delightful, and he’ll roll up in his pickup to cart her away to his secluded ranch where she can help him tame his wild stepchildren who are still reeling over the death of their mother.”

“Too close to home,” I said with a wince.

“What do you mean?”

“His brother and sister-in-law died, and he’s raising their kids. They’re Monica and Tasha’s great-niece and nephew.”

“Oh shit,” Jewel whispered. Perking up a little bit, she asked, “But does he have a truck?”

12.

DAMIEN

“That smell is not coming from my house,” I said for at least the fifth time since my nosy neighbor had stormed onto my porch and started ranting. “I don’t have my music up loud either. It’s just me here.”

“Like I’d trust a word you say after those children of yours vandalized my property!”

I leaned back, calling on the heavens for patience and restraint because this woman was surely testing my reserves of both. “And I know you’re the one who poisoned my petunias!”

“Poisoned your petunias,” I repeated. “I have never once had anyone accuse me of that.”

“I know what criminals like you do. I watch television!”

“Criminals like me, huh? What exactly do we do again?”

“Deflect during interrogation,” my neighbor said knowingly.

“Is this an interrogation?”

“Of course it is! That’s the only way I’ll be able to get to the bottom of all the things that are happening around my house.”

“What sort of things?”

“As if you don’t know,” the woman hissed.

“Lady, Petunia is the name of a pig from a cartoon, so unless you’re raising pigs on your property, I have no idea what you’re talking about. That being said, I didn’t poison anything, so I’m going to have to ask you very kindly to leave and not knock on my door again. If you’ve got a problem, call the cops.”

“I already did. They’re on their way,” she said with an obnoxious smile. “They’ll get to the bottom of this and have you in cuffs for everything, including those drugs I smell wafting off of your property.”

I’d seen a patrol car parked down the street before and wondered if this

woman called them so often that they'd found a comfortable spot to wait for her next complaint. When I glanced over her shoulder to see if it was still there, I saw a man in uniform walking toward another unit that had just pulled up. He and the other officer talked through the car's open window. As if he could feel me watching him, the officer standing turned and stared at me before he heaved a big sigh and shook his head.

Instead of getting into his patrol car, he started walking down the sidewalk toward us as the other officer drove beside him slowly. I watched him pull his phone out to make a call before he slipped it into the holster on his hip and laughed at something the other officer said.

My neighbor glanced over her shoulder and then turned to smile at me. "I told you they were coming."

"I have a question before they get here," I said as I studied the woman's face. "Do you pick on me because I'm the new guy and you've already made every other neighbor on the block hate you?" The woman gasped, but I didn't care if I hurt her feelings at this point. "Did you ever stop to think that someone *poisoned your petunias* because of the way you treated them?"

"I knew I'd get you to admit it!"

As the woman crowed about her interrogation skills, the officer on foot stopped in front of my house while he waited on the other officer to join him. I recognized them now that they were closer and bit back a grin when I saw the tortured looks on their faces.

"Hey, guys," a man's voice called out from my right. I looked over to find one of the owners of the property jogging our way. He stopped in front of the officers, and I tried to block out the nagging woman in front of me so I could hear their conversation. Finally, Adam started up the path to my house with the officers, Brawley Dumont and Zoey Duke, flanking him. He addressed my neighbor first, and if I didn't know better, I'd almost think he was taunting her. "Evenin', Margaret. It's good to see you're finally making friends with one of your neighbors."

Margaret glared at him for a second before she looked at Officer Dumont and barked, "Do you smell that?"

Without missing a beat, he frowned at Adam and ordered, "Control yourself, man!"

With a disgusted expression, Zoey exclaimed, "Good grief. What did you eat for lunch today?"

"That is not what I smell!" Margaret argued, even more outraged. "I

smell marijuana.”

Adam, Brawley, and Zoey made a show of sniffing the air before they started sniffing around each other. I had to fake a coughing fit to cover my laughter when Adam exclaimed, “You both smell like bacon!”

“I want to file an official complaint, Mr. Evans. There are toxic smells coming from this man’s property.”

Adam slowly shook his head. “We talked about this, Margaret. You’ve got to pick your battles. You’ve already filed one report this month. I’m gonna have to charge you if you file another.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“So is reporting my son *to me* for riding a skateboard down the sidewalk,” Adam retorted. “What exactly am I supposed to do with that?”

“You should control your children!”

“Oh!” Zoey exclaimed with wide eyes and her mouth open in exaggerated shock. “She went there, didn’t she?”

“Now, you have to decide if you want to push for the complaint about my son’s skateboard, Lucky Mark’s drum set, Phoenix’s daughter’s playhouse, or some mysterious smell you think is coming from this nice gentleman here. If you want to keep all of those on record for this month, I’m gonna have to fine you.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Or you could take the generous offer my brothers and I made and sell.”

“I’m going to hire a lawyer!”

“When you do, make sure to take along a copy of the HOA rules you signed before you purchased the house along with the amendments that have been added since you moved in. He’ll want to look those over, I’m sure.”

“You know who I’ve heard is an excellent attorney?” Zoey asked seriously.

“Who?” Brawley replied, playing along.

“Marcus Hamilton,” she said knowingly as she slowly nodded. “He *never* loses a case.”

I saw Margaret’s posture change and knew she was taking the bait.

“Great track record,” Adam agreed. “He’s a menace in the courtroom . . . or so I’ve heard.”

“Thank you for that information, but if he’s as good as you seem to think he is, you’re going to regret it. I’ll call his office first thing Monday morning.”

“He’s got a paralegal working for him named Petra Parker. I bet she’d love to help you,” Brawley said helpfully. “Make sure you tell her Adam referred you.”

Adam elbowed Brawley in the ribs, and he grunted before he smiled at Margaret. “Is there anything else we can do for you, ma’am?”

“Absolutely not,” Margaret snapped as she walked down the steps and turned to cross the grass.

She’d gotten about halfway to her own yard when Adam called out, “I’m going to have to fine you for that, Margaret. You insisted that we include the rule about always using the sidewalk, and to be fair to all parties involved, I’ll have to write you up.”

“Nobody reported me,” she retorted as she stopped and gave him her patented shitty smile.

Adam looked at me and motioned with his hand, so I took his cue. “I’d like to report my neighbor for walking on my grass.”

Margaret turned her head so fast that she was probably going to need a chiropractor and glared daggers at me. “You wouldn’t!”

“What do I need to sign to make it official?” I asked.

“You’re just as bad as those hoodlums who live here!” Margaret stomped off without another word.

The second her door slammed, we all started laughing. Once it died down, I told Adam, “I have a feeling that I just made an enemy who’s going to make my life a living hell. Which neighbor is she calling a hoodlum?”

“Could be any number of people,” Adam admitted. As he spoke, he pointed out different houses, “My guess is Crow, maybe Phoenix, most definitely Lucky . . .”

“Hell, I live down there, and Ruf just bought that house across the street, so if he’s not on her list now, he will be soon. Imagine when she gets a taste of Koda Forrester. The shit’s gonna *really* hit the fan.” Brawley and Zoey laughed, but Adam looked distinctly uncomfortable. “We should start a pool and guess how many times each of us gets reported in the next few months.”

“If you do that, half the residents out here will take it as a challenge. She’ll blow my phone up even more than she already does, and I am not looking forward to that,” Adam said with a sigh.

“She’s going to start reporting me for even more stuff now, I suppose.” The last thing I needed was trouble with my neighbor, but I had a feeling she was about to become even more of a thorn in my side.

“It’s too bad your landlord is an asshole. He’s probably going to give you all sorts of shit,” Zoey joked. “But that’s what you get for hanging out with riff raff.”

“I’m doing everything I can to get her out of here, but she’s stubborn. I’ve got Emerald on the case now, so she’ll probably cave soon.”

Brawley barked out a laugh before he said, “That poor woman has no idea what’s in store for her.”

“Who is Emerald?”

I heard women’s laughter and looked at the house on the corner just as Brawley said, “That’s Em’s house. That’s also the source of the smell.”

I looked back at him in question, and he shrugged. “I got off half an hour ago.”

“I don’t smell shit,” Zoey said as she took off toward the house two doors down. “I’m on my lunch break, so I’m going to see what sort of munchies they have.”

“Me too!” Brawley said as he jogged to catch up with her.

Adam studied me for a minute and then asked, “Is your cop brain gonna be okay with that, or are you gonna cause a fuss?”

“I’m a detective, not a patrol officer.”

“And?”

I shrugged. “I don’t smell shit.”

Adam laughed. “Come on. Let’s go see what the girls are doing, and I’ll introduce you to Em. Believe me, she’s a much better neighbor than Margaret.”

We weren’t too far behind Zoey and Brawley, so they held the gate open for us, and we walked down the side of the neighbor’s house before we turned the corner to find five women lounging around a fire pit. I was pleasantly surprised to see that one of them was the woman I couldn’t seem to get off my mind.

“Hide the donuts, ladies! It’s the po-po!” one of the women called out.

“Holy shit!” I whispered. “That’s my doctor!”

Adam burst out laughing and said, “So, you’ve met Jewel, but let me introduce you to the rest of them.”

Brawley walked over to Dr. Parker and snatched the bag of chips out of her hand before he flopped onto the chair beside her. “Is this all you’ve got to eat?”

“Well, hello to you, too, my little Brawley Bear,” a gorgeous Black

woman said from one of the lounge chairs.

“Don’t start with me, woman,” Brawley growled.

Holly suddenly realized I was standing next to Adam. She waved at me and asked her friends, “Can you see him, too, or did my gummy just kick into high gear?” She blinked a few times and then shook her head. “Damn. He’s still there.”

“That’s funny. It looks like Adam’s got a shadow,” one of the women choked out before she started laughing.

“Adam, bring your shadow over, and let me get to know him a little better,” one of the other women said suggestively.

“Hands off, skank. That’s Detective Dark and Delicious, and you can’t have him,” Holly said as she pushed at her friend’s shoulder.

“Well look at that. Eve brought Holly a present,” the Black woman said as she studied me from head to toe. She looked at Adam and asked, “What did you bring for me?”

Adam ignored her question and asked, “Are you drinking because your arm hurts or because you want to?”

“I’m drinking apple juice so it looks like I fit in with the cool kids.” With the hand that wasn’t wrapped in a bandage, she lifted her wine glass. “It goes really well with the brownies we have, and my arm doesn’t hurt at all.”

“That’s because Leia crushed a painkiller and put it in her ice cream,” one of the other women whispered loudly enough for people three streets over to hear.

“She didn’t!” the woman exclaimed.

Dr. Parker laughed and admitted, “I told her how to do it.”

“Come closer Adam. I want to touch your shadow,” Holly said with a relaxed grin.

“Well, that’s one I haven’t heard before,” Adam mumbled. “Ladies, this is Damien Harris. He lives a few doors down next to Karen.”

I laughed. “I thought her name was Margaret.”

“It is, but the urge to call her Karen is overwhelming sometimes. If I’m not careful, I’m gonna slip up and call her that to her face one day,” Adam admitted with a grin. He pointed to each member of the group as he introduced them. “That’s Emerald, apparently, you know Holly, that’s Lexi, Leia’s the one passed out in the chair, and this is Jewel.”

I nodded as I said, “Dr. Parker.”

“Nope. You can only call me that when I have my stethoscope around

my neck. Any other time, I'm just Jewel."

"Just Jewel. Just Jewel." Lexi giggled and said, "That sounds funny."

"Who's got the wacky tobacky, and if you're eating gummies and brownies, why are you still smoking?" Zoey asked as she walked out carrying a plate of food with a bottle of water under her arm. "I get off in two hours, and after the bullshit day I've had, I'm going to need a little of each, I'm sure." Zoey realized what she'd just said, and her eyes got wide before she backtracked, "But, of course, I won't be doing that because it's illegal, and I'm an officer of the law who strives to follow all the rules of society at all times."

"Do I look like a narc?" I asked, looking from Zoey to Adam. "Really?"

"Lookin' like a snack," I heard Holly mumble.

"Do you have the munchies?" I blurted.

Once everyone's laughter trailed off, I assured Zoey, "What you do when you're off duty is none of my business."

"Thanks," Zoey said, but she still looked unconvinced.

"I've got plenty to share. Parker brought some samples of the new strain he's working on with his dad." Jewel touched her fingers to her lips and kissed them before she said, "Chef's kiss. That shit is awesome."

"There's the name!" Emerald shouted.

"I have to text him!" Jewel said just before she grabbed her phone from the table and started typing furiously.

"I need to remember to text Parker tomorrow and tell him what she's trying to say because there's no way she's going to make any sense right now."

"I'll text him. Is there more food in the house?" Brawley asked as he crumbled up the chip bag he'd stolen. "I'm starving."

"You ate constantly when I babysat you, and it made me crazy," Holly complained. "I was always having to make you snacks and then clean up your mess. Drove me nuts."

"Isn't that what a sitter is paid to do?" Brawley asked as he stood to go inside.

"I got paid double for watching ZoZo, and she didn't eat nearly as much," Holly informed him.

"Bullshit. I distinctly remember her and Zane gnawing on furniture," Brawley retorted before the door shut behind him.

"Possibly," Holly conceded. She looked at Zoey and said, "Every time I

watched you two, it was like taking my life in my hands.”

Emerald laughed. “Because they were demon spawn that crawled up from the pits of hell to test our patience and restraint.”

Zoey laughed. “I resemble that remark. And I wasn’t nearly as crazy as my brother.”

“Watching you one at a time wasn’t horrible. But even now, it’s just chaos when you and Zane get together,” Emerald said.

“That’s the guy from the wedding, isn’t it? The one that set your hair on fire?” I asked.

Holly was the only one who didn’t burst out laughing at my question. Instead, she grimaced as she ran her hand over her hair to make sure it was still there.

“On the bright side, you did get to wear all of Sarah’s really cool wigs for a while,” Jewel said. “It was a good trade-off.”

“How in the hell was that a good trade-off? I didn’t have any fucking eyebrows, Jewel. Do you know how long it takes for those to grow back?”

“Between three and four months,” Jewel answered.

“No shit, smartass,” Holly snapped.

“That was fucking hilarious,” Adam chortled as he motioned for me to find a chair. He sat next to Emerald, and I chose the spot beside Holly.

When he turned to say something to Emerald, I leaned closer to Holly and asked, “Can I have your phone number?”

“Why?”

“So I can enter you in a sweepstakes drawings.” Holly raised her eyebrows, and I grinned. “I’d like to text you so we can find a convenient time for our next date.”

“We haven’t had a date yet,” Holly argued.

Lexi coughed, and it sounded a lot like the word ‘bullshit.’ Holly glared at her and asked me, “When did you start hanging out with Adam?”

“Margaret smelled the weed and assumed it came from my house.”

“Your house? Where is your house?”

“I told you he lives next door to Karen,” Adam intervened.

“You’re shitting me,” Holly responded.

“I wouldn’t shit you. You’re my favorite turd.”

Holly closed her eyes and sighed before she said, “I don’t like him at all, just so you know.”

“Noted,” I said seriously. “I can’t run around with Adam anymore.”

“If you were dating, would you let her tell you who you could hang out with?” Jewel asked.

“Absolutely . . . *not*.”

“My ex-husband tried to get me to give up this wacky bunch,” Holly said. “Of course that wasn’t gonna happen, but he was pretty persistent. I’ll give him that much.”

“Is that where your kids are tonight? With their father?”

Holly sputtered out a laugh. “No. They’re actually with *my* fathers. My sister was going to babysit them, but my dads asked her to bring them over. They’re all going to spend the night there and then go see Gamma for breakfast.”

“Did you take an Uber to get here? I didn’t see a lot of cars out front.”

“I didn’t drive because I knew I’d be impaired one way or another,” Holly explained. “Leia’s the only one that drove, but she’ll stay with her sister tonight.”

“She’ll stay right here on the patio,” Lexi informed her. “I’m not carrying her ass all the way to my house.”

“I’ll carry her inside later,” Adam promised. “So, what was the reason for this hen party?”

“We were looking for intelligent conversation and doing fine until a few minutes ago,” Jewel said with a fake smile as Brawley came out of the house with a plate of food and sat down next to her. “Now I’m surrounded by idiots.” Brawley flipped her off and Jewel laughed. “Love you, Brawley Bear.”

“We were playing a game and trying to convince Emerald and Jewel to call some of their matches,” Lexi explained.

“Matches?” Adam asked.

“Some of the children signed us up on a dating site.”

“How are you going to find a match when we either know or are related to everyone in this town who’s of dating age?” Brawley asked.

“Holly found one. Of course, she had to dig all the way to the bottom of the barrel to find him, but she did fulfill her promise to at least try the service,” Emerald explained.

“Your kids signed you up?” I asked, looking at the women around me. “How old are they?”

“We’re talking about people Zoey and Brawley’s age. We’re some of the older group along with Adam’s two brothers and a few of our family who

live in Colorado. Our kids love us and respect us enough to never do such a thing,” Jewel said primly.

Everyone laughed until Zoey chimed in and said, “They’re the elders.”

Brawley laughed as he explained, “They *love* it when we call them that.” As if they’d planned it, everyone on the patio except for Zoey and myself flipped Brawley off. “See?”

“It was just stupid when we were younger, but now that we’re in our forties, it hits a nerve,” Emerald said as she glared at Brawley.

“I am *not* in my forties, thank you very much,” Holly sassed.

“Shut up. You’ve only got nine months left to throw that in my face, so enjoy it while you can.”

“If you guys are staying, you have to join our game,” Lexi ordered.

“And I’m out,” Brawley said as he stood up to take his plate into the house.

“Chickenshit,” Emerald taunted.

“I’ve gotta get back out there to protect the masses, mostly from themselves but whatever,” Zoey grumbled.

“Are you coming back to imbibe?” Emerald asked.

“I’ll have to take a raincheck. I’ve got something early in the morning. I need to stay home tonight.”

“Styx sent Parker with a gift basket for your parents, so I’m sure they’ll share if you need it,” Jewel told Zoey.

“I love it when they’re working on a new strain,” Zoey said with a sigh.

She already looked relaxed just thinking about it, and I couldn’t help but ask, “Is this another distant relative who also happens to be a dealer?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, officer,” Jewel said dismissively.

I laughed as I said, “I didn’t hear nothin’, I didn’t see nothin’, I don’t know nothin’.”

“Exactly,” Jewel said with a grin.

“That’s my kind of man,” Emerald said cheerfully. “Good catch, Holly. You don’t have to throw this one back . . . yet.”

“I haven’t been fishing,” Holly retorted.

“You’ve got me on the hook, sweetheart. You’ve just gotta reel me in.”

Holly glared at me and said, “I don’t like fish. I’m more of a steak and lobster kind of girl.”

“She’s very high maintenance,” Adam said as he tried to maintain a

straight face. “Easygoing, personable, and very much a people pleaser.”

Everyone laughed, and Brawley shook his head as he walked past me. “Good luck with that, man.”

“Goodbye, children! Make sure you’re home before curfew and don’t run around with any of those wild bikers,” Emerald called out. “They’ll get you in trouble every time!”

“I’ll tell Mom and Dad you said ‘hi,’” Zoey threw over her shoulder as she and Brawley left.

“Thanks for dinner!”

“Bye, Brawley Bear!” Holly called out.

“Do y’all call him that to irritate him?”

“His dad goes by Bear, and he’s a perfect replica of him, so that just naturally became his nickname,” Holly explained.

“So, you’re the guy who thought Holly wouldn’t like you because she looks like Kate Hudson and you look like Michael B. Jordan?”

“That’s me,” I said as I smiled at Emerald. “Obviously, I jumped to the wrong conclusion.”

“He does kind of look like him,” Jewel said as she studied my face. “I see it now.”

“And you’re a detective for Uncle Nick?” Lexi asked.

“Chief Cardenas is my boss.”

“Hmm,” Emerald said. “Let’s change the game up since we’ve got a newbie.”

“What game were you playing?”

Emerald smiled, “Two Truths and a Lie.”

“Which is difficult since we’ve all been around each other through the good and the bad.” Holly scrunched her nose up and added, “And the ugly.”

“Okay. I’m game. You want to see if I can spot the lie?”

Adam laughed before he said, “This should be fun. Good luck, man.”

“Throw ‘em at me. We’ll see how I do.” I thought this would be an interesting way to get to know Holly and her friends. They all seemed like genuinely nice people, but there were a few undercurrents I was still trying to figure out. The game Emerald had suggested might help with that. “Who goes first?”

“I will,” Lexi volunteered.

“I’m gonna grab a beer.” Adam announced as he got up to go inside. “Anyone else need anything?”

“I’ll take one, thanks,” I answered. After the women answered Adam, he left to fill their orders, and I asked Lexi, “So, you’ll tell me two truths and a lie but not in any specific order?” Lexi nodded, so I smiled and said, “Bring it on.”

She looked thoughtful for a few seconds and then said, “I was in a coma for nineteen days. I helped rescue an infant from a kidnapping. I’m a veterinarian.”

I studied her for a minute or two, and she stared back with a completely blank expression. “Damn. You’re good.”

Holly laughed before she said, “Oh, just wait. She’s not even the best poker face.”

“Your manicure says you don’t work with animals, but gloves are a thing . . .” I thought about it for a little longer and finally said, “The coma is a lie.”

“Wrong. My sister is a large animal vet. I’m an artist and own an art gallery,” Lexi said as she motioned toward the woman sleeping on the lounge chair. “I helped rescue *her* niece from a kidnapper.”

“Whoa.”

“And a few years later, she was indeed in a coma for almost three weeks. That was traumatic,” Holly mumbled.

“I woke up well-rested, so I wouldn’t know,” Lexi said with a grin. Holly, Emerald, and Jewel glared at her. “I’m fine now, right? Isn’t that all that matters? There were a few surprises, some good and some bad, but it’s all fine now. Who’s next?”

“I’ll go,” Jewel volunteered. “When I was a kid, I was investigated by the FBI and the FAA for building *and successfully launching* a rocket. I helped create a hybrid rose bush and named it after my mom. I took my SAT wearing a baby wrap holding a three-week-old infant.”

“That’s easy,” I scoffed. I thought about it and then sighed. “Okay, the rose bush I can maybe . . . *possibly* see happening. I don’t know about the test thing, but you didn’t launch a rocket.” I thought I was right when everyone on the patio laughed, so I said, “My score is one to one. Next level. I’m ready.”

“Oh, no, buddy,” Jewel corrected through her laughter as she shook her head. “Wrong answer. My Gamma babysat Parker while I took my test.”

“You want me to believe you launched a rocket?”

“Everytime Grunt thinks about the FBI crawling all over his barn studying their work, he gets pissed all over again,” Adam sputtered through

his laughter. “That was so damn funny.”

“I’ll never forget when they were hauling us away for questioning. My mom kept yelling, “Don’t say a fucking word to anyone until you talk to Marcus!”

“I was sitting at the table with Dad when he got the call from Nichole about the raid,” Holly said, cackling with laughter. She looked at me and explained, “Nichole is their neighbor and another friend of ours. Papa put his head in his hands, and I thought he was crying. Turns out he was laughing so hard, he couldn’t catch his breath.”

“Dad saw them coming up the road and tried to call Grunt to warn him, but he didn’t answer. We stood out in the paddock and watched them haul everyone away. It was crazy,” Lexi explained.

“The best part was when Terran picked the lock on the door of his interrogation room and freed all of us,” Jewel chortled. “We walked over to Gamma’s for some pie, and my mom caused a shitstorm because they *lost* four children who were supposed to be in custody.”

“Holy shit,” I whispered. In a louder voice, I asked, “You guys are serious?”

“Absolutely,” Holly said, nodding as she dabbed at the tears in her eyes. “That was wild.”

“You can’t take a baby into testing,” Jewel said, as if *that* was the most unbelievable thing she’d told me. “That’s against the rules.”

“Kind of like building a rocket?”

“A little bit, yeah,” Jewel said, laughing again.

“Jeez. I thought I was a badass because I toilet papered my math teacher’s house without getting caught. You guys were dealing with the FBI.”

“Okay! Emerald, it’s your turn,” Jewel said as she tried to catch her breath. “God, that’s still funny, even now.”

“Okay, let me think,” Emerald said as she leaned her head back and stared at the darkening sky. “Eve, you go first.”

“Eve?” I asked.

“She’s been calling me that since we were kids. Makes me want to strangle her.” Adam scowled at Emerald, but then he smiled. “You’re such a pain in my ass.”

“At your advanced age, you’ve probably just got hemorrhoids,” Jewel chortled.

Adam looked at me, his expression serious, and asked, “Have you ever looked around at your friends and wondered if you should just pack it all in and move to Siberia?”

“Not really.”

“I do it all the time,” Adam grumbled. “Okay, I’ll go next.” He sat quietly for a second before he said, “When I was 20, I helped deliver a baby on the side of the road during a snowstorm. I’ve ridden my motorcycle in all fifty states. I spent a month living off the grid alone in a cave.”

“A cave?”

“Yep,” Adam said with a firm nod. “All alone.”

“I’ve got to go with the fifty states thing. How did you get your motorcycle to Hawaii and Alaska? That’s the lie.”

“Nope. I didn’t live off the grid in a cave, I lived off the grid in a cabin in Alaska . . . and I rode there on my motorcycle.”

“What about Hawaii?”

“I spent six weeks in Hawaii and rode everywhere on a rented motorcycle.”

“Is Alaska where you helped a woman give birth in a snowstorm?”

Jewel burst out laughing and said, “No, we were on our way back into town from a family thing in Colorado, and I gave birth in the back of my mom’s SUV.”

“And we were all there to witness it,” Lexi said with a grin.

“All I did was catch the baby. Emerald and Leia had the practical knowledge, and my brothers and I had some first aid training, but yeah, we delivered Parker on the side of the road in a snowstorm,” Adam explained.

“Holy shit,” I whispered in shock. “That’s crazy.”

“You’re telling me, man,” Adam said as he slowly shook his head. “When Bianca was pregnant with Noah and then Lorelei, I wouldn’t even let her leave the city limits during her last trimester. I was traumatized.”

“*You were?*” Jewel asked incredulously. “I was the one pushing!”

“My turn,” Emerald said with a grin. “I fell off the roof of a second story house and didn’t get a single injury. I did the Heimlich on the president and saved his life, and . . . What’s one more?” Emerald thought about it for a second and then said, “I had my first child when I was 18.”

“The president thing is a lie. I would have seen that on the news.”

“I’m not sure how good you are at your job,” Jewel said with an eyebrow raised.

“It’s possible she fell off the roof onto a trampoline or something, so that *could* happen. Lots of people have children while they’re young, so that makes perfect sense. The president thing has to be a lie.”

“Bird choked on a peanut while he was sitting by the pool in his backyard, and I gave him the Heimlich,” Emerald explained.

“He’s not the president.”

“She got you on a technicality. Bird Forrester is the president of my MC, the Texas Kings,” Adam explained.

“I didn’t say the president of what, just the president,” Emerald explained with a grin. “Gotcha.”

“So, it’s the age you had your first kid. How old were you?”

“I was 13 when I had Esme. She’s a dispatcher at RPD.”

“The chief’s daughter.”

“That’s her,” Emerald said with a proud smile. “She’s a sweetheart who takes no shit.”

“Just like you,” Adam said before he took a sip of his beer. “Holly, it’s your turn. Make it good. We don’t want to break our streak stumping the detective.”

“I’ve got this, but I’m going to make it even harder for him to figure out since I can’t decide what to use,” Holly assured her friend. “Let’s do four truths and a lie.”

“I’m already losing miserably at this game, so why not?” I asked.

“I can rebuild an engine, I’m allergic to dogs, I’ve had six broken bones, and I’ve been arrested twice.”

I studied the beautiful woman in front of me and appreciated how her eyes held mine as she tried to trick me with at least one lie. “I haven’t known any of you for very long, but after our breakfast the other day, I can almost entertain the possibility of you being arrested. Pet allergies are pretty common so that might be a trap. It’s doubtful you’ve broken that many bones, and your hands are way too soft and well-manicured for me to believe you’ve ever worked in a garage.”

“So, what’s your answer?” Holly asked.

“You can’t rebuild an engine.”

“Wrong.” Holly grinned. “I’m allergic to cats, not dogs.”

“You can rebuild an engine? In a car?”

Holly shrugged a shoulder and said, “Or a motorcycle. Whatever.”

“You suck at this,” Jewel said abruptly.

“How did you learn to work on cars?”

“Our parents didn’t want us to be those women who get screwed over by some mechanic, so they made all of us work at one of the garages for at least one summer,” Holly explained. “Some of us were better at it than others, and not everyone enjoyed it but . . .”

“I hated it,” Emerald said with a sigh.

“You were turning into a damn good mechanic,” Adam argued.

“I still hated it. I wasn’t like Holly who turned into a grease monkey the second she smelled motor oil.”

“Can you change the oil on my truck?” I asked.

“The oil. The brakes. The transmission. You name it, I can figure it out,” Holly boasted.

“You don’t see many female mechanics,” I mused. “At least, I haven’t.”

“My mom’s a mechanic,” Adam said with a laugh. “A damn good one too.”

“That’s good to know. If I ever need one, I’ll get in touch with you.”

“You can’t afford her. Believe me,” Adam replied. “She doesn’t work much now anyway. She’d rather stay home and work on her own projects.”

“You know what sucks about getting older?” Jewel asked.

“So many things,” Emerald grumbled. “What are you bitching about?”

“I’m just so tired,” Jewel whined. “My internal clock is screaming, ‘The sun set! It’s time to take your ass to bed!’”

“That could be the gummies talking,” Emerald said with a loud yawn.

“Will you really carry my sister inside before you leave?” Lexi asked before she yawned too. When Adam nodded, she said, “I’m out. I’ve been over here trying not to fall asleep. I’m ready to crawl into bed.”

“The kids have things on the calendar tomorrow, so I’m not going to be able to sleep in,” Jewel said as she stood up. “I’m going home. Want to walk with me?”

“Yeah. Let’s go. I’m tired and have just enough left in me to sleep *really* well.” Lexi stopped beside Emerald’s chair and smiled down at her before she asked, “Do you feel a little better, friend?”

“Much. This was exactly what I needed. Thanks.”

“Any time.” Lexi looked at me and smiled. “Glad you got to hang out with us for a while, Detective Dollface. I’m sure we’ll see you again soon.”

“I don’t know that I’d call him a detective. If Uncle Nick gets wind of how bad he sucked at tonight’s game, he might get demoted to working the

crosswalk in front of the elementary school.” Jewel smiled at me. “I’ll see you around, Damien.”

“I guess I should go too,” Holly said as she put her feet on the ground and stretched her arms above her head. “Need me to do anything else before I go home?”

“Are you driving her, or do you want me to take her home?” I asked Adam.

“Walk with her,” Emerald ordered. “There are all sorts of riffraff in this neighborhood, and I worry about her safety.” Adam raised his eyebrows as he slowly turned to stare at Emerald. “Roll with it, Eve.”

“You live around here?” I asked.

“Observant as ever,” Jewel said before she turned to go.

“In his defense, she didn’t know he lived on her street,” Lexi argued as they rounded the house.

“You live on this street? *My* street?”

“Technically, it’s mine but . . .”

“I lived here first,” Holly interrupted Adam.

“I’m walking her home,” I said as I stood up. I saw Emerald was wearing a huge grin, and before I looked away, she winked at me and said, “You two have a good night.”

Holly reached out and tugged on one of her friend’s braids before she said, “Call if you need anything. I’ll check on you tomorrow.”

“I’ll get her and Leia settled in,” Adam assured her. “Don’t let the boogeyman attack Damien on his way home.”

“I think Damien is going to be just fine,” Emerald said with a grin. “You kids be safe.”

13.

HOLLY

We'd just turned off the path to Emerald's house onto the sidewalk when Damien asked, "Does it bother you that I live so close?"

"No," I answered honestly. "It might if you were the stalker type, but since you're you . . ."

When I let my voice trail off, he asked, "How would you know if I am the stalker type? We don't know each other very well yet."

"I've got a little bit of experience in that area, and you don't fit the profile like he does."

"Does? Meaning you've still got a problem?"

"It's not a problem at this moment, but it's an ongoing issue," I explained, trying to be as vague as possible since I was trying to convince myself that Van was losing interest.

"Ongoing as in threatening or just annoying?" I thought about it for a second, but apparently, I took a little too long to suit Damien, and he said, "Your hesitance there says it's both."

"It's more confusing than anything, really."

Damien stopped and motioned toward the house we were in front of as he said, "This is where I live with the kids."

"You really are my neighbor," I said with a laugh. I lifted my arm and pointed down the street. "I'm down there."

"Since we have a little farther to walk, that gives us plenty of time to figure out this stalker situation."

"Not really a stalker yet."

"Yet being the operative word," Damien said as we started walking again. "Is it the guy that irons his underwear or someone else?"

"It's the new assistant DA."

"Oh damn. I've only been in town for a little while, and I've already

heard about him . . . and not just from you.”

“Really?”

“One of the other detectives testified in a case he was prosecuting and said he half-assed it because it wasn’t going to give him any notoriety. It was a burglary case so nothing too flashy, and the detective said it seemed like the guy was bored and didn’t want to be there.”

“I imagine he’d see a case like that as something beneath him.”

“You guys seem to know everyone in town. What was he like growing up?”

“He didn’t go to school with us. He went to a private school about an hour away.”

“Bougie.”

“His dad was a senator, so I guess he grew up with money.”

“It would seem so. If you add all of that together, it might explain a little about why he’s so focused on you.”

“How’s that?”

“He’s well educated and moving up in his field. Intelligent, driven, and successful with an upbringing where he was probably given everything he wanted. People like that don’t usually take no for an answer, and you told him to piss off.”

“I think I said those exact words,” I told Damien with a laugh.

When I stopped in front of my house, Damien turned around to face me. “And now you’re ignoring him, which is probably making it even worse.”

“So, should I send him a text telling him to leave me alone?”

“Absolutely not,” Damien said firmly. “Don’t do anything different than what you have been, but I would ask that you be . . . careful.”

“I’m always careful. You should know that.”

“Well, you’ve shot me down more than once, but I keep coming around.” Damien looked up as if in thought and then winced. “Considering the subject matter at hand, that doesn’t paint me in a very good light, does it?”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I shook my head. “I think it’s a totally different circumstance.”

“In that case, when can I take you out to dinner?”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

“I’m not a stalker, so I’ll give up the second you tell me to piss off, but so far you haven’t done that.” Damien pulled his lips between his teeth and winced. “Okay, you did that night in the restaurant, but that was a

misunderstanding.”

“About the dark side.”

“Exactly.”

“But you apologized for jumping to conclusions, and I think I said I was sorry for snapping at you.”

“Did you, though?” When I glared at him, he put his hands up and said, “I’m sure you did.”

“Just in case I missed the opportunity, let me make it up to you.”

“By giving me your number?”

“And inviting you in for a drink.”



I handed Damien a fresh beer before I settled in on the other end of the couch, bending my leg up to sit on my foot when Damien laughed.

“What’s funny?”

“If I twisted myself up like that, I wouldn’t be able to walk for three days. Yesterday evening, I sat on the floor and played Legos with the kids for an hour and needed a walker once I stood up.”

“You’re not much older than me, are you?”

“I’m 41.”

“You’re resisting the urge to ask me how old I am, aren’t you?” When Damien shook his head, I asked, “You don’t want to know?”

“You’re 39. When y’all were teasing each other earlier, Emerald said you only had a few months left before you hit 40.”

“True.”

“It may not seem like it after my devastating loss at that game, but I am a pretty observant guy.”

“How long have you been a detective?”

“Just a few years. I was promoted in my former department, and when I moved here, I was lucky enough to find a position with RPD.”

“Do you investigate anything specific? Burglaries, homicides . . . What?”

“Actually, I just got moved to a new department. I’ll be working on cold cases with another detective.”

“Really?” I asked as I sat up a little straighter. “How cold?”

“Unsolved. I’ve got a list of them to work my way through.”

“Will you look into what happened to Stacy Vega? She was murdered when we were in high school, and they never found out who did it.”

“I don’t remember seeing that name on my list, but I can check into it.”

“Would you? We’ve always wondered what happened to her. She had this mysterious boyfriend she always talked about, but then things changed, and she got really secretive. One day she didn’t show up for school, and we found out that she’d disappeared. They found her body a few months later. It was horrible. Her parents ended up getting a divorce, and I think her dad took a job somewhere else and moved away.”

“Did they have any other kids?”

“She had a sister a few years younger than us.”

“I’ll look into it, and if I can give you any details, I will.”

“Thanks.”

“Now tell me about what you do for a living.”

“I’m an event coordinator. I worked for a woman named Thea Conner while I was in high school and then when I could during college and while I was looking for a job after graduation. By then, I knew the ins and outs of the business, and when she decided to retire, she sold the company to me.”

“You organized the wedding for your dads, didn’t you?”

“I did. That was one of many I’ve done. I also do parties and business functions, pretty much anything that someone needs organized.”

“So, you’re very driven and detail-oriented too.”

“I am,” I agreed with a laugh. “Watch out, I might be a stalker. I’ve just been pretending that I’m aloof to draw you into my web.”

“Well, obviously it’s working.” Damien took a sip of his beer and then admitted, “I had no idea how hard dating would be when you have kids. It gives you a million other things to consider, and you don’t really have time for much of anything but the occasional dinner here and there.”

“That’s true. Have you dated much since they came to live with you?”

“Oh, I’ve gone out once or twice but there wasn’t really enough spark there to make me think it was something to bother with. Obviously, you’re different.”

“You think there’s a spark?”

“You don’t feel it?” Damien asked.

I thought about lying but admitted, “I’ve been trying to ignore it because it kind of scares me.”

“Why?”

“The last man who made me feel like that tore out my heart and left me when I needed him most.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

“No, but I feel like I’m going to pay for his mistake if you don’t have some sort of closure. I mean, I assume he never apologized for hurting you the way he did.”

“Have you ever dated someone with kids?”

“Nope. But then again, I didn’t have kids until about nine months ago, so I didn’t really understand the challenges. I actually avoided dating anyone with children.”

“Really? Why?”

“I never wanted kids of my own, and I . . .”

“Never?” I interrupted. When Damien shook his head, I asked, “Why?”

He shrugged and said, “Because after I became a police officer, I realized that there are thousands of kids out there who need a good home. I thought maybe someday if I ever got the urge to have kids, I’d figure out how to adopt a sibling group or maybe a kid with special needs.”

“My siblings and I were adopted. Papa and Dad took in me, Roscoe, and Ranger when our mom died. It’s sort of the same situation with your niece and nephew..”

“And the others? I’ve met Noble and Cruz but not your sister.”

“Noble and Tati came to us first. Cruz just joined our family a few months ago. Right before my dads got married, actually.”

“I worked that case. The one that involved your little brother’s parents and your dad.”

“That was scary,” I admitted. “It all worked out in the end, though.”

“I have to ask, was it your children’s father that broke your heart or . . .”

“No. I was married years ago to a man I thought I’d be with forever, but I was diagnosed with cancer and part of my treatment was a hysterectomy. He couldn’t accept that I’d never be able to have children of my own and filed for divorce while I was going through treatment.”

“What the fuck?”

“I said that more than a few times.”

“Well, you’ve got kids anyway, so fuck him.”

“Yeah! Fuck him!” I agreed with a grin. “It took me a long time to be able to say that and laugh about it, but it’s true. He’s got no idea what he’s

missing. My kids are great.”

“I bet they are. Every time I’ve seen them, they’re happy and smiling, and that says a lot. It’s taken some time, but Juni and Simon smile all the time now, too, probably because I finally got my head out of my ass and paid attention to what they needed instead of what I needed.”

“I’m glad you did. Thanks for the compliment, by the way.”

“Get used to it. I have a feeling that will be happening all the time as I get to know you.” I thought about it for a second and then said, “I can’t have kids. That’s why my ex and I split up. My kids are adopted. Technically, they’re a sibling group connected by their mother.”

“Did they all come to live with you when the girls were born?”

“No, Jericho came to live with us when he was just a few weeks old. He was born with a hole in his heart and needed surgical intervention. I didn’t realize it at the time, but his mother was fighting to stay out of prison when she had him. When she missed several of his medical appointments, the state stepped in. I had just formally adopted him a few months before the girls came to us. That’s when I met their mother.”

“When they were born?”

“Yes. She was already in federal custody when they were born and wanted to make sure that they were going to be with Jericho if at all possible. She knew that whoever had him had taken care of his medical problems. She wanted to do what was best for the three of them, so she had the CPS worker track down Jericho’s case.”

“And you’ve adopted them all now?”

“Yes. They became Hamiltons, just like I did when I was a kid.”

“That’s awesome. They’ll have a good life. You’ll make sure of it.”

“So will my family. I’ve stayed in contact with their mom, even if it’s just a note here and there. She’s got a long road ahead of her, but hopefully, she’ll stay on track. Maybe someday she can meet them.”

“You’d be okay with that?”

“Absolutely. As long as they’re safe and happy, I’d love for her to be part of their lives.”

“You’re an awesome woman, Holly.”

I hadn’t ever been as comfortable with a man who wasn’t part of my family as I was with Damien, and I realized that if I didn’t stop being so aloof and distant, he might actually believe that I wanted him to leave me alone and stop trying so hard, which was the opposite of what I wanted.

When I matched with Van, he ticked all the boxes I *thought* I wanted in a partner, or at least he did before I got to know him in person. Damien, on the other hand, was a little rougher around the edges. So far, he'd been much more direct than Van ever was, not trying to hide his opinion behind some bullshit facade. Instead, Damien put it right out there for the world to see and he didn't care who knew it.

We'd sat in companionable silence for a few minutes when Damien asked, "So, have I passed the test yet?"

"Which one?" I asked, laughingly acknowledging that there had been one at all.

"Can I have your phone number yet or do I need to work a little bit harder?"

I thought about it for a second and realized that even though I didn't know the man well at all, I wanted to know more about him. Everything about him. I wanted to hear some of his sarcasm and honeyed words through texts during my work day. I wanted to smile when my phone rang, and I saw his name appear on the screen. I wanted to hear him call out my name when he walked through the front door, and I wanted to see that sexy smile of his as he swept me into his arms and kissed me breathless. I wanted his kiss to be the last thing I felt before I went to sleep at night and . . .

"Spend the night with me," I blurted. His eyes got wide, and I shook my head before I said, "I'm not saying I want to sleep with you right now, but I want . . ." I let my voice trail off as I tried to form the words to explain without stammering through a bunch of gibberish that would make him think I was turning into the type of stalker we'd talked about earlier. Finally, once I had my thoughts together, I explained, "The only thing I miss about being in a relationship is waking up in someone's arms."

"I miss lots of things, but one of the biggest is laying in bed talking about everything and nothing at the same time until I fall asleep."

"Let's do both."

I studied his face as he thought about it and smiled when he asked, "Do you have an extra toothbrush?"



I felt the bed dip when Damien sat down, and I waited for him to lay back

so I could snuggle in and fall asleep again. I'd been having the best dream - and probably the filthiest. I wanted to fall back to sleep so I could finish it.

In my dream, Damien had been kissing my neck as my hands roved over his chest, and I felt his big palm grip my butt to pull me closer so I could grind against him. My leg was thrown over his hip, and if we were just a little bit closer, I would be able to feel him inside me. But, suddenly, the dream came to a screeching halt when I felt Damien get out of bed and pad to the bathroom.

The streetlights outside gave me just enough light to see Damien with his elbows on his knees as he rested his face in his hands. It seemed like he was upset about something. I was sure of it when I heard him take in a big breath and then let it out slowly as if he was trying to calm himself. When I reached out and rested my hand on his back, he tensed, so I asked, "Is everything okay?"

"Sorry I woke you," he answered without answering my question at all.

"What's wrong?"

"I should probably go."

"Why? Is it hard for you to sleep with someone else in bed with you?"

Damien laughed softly before he said, "I can probably count on one hand the times I've spent an entire night without one or both kids crawling into bed with me since they moved in."

"Jericho does the same thing." I thought about it for a second and then asked, "Is it me?"

"Yeah," Damien said with a laugh. "It's totally you."

"Do I snore?"

"No, babe. Well, a little, but it's cute."

"Great," I whispered sarcastically. "So, what's wrong? Why do you have to leave?"

"Because I'm trying really hard to be a good guy."

"What does that have to do with sleeping here?"

"You're very . . . *expressive* when you sleep, sweetheart."

"What does that mean? Expressive?"

"You're very snuggly and affectionate. Let's put it that way."

"That's a bad thing?" I remembered snippets of the dream I'd been having and felt my eyes go wide. "I was touching you, wasn't I?"

"Little bit," Damien said with a bark of laughter. "At first, I rolled with it, but then I remembered that you said you weren't ready, so I turned over

and things came to a halt. I guess I rolled over in my sleep, and you kicked it into high gear again about thirty minutes ago.”

“And you didn’t like me touching you?”

“I liked it too much.” Damien stood up, and the light from the windows slanted across his face as he stared down at me. “I’m gonna go home, but I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

It only took me a split second to make a decision that I knew was going to change everything. I lifted the covers and invited, “Come back to bed, Damien, and let’s make that dream I was having come true.”

14.

HOLLY

I started to doubt myself when Damien just stood beside the bed staring down at me. I let the blanket fall to the bed, and he shook his head.

“I’m sorry. I guess I read things wrong. I’ll . . .”

“No. I want to look at you.”

I laughed softly, kicking myself for not wearing something sexier. At the time, I’d told myself Damien was staying here as a friend, and I wasn’t going to let things go too far. Snuggling only, right? Wrong. If I was honest with myself, I’d have to admit that the second I laid my head on his shoulder and rested my hand on his firm stomach, I’d regretted my decision. The clean, crisp smell of his cologne along with his soft skin made me want to run not just my hands all over his body but my tongue too.

And now, here he was, standing beside the bed trying to get a good look at me, and I was wearing my favorite sleep clothes - one of my old motocross T-shirts and a pair of my brother’s cast-off basketball shorts. Absolutely the un-sexiest clothes I owned. At least I’d shaved my legs this morning. Or was that yesterday? Shit.

Damien lifted the covers again and studied my body, and I took the opportunity to do the same. He’d stripped down to his boxer briefs while I’d been changing clothes in the bathroom, and now he stood in front of me in his almost naked glory. It was the most beautiful sight I’d ever seen.

His broad shoulders tapered down to a trim waist, and he had muscles like I’d only seen on the cover of romance novels or on action heroes in movies. There were one or two scars that I wondered about, but I didn’t have enough air in my lungs to ask about them right now. When I looked up at his face, it seemed like his eyes had gotten darker somehow, and he was staring right into my soul.

“You’re beautiful, Holly. Absolutely breathtaking.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, still barely able to speak. “So are you.”

His eyes never left mine as he reached over and picked his jeans up off the chair by my bed and then pulled out his wallet. He tossed two condoms on the nightstand before he took the covers out of my hand and tossed them behind me. Before I even knew what he was doing, he had my ankles in his hands and was pulling my legs in his direction. As he tucked his fingers into the waistband of my shorts, he ordered, “Shirt off, Holly.”

I didn’t think to argue and pulled my shirt over my head. I was holding it in front of me when he pulled my shorts down my legs and tossed them aside. He reached out and ran his hand from my shoulder across my collarbone and then tugged the T-shirt out of my hand before he tossed it in the same direction as my shorts.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.” I moved closer to the edge of the bed and let my legs fall beside his, putting me very close to the large bulge I could see there. When I ran my hands up his chest and then back down to the waistband of his boxer briefs, he hissed, and I felt him tense beneath my hands. “Do you know how many times I’ve imagined you looking up at me like that?”

I smiled, knowing exactly what he was thinking, before I pulled the waistband down just a fraction so the head of his cock was visible. I leaned forward and licked the tip and heard him gasp as his entire body went rigid. When I did it again, he groaned and that was exactly what I wanted to hear more of. I pushed his boxers down his hips, and they fell to the floor as I took as much of him as I could into my mouth. I felt his hands touch the side of my head, tentatively at first, but when I wrapped my hand around the base of his cock and leaned back, his touch got a little more firm, and he pulled me closer.

It wasn’t so much that I enjoyed what I was doing, but I *did* enjoy the sounds Damien was making and how close he was to losing control. I could tell he was near the edge because he’d hold my head still every now and then and back away until he’d taken a few deep breaths to try and gather himself. Finally, he pulled his hips back until I lost him and then pushed me backwards onto the bed.

My back had barely touched the mattress before he had his hands under my thighs, pushing them up and apart. In the next second, his mouth was on me. When he licked my clit, flicking his tongue back and forth while he pushed a finger inside me, I couldn’t stop the long scream that came from

deep inside. I didn't so much hear him chuckle as felt him, the vibrations from his voice turning the sensations I was already feeling up a notch. He was working magic with his hands and mouth, and even though I usually couldn't even come close to orgasm this way, I felt like I was right on the precipice. Damien seemed to sense that and stayed the course until I was teetering on the edge. Suddenly, he hummed against my clit, and I was lost, writhing on the bed beneath his magical hands and mouth until I was pushing at his head and trying to scoot away from the intense sensations.

I was still trying to catch my breath and clear the stars from my eyes when I heard the crinkle of the condom wrapper. By the time I took another breath, Damien was above me and sliding deep inside. So deep that I lost my breath for a completely different reason.

I tapped his shoulder as I shook my head. "It's been a long time and I . . ." I let out a yelp when he flipped us so that I was on top. His strong hands held my hips as he slowly lowered me down on his cock. Nature took over, and I was moving on top of him in seconds, finding the rhythm that made both of us moan with pleasure.

I leaned forward and kissed Damien, long and hard, our tongues tangling as our bodies moved in sync. As our kiss deepened, it somehow started to feel more meaningful, and I slowed my hips, savoring every feeling and understanding by his slower movements that he was doing the same.

This wasn't the fumbling first time that I'd experienced before. It wasn't too fast or frantic. Instead, it felt right, as if we fit together perfectly. This felt closer to making love than I'd experienced in years, maybe ever. I liked it and couldn't get enough, especially when I felt the first stirrings of another orgasm. Damien guided me through it before he had his own release with a loud shout.

When I collapsed on his chest, he grunted loudly, so I started to move away. He didn't say a word, just held me there on top of him as we tried to catch our breath. His perfect hands drew patterns on my back and hips as we laid there, still connected, and a little stupefied by what had just happened.

At least, that was how I felt, and I realized he was feeling the same when he said, "I knew you were the one from the second I saw you, Holly."

"You did, huh?" I asked, trying to lighten the mood as I propped my chin on his chest and stared at him.

"I did. Later, when we're old and gray, I'll remind you of this conversation and the doubt I saw in your eyes when I said what I did."

“I’m not scared of nothin’,” I joked, trying to ignore that my heart was racing for an entirely different reason now.

“Good. Let’s keep it that way.”



DAMIEN

“I would cook something for you, but I’d rather you have fond memories of the night instead of a hospital bill for food poisoning,” Holly joked as she stood in front of the open refrigerator. She was wearing my shirt and nothing else, and the sight was so distracting I barely heard what she said. Apparently, I missed something while I was staring at her legs because she laughed and waved her hand by her side as she said, “My eyes are up here, big guy.”

I shook my head and grinned. “Sorry. I was mesmerized.”

“You’re good for my ego, Detective Harris,” Holly teased.

“I like that,” I said as I stepped up behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. I kissed her on the nape of her neck and ordered, “Say it again.”

“Detective Harris,” Holly said, her voice a little raspier than before.

The moment was ruined when her stomach growled loudly, and I rubbed my hand over it before I said, “Hold that thought until we get some nourishment. You’ll need your strength. I’ve got plans for you.”

“Oh really?” Holly asked as her head fell back on my shoulder. Her stomach growled again, and she grimaced. “Dammit. Okay, I’m hungry.”

“I figured that out,” I teased. “After all, I am a detective.”

“I can’t concentrate when your lips are anywhere on my body,” Holly grumbled as I kissed my way to her shoulder. I took the hint and stepped back until I was leaning against the counter, and I grinned when Holly shivered. “Alright, we’re gonna have my go-to midnight snack.”

“And that is?”

“S’mOreos.”

“What’s that?”

“S’more Oreos.” As if in protest of such a meager offering, my stomach took its turn growling. “Okay, we’ll have those for dessert. First, we’ll have a Holly Hamilton specialty.” She started pulling things out of the refrigerator

and setting them on the island before she pulled two types of crackers out of the cabinet. She grabbed two plates and set them on the counter before she laid a towel down and then hopped up to sit on it. When I laughed she said, “Don’t laugh at me.”

“What are we having here?”

“It’s the newest craze, a charcuterie board. Except we don’t have the board, and we only have two kinds of cheese and some cheap cold cuts. Oh! And we have an orange!”

“In my world, that’s a gourmet meal.”

“That’s one of the reasons we’re going to get along just fine.”

~*~

“Where are you going?” Holly mumbled from behind me.

I sat on the edge of the bed and leaned down to kiss her temple. She smiled and sighed before I asked, “What time do your kids come home?”

“Since Tot’s got my car, my brother is taking me to my dad’s for lunch. I’ll pick them up then.”

“Okay.” I kissed her one more time before I said, “I’ve got to pick up Simon and Juni before ten because their grandma has a hair appointment.”

“Bye, Detective Harris,” Holly replied, her sleep roughened voice sexy as hell. “Talk to you later?”

“Absolutely.”

I made sure I had my keys before I opened the door and stopped in my tracks when I saw a blonde man with his finger aimed at the doorbell. He was dripping sweat, and there were two guys close behind him, one that looked almost identical to him and the other a darker-haired younger man.

“Well, hello,” the man at the doorbell drawled as he studied my face with a mysterious smile. “What do we have here?”

“I can tell just by looking at you that you’re one of her brothers,” I said in response. I realized then that I’d already met the younger man, just in very different circumstances. “Hey, Cruz. Good to see you again.”

Cruz nodded as he greeted, “Detective.”

I stuck my hand out to the man nearest me as the others walked onto the porch. “I’m Damien Harris.”

“Roscoe Hamilton.” After he shook my hand he said, “This is Ranger,

and I guess you know Cruz.”

I shook Ranger’s hand and then bumped knuckles with Cruz before I said, “Holly’s sleeping.”

“I don’t need her awake, I just need her pantry.” When I raised my eyebrows he said, “I’m out of sports drink, and she always keeps a stash for us.”

“How far have you guys been?”

“We try to run a couple of miles a few times a week,” Ranger said as he assessed me. “Do you run?”

“Whenever I get a chance.”

“You should join us sometime,” Cruz said.

When the other two didn’t seem fazed by his invite I said, “I’d like that. I live just down the street, and I usually have to run a track around the neighborhood so I’m not out of range of the baby monitor.”

“We can do sprints at the park,” Roscoe offered, causing Ranger and Cruz to groan. “Okay, you and I can do sprints and then run the perimeter. I go into work at seven, so I’m usually running by six.”

“Come by and get me. I live at 1003.”

“Next to Karen,” Ranger said with an exaggerated grimace. “She’s always hated Brighten and Crow, and now she’s got Hawk to contend with too.”

“And Emerald,” Roscoe said with a grin. “I’m not sure who to feel more sorry for.”

“Me. I live next door to her.” I thought about what he’d said for a second and then asked, “Hawk lives in this neighborhood?”

“I think he’s moving in with Brighten soon. His brother, Crow, lives next door.”

“Good to know. I’ve been meeting all sorts of neighbors lately.”

“Keep that in mind,” Ranger said with a grim expression. “It was good to meet you, Detective.”

I smiled, hearing the implied threat. “You too. I’m sure I’ll see you around soon.”

“We’ll see.”

15.

DAMIEN

“You came back!” Rylee, the waitress I’d met last week with Holly, greeted me as I came through the door of the diner. She smiled down at Simon and then reached out to touch Juni’s hand as she said, “And you brought reinforcements.”

“I thought my crew might help me get in good with the family,” I joked, even though the thought really had crossed my mind.

“That’s smart, especially since my Gamma’s here with Papa Smokey.”

“I get to meet the infamous Martha?”

“The one and only,” Rylee said as she led me and the kids toward the back room. “Is Holly on her way, or did you leave her home in bed?” I coughed to hide my gasp, and Rylee shot me a mischievous grin. “Word travels fast, my man.”

“It’s not what you think,” I started to argue.

Rylee interrupted me as she shook her head. “That’s not what we wanna hear.”

“Who are we?”

Rylee reached for the door that led to the back room as she answered, “Everyone that loves Holly, of course.”

I walked in behind her and heard Holly’s uncle say, “Well, look who made it back.”

“Gentlemen,” I said as I looked around the table. When I saw the woman perched on Smokey Forrester’s knee, I smiled my most charming smile and said, “Mrs. Forrester. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

The woman’s ice blue eyes studied my face for a second before she smiled at Juni and then Simon. “What a beautiful family.”

“Thank you. This is my niece Juniper and my nephew Simon. I’m a friend of Holly’s - Damien Harris.”

“These little cuties live with Damien,” Rylee said helpfully.

As if on cue, Simon informed the group, “Our mommy and daddy died, so we live with Uncle D now.”

“Come here, sweetie,” Martha said as she stood up and walked around the table. Once she had Simon’s hand in her own, she reached the other out toward Juni. The girl had never met a stranger and lunged toward the woman who laughed as she settled her on her hip. “Let’s go see if we can find you something yummy to eat. Who likes pancakes?”

“Looks like you win this round, Mr. Cypher,” Lout said as he pushed a chair out with his foot. “Have a seat.”

“Have you met Roscoe and Ranger?” Lout asked.

“We met Holly’s new victim . . .” He coughed dramatically before he corrected, “Friend. I meant new friend. We met this morning.”

“Which one? Victim or friend?” Lout asked. When I shrugged, he just laughed and said, “Welcome back.”

“Thanks,” I said as I looked over my shoulder to see where Martha had taken my kids. She was standing at the buffet with Juni on her hip as she made a plate, and I was surprised to see both kids calmly listening to her talk as they watched her serve them food. Rylee had walked away with Martha and was helping Simon with his plate. I was glad the kids were comfortable.

“Don’t worry about them,” Smokey said as he waved toward his wife.

“Believe me, they’re safer with her than they are standing next to any of us,” a man I hadn’t met before informed me. “She’ll do anything for the little ones, especially now that she knows you’re all they’ve got.”

“How’s Hawk doing? I guess he’s my neighbor now,” I said.

Bird Forrester, Hawk’s father, smiled when he said, “He’s making waves and finding his place in the free world.”

“That’s good. I’m glad I got to meet him.”

“You’re the cop that drove him home.”

“And you’re the president that Emerald saved with the Heimlich,” I said with a laugh. “It’s good to put a face with the name.”

“I found out last week that this guy rode in a car with one of your kids. The fact that he’s still sticking around and trying to get our sweet Holly to give him the time of day doesn’t say much for his brain power.”

“What’s wrong with my kids?” Bird asked Lout.

“Not a damn thing,” Martha said as she joined us at the table. Smokey reached up and took Juni from her and settled her on one leg as Martha

perched on the other. I looked around and found Simon sitting with the other little boys I'd met last week and had a moment of panic at the thought of the trouble he could get into before Martha said, "All of the kids in our family are sweet little angels, and I won't have any of you say anything different."

"The devil was an angel once, too, you know," Lout reminded her. Martha shot him a pointed look, and he grinned. "My kids are *almost* as crazy as his."

"And they're all my family, so I won't hear any of you disparaging them."

"Yes, ma'am," Lout agreed readily. He looked over at me and said, "I told ya."

"Why didn't Holly come with you this morning?" Smokey asked. For a second or two, I wondered how he knew I'd slept over but then remembered how Holly had complained that everyone in her family was always in each other's business.

I decided to go for broke and replied, "She was sleeping so soundly that I couldn't make myself wake her. I picked the kids up from their grandma's and just came up here without her."

"There are my boys," Martha said, looking over my shoulder at the door. Adam and two other men I'd met while doing the paperwork to rent my house walked around the table. Each of them gave Martha a kiss on the cheek as they greeted the men around the table. "I'm sure you're hungry, so go fill a plate and I'll get your drinks."

"We ordered them from Ava on our way through, Gamma," Heath said as he patted her on the shoulder. "We'll be back in a second."

"Now, tell us what progress you've made with our Holly," Smokey said as he held his glass of water up so Juni could take a sip. He smiled at her while she drank. "How are things moving along? I see you're not dead yet, so that's a step in the right direction."

"She seems too sweet to even think of that," I mused.

The men around the table laughed until Lout finally said, "It's not just her you have to worry about. When those girls get together, things go off the rails."

"Adam and I hung out with them last night. I met Jewel, Lexi, and Emerald. Oh, and Leia was there too."

"Well, he's either a glutton for punishment, or they've given him their stamp of approval," Lout said before he took a sip of his coffee. "Which is

it?”

“Adam was there. He can tell you,” I said, deflecting everyone’s attention to the men getting settled around the table.

Another man walked up and nodded toward me before he leaned over and kissed Martha’s cheek. After he smiled at her, he looked around the table and said, “Morning, assholes.”

“Aww, Polka Dot, are you a widdle bit grumpy this morning?” Bird asked.

“Loyal and Harley went barhopping with their fake IDs last night and got into a tangle with some asshole at that sports bar across town. I had the pleasure of leaving my nice warm bed at three this morning to bail their asses out of jail. So, yeah, I’m a little cranky.” Daughtry smiled at his mom before he said, “Clem and Sonny won’t be joining us this morning because they’re trying to get some more sleep after all that excitement.”

“Which kids were there?” Martha asked.

“Sonny picked up Lila while I was there for the twins, and Clem was coming in for Elvis as I left. Two of the Conner kids got picked up, too, so I also saw Angus and Ronan last night. Or this morning. However you want to look at it.”

“Where were Flint and Justice?” Lout asked seriously. “You know those boys are always together.”

“I guess you and Luke did a better job than we did at teaching your kids to evade arrest,” Daughtry said, seemingly unconcerned. I knew he was when he grinned and said, “Seems like they had some fun, though. You should have seen the other guys.”

“Speaking of other guys,” Adam said as he set his fork down on his plate and rested his arms on the table. He smiled at me and said, “Since Detective Delicious is . . .”

“What?” Lout asked.

“That’s what the girls are calling him. So far I’ve heard delicious, delectable, darling . . . There was even a ‘hot stuff’ and a ‘cute booty’ thrown in for good measure.”

“Oh, that’s fun,” Lout said with an evil grin. “It opens the door for so many things.”

I sighed and closed my eyes, wishing I could punch Adam for giving this diabolical man fresh ammo.

“Anyway,” Adam continued. “Since he’s new, I’ll spill the beans to keep

him out of hot water with Holly.”

“What’s going on?” Lout asked.

“She’s got herself an unwanted admirer. The girls are trying to keep it close to the vest, but in their defense, they’ve told her more than once to let you guys know, and she’s declined.”

“That douche from the restaurant?” Bird asked.

“That’s him. Our illustrious Assistant District Attorney, Van Reece.”

“Unwanted attention, huh?” Lout asked before he looked at me. “What’s that about?”

“She mentioned that he calls and texts all the time, but that’s about all I know,” I admitted.

“He sends her flowers a couple of times a week, but she has Taylor and the girls deliver them to the nursing homes around town. Taylor’s got all the notes he’s wanted included with them, and she’s got recordings of all their phone calls,” Holly’s brother Ranger informed them.

“We’ve been keeping our eye on the situation and biding our time, hoping she’d mention it to Papa or maybe even Dad,” Roscoe added. “Tot said she seems to think this guy will just fade away, but from what she told me about the texts and voicemails, I don’t see that happening.”

“He’s persistent, I’ll give him that,” Ranger agreed.

“Reece, huh? I remember his father,” Smokey said with a frown. “I guess the apple didn’t fall far from the tree.”

“Wasn’t he involved in some scandal having to do with an underage girl?” Martha asked.

“That was him. He died in a fiery car accident,” Smokey said with a secretive smile.

“I always wondered if he had something to do with the girl who went missing,” Martha said sadly. “I felt so sorry for her parents when they found her.”

“Holly mentioned a girl named Stacy Vega that she went to school with. Is that her?”

Martha nodded. “Yes, that was her. Poor thing.”

“I’ll talk to Marcus about this today,” Lout promised. He nudged me with his elbow and said, “I’ll even leave your name out of the mix.”

“Thanks,” I said sincerely. “I’d hate for Holly to think I’m carrying tales.”

“Marcus is a vault. We’ll just let her wonder who spilled,” Lout said with

a grin. “It will make her nuts.”

“I told her I’d look into the Vega case. I’m sure it’s one of the files the chief gave me that I just haven’t gotten to yet.”

“You should look into it,” Martha said firmly. “Figure it out so her family can get some closure.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



When we pulled up, I noticed that Holly’s SUV was parked in her driveway, so I knew her kids must be home. Instead of herding the kids into the house, I asked, “Y’all want to go see some friends?”

“Where?” Simon asked as he looked around.

“Let’s go see if my friend Holly wants to take her kids to the park with us.”

“Who’s Holly?”

“Her little boy is in class with Juni,” I replied, trying to deflect. I had read a little bit about dating as a single parent and knew enough not to confuse kids with relationships, especially when they were new.

“Will there be any kids I can play with?”

“Wanna play!” Juni squealed as I unbuckled her harness.

“Surely there are more kids your age around here,” I said as I lifted Juni out. “Maybe Holly will know.”

“Let’s ask her,” Simon said as he waited for me to catch up to him. I put Juni down and held her hand so I could keep her close and started off down the sidewalk with Simon on my other side.

We had only gone two doors down when I looked up and found Hawk Forrester sitting on the porch with another man I didn’t recognize. When I waved, Hawk called out, “It’s Count Chocula the Second! I didn’t realize you lived around here.”

“Just a few doors down,” I responded as I stopped at the end of the walkway. “We’re going over to Holly’s to see if she wants to go to the park. Do you know if there are any other kids around here that are Simon’s age?”

The other man looked at Simon and said, “Griff is about that size. I’ll see if he’s willing to venture out into the sunshine and play for a while.”

“Damien, this is my brother, Crow. Crow, this is the cop that drove me to

Royo.”

“Nice to meet ya,” Crow said as he stood up. “I’ll get Griff and see if we can find his shoes. That’s always an adventure.”

“We’ve got the same problem at our house,” I commiserated. “I’ll check in with Holly, and we’ll meet you guys at the park in a few.”

“Sounds good,” Hawk said as he waved.

As we walked away, I looked down at Simon and said, “That wasn’t too hard, was it? We’ll get you a whole gang of friends so you can terrorize the neighborhood like me and your dad did when we were young.”

“Did our dad like to play at the park?”

“He could swing across the monkey bars better than any kid I knew. Run faster too.”

“I can run fast!”

“I bet you got that from him,” I said with a smile, remembering how much fun my brother and I had always had together. It still hurt when I thought about him, but I saw more and more of him in Simon everyday, and I was happy about that. “You can show me how fast you run when we get to the park.”

We stopped in front of Holly’s, and when I turned to go up the sidewalk, I could hear music coming through an open window. We stepped onto the porch, and I smiled when I saw Holly through the glass door. She was dancing with a baby in her arms, and there was a woman a few feet away holding another baby. The little boy I’d met at the daycare, Jericho, was standing on the couch as he got down to the music, and their laughter carried outside.

“Play!” Juni said as she jumped up and down excitedly.

As Holly turned with her daughter in her arms, she caught sight of us standing at the door, and a smile lit up her face. She walked over and pushed open the door as she said, “Wanna join our dance party?”

“Looks like fun. Want to move it to the park?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! Park!” Jericho squealed as he jumped off the couch. He waved at the other woman who was still swaying back and forth and said, “Come on!”

“We can’t right now. The girls will need to go down for their nap soon and . . .”

“I’ll put them down,” the other woman said. “Take Jericho to the park and run him until he’s tired, and then he can come back and take his own

nap.”

“Are you sure?” Holly asked. She looked over at me and said, “This is my sister, Tati. Tot, this is Damien.”

“Damien,” Tati said as she walked closer. She scrutinized me with a flick of her eyes and then grinned at her sister. “By all means, go to the park with the man.”

Holly rolled her eyes and said, “Give me a second to find our shoes, and we’ll be ready.”

I watched her walk off, and when she stopped in the middle of the living room to put her daughter down on a blanket, I looked at Tati. She was studying me and the kids and finally smiled at me. “So, you’re Damien.”

“I am.”

“I’ve heard about you.”

“Good things?”

“Mostly . . . after the dark side fiasco got figured out.”

“That was a misunderstanding.”

“Understandably so, but I’m glad the two of you worked it out. Take care of her.”

“We’re just walking over to the park.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Tati said as Holly reappeared holding Jericho’s hand as he bounced next to her. She turned to her sister and said, “Take your time. I’m going to get dinner into the Crock-Pot and then nap with the girls.”

“You’re cooking for me?”

“If I don’t, then my sweet nieces and nephew will starve.” Tati turned around and grinned at me. “I hear that you don’t cook much better than she does. I’ll make plenty so you can feed your little ones too.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that.”

Tati smiled. “It was nice to meet you, Damien. I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“I hope so.”

“Let’s go, ladies and gentlemen. The park is waiting!”



“I’m out of breath,” I said as I flopped onto the grass next to Holly.

“Let the children run with the kids. They’ve got more energy.”

“It cracks me up that you call full grown men ‘the children.’”

“Look at ‘em. What would you call them?”

Hawk and Crow had shown up with Griffin along with their brother Phoenix and his daughter, Lyric, who I’d met the week before at breakfast. A few minutes after we arrived, a woman named Cadence showed up with two girls, her daughter and niece, and they all joined in the fun.

Currently, adults and children alike were playing tag, but the problem was that no one seemed to know who was ‘it.’ They were just chasing each other around the playground equipment and had been for at least twenty minutes.

“They’re going to sleep so well tonight,” I said as I flopped back down. Holly turned so she could look down at me, and I grinned. “Lay down, and let’s look at the sky.”

Holly laughed as she laid down and rested her head on my arm. “I used to lay on the grass with my dad, and we’d look for animals in the clouds.”

“Let’s find some.”

After a few minutes of pointing out the different things we’d found, Holly said, “I don’t think I’ve ever been so comfortable with a man before.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“You don’t think so?”

“Well, that depends on whether that comfortableness . . . Is that even a word? Anyway, does that put me into the friend zone, or is there still a flicker of hope that I might get past that again?”

Holly turned so that she was facing me and nuzzled in like she had the night before. “I think it’s important to be friends first. I lost sight of that after my divorce, and I’ve been going about this whole dating thing all wrong.”

“So, I’m a learning experience?”

Rather than answer, Holly said, “I’d like to go on an official date with you, Damien Harris.”

“It’s about fucking time.”

16.

DAMIEN

“Have you found those files yet?” Chief Cardenas asked as he walked into the office I shared with Eric and three part-time interns: Gus Conner, Theo Conner, and Beretta Evans. The only intern here now was Gus, our computer guru, and he nodded at the chief like they were buddies before he turned his attention back to his computer screen.

“We’re still missing three files. I’ve traced them back to the file room, but they weren’t checked out by anyone after the last time they were inventoried.”

“I’m tracing the digital files,” Gus interjected. “They were on the system at one point, and I’m trying to figure out which user moved or deleted them.”

“When you find them, can you retrieve them?” the chief asked.

“I sent Beretta over to pick up the backup hard drive and . . .”

“I’m back,” Beretta said as she hurried into the office. Rather than go to her desk, she came around mine and stood behind me. “Heads up. I got followed over . . .”

“Cardenas, I’d like to speak to you immediately,” a man said from the doorway. As the chief turned around, I took a good look at the man. Even though it had been well over six weeks since I’d first seen him, he’d made a lasting impression because of the beautiful woman he’d been eating with that night - the one I had dinner plans with in just a few hours.

“You can address me as Chief Cardenas, and if you need to speak with me, make an appointment with my assistant,” the chief said as he turned around to look at me, effectively dismissing the man.

The man in the doorway stomped his foot and actually growled before he said, “I will not have your minions creeping around and stealing important information that has to . . .”

The chief spun around and stomped toward the door as I heard Beretta

gasp behind me. “And I will not have you chase *my* employee back to *my* department and then have a fit like a child *in my building* while you address me in a disrespectful manner, *Van.*”

“I am the Assistant District Attorney, and I’ll have you know that . . .”

“And I’ll have your head on a platter served with a side of apology from your boss before the day is over,” the chief snapped. “Run along, *minion.* I’m sure we’ll be speaking soon.”

Chief Cardenas turned his back on the man, but I could tell he was still watching him in the reflection of the window behind me. I heard footsteps and then a door slammed before the chief walked into the hall to make sure we were alone again.

When he came back into the office, he looked at Beretta and asked, “What’s wrong, Beri?”

“While I was in the records room at the courthouse, the lady at the front said I could go find what I needed, but she had orders from the ADA to call him if anyone started looking at specific files. I figured that was what she was doing when I went to dig through the file records to find what I needed. I could hear him yelling at her that no one was supposed to access that room anymore. So I . . . Well, I . . .” Beretta stepped around my chair and stood beside me before she finished, “I wondered why it was so important that no one saw this stuff, and I knew he was going to stop me from getting it, so I . . .” Beretta lifted the hem of her shirt and pulled out a file folder which she handed to the chief. Then, she reached down through the neck of her shirt and pulled out a cartridge that was about as big as a deck of cards. “I took it.”

Rather than anger, I saw amusement on the chief’s face. He shook his head as he looked at the files and hard drive and then back up at me with a grin. “At this point, she would make one helluva detective or a damn good investigative reporter. Do whatever you can to keep her on our side of the fence, okay?”

“Yessir.”

The chief looked back at Beretta and asked, “Did he chase you all the way over here?”

“He yelled at me in the records office and then again in the hall outside of it. I didn’t say anything because, well . . . it’s really hard for me to put up with shit like that and . . .”

The chief scoffed as he interrupted, “And you don’t have to. I’ll take care

of it.” He looked over at Gus and said, “Figure out how to make a copy of whatever’s on this drive, and do it quickly before I have to wade into whatever bullshit that asshole is stirring up. I want a copy of that and every single scrap of paper in these files secured in Vance’s office, a copy for me, and a copy given to Harris.”

“Yessir,” Beretta and Gus chorused.

“I have staff in and out of that department every day, and none of them have ever encountered a problem like this. That leads me to believe that whatever you’ve got here is going to cause a problem for someone higher up the chain. Find it, share it, and then I’ll clean house with it.”

“I’ll do that.”

With a final nod, Chief Cardenas walked out of the room, pulling the door shut behind him as he went.

“That was way too fucking weird,” Beretta mumbled as she picked up the files she’d stolen. “That guy gave me the creeps.”

“There’s something off about him,” I agreed. “Watch your back, Beri. You, too, Gus.”

“Did you see the way he was looking at you? I think you should take your own advice, man.” Gus said firmly. “Beri is right. There is something creepy about him, and it seems like it’s aimed at you.”

“That’s just fucking great.”



HOLLY

I walked through the banquet room, paying close attention to each place setting and adjusting the centerpieces as needed before I stopped at the front of the room and took in the big picture.

“It looks fantastic,” Bella Conner, a girl I’d employed since she was just a part-time college student that had become my right hand, said as she swept into the room with a tray full of supplies that we’d need to put under the podium for the speakers. As she walked up the main aisle to the front of the room, she said, “Dylan is here with his staff and said everything’s in order for lunch to be served on time.”

“And Janis? Did she come through?”

“She did. She’s grumpy about it, but we knew she would be,” Bella said

with a laugh as she walked up the steps onto the dais that held the podium. “She said she expects a sizable donation to her cruise fund within the next few days.”

“As if we aren’t paying her enough already.”

“The folders are stacked at the front, and Liv should be here any minute to help me distribute them to the guests.”

“I think we’ve got this,” I said as I looked around the room once more. “I’m going to check in with Dylan and grab a plate. Did you eat something?”

“I did while I was talking to him,” Bella said as she came down to stand next to me. “I’ll go out front and field anyone who’s early. Take five and eat before the madness starts and then drink an energy drink so the boring speakers don’t put you into a coma.”

“Ugh. Lawyers. They do like to hear themselves talk, don’t they?”

Bella laughed as I walked away, and with one last glance over my shoulder, I left the room to her capable hands. Today was an important event, and if it went well, it could net us quite a sizable contract for monthly events that this group holds. Composed of lawyers from Rojo and the surrounding counties, the group scheduled seminars and meetings throughout the year. If we pulled off today’s meeting without a hitch, the committee would vote to sign a contract with my company, and I’d have a sizable sum of income guaranteed for the next year.

When I walked into the kitchen, it was controlled chaos overseen by my friend, Dylan Conner. Dylan was Bella’s twin, and they were part of the Conner family that had been vaguely connected to mine for years. Dylan owned a local barbecue restaurant that had caught the interest of a popular Food Network star, and his place had been highlighted on the channel twice so far. His business was booming, and the recognition was well-deserved. But Dylan hadn’t forgotten his roots and was always available to cater local events for his friends and family.

“Everything set up out there?” Dylan asked as he lifted the cover on a large serving tray and looked at the contents. “Bella said you need to eat.”

“I do.”

“What do you want?”

“Yes, please,” I said with a cheesy grin, knowing anything he served me would be phenomenal.

Dylan laughed as one of his assistants handed him a plate, and I watched as he filled it with portions of all the goodies he’d be serving the guests

today. When he handed it to me, I stared at it, my mouth watering at both the smell and the presentation. “This looks too pretty to eat.”

“You know how the highbrows work. It’s gotta be pretty before they’ll touch it,” Dylan grumbled. “Makes for more work on my end, but their portions are smaller, so there’s that, at least.” I had just put a bite in my mouth, and when the flavor burst on my tongue, I had to close my eyes and hold back a moan of bliss. Dylan winked at me and said, “That’s what I was going for.”

“You’re the best,” I said sincerely. “The absolute best.”

“I know.”

I laughed at his smug smile and walked away with my plate in hand, headed to my office where I could sit and check my messages while I made quick work of my lunch. I was expecting a call from my dad anytime now with news of the request he’d filed to keep Van from sending me any more texts or emails and calling my phone. In the six weeks since our last date, I’d only seen Van from afar. Luckily, every time I’d spotted him, I’d been in a position to walk the other way or get in my car and leave.

Normally, I wasn’t one to run from conflict, but after my dad and uncle had become involved in this fiasco, they’d listened to all of the voice messages and read all of the texts and emails. When I received them, I thought they were pushy and over the top, but when you read them all in order, it was easy to see the progression of someone who was really pissed about being ignored. A few of the messages proved that he’d seen me when I didn’t realize he was around, and those were the ones that really put my family on alert.

At first, I’d felt like we were all being paranoid, but then Van had shown up at the gate that led into my neighborhood and insisted he be let in so he could speak to me. When the guard refused because he knew I wasn’t home, Van had a tantrum. That was the only way to describe his behavior. He was screaming profanities, banging on his steering wheel, and acting so erratically that the guard wondered if he might be on something and called 911. Adam had been in the office at the time and had watched the footage of the interaction between Van and the guard and then Van’s interaction with the officers who arrived on the scene and ‘accidentally’ posted it to social media where it went viral.

My dad and Uncle Lout were sure that one of two things would happen. Either Van would run off with his tail between his legs, or he’d fuck up in

such a way that Uncle Nick would be able to arrest him and get an official record of his unhinged actions.

It had slowed down his erratic behavior to a certain extent, but it had also done something completely unexpected. Adam's video had brought forward various women who'd had the same problem with unwanted attention from him over the years. There was even one woman who he'd quit harassing the day he and I matched online. I was happy that he'd finally stopped but a little irritated that he'd had to focus on me to do it.

Emerald heard from Esme who had talked to a friend who worked at the courthouse, or some version of that old telephone game, that tensions in the DA's office were high, and Van was scheduled to go in front of a committee regarding his behavior. I thought that was a fine idea and wished I could be a fly on the wall for that meeting. It sounded like fun entertainment even though I didn't have faith that he'd get more than just a slap on the wrist if he got any punishment at all.

I sat down at my desk to eat my lunch, and rather than check emails and do something productive, I opened my phone and scrolled through social media. As much as I hated the drama I saw from some people, it was nice to see pictures and read updates on friends and family that I didn't get to talk to as often as I'd like. I commented on a few posts and then saw movement out of the corner of my eye and looked up as I heard, "Hello, beautiful."

I smiled so big that it made my cheeks hurt, and felt my heart trip in my chest at the sight of Damien standing in the doorway. His hand was behind his back, and when he brought it around, I saw that he was clutching a bouquet of tulips, one of my favorite flowers. I stood up and rushed across the room, the smile never leaving my face, before I threw myself into his arms for a long kiss. When we finally came up for air, he said, "I've missed you too."

"I know it's only been a few days, but it seems like forever," I said, sounding like a lovesick teenager. Between my job and his along with juggling the kids' needs and schedules, we didn't get to see each other every day, or sometimes even every other day, which made the impromptu visits and long phone calls even more meaningful. "I was just about to send you a text before the event started."

"I know you don't have much free time on days like today, so I thought I'd pop in early to see my pretty girl since I was going to be here anyway."

"You're coming to the luncheon?"

“Nick asked me to come because he’s going to be talking about my department. Luc is here, too, along with Captain Alvarez from patrol.”

“Some of my favorite people! I’ll tell Dylan to make sure y’all get extra portions of dessert to make up for the fact that you’ve got to listen to all that legal speak.”

“And make sure they keep the coffee coming. I feel like that’s going to be my best friend for the next few hours.”

“We’ll keep you guys supplied,” I assured him before I took the tulips from him. “These are beautiful.”

“Taylor said these were your favorite.”

“You’re so sweet. Thank you.”

“Now, give me a hint about what I can bring to dinner tonight.”

“Not food!” I blurted. I’d spent enough time with Damien to realize that his kitchen skills were almost as bad as mine, and he should definitely not bring anything homemade to dinner with my family. “You really don’t have to bring anything, but if you feel like you must, Dad likes white wine and Papa tolerates it.”

“I’m a little nervous,” Damien admitted.

“There’s no need to be. You’ve already met and hung out with my siblings a few times. And you’ve survived more than a few breakfasts at the diner. Rumor has it that they actually like you, so you’re set. Seriously, no need to worry.”

“If you say so. Just know that I’m not above using Juni as a shield. No one can get past those eyes of hers without turning into a pile of mush. I’ll use that to my advantage if I have to.”

I laughed and told him, “My girls are obsessed with you, and so is Jericho. That will go a long way in my family’s eyes.”

“And I’m kind of obsessed with their mama, so it’s a good thing the kids like me,” Damien said before he leaned down and gave me another kiss. “I’ll come and say goodbye before we leave.”

“Okay. I’ll talk to you soon.” I watched Damien walk off and smiled when he looked over his shoulder and blew me a kiss.

It struck me then just how much I loved him, and the thought took my breath away. He was so easy to talk to and such fun to be around. His wit and charm always kept me on my toes, and his dedication to Juni and Simon was enough to make any woman fall in love with him. The way he treated them, listening to their concerns and comforting them when they needed it,

kept the kids happy and made me love him all the more.

If the way he treated his own kids wasn't enough, watching him get to know mine clinched it. He and Jericho had made fast friends, and it didn't seem to faze him when my boy started doing zoomies around the house. Of course, Juni was running right beside him, usually screaming at the top of her lungs. But rather than get irritated at all the noise or frustrated when they couldn't sit still, Damien stood out of the path of destruction and watched them with a smile, usually while holding either Jada or Jiana who had stolen his heart the first time they each blessed him with one of their gorgeous smiles.

I knew a few weeks ago just how vested Damien was in our relationship when he rearranged his schedule so that he could come with me to my sign language class and then again when I showed up at his house and found him watching a video with Juni and Simon as they practiced signing some of the most common words.

After my divorce, I knew I'd never fall in love like I had before, and I was right. This was an entirely different emotion than I'd felt with my ex-husband. With him, it had been an all-encompassing roller coaster of emotion that swept me off my feet like a rogue wave. But with Damien, it was the complete opposite. It was calm and right, and I was starting to imagine what our relationship would look like years from now after we'd watched the kids grow up and began anxiously waiting for them to give us grandchildren to spoil.

I sighed as I shook off the dreamy spell Damien always seemed to put me under. I had work to do and a business to run. I could daydream about my hot boyfriend when I was alone tonight. Or maybe I could take it a step further and see if he was ready to bring Juni and Simon with him for a sleepover.

It was a big step, but I was more than ready.

17.

DAMIEN

If I had to listen to one more pompous lawyer rant about the changes he was ready to see in our justice system, I was going to lose my fucking mind. I hated events like this where I had to wear a tie and be presentable for inspection rather than be out in the field, tracking down leads and looking for clues about a case. Not that it was any consolation, but the chief, Captain Vance, and Captain Alvarez looked just as bored and uncomfortable as I felt.

I looked around the room as the elderly lawyer up front droned on about what the judicial system was like when his early clients showed up in covered wagons and noticed Holly's own personal stalker glaring at me. Or was he glaring at Marcus Hamilton who was sitting right behind me? I couldn't be sure.

I turned to look at Holly's dad and realized Marcus was staring at Van with an expression so cold, it made me want to shiver. As my eyes went back to the dinosaur at the front of the room, I heard the crowd around us start to clap in earnest. I was sure it had nothing to do with the man's speech and everything to do with the fact that it had finally ended.

"It looks like we're caught in the crossfire," Captain Alvarez said under his breath as he glanced from Van to Marcus and then looked at me. "If lasers start shooting out of their eyes, we're screwed."

I put my hand over my mouth to cover my grin and watched an older man take up his position behind the podium and then fiddle with the note cards he held. It took a minute for the room to settle again, and by the time it was quiet, he was ready to speak.

"Good afternoon, my friends," he said with a jovial smile. "I'd like to thank . . ." I let his voice fade out as I glanced around the room, taking in the different types of lawyers in attendance. There were, of course, the expensively dressed folks with the perfect hair, their eyes also assessing the

room, but there were also more than a few that looked more like absent-minded professors than legal experts.

I saw Holly peek into the room through a crack in the door on the right side of the podium, and I smiled, wondering if she was bored too. At least she could walk around out there rather than sit here and try not to fidget or pass out from disinterest.

“Since today’s theme seems to be all about change, I’d like to make an announcement about some that will be happening in my office. Our assistant district attorney, Van Reece, has decided to explore greener pastures around the Dallas area and will be leaving our office at the end of the week. Luckily, I have a few candidates in mind to replace him, but we won’t be announcing who the next ADA will be just yet.

I heard a man chuckle and turned just in time to see Marcus Hamilton grinning at Van right before his smile dropped away and his eyes got wide with shock. A woman near the back of the room screamed and men started to shout just as a gunshot rang out. The man behind the podium staggered back with a growing red bloom spreading down from his shoulder.

I snapped my head around to look for the shooter and saw Van holding a gun that was now aimed in my direction, but more likely at Marcus Hamilton who had stood up the second the first shot rang out. As Captain Alvarez started yelling orders at Van to drop the gun while the chief shouted for everyone in the audience to get down, Luc Vance ran to the podium to help the DA. I turned to see Marcus push the woman sitting next to him to the ground, and as he turned to look back at Van, another shot rang out, and Marcus jerked to the side.

Rather than fall down like the man on the stage had, he roared and faced Van again. I realized two things in an instant: Van had better aim than most people, and my future father-in-law was his intended target, not me. Without even thinking, I jumped toward him. I heard more shots as I launched myself through the air to tackle Marcus. I felt fire explode in the back of my leg.

More shots rang out as I rolled with Marcus underneath the table and covered his body with mine. Suddenly, the gunfire stopped, and the noise and voices around me started to fade.

“He’s bleeding,” I heard a woman say. “Shit! He’s bleeding *a lot*. There’s too much!”

“What the fuck have you done, boy?” Marcus growled as he tried to push me off of him. As I flopped over onto my back, his face started to get hazy.

“Shit. Holly’s gonna kill us both.”

“I love her.” I didn’t realize I’d spoken the words out loud until I saw Marcus’s eyes go wide.

“Tell her that yourself, son,” Marcus said as I felt someone pressing on my leg, causing pain to shoot all the way to my toes. “We’ll get you fixed up in no time.”

“Juni and Simon . . . tell them . . . tell Holly . . .”

“Shut up, and tell ‘em your damn self,” Marcus said as he put his hands on either side of my face and stared into my eyes. “Don’t you fuck this up, Lucifer. You’ve got a lot of living left to do.”



HOLLY

“Did you see the look on Captain Psycho’s face?” Bella asked as we walked shoulder to shoulder down the hall. “You dodged a bullet there, sister.”

“I think so. Dad was supposed to talk to the judge about a restraining order this morning, but I never heard from him, so I’m not sure what happened.”

“Knowing your dad, there was a lot of bloodshed.” Bella laughed as she pushed open the side door that led into the kitchen and then stopped when we saw the organized chaos of Dylan and his employees. Lunch was a hit and everyone had raved about the dessert. I was really happy with the way things were going today. Apparently, Bella recognized that the success of this luncheon was monumental for the growth of the company. “You know, since we get to host this in our own building and we can bring in whoever we want to cater, I don’t think this is going to be a bad monthly gig.”

“Hopefully, we’ll get even more work from some of the law firms that . . .” I jumped when I heard a gunshot and then spun toward the door leading out to the banquet hall when someone screamed.

Bella was jerked off her feet as suddenly as I was, and within seconds, we were pushed out the side door toward the parking lot. From behind us, Dylan barked, “Run!” I had barely settled my feet on the ground when he pushed me and said it again, “Run! Now!”

“My dad is in there! And Damien! I’ve got to . . .”

“Get to safety so there’s one less thing they have to worry about,” Dylan said as he pushed me again. When I resisted, he hissed, “I will put you over my shoulder, Holly.”

There were more gunshots, and people started pouring out of the building’s front door. Bella had run ahead of us and pulled open the door to the metal storage building. She held it open and let a few others go inside before Dylan pushed me past her and then shoved her in behind me. He put his finger in her face and said, “Don’t open this fucking door for anyone. I’ll call you when it’s safe.”

The next few minutes felt like an eternity, and just as I heard the first sirens outside, Bella’s phone rang. When she answered, her eyes shot straight to mine. “I’ll bring her inside.”

I didn’t wait for her to tell me what was going on, I just threw the door wide. There were clusters of people milling around the parking lot, and I saw two groups giving first aid to people bleeding on the ground. I didn’t even take time to see if I could help. Instead, I sprinted into the banquet hall only to skid to a halt when I saw Papa kneeling beside Damien.

I dropped to my knees beside Damien and reached out to touch his face. There was a pool of blood beneath him, and Uncle Luc was straddling his legs. It looked like he had his fingers plugging the bullet wound, and when the paramedics got there, he explained that was exactly what he was doing.

“I’ve got my finger on his artery, and I’m afraid to move,” Luc explained. “What do I do?”

“We’ll figure it out,” the paramedic said as he started yelling orders at the others on their way into the room.

Since the paramedics were taking care of Damien, I took a moment to look at Papa and realized he was bleeding too. “You’ve been shot!”

“‘Tis but a scratch,” Papa quipped, quoting one of Dad’s favorite movies.

I knew he was lying when I saw him grimace, but he smiled and reassured me, “I’m going to be fine, Holly. They need to focus on him.”

I felt a sob well up as the paramedics had Luc shift to the side so they could put Damien on the stretcher and then helped him back into the same position he’d been in before, straddling his legs.

“Let me take a look at you, sir,” another paramedic said as he dropped down beside Papa.

I was torn. They were wheeling Damien away, but Papa needed me too. I didn’t know what to do until Papa ordered, “Dylan take Holly and follow

Damien's ambulance. Petra, you're on phone duty. Call Reagan, and let him know *I'm fine*, but he needs to meet us at the hospital. Call Monica, and let her know that Damien's hurt, and she needs to get Tasha up there. Then find whoever you can to pick up all five kids from daycare and farm them out however you can so Holly doesn't have to worry. Bella, take care of things here."

"Yessir," Dylan said with a nod. Petra put her phone up to her ear as she walked away from the commotion, and Bella stood and nodded in agreement. "Come on, Holly."

"Will you be okay?" I whispered before I leaned over and kissed his forehead. "I don't know if I can leave you."

"I've got them to take care of me. You go ahead, and I'll find you later. Don't worry. Everything's going to be just fine."

"I love you."

"Love you, too, baby. Go on now. Go be with your man."

I reached up and took Dylan's outstretched hand and then we jogged outside and across the parking lot. We had just stepped off the curb when the ambulance closed its doors, and Dylan squeezed my hand as he led me around his SUV.

"He's gonna be fine, Holly," Dylan tried to reassure me as we took off after the ambulance.

"Have you ever been in love, Dylan? Real, true, no doubt about it love?" I asked as I swiped at the tears streaming down my face.

"Not the kind that can weather any storm," Dylan admitted sadly.

"I think that's how I feel about Damien. It feels strong and steady, just like him."

"Then hold on tight to that, Holly. It will pull him through this, and you can be waiting for him on the other side."

"What if it's not enough?"

"Don't waver. Be strong enough for both of you until he recovers and can take his place beside you."

"I can do that."



"He's still sleeping?" my dad asked softly as he sat in the chair beside

mine. He looked exhausted, and I knew it was because he was worried about Papa.

I leaned against him and rested my head on his shoulder before I answered. “Jewel said that’s perfectly normal and actually a good thing because it means his body is healing. The nurses are in there going over everything for shift change, but I’ll get to go back in when they’re done. I should call and see how the kids are doing.”

“I went by and checked on them before I came back up here. They’re fine, but we knew they would be.”

“I convinced Tasha and Monica that they didn’t need to rush home. When they found out the kids are staying with Martha and Summer, they laughed and said I was right. Everything here is taken care of, so they kept their reservation and will fly back in a few days.”

“Are you going to stay the night?”

“Yeah. Jewel said she’d make arrangements to get a cot put in there. Did you get Papa settled in at home?”

Dad snickered and said, “I left him there with Sandra. It will be a lot easier for her to get him to take the pain pill and go to bed than it would be for me. I told him I wouldn’t be gone long, I just wanted to bring you an overnight bag and check in on the kiddos.”

“Jewel said that if everything goes well, and she thinks it will because he’s a very fit guy, he’ll be able to check out of the hospital tomorrow or the next day.”

“And then what?”

“I’ll take him home with me.”

“And all five kids?”

“Yep.” I laughed at the look on my dad’s face and asked, “Do you think I’m crazy?”

“That’s an awful lot to take on, sweetheart.”

“I’m not going to let him go home alone because he’ll probably insist on taking care of the kids by himself and then he’ll . . . Just no. He’s coming home with me, and so are Juni and Simon.”

“Are you ready for that?”

“I am,” I said firmly. I thought about it for a second and then nodded. “I am definitely ready for that.”

“If he comes to stay with you while he recovers, are you ever going to let him leave?”

Without a second's hesitation, I said, "Nope."

Dad smiled. "You're all in, huh?"

"One hundred percent."

"That's awfully fast."

"Six weeks." I tilted my head and tried to remember the stories either my dad or Papa had told me over the years. "How long were you and Papa together before you knew?"

Dad laughed before he answered, "Our situation was totally different, sweetheart, but I will say that I knew I loved him almost from the start."

"I made him jump through hoops. I tried to deny that I was even dating him, let alone how I really felt about him. I waited until now to even officially introduce him to you and Papa. Well, we were supposed to do that tonight." I laughed, but there was no humor in it. "I guess he figured out a good way out of that awkward first dinner with the family, didn't he? But now, looking back, I . . ."

"Never look back, Holly. Look ahead to the future. Do you see him there with you?"

"Absolutely."

"Then that's all you need to focus on."

"My dreams are coming true."

"I knew you'd find someone, Holly. You've got a heart full of love to share."

"Thanks, Dad," I said as I lifted his arm and snuggled in close. "I love you, you know."

"Of course you do. What's not to love? I'm fantastic." Dad laughed and hugged me closer. "I love you, too, sweetheart."

"I think you're going to love him. And the kids are just awesome."

"It goes without saying that your papa and I will love being grandparents to even more little rascals and that we'll love Damien as long as he treats you and the kids the way he should."

"I think he will."

"And if he doesn't, we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

"You're starting to sound like Papa." I pulled away and looked up into my dad's face. "Go home, Dad. I know you're antsy to make sure he's okay."

"Maybe a little bit, but I wanted to make sure you were okay too."

"I'll be just fine. I know it."



“What the hell?”

My eyes flew open, and I jerked to a sitting position the second I heard Damien’s voice. I threw the covers back and was across the room in an instant, leaning over Damien as I urged him to be still. “Don’t sit up, babe. Settle down. I’ll call the nurse.”

“Why can’t I move my legs?” Damien asked, terror in his voice. “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I . . .”

“They have a weight on your thigh to hold pressure on it, and I think your legs are strapped down.”

“Are my toes moving? Tell me my toes are moving!” Damien looked down and wiggled his toes before he let his head fall back to the pillow with a relieved sigh. “Shit. That was scary.”

I pressed the button to call the nurse before I rested my hand on his forehead and then ran it back over his short hair. “You’re okay. You lost a lot of blood, but they got you fixed up. They even repaired the damage the bullet made in your leg.”

“What about your dad? He was aiming for him, so I . . . I couldn’t let him shoot your dad again.”

“You jumped in front of a bullet for Papa?”

“I knew it would break your heart if he got hurt.”

The tears I’d been holding back spilled down my cheeks as I said, “But you got hurt, and it *did* break my heart.”

“I’m fine,” Damien said as nuzzled his head against my palm. “Is he okay?”

“He’s already home and probably bitching about Dad hovering too much.”

“Good,” Damien said as his eyes fluttered closed. “Where are the kids?”

“They’re with Martha and Summer.”

“They’re good then,” Damien whispered as he started to drift off. “Did Alvarez shoot that fucker?”

I laughed softly at his mumbled question and didn’t rush to answer because he was already asleep again. When the nurse came in, I gave her an update and waited until she left to lay back down on the uncomfortable cot. I listened to Damien’s even breathing and let it lull me to sleep, hoping I’d be

hearing that sound for the rest of my life.

I loved Damien Harris and wasn't ever going to let him go, but first, I was going to have to kill him for putting his life in danger, even if it was to protect Papa. I smiled to myself as sleep started to take over. Okay, maybe I would just give him a stern talking to instead of killing him. I couldn't imagine my life without Papa in it, just like I couldn't imagine a world without Damien.

And I hoped I'd never have to.

18.

DAMIEN

I heard someone enter my hospital room and guessed the nurses were back again. I'd had medical professionals trooping in and out of my room for the last hour, and I was ready for some peace and quiet. Holly would be back any minute now. I wouldn't mind having her here, but the rest of them needed to just leave me the hell alone. Either that or they needed to discharge me. Those were the only acceptable options as far as I was concerned.

It was damn near impossible to navigate the small bathroom on crutches, and the thought of rupturing the work the surgeons had done and bleeding out terrified me. I knew that was what Jewel was going for when she visited my room early this morning and gave me a vivid description of what might happen if I didn't heed the doctor's movement restrictions. My first thought was how would I take care of the kids, but while I made a plan, I realized Holly already had one in place. She was moving us in with her for the duration of my recovery, and from the tone of her voice, I knew there wasn't any room for argument or discussion.

I wouldn't dare tell Holly, but the cutest little furrow in her brow appeared when she was being serious. It was hard for me to focus on anything else, even when she was trying so hard to be stern. Of course, just looking at her made me think of that dreamy smile she got after a long kiss or, even better, a mind-blowing orgasm or two. Unfortunately, according to Jewel, I wouldn't be seeing that expression for the foreseeable future. The thought of that made me crankier than trying to take a piss while standing on one foot, holding myself up with crutches.

"How long are you going to be in there, Popsicle?" I heard a man ask from outside the bathroom door. It sounded like Holly's uncle, but I couldn't imagine what he might be doing here.

"What the hell?" I mumbled as I dried my hands. When I pushed the

door open, I realized that Lout was there along with Marcus and Noble, Holly's father and younger brother. "Hi, guys. What's going on?"

Marcus shot daggers at his son as he hovered nearby, resisting the urge to help his father sit down in the chair next to my bed, before he said, "I wanted to come talk to you, but apparently, I'm not allowed out of the house by myself."

"I think I'm about to be in the same boat," I said with a tortured sigh. "Before Holly left, she asked me if I needed any help going to the bathroom. I'm pretty sure I've been doing that by myself for almost forty years now."

"They won't let me drive," Marcus complained.

"Me either."

"Well, it's your right leg, so I can see that, but I can surely drive with one fucking arm," Marcus snapped. "Shit. Sorry. I'm a little testy."

"Same here."

"Holly making you nuts?" Noble asked. "She can be a little over the top."

"She's just worried," I said with a smile, remembering how she nervously flitted around me like a moth the first time I sat up in bed and how she'd fretted about having to leave me 'all by myself' at the hospital while she took Jada and Jiana to an appointment. "I think that once I get settled in at home, she'll realize I'm not so fragile."

Marcus chuckled. "Ha! You think you're going home? Her home maybe, but there's not a chance in hell you'll get to stay at your house alone for the foreseeable future."

"At least a month," Lout agreed. "Probably longer."

"I'm surprised she's not here right now," Noble said. "Where is she anyway?"

"The girls had a check-up, and I convinced her she didn't need to reschedule."

"He's better at this shit than I'd have thought," Noble said with a nod.

"When it comes to the kids, she'll always put them first. I wouldn't have it any other way," I assured them.

"Good call, Popsicle," Lout said cheerfully. When I tilted my head in question, Noble laughed. Lout just smiled as Marcus shook his head. "That's your name now."

"Why?"

I gingerly sat on the edge of the bed and winced when the position pulled

at the stitches in my leg. For all his bluster and teasing, Lout was the first one at my side to help me get situated, so it was hard to be angry at him when he explained my latest nickname.

“First of all, it’s a pain in the ass to come up with a new name every time we see you. Besides, that’s how we make Nosferatu feel special . . .”

“He means Uncle Luc,” Noble inserted with a grin.

When I nodded in understanding, Lout grinned. “And besides, it fits with the new name we’ve come up with for Detective Murtaugh.”

“What’s that?”

“Stick.”

“Huh?” I asked, confused. Noble started laughing but sobered when Marcus’s laughter caused him to grimace in pain. “Well, Stick rode in the ambulance with his hand up your ass trying to save your life. That makes you Popsicle.”

I sat there for several seconds with my mouth hanging open, trying to figure out Lout’s reasoning, until Marcus and Noble’s laughter registered, and I felt the need to defend Luc Vance and myself at the same time.

“His hand wasn’t up my ass! He was pinching my fucking artery closed so I didn’t bleed out.”

“Your artery in your ass?” Lout asked.

I pointed at my lap and said, “No! The bullet went through the back of my leg and nicked the artery in my inner thigh. His hand wasn’t up my ass, it was right next to my balls.”

I realized I’d just made it worse when Noble guffawed loudly and said, “Told you we should have gone with the other nickname.”

“That settles it. We’ll have to tell Jockstrap that Popsicle here decided on his new name.”

I scowled when I realized what Lout had just threatened. “I did not say that!”

Lout shrugged. “Yeah, but that’s what we’re gonna tell him.”

“What is wrong with you people?” I asked, mortified at the thought that my superior was going to think I had something to do with this.

“The list is endless,” Jewel Parker said as she walked into the room. “And don’t say ‘you people’ like you’re not already one of us, Popsicle. It sounds bad.”

“You’re not . . . You can’t . . . Fuck,” I muttered as I leaned back against the pillow and closed my eyes. I opened them and looked at Jewel before I

asked, “Is something wrong? Do you have to run more tests?”

“No. When Holly called Reagan to check on Marcus, she heard these three were together and had a feeling they’d come here, so she sent me to check on you. Lucky for me, I got here just in time to hear them christen you with your new name.”

“You’re not helping at all,” I complained.

“I didn’t tell her I’d help you, just that I’d make sure you were okay,” Jewel said with a grin. “She knows my limitations.”

“Can we have just a minute, Jewel?” Marcus asked, his expression somber now.

She recognized the shift in emotion and nodded before she said, “I’ll just go out in the hall and send her a text explaining there’s no need to hurry since Popsicle is sleeping.” I pulled the pillow out from under my head and threw it at her, but she caught it and tossed it back. “I’ll be right outside.”

Once the door closed, Marcus stood and got closer to the side of the bed. Noble and Lout stood at the end, their faces serious as Marcus started speaking. “I’m here because I wanted to thank you for what you did yesterday. The crime scene investigator said that if you hadn’t jumped up to block that bullet, it would have hit me square in the chest. It fucked you up, but it probably would have killed me.”

“I could tell he was gunning for you right after he shot the DA. I didn’t want Holly to lose you because . . . well, I knew it would break her heart, and that’s the last thing I ever want to happen.”

“That’s good to know,” Lout said with a deadly calm. “You’ve got my thanks too. I can’t imagine life without my favorite pain in the ass, and none of us want to break in another attorney, so we’re sort of attached to him.”

“I’m here as an emissary for my brothers and Tati. We knew Holly would have our heads if we bombarded you with visitors while you’re supposed to be resting, and our dad suggested one of us come to keep these two in line.”

“Hey! I’m a well-behaved gentleman!” Lout argued.

Noble shook his head and stuck his hand out to shake mine. “Thank you, Harris. We’ll never forget what you’ve done. We’re in your corner if you ever need us.”

“Same,” Lout said, serious again. “Anything you need, we’re just a phone call away.”

Marcus reached over with his good arm and squeezed my shoulder. “I

have a feeling you're gonna be around for a long while if Holly has her way, so welcome to the family, Popsicle."

"Thanks . . . I think."



"I understand that you had some visitors this morning," Holly said when I opened my eyes from yet another nap. I couldn't seem to stay awake for very long at all, but Jewel said that was perfectly normal considering the trauma my body had been through. "How did that go?"

"Well, on one hand, it looks like I've made some friends for life, but on the other, it seems like they're assholes, so there's that."

Holly laughed before she said, "Popsicle sounds better than Corn Dog. That was another option." I closed my eyes again as she giggled, and I couldn't help but smile. "Giving you a nickname is a sign that they like you." I opened my eyes when Holly sighed, and I realized she looked uncertain about something. Before I could ask why, she added, "Well, maybe not *like* you, considering I'm their sweet little princess and they probably realize you've seen me naked, but it *is* definitely a sign that they're not plotting your death."

I laughed softly because anything else would shake my body and shoot pain down my leg. "How did the girls' appointment go?"

"It went fine. They ran a few tests and tweaked some settings on their implants, but overall, they are really happy with the progress they're making."

"Good. While you were gone, I watched some videos and learned some new signs."

Holly's smile lit up the room. "What did you learn?"

I touched my fingertips together, and she grinned. "Of course I'll give you a kiss." She leaned over the edge of the bed and gave me a lingering kiss, and when she stood, I signed something else I'd learned today. Holly's eyes filled with tears, and she whispered, "I love you too."

"Crawl up, and take a nap with me," I ordered.

"I don't want to hurt you." I gave her a pointed look, and she smiled. "Maybe just until you go to sleep."

"I've found on the few nights we've stayed together that I sleep better

with you beside me,” I explained as she settled in. Once she’d found the right spot and was nestled against me with her head on my shoulder, I felt calmer and more hopeful than I had been since I woke up in the hospital. Sleep started to pull me under again, and my last thought was to say, “I love you, Holly.”

“I love you too.”

We hadn’t been sleeping for very long when I heard voices outside my room. Hoping it was someone with my release orders, I lifted my head and tried to discern who it was. I heard movement beside me and jolted, disturbing Holly’s nap. I settled and so did she before I finally asked, “What’s up, Jockstrap?”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t just call me that so I don’t have to kill you with my niece so close by,” Luc Vance said as he narrowed his eyes.

“It’s the pain meds. I don’t even know my own mind,” I lied, enjoying my one chance to have an excuse to rib him like Holly’s family did every chance they got. I recognized the voice in the hall as Chief Cardenas and glanced that way before I asked, “What’s going on? If you tell me Reece managed to escape and is on the loose, I might go on a killing spree.”

Luc chuckled and said, “No, he’s on the floor below us with an armed guard, as much for his protection as the general public’s.”

I didn’t even ask because I thought it might be better to stay in the dark on the subject, but I did joke, “Did you guys bring me flowers?”

“No, but we brought you news.”

Chief Cardenas slipped his phone into his back pocket as he walked in and smiled when he realized I was awake. In a soft voice so he didn’t bother Holly, he said, “I’m glad to see you finally decided to wake up and join the party, Harris.”

“Maybe I don’t want to come to parties you invite me to anymore. The last one didn’t go so well,” I said sarcastically.

“I planned it that way so you had an in with the Hamilton family. It takes a lot to get on their good side,” the chief retorted. “A near-death experience saving the life of one of their patriarchs definitely paved the road for a lasting relationship.”

“Thanks. I’ll try some good old-fashioned sucking up next time. This invalid shit is for the birds.”

“Enjoy the rest while you can because we’ve got plenty of work for you when you get back to the office,” Luc said with a sadistic grin. “As a matter

of fact, I already gave your assistant orders to make copies of everything so you can work from home while you recuperate.”

“That’s probably the only thing that will keep me sane if I’m locked in the house for any length of time.”

“Since Van’s on painkillers, we haven’t been able to question him yet, but we’ve found plenty of evidence to convict him,” the chief started to explain.

“A room full of eyewitnesses isn’t enough?”

“Shit. He didn’t tell you?” Chief Cardenas asked, his eyes snapping to Luc. “I guess I get the honor.”

“Tell me what?”

“You uncovered evidence that Reece is guilty of murder, not just attempted murder.”

“I did?”

“Those records he was so intent on keeping hidden just needed a fresh set of eyes on them, which was probably what had him running scared. Hendricks went over your notes and added them to some things he found. Van Reece was a student at a private school in the area when he started dating a girl who his judgmental parents thought came from the wrong side of the tracks. Stacy Vega’s parents weren’t keen on her dating, so she hid her budding relationship with the young man she’d met at a speech competition. Friends said that she gradually started to draw away. They knew it had to do with a boy, but they didn’t realize how intense the relationship had become until they saw her in the locker room with bruises covering her arms. She played it off as nothing, but that made a lasting impression on several of the girls. One of them actually remembered seeing Van’s name on a piece of mail in Stacy’s car.”

“He killed her?” I asked in shock.

“Hendricks was exploring that path when Reece pulled that stunt yesterday. After he went through his office with a fine-tooth comb, he found a handwritten confession along with what basically amounts to a manifesto explaining why Reece felt the need to shoot his boss and Marcus Hamilton.”

“Because he knew we’d be onto him sooner rather than later,” I said in awe. “Holy shit. But what did that have to do with Marcus?”

“Marcus is a powerful man in this community. He’s got connections who have roots that run deeper than any of us really want to analyze.”

“Or should try to analyze,” Luc said with a pointed look in my direction.

When I nodded, he smiled bitterly and said, “With just one phone call to the DA, he got Reece fired and then let him know that was all his doing and that no matter where Reece landed he’d cause problems for him.”

“Marcus painted a target on his back to take Reece’s attention off his daughter,” Chief Cardenas explained. “What he did and how he pushed him threw Reece into a tailspin, and he could see his perfectly ordered life unraveling right before his eyes. That sent him over the edge along with the knowledge that the Vega case was coming back to the forefront in the new department. He was cornered and decided to go down in a blaze of glory, hoping that he’d be killed by the officers he knew would be in attendance. But Alvarez didn’t make a kill shot. He winged him, and Reece didn’t die like he’d planned. That means we’ll be able to gather more information and hopefully wring a confession out of the bastard.”

“I bet my future father-in-law and his pals could get one for you if given half an hour alone with him,” I hinted.

“Rookie thinks it would take half an hour,” Luc scoffed. “You haven’t even met the whole crew yet, have you?”

“Not even close,” I admitted. “She was taking baby steps, introducing me to a few at a time. We were supposed to go to dinner at her parent’s last night, but I ended up here instead.”

“There are other ways to get out of family functions. I’ll share a few with you sometime,” Luc said, and I was almost positive he wasn’t joking. “Hold on. You just referred to Marcus as your future father-in-law.”

“You just caught that, detective? Way to be observant,” Chief Cardenas snarked.

“Obviously, I haven’t asked her yet, but that’s the direction I’m headed,” I said firmly. “Unlike Vance here, I’m a pretty observant guy, and I saw the signs from the beginning that Holly was the best thing that could ever happen to me and my little family.”

“Smart man,” the chief conceded. “You also look like a tired man, so we’ll let you get back to your nap. Any news on when you’ll be discharged?”

“I was hoping it would happen today, but it’s getting late so I’m not sure.”

“Well, keep in touch. We’ll do the same,” the chief said as Luc stood up from his chair and started walking toward the door.

“Good luck with my niece, Harris, and have fun with that family of hers.

I'll welcome you in with open arms. You might finally take some of the heat off me."

"You must be dreaming, Jockstrap," the chief joked. Luc shot him a glare and then flipped both of us off for good measure.

I could hear the men laughing as they walked down the hallway and realized that, with the shock of the information they'd given me, I had completely forgotten to thank Vance for saving my life. But since I'd decided I'd be joining his family, I knew I'd have plenty of opportunities to thank him. Now I just had to convince Holly to marry me.

"I'll say yes," Holly whispered.

"What's that, babe?" I asked before I kissed her temple.

"When you propose, I'll say yes."

"You will, huh?"

"Yes."

"You're not going to run away?"

"No. From now on I'll run to you, not away from you."

"I like the sound of that."

"Just so you know, I'm sort of bossy."

"You *are*?" I asked in mock dismay.

"And I like to get my way." When I just hummed in response, she continued, "And I firmly believe that falling into an open toilet bowl in the middle of the night is a justified murder defense." When I laughed, she explained, "Tati and I grew up the only girls in a virtual frat house, and that's created a little bit of resentment. Certain things might get you killed if you don't learn to avoid them."

"Toilet seat down. Got it."

"If you cropdust me, I will poison your food. It's as simple as that. No Dutch ovens either."

"Got it. No farting."

"And I'm probably never going to learn to cook."

"I think that skill is out of reach for both of us."

"Someday, I might want more kids."

The thought made my heart lurch, but I figured I had some time to get used to it, so I said, "Let's give it a little time before we jump into that."

"Three years."

"I can do that."

"And you and the kids are moving in with me when you leave here."

“Now, let’s talk about that for a minute, babe. I signed a lease and . . .”

“And I happen to be on very good terms with your landlord. If he gives you any lip, I’ll tell his mom about the time he took her favorite car on a joyride and let some little tramp he met at the mall drive it around the parking lot.”

“He’s our age and that’s a problem?”

“You haven’t met his mom or seen her car collection. In her world, that’s like you leaving the seat up in my house.”

“Justifiable homicide.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you sure we’re ready for this step? We should talk to the kids and . . .”

“You’re all going to stay with me while you recover anyway, so that’s the perfect time to transition them to living in my house full-time.”

“You’ve got this all mapped out, don’t you?”

“I’m a planner. That’s what I do.”

“I guess I’ll have to get used to that.”

“You’ll learn to roll with it like everyone else in my family.”

“I just have one question.”

“What’s that?”

“How does it feel now that you’ve joined the dark side?”

“It’s the best feeling in the world.”

“Good because I’m never going to let you go.”

“I’m counting on that.”

19.

HOLLY

“How are things going with Damien and the kids living with you?” Summer Forrester, an honorary aunt of mine, asked as she topped off my coffee. She had Jada on her hip like it was the most natural thing in the world to serve guests with a kid attached, and to her, it must be. She’d raised seven children of her own and had a hand in raising countless others over the years, me and my siblings included.

Aunt Willow, Uncle Lout’s wife, was standing behind the high chair where Jiana was happily gnawing on a teething ring. As she deftly braided my daughter’s hair, she said, “I’ve been wondering that same thing.”

I glanced over my shoulder to check on the other kids and found Juni, with her hair already styled by Willow, sleeping on Smokey’s chest. He was snoring with much less gusto than his son Bird, who was curled up in the recliner with Jericho laying next to him. Simon had gone next door with Gamma to help her make cookies earlier. I knew that he’d come back full of sugar and bouncing off the walls, but he’d have a smile from ear to ear and that’s all that really mattered.

“I think he’s going stir-crazy.”

“He’s an active guy who isn’t even allowed to walk. Of course he’s going stir-crazy.”

“I think it’s the noise,” I admitted. As if to prove my point, Jiana let out a loud shriek and threw her teether on the floor just as Jada started fussing and squirming, wanting Summer to put her down.

In one deft move, Summer sat Jiana on the floor, grabbed the teether, spun around to rinse it at the sink, and then handed it back to Jiana. “Bird had some difficulty adjusting when the boys and I moved in too. Add in Lark’s adjustment to our house and I’m surprised the man didn’t run screaming for the hills.”

“Are you afraid that’s what Damien’s going to do?” Willow asked.

“No. He’s not a quitter by any means. I’m afraid he’s going to realize that five kids in one house is just too much and . . .” My words were cut off when Summer and Willow started laughing.

“Five?” Summer sputtered through her laughter. “That’s amateur hour.”

Willow wheezed before she asked, “Don’t you mean six? Damien counts while he’s incapacitated.”

Summer rolled her eyes as she dabbed at the tears on her cheeks with a paper towel. “Bird is *terrible* when he’s sick, but when he’s injured, there’s just no scale to measure what a pain in the ass he is. He’s the worst.”

“You’d think they graduated from med school with all the bullshit they spout about, ‘Nah. It’s okay if I lift this.’” Willow and Summer laughed again before she continued, “Or, better yet, ‘The doctor didn’t say I couldn’t do *that*.’”

“Oh! Or ‘I know when too much is too much, Summer. I’m not a fucking invalid!’ And then he tweaks something and is down for the count even longer than he was scheduled to be.”

“Makes you just want to kill ‘em,” Willow agreed with an understanding scowl.

“I thought about hiding his crutches so he would quit following me around the house while I did my Sunday morning chores. Every time I turned around, he was standing there in my way.”

“He’s still using his crutches?” Willow asked doubtfully.

“It’s only been three weeks!”

“Yeah, but is he really still using them or just while you’re there?”

“The surgeon told him . . .”

I stopped when Summer waved a dismissive hand and interrupted, “Yeah, of course there were instructions, but what makes you think he’s following them?”

“Because . . . Well . . .” I sighed and asked defeatedly, “He’s not, is he?”

“Absolutely not,” Willow said with a bark of laughter. She reached out, and I handed her the comb so she could adjust the part in Jiana’s hair. When she was finished, she handed it back to me and asked, “I mean, would *you* still be using them?”

I jumped off the stool and nabbed Jada before she got all the way to the steps leading down into the living room. “Probably not.” Summer gave me a knowing look, so I admitted, “Okay, no, I wouldn’t.”

“What’s he doing right now?” Willow asked.

“He was napping when I left. Erik was there earlier, and they sat out on the patio going over Stacy Vega’s case to see if there’s anything else they can dig up to make sure the acting DA is able to charge Van.”

“Can you believe that shit?” Willow asked. “Without an admission from him, I’m not sure how the case against him is going to go.”

“But he wrote out a confession!” Summer argued.

“He’ll do everything he can to get that dismissed. He’s representing himself,” I told the girls. “Dad says that’s the dumbest thing he could possibly do, especially with his temperament.”

“Good. That means he’ll get the chair.”

“Do they really use the chair anymore?” Summer asked.

“I don’t care what they use as long as he gets it,” Willow retorted.

“I completely agree. Erik brought over some more case files so Damien can do something besides watch television with the kids. Hopefully, that will help him pass the time.”

“You could help him pass the time, you know,” Willow said as she wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

“But he’s not supposed to do anything strenuous!” Summer and Willow both stared at me until I realized what they were implying. “Oh! You’re right!”

“Leave the kids with us for a little while and run home to entertain your man,” Summer suggested.

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Honey, think of all the times you watched ours. We owe you one,” Willow said with a grin.

“Have you met our children? We owe her way more than just one,” Summer argued. “Take your time, honey. They’re in good hands. I promise.”

I kissed Jada on the forehead and handed her to Summer before I leaned down and gave Jiana a kiss on the head. “I’ll be back soon.”

“But not too soon!” Willow chortled.

“Get him, girl.”

Summer’s words were the last thing I heard before I was out the door and on my way to spend a little quality time with Damien. I knew the perfect way to wake him up from his nap.



DAMIEN

A few minutes after I sat down at the picnic table, Noble jogged toward me with a football in hand and warned, “She’s gonna kick your ass if she finds out you walked over here.”

“If I don’t get out of that house for a minute, I’m gonna lose my fucking mind.”

“Are the kids making you crazy? They can be a little much,” Noble acknowledged.

“It’s really not the kids, it’s that I’m supposed to stay on those fucking crutches, I’m not allowed to drive, I can’t work out, Holly won’t even . . . And some other stuff,” I grumbled, catching myself before I said something to her brother that was completely inappropriate. He raised his eyebrows, and it was all I could do not to laugh. “Sorry, man.”

“You gonna keep that ball all day?” Hawk Forrester asked as he jogged over. His brothers, Phoenix and Crow, weren’t far behind along with a few other guys I hadn’t met before.

I put my hand out and said, “Toss me the ball.”

Noble took a step back and clutched the ball to his chest. “Fuck no. You are not getting in on this game. If the exercise doesn’t kill you, Holly will, and she’ll take me down too.”

“She’ll take all of us down,” Hawk added with a chuckle.

“At least let me throw it. I won’t even stand up.”

“We were about to head to my place for a few beers anyway. You wanna join us?” Phoenix asked.

“A beer sounds really good, but I can’t drink for a while,” I lamented.

“Grab the beer and let’s invade their house,” Noble suggested to Phoenix. “Dad, Gamma, and Sandra keep Holly stocked with food so the kids don’t starve.”

“And if Holly comes home, he won’t be at death’s door,” Hawk surmised.

“A little walk isn’t gonna fucking kill me!”

“I was talking about *her* killing you, not your leg.”

I sighed. “You’re right.”

Noble put his hand out, and I took it, letting him slowly pull me up. Once I had my balance, I gingerly stepped onto the grass, making sure not to

wobble too much because I knew from experience my leg wasn't exactly as stable as I wanted to pretend. The guys must have realized I wasn't quite up to par yet because they fell into step around me, walking at a leisurely pace down the sidewalk.

"So, you're officially moving in?" Crow asked. "Margaret's gonna just love that."

"She will because me and the kids will be farther away. Now she just has to deal with you two."

Hawk grinned. "And Emerald."

"She hates Lucky too," Noble added. "Somehow, he always forgets to shut his windows before he starts practicing. It's crazy how often it happens."

"Practicing?"

"He's in a band called The Rojo Kings. They were the ones that played at the wedding."

"Oh. And he lives near Margaret?"

"Right across the street," Phoenix answered with a grin. "She thinks it's awesome when he plays guitar."

I carefully made my way up the steps onto the big porch at the front of Holly's house . . . *our* house and let myself in. The guys trooped in behind me, and I realized they must have been in here many times before. Hawk kicked off his shoes and relaxed in a corner of the couch as Crow opened the drawer in the side table that held the remote control. Once the television was on and the guys were good-naturedly arguing over what to watch, I joined Noble in the kitchen.

"I knew they were in here somewhere. Gamma sends bags of these home with all of us when we visit," Noble said, holding up a bag of frozen cookies victoriously. "I'll get them started while you find us something else to eat."

"What sounds good?" I asked as I peered into the open freezer. There were aluminum casserole dishes with everything from lasagna to Swedish meatballs, and I wasn't sure which dish to choose. "We've got a little bit of everything."

"It's all good. Gamma, Sandra, and Dad keep us stocked." Noble studied me for a minute before he said, "Just pick something, and I'll heat it up."

"I can heat up a frozen dinner."

"You'd think so, but Holly can't even do that. I'll take care of that part."

Once I chose a casserole, Noble nudged me out of the kitchen, probably

afraid that my presence near the oven might screw something up. Considering my track record in the kitchen, his worry was justified, so I joined the guys in the living room just as Phoenix walked in with a cooler of beer. I declined as did Hawk, but Crow, Noble, and Phoenix all twisted the bottle caps off and took a long, refreshing drink.

Hawk and I made do with glasses of milk while we ate the fresh cookies while the guys were content to sip on their beers.

“I hate all of you right now,” I grumbled. “I can’t do anything I want. I’m going fucking crazy here. It’s so frustrating.”

“Didn’t Holly take some time off to stay home with you?” Hawk asked.

“She did. She goes back to work tomorrow.”

“It must be nice to get to hang out with your sweetheart all alone for two freaking weeks,” Hawk said with a jealous glare.

“It was kind of nice. The first week was a little tense because I felt like shit, but then I started feeling better, and she kept treating me like I was made of glass.”

“She hovers,” Noble commented. “Dad says it’s her love language.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then she definitely loves me.”

“I did,” Holly said from the doorway that led into the laundry room and garage. “I’m rethinking that now.”

“Hey, babe,” I said as I greeted her with an uncomfortable smile. “Where are the kids?”

“They’re staying with Willow and Summer for a few hours.”

“Is everything okay?”

Holly got a wicked gleam in her eye before she asked, “How are you feeling?”

“I’m good.”

“How good?” Holly asked.

I shrugged and said, “Like 75 percent.”

“Is all of you at 75 or is part of you at 100?” When I looked at her curiously, she glanced down at my lap and then back up to my face. “The good part.”

“Oh man,” Noble groaned.

“Well over 100.”

“In that case, I need to speak to you in the bedroom, Detective Harris.”

“And I’m out,” Noble said as he jumped up from the couch and rushed toward the front door, muttering the whole way. “This is bullshit.”

“And that’s our cue, gentlemen,” Hawk said cheerfully. “Holly, it’s always a pleasure.”

“Not that much of a pleasure but whatever,” Crow said with a disgusted look on his face.

“I’ve seen you naked, Crow Forrester. Let’s not start insulting each other because I’m sure I’d win.”

“Well, that’s it for me,” Crow said as he walked out of the house, waving his middle finger over his shoulder.

“You kids be safe now,” Phoenix warned as he picked up his cooler.

“Let us know when you get ungrounded and can come outside to play, buddy,” Hawk teased. “Bye, Holly.”

“Bye, boys,” Holly said with a grin. “Y’all be good.”

“And y’all be good at it,” Phoenix called out before Hawk pulled the door shut behind him.

“Are you mad at me?” I asked once we were alone.

“Have you been walking around without your crutches when I’m not here?”

“Yep.”

Holly glared and asked, “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?”

“I’m fine, but if you don’t get naked in the next two minutes, I’m going to get cranky again.”

“Is that what’s been wrong with you? You’re horny?”

“No,” I said, exasperated. I thought about it for a second and then admitted, “Sort of.”

“What else is wrong?”

“I’m over here like a lump on the couch, and you’re chasing the kids around and doing everything all by yourself. I don’t want to be that guy.”

“You got shot!”

“That was two weeks ago!”

“Well, it’s taken me a little bit to stop panicking and realize I’m not going to lose you, so I *might* have hovered a little too much.” When I raised an eyebrow, she grinned. “I said ‘might.’ Don’t push it.”

“Will you stop? I’m trying to follow the doctor’s orders, but it’s hard.”

“What else is hard?”

I glared at her. “You’re not naked yet.”

“I could be.”

I carefully pushed myself up off the couch and waited until I was steady

on my feet before I slowly stalked across the room toward her. “I love you, Holly, but your time is running out.”

Holly squealed and sprinted down the hallway toward her . . . *our* bedroom. I wasn’t sure exactly what I’d be capable of doing once I got there, but I’d damn sure do whatever necessary to get my lips and hands on her.

“There are specific parameters we have to follow if we’re going to do this,” Holly warned as she tossed her shirt aside and started unhooking her bra.

I had to swallow hard before I could reply and then it was just one word, “Parameters?”

“I called Jewel and told her I was coming home to have some alone time with you and asked what positions might be best.”

“Does everyone in town know?”

“That you’re about to get lucky? Probably.”

“I got lucky the first time you smiled at me, and it’s just gotten better from there,” I said honestly. “I just want you to know that . . .”

“Hold that thought,” Holly said as she put her finger over my lips. She gave me a searing kiss and then dropped down in front of me.

I sighed and closed my eyes, enjoying every second with her, whether she was on her knees in front of me or laughing by my side.

Stalkers, gunshots, stress, parenthood, everyday life - none of that would ever dim the love I felt for Holly Hamilton, and I was thankful for every moment we got to spend together.

And I always would be.

EPILOGUE

THIRTY YEARS LATER

DAMIEN

“Who is that, Papa?” my granddaughter asked as she pointed to a picture on the wall.

“You don’t remember?”

“I like it when you tell me the stories,” she said with a grin.

“That is my brother. He was your mom’s dad before she came to live with me.”

“Was he nice?”

“He was very nice. He was my best friend.”

She pointed to another picture, this one bigger, and said, “Her dress is pretty.”

“Her dress was pretty, and she was beautiful,” I said as I straightened the frame just a fraction. “She’s still beautiful.”

“Gram *is* beautiful, but she said I’m prettier,” she told me as she reached up and touched her long braids.

I laughed softly but didn’t argue with the child. She was more stubborn than Juni and Holly put together. “Do you know this handsome man?”

“That’s Uncle Jericho! And there’s Uncle Simon. Who are these men?”

“You don’t recognize your great-grandfathers?”

“Well, yeah,” she said with an eye roll. “They’re just not as wrinkly in that picture.”

“Someday, you’ll be old and wrinkly, just like me.”

“But Gram’s not wrinkly. She’s beautiful.”

“You’re right.”

“Hollyanne! Come in here, and help me with the dishes!” Juni called from the kitchen.

Hollyanne sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know why I have to help

wash dishes. She already made me help cook!”

“Cooking’s a good skill to have, sweetheart. Believe me.” I pulled her close to my side for a hug and whispered, “You better get in there before she fusses.”

I studied the framed pictures as my granddaughter walked away and then felt someone walk up behind me before Holly lifted my arm and fit herself at my side like she’d done a million times before.

“Every time I look at that picture, I smile and think that youth is wasted on the young,” she said as she tapped her nail on the picture taken after our wedding. “Look at us.”

“Honey, we weren’t exactly young when we got married.”

“I know, but I always thought I’d somehow look the same as I did then.”

“Of course you don’t,” I said honestly as I turned and pulled her into my arms. “You’re much more beautiful now.”

“Even though I’m wrinkly?”

I laughed softly and said, “Hollyanne said you are not wrinkly. I noticed she didn’t say that about me.”

“You’re just as handsome as you were the first time I saw you in the flower shop. I’m glad you convinced me to come over to the dark side.”

“So am I because you’ve brightened it up every day since.”

“Love you, Detective Harris.”

“My only title now is husband, remember?”

“That’s true. What are we going to do with ourselves now that we’re retired?”

“I’m going to enjoy every minute I get to spend with you just like I’ve been doing since the beginning.”

“Mom! Dad! Are you ready for dessert?” Jiana called from the kitchen.

“Those kids of yours are very loud,” Holly pretended to complain.

“When they’re wild and crazy, they’re mine, but when they’re sweet and nice, they’re all yours.”

“But you love me when I’m wild and crazy.”

“Just as much as I do on the occasions when you’re sweet and nice.” Holly frowned at me, and I smiled. “I love you, sweetheart. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“I know.”

THE END

Please take just a few minutes to leave a review of this book on Amazon and feel free to share the link with your friends. I enjoy discussing my books and characters and would love to hear from you. Check out Cee Bowerman on Facebook. You can also find information about the author and her books on www.cebowermanbooks.com.

COMING SOON

Fly Away with Me, Springblood, Book 2 - COMING JULY 15th, 2023!

As a young adult faced with uncertainty and surrounded by danger, Nikki Collins found friendship with a wild bird who seemed to appear just when she needed him most. Her new companion took her mind off her troubles and inspired her to become one of the leading experts in the field of ornithology - the scientific study of birds. Her career took her to exotic places with adventures she'd never dreamed of having and experiences she would never forget. However, a longing for stability and permanence led her back home to her family in Colorado Springs.

As part of the Tempest family, Nikki was surrounded by love and support, but she still felt alone in the crowd. After a failed marriage, it was time to start over. Little did she know someone had been waiting in the wings for the right opportunity to sweep her off her feet and convince her that the love she sought was closer than she knew.

Years ago, Cassius Durant came upon a group of supernatural beings who longed for a safe place to call home, just as he did. As a member of the council that formed an unlikely alliance between vampires, witches, and shifters like himself, he made a home in Mereu, Colorado. A successful business and friends who were more like family made his life almost complete, but he was missing one thing: love.

Finally, his true mate was revealed to him, but she wasn't ready for the all-consuming love that his kind experienced when they found the other half of their soul. He sacrificed years without her in his life so she could live her dreams and explore the world. Now that she's home again, it's time for Cas to reveal himself to her and pray that she'll understand that even if he wanted to, he can't live without her in his life.

Join Cee Bowerman as she helps two people who are meant to be together find their way in the second book of the Springblood series.

About the Author

Cee Bowerman is a proud, lifelong resident of Texas. She is married to her own long-haired, tattooed biker and is Mom to three mostly adult kids - a daughter and two sons. She believes in love, second chances, rescue dogs, and happily ever after.

Cee received her first romance novel along with a bag of other books from her granny when she was recovering from surgery at 15. She has been hooked on reading romances ever since. For years, she had a dream of writing her own series of stories, but motherhood and all the other grown-up responsibilities kept getting in the way. Luckily, with the support of her family and the encouragement of her son, she purchased a computer and let her dreams become a reality.

With over fifty published books, Cee is still happily writing and creating new worlds for her readers to enjoy.

You can find her on Facebook @ceebowerman or online at www.ceebowermanbooks.com.

Look for more fun romances in the coming months and get updates on the Facebook page for more information on characters and stories that are in progress.