



a Winston Brothers Novel  
 by PENNY REID

# BEARD IN HIDING

WINSTON BROTHERS BOOK #4.5

PENNY REID

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BEARD IN HIDING

A WINSTON BROTHERS STORY, BY PENNY REID

This book is meant to be a companion novel to the Winston Brothers and Solving for Pie series and is not a standalone.

**Where this book fits** The \*start\* of this book takes place immediately after the action of ‘Beard Science’ and ‘Beard In Mind,’ but a few weeks before ‘Engagement and Espionage,’ and one year (plus a few months) prior to ‘Marriage and Murder.’

I do not suggest reading this book unless you’ve read a significant number of the Winston Brothers books and ‘Marriage and Murder’ first. This book contains serious spoilers for ‘Marriage and Murder.’ Also, you might be a little lost by the number of characters, who they are, and how they’re relevant to the story.

**Warnings** This book contains: divorce, discussions of violence and drugs, criminal behavior, portrayal of death / murder, discussions of domestic (mental) abuse, discussions of violence against women and men.

Since this book is very much a romantic comedy and these issues aren’t necessarily par for the course in the genre, I wanted to spell out which subjects might be difficult for readers. Had this been a murder mystery or a thriller (as examples) the potential triggers wouldn’t have been called out. Additionally, as the hero of this book is a rough guy, expect LOTS of non-ironic swearing, crude language, and “f-bomb” usage.

**The Characters** I never, not in a thousand years, thought I’d write a book for Diane Donner and Jason (Repo) Doe. But in the fall of 2020, while I

wrote 'Marriage and Murder,' Diane Donner would not be silenced. She wanted to be heard. She demanded it. She wouldn't let me sleep and she'd hijack the book I was supposed to be writing to let her wishes be known.

I wrote a first draft of this book very quickly (just to get her off my back). I thought about not publishing it, because who in their right mind would want to know about these weirdos with dubious standards and morals? Well, I guess I do. I thought perhaps some of you fine people would as well.

# CHAPTER ONE

\*JASON\*

“The finest of pleasures are always the unexpected ones.”

— ERIN MORGENSTERN, *THE NIGHT CIRCUS*

“**Y**ou drinking?”

I gave Burro a short nod and didn't bother to remove my jacket; I wasn't staying. “The usual.”

He didn't move. When I glanced up, I found the bartender studying me. “What's the news? Are Romeo's boys finally going to cooperate? Did Christine get to Beau?”

I peeled off my leather gloves and stuffed them into my pocket, then reached for a napkin. “None of your business.”

“So, that's a no.” Finally, he reached for the whiskey bottle reserved for me and filled a tumbler. He then grabbed a different bottle—his preferred brand of gin reserved for him—and filled a shot glass, clinking the two together before handing mine over. “Merry Christmas. Looks like things are about to get tight around here.”

“No,” I ground out. “We've known for a while Beau was a long shot. We have other leads.” Beau Winston had turned Christine down weeks ago. This was old news.

Burro tossed back his drink. “All the same, Merry Christmas.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “Is it?”

“Yep. Christmas Eve today.” He filled his shot glass again and tucked the gin back under the counter. “Twenty-fourth of December. Comes around once a year.”

A ruckus sounded near the entrance followed by a hush. I ignored it. I’d noticed upon walking in that the bar seemed more crowded than usual for 5:00 PM, even for a Saturday. For whatever reason, the younger guys gathered in droves on holidays, preferring the Dragon to The Plank or one of the strip clubs. Christmas in particular was a hard time for recruits who came from families with traditions.

I hadn’t come from a family. I had no traditions. Holidays were just another day. But with so many boys crowded in the room seeking festivities, it’d be a good day to catch up on paperwork.

Stepping back from the bar, intent on vacating the main room before more Wraiths wandered in, I grabbed my drink and pointed at the whiskey bottle still out on the bar top. “Hide that. Don’t let Wolf see it out. He’ll drink the whole thing.”

Again, Burro didn’t move. His eyes, which had grown wide and round, appeared to be preoccupied by something behind me. *Oh well.* I had another bottle in my room. *Time to go.*

Banks were closed on Christmas and the Monday after. If I sent my emails tonight, I couldn’t expect any answers until Tuesday. But at least it would be—

“It’s you.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the feminine voice, found a hot blonde pointing an expectant look directly at my face, and then did a double take.

*What the—?*

The last person, the very last person I’d ever expect to be standing inside the Dragon Biker Bar, watching me like she knew me—or *was looking for me?*—was Diane Donner Sylvester, local businesswoman, socialite, and church-going glitterati.

What. The. Hell?

Her lips curved in a small smile, and she waited, watching, looking up at me like we knew each other. For the record, we did *not* know each other. Everyone knew who she was, sure. She was basically famous in these parts. It was impossible to not know who Diane Donner Sylvester—wait, no. *Just Donner. She's divorced, or is about to be.*

Eventually, because Diane Donner didn't disappear after several seconds of my confused staring, I said, "It's me," like a fool.

The woman blinked, rocked back on her heels, then looked at the floor. A moment later, she took a deep breath and lifted her chin, jaw set, eyes forward. I watched in complete disbelief as Diane Donner pulled off her jacket, revealing an outfit more commonly seen on teenagers going through a rebellious phase than on a pillar of polite society and mother of two adult children.

Hanging the coat and a little purse on the back of the stool nearest to me, she smiled at Burro. "Good evening. What do you serve?"

"Whatever you want, lady," he said, openly gawking.

So was I.

I made no attempt to hide my shock. Meanwhile, a different kind of shock, one of profound interest, headed south. I stiffened, sobered by the stab of visceral attraction. Frowning, I searched the room, just to be sure she wasn't a figment of my imagination, and this wasn't some joke. But no. Most eyes were on her. Well, technically, most eyes were on her body and most everyone seemed just as stunned as me by her sudden presence.

Her sweet but firm voice said, "Let me think on it for a minute."

"Take your time," came Burro's reply. "I got all night."

I inhaled a deep breath, returning my attention to her, not quite sure what to make of the woman being here, at the Dragon Biker Bar. She was the implicit sovereign of Green Valley and top of the food chain, apparently out for a night with the bottom feeders. And—wait. *Is that a . . . mini skirt? That's a mini skirt.*

Stifling a groan by gritting my teeth, I tore my attention away. In my bewilderment, I rubbed my eyes, but then abruptly stopped. This moment was akin to a dream I'd had too often, but we'd never been here, and she'd never been dressed . . . like that.

"I thought I might find you here," she muttered. To me.

I slid my eyes her way, wary for obvious reasons, and then to Burro. He'd mostly recovered and was now grinning in a toothy display at the woman, placing his hands wide on the bar top and raking his eyes over her breasts with admiration.

Instinct had me snapping my fingers at him. "Hey. Burro. She'll have a water and that's it."

"No, I won't." She said, all high and mighty, not looking at me. I studied her profile, still mired in my disbelief. Her cheeks were high in color, her lips fighting a smile. "I think I'll have vodka. Neat. And two olives if you have them."

Burro smirked and then bowed. "Of course, m'lady."

His slimy show of deference earned him a sweet smile, which he returned with another appreciative raking of his eyes over her breasts. That was, until his attention came to me. I placed my hand on the back of Ms. Donner's stool.

*Don't even fucking think about it.*

Burro's gaze dropped and he mumbled something about getting clean glasses from the back. Then he left because he wasn't as dumb as he looked. I wasn't sure what was happening, why she was here, or what she'd meant by, *There you are*, or *I thought I might find you here*, like she'd been looking for me in particular, but I would put my boot in Burro's face before he laid a hand on her.

"What's your name?" she asked, pulling me out of my violent thoughts.

I worked to keep my eyes forward. I failed. "You can call me Repo."

Damn. *Damn.* This had been a crap year and the last thing we needed was this woman coming in here and stirring up shit. We didn't need the attention. *No one is going to touch her. No one.* But that was easier said than done. I loved these guys like most folks loved their dogs. A pack of good soldiers when it came to business. Otherwise, always dirty, mostly feral, often chaotic.

It didn't matter if she was twenty or fifty, a socialite or a whore or both. Walking in here, looking as fine as she did and dressed to show it off, was a language my brethren interpreted as a tacit invitation to do whatever the fuck they wanted. The hour may still have been early. The party hadn't yet officially started. But when it did, Diane Donner needed to be long gone.

"Mr. Repo," she said, testing my club name and looking at me like the word *Repo* had given her the answer to a long-pondered question. "Nice to meet you. I'm Diane." She extended her hand.

I glared at it and then at her.

Her pretty smile grew tight. She withdrew her hand, using it to tuck a few waves of blonde hair behind her ear. She had it down tonight, loose and long and wavy. She usually wore it like a helmet, stiff and big and mostly straight.

"I've never been inside here before, but I've driven past lots of times." She glanced around us, her focus never settling. "I always wondered what it was like. I guess now I know."

"Lady, what are you doing here?" I asked the most obvious question, not caring that I sounded hostile. She shouldn't be here. If she stayed, she'd be mistreated. And if she was mistreated, she'd go to the police. And if she went to the police . . . well, that was a headache I didn't have time for.

Diane Donner gave me an inscrutable once over. "Getting a drink. What are you doing here?"

"A drink." Slowly, cautiously, I settled on the stool next to hers, staring with open antagonism, hoping to unnerve her.

I wanted to say, *Leave. It's not safe. Go.* But we had too many eyes on us, too many ears listening for me to reason with her. Besides, knowing what I

did about the woman, I doubted she'd listen to reason.

“Yes, a drink. That’s what I said.” She didn’t look at me this time, her voice had grown impatient, and she wore a frustrated frown. “Why? Is that hard to believe?”

“Yes,” I answered honestly, my attention shifting over her shoulder to Gears and Wolf. They—like most everyone else—were watching us, making no attempt to hide their curiosity or appreciative stares. I set my jaw, waiting until they noticed my *fuck off* face. A heated tightness, a discomfort, wrapped itself around my chest and squeezed.

“Why?”

“Pardon?” My eyes returned to the woman next to me and I found hers searching my features, as though looking for something.

“Why is it so hard to believe I’m here for a drink? This is a bar, isn’t it?”

“You don’t belong here.”

She didn’t like my answer. I knew this for a fact because her minor frown became a severe scowl and her lovely blue eyes burned hot and angry. *Damn*, but she was sexy when she was mad, flushed and agitated.

“Well, Mr. Repo. You’re kind of ruining my night. So, if you don’t mind . . .” She flicked her wrist, dismissing me. And fuck me, her dismissiveness sent another shock of interest straight south.

I didn’t leave; I couldn’t. If I did, someone would take my place. Her being here might result in a headache for me, but it would result in a hell of a lot more for someone like her. Shame. Terror. Maybe scars.

*Damn. It.*

I used the ensuing silence to take a second measure of the woman, this time slower, working through my options. If hostility wouldn’t drive her out, I had to find another way.

Her lips were painted bright pink, as were her fingernails, and if I could see her toes, I bet they’d match. Despite the freezing cold outside, she wore a black, low-cut tank top. The neckline plunged deep enough that the edge of

her pink, lacy bra flirted with anyone looking. The tops of her tits were on display, round and pushed up like two scoops of peaches and vanilla ice cream.

I licked my lips.

“Aren’t you gone yet?” She crossed her legs, drawing my eyes there. She didn’t have long legs, but they were proportionate to her hourglass body and the black miniskirt rode high up her shapely thigh. Her shoes were also black and looked expensive, at least four inches with a pointed toe. I bet she wore them with business suits during the week and I couldn’t help but think I’d like to see that.

“Diane—”

“You can call me Ms. Donner.”

Her teasing tone had me lifting my eyes and I found her watching me watching her, her face slightly turned in my direction, her pink lips pressed together primly, but her gaze held a challenge.

A smile I couldn’t stop tugged on my lips. “You’re in my bar. I’ll call you whatever I want.”

She swiveled in the stool to face me, her calves bumping against my knees. “Oh? Is that so?”

“That is so.”

“And if you could call me anything, what would that be?” Diane Donner crossed her arms, her posture like that of a dancer, her back perfectly straight. The action pushed the swells of her breasts higher, showing me a little more of that lace bra, and my attention flicked there. Another shock of interest, this one more powerful and thus alarming, made concentrating difficult.

This was the very first time we’d spoken, but I’d seen this woman around town for years. For *years*. At Jess’s softball games, at the Piggly Wiggly, at the church, downtown, the community center, once or twice at the Lodge when she’d been in her element. No matter the place, Diane Donner was in full command of herself as well as whatever room she entered.

She was impressive, driven, brilliant, and assertive. And she was gorgeous. I mean, goddamn stunning. Always dolled up and dressed for the occasion in a way that screamed high maintenance, but so very worth it. Which was why her choice in husband had never made sense.

Point was, this was a quality woman. Don't misunderstand; there are many types of quality women. It was a spectrum, I reckoned. A recipe. This town had had its fair share, from the low maintenance, sweet natured kind like Bethany Winston and Janet James to the high maintenance, ambitious, cut-throat kind like Dolly Payton and Diane Donner, with the latter being precisely my type. *Very, very much my type.*

I, being an intelligent man, had learned to avoid my type decades ago.

Rubbing the beard covering my chin, I considered this high-quality woman who checked all my boxes like she'd been custom ordered just for me. This was a respectable woman acting not at all respectable. Again, don't misunderstand. I liked what she had on tonight. If we'd been alone instead of in this room with my compatriots in crime, I'd have thoroughly enjoyed the moment. But with so many eyes looking their fill (and making plans should she lose interest in my company), I would've preferred her in a pantsuit and wool coat.

She also happened to be the mother of our most promising recruit in a decade. Thankfully, he was gone on assignment for a few weeks. *I do not want him hearing about this later.* Not just that, but her daughter was involved with Cletus Winston; he was not someone I ever looked forward to tangling with, but who would *definitely* consider any interaction between me and Diane Donner a tangle.

So, what did I want to call her?

"How about . . ."

"What?" she pressed when I didn't finish the thought, scooting to the edge of her seat.

I poked my tongue at the corner of my mouth, admiring the color on hers. I couldn't call her *Gorgeous*, not if I wanted her to leave soon. Which I did.

Her smile widened slowly, showcasing a row of perfect, pretty teeth, and she leaned forward, uncrossing her arms to place a hand on my thigh. “Don’t be shy.”

Despite myself, I chuckled. “I’m not shy.” The heat of her palm was an impossible temptation.

“You’re acting shy.” Her eyes danced.

*Is Diane Donner . . . flirting? With me?* The thought struck me as absurd, but it still struck me.

Half-lidded, I gazed at her, irritated with myself for grinning, yet unable to stop. She was . . . *wish fulfilment*. That’s what she was. A fantasy, like she’d stepped out of my dreams. Believe me, over the last twenty years, catching glimpses of Diane Donner from afar, I’d had plenty. But I’d never made the mistake of entertaining any. I knew my place.

*Except, here she is.* The noise of crude conversation around us faded, as did the smell of beer and smoke and the sight of my brothers.

I also leaned forward, whispering conspiratorially, “I guess I’m a little shy.”

Now she laughed, looking delighted, and her pleasure cast a spell. “Mr. Repo, what can I do to put you at ease? You know, contrary to what people say about me, I don’t bite.”

I clicked my tongue, acting mock disappointed. “That’s too bad.”

She laughed again, her hand moving higher up my leg. I glanced down at her pink fingernails on the black fabric. She had such small hands. They looked soft, delicate. If this had truly been one of my fantasies, we’d be at an expensive restaurant, or a penthouse apartment. Not this shit bar surrounded by lost boys. *You used to be a lost boy, not so long ago.*

When I looked up, her eyes were on me and she held a drink. A large, sparkling clean glass of clear liquid with two olives on a toothpick. A toothpick was as extravagant as Burro got.

She took a gulp—not a sip, a gulp—watching me over the rim, her eyes warm with interest. “You know—” She licked her lips of the liquor, not

wincing at the burn as she swallowed, which made me wonder if Burro had given her water instead of vodka or if she'd already been drinking before walking in. "I've always wondered something about you."

"What's that?" I leaned my elbow on the bar next to us, drawing my index finger along my bottom lip as I stared at hers, ignoring the voice in the back of my head screaming at me to get her out of the bar. She was already here, a rare opportunity. What could be the harm in another few minutes? *Then, I'll make her leave.*

"I know who you are. I've seen you around town lots of times," she said, angling her chin again. "I came in here tonight looking for you."

"Is that so?" I inclined my head, surprised. Louisa, my daughter's birth mother, had always said people like me were invisible to people like Diane Donner, and her family, and the society she kept, with their fine manners and big houses and legitimate bank accounts.

"That is so," she said, parroting my words, her gaze growing intense, determined. "You're hard to ignore, Mr. Repo, even though you do your best to hide in plain sight. You're too tall, your features too striking. And, you know, every time I see you, I wonder . . ." After a moment of hesitation, her gaze seemed to firm. Using her grip on my thigh to leverage herself, Diane leaned forward until her lips were against my ear. "I've always wondered what it would be like to fuck you."

The words sent a spike of heat straight down my spine and I needed a moment. Automatically, my hand lifted to the curve of her lower back, keeping her in place. Blood pumped hot and thick as the scent of her expensive perfume mixed with the meaning and implied invitation of her statement. She lifted just her head, her lips maybe two inches away, her eyes coming to mine and holding a prideful dare as she waited for me to respond.

I studied her, smelling no alcohol on her breath. Her eyes were bright and she was steady. She looked sober, she was here for me, this was premeditated, and I'd be lying if I said every instinct didn't tell me to toss her over my shoulder, take her to one of my rooms, and give her *exactly*

what she was asking for. She was thirsty for my cock? I'd be happy to feed it to her all night.

*Except . . .*

Despite the thrill of such filthy words coming from her respectable mouth, despite the fact that this was a woman I'd often fantasized about and in this moment was every one of those fantasies come true, better judgement had me pausing. Thinking. Considering. Weighing.

I would have absolutely no regrets in the morning. I'd happily take this one night and I'd make damn sure she had no complaints. She'd roll out of here with a smile on her face.

But after leaving with a smile, I suspected this moment and everything that might come after would be a source of shame for her. Women like Diane weren't raised to enjoy sex. They were raised feel shame if they did. Fact was, she probably came in the bar hoping for mistreatment, wanting to be used. Otherwise, why would she be here? Why seek out someone like me?

I wouldn't mistreat her, ever. I'd be as gentle as a saint—a horny saint, yet still a saint—but it wouldn't matter. I'd be a dark stain on her glowing record of perfect choices. A regret. I'd sworn long ago to never be a regret for another woman ever again.

Tunnel vision receded as I shoved away the intensely carnal, but ultimately futile longing. Our surroundings came into sharp focus once more. Gears still watched me—*us*. So did Catfish and Drill. In fact, most of my brethren were sneaking glances, some more obvious and bold with their inspections than others. Behind Diane, King and Grizz were checking out her ass, and Chuck seemed like he was working himself up to come over, should the lady shoot me down or vice versa.

Eventually, I swallowed down temptation and guided her back to her stool as I stood. "Come on." I grabbed her jacket and purse with one hand and her arm with the other.

She batted her eyelashes at me, excitement and a fair amount of fear sparking behind her eyes. "Where are we going?"

I bent close and said, "I'm taking you home."

She stiffened immediately and hissed, “I don’t wish to go home.”

Diane twisted her arm out of my grip, her smile gone, and she picked up her drink again. I saw and felt the shift in the room—predators pressing closer.

I grabbed her drink out of her grip, slamming it down on the bar top and whispering in her ear harshly, “You need to leave. Now. I’ll walk you to your car.”

She leaned away, her cheeks flushing red and her lips forming a bitter twist. “If you don’t want me, fine. Once I’m drunk enough, any one of these reprobates will do.” She picked up her drink again, took another gulp. “I am quite content where I am.”

I caged her in, one hand on the bar in front of her, the other on the back of her seat, still gripping her jacket and bag while I glared at the men watching us. I knew them all. I’d recruited many. They were loyal to me. But they’d also been taught to take what they wanted, when they wanted. Judging by the restless shift in the mood, the sooner I removed her as a source of contention, the better. *Just get her out of here.*

Leaning down to whisper in her ear once more, I growled, “You want to fuck? Fine. Come with me.”

She straightened, her eyes darting to mine like I’d shocked her, but in the next second she slipped off the stool. I stepped around her seat, placing a heavy arm over her shoulders and staring down Gears and Wolf as we strolled unhurriedly out of the bar. Making a left toward the hall instead of a right toward the parking lot, I cursed my luck with every step.

There was no away around it now. One way or the other, Diane Donner was going to be a headache tomorrow.

*Dammit.*

Merry Christmas to me.

## CHAPTER TWO

\*JASON\*

“Someday, you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.”

— C.S. LEWIS

“**D**o you think we could, uh, talk for a bit?” Her voice sounded higher pitched than it had in the bar. Squeaky. *Scared*.

I didn't like that.

I didn't want her scared, not now that we were alone. Back in the bar when she had every reason to be? Yes. Absolutely. But not now. I needed to say something to set her mind at ease and it couldn't be, *Don't worry, I'm not going to touch you*, because that was liable to send her storming out of the room and back into the dragon's lair.

Thinking over my options, I shut and bolted the door, blocking out most of the noise from the hallways. I then turned to study the woman. She stood in profile, her hands pressed flat and stiff against her thighs, giving me the sense she was trying not to fidget.

When I said nothing, she repeated, “Can we talk first? Before we get down to business.”

Here she was scared and still thinking we were going to *get down to business*? Unlike sociopaths, I did not find anything exciting about fearful women.

“Sure,” I drawled, making no attempt to disguise my incredulity or my sarcasm.

Both went over her head and when she spoke next she sounded relieved. “Oh! Good. So, um . . .” She slowly spun in a circle, glancing around at the room. “Is this—is this your room?”

I hesitated, placing her coat, purse, and my keys on the tall dresser by the door. This wasn’t my room in the way I suspected she meant. I didn’t sleep here and it held few of my personal effects. But it was my room in that it had been earmarked for my use, I was the only one allowed to access it, and I was the only person with a key.

She peeked at me, her forehead wrinkling. “It’s not your room?”

“Not really,” I finally said, not wanting to explain its purpose.

“Then whose room is it?”

Again, I hesitated to respond, removing my jacket. The last person to use this room had been my old lady twelve years ago. I’d only ever had the one, we’d lasted for just three months, and the whole thing had been one giant clusterfuck. It had been a valuable lesson: the only kind of loneliness worse than being alone was being with someone who felt more for me than I did for her.

Margaret hadn’t been my type, but she had been quality. She’d deserved more, and so I’d cut her loose. Unfortunately, she hadn’t taken it well.

“What I mean is, do I need to worry about someone else coming in?” Diane asked, now facing me fully and twisting her fingers.

“No. No one will bother us.” I allowed myself an uninhibited moment to admire the woman, starting at her shoes and moving up.

Everything about Diane Donner tempted, which was likely why everything about her also struck me as extremely calculated. Her expensive high heels, the choice to keep her toned and shapely legs bare instead of stockinged, the shortness of her leather skirt, the thinness of her tank top, the color of the lingerie visible beneath. Even the color of her lipstick, nail polish, and

the natural waves of her unnatural blonde hair. Each selection carefully made to both shock and awe.

She'd had a goal, and this was a woman who never failed to reach her goals. I shouldn't have been surprised by how calculated and thorough she'd been with her appearance tonight. I was surprised, and I was impressed. But I shouldn't have been surprised by that either.

“Well, I suppose that's good at least.” Her eyes drifted to the bed. It was just a bed. No blankets, no sheets except the fitted one, no pillows. Her shoulders pulled back and she glanced at me. “What did you say this room is used for again?”

“I didn't.” Leaning against the door, I crossed my arms, unable to stop the small curve of my mouth as I watched her mind work.

“Is it—” Diane watched me as well, and she winced a little, her nose wrinkling in plain distaste. “Is it where you bring those women? To have intercourse?”

I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. There was no mistaking the judgement in her tone, which I found both adorable and painfully ironic. “Those women?” I asked, working and likely failing to sound honestly perplexed.

“You know what I'm talking about.”

“I assure you, I do not.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Are you poking fun at me?”

My smile broke free. “I would never.”

Despite her squint, she also smiled. But she also wagged a finger, like I was a naughty boy. “You're teasing me, Mr. Repo. But I know how things work around here. I know what you people do to pass the time.”

I rubbed the beard on my chin in mock-thoughtfulness. “You mean our Parcheesi tournaments?”

She laughed, a good one, straight from the belly, and so did I.

“Oh yeah, right. *Parcheesi*. That’s what you and your friends are doing with all those strippers,” she said, her laughter tapering.

One of my eyebrows lifted, but I said nothing. Despite what folks like Diane Donner thought, most of the club women weren’t strippers. Sure, a few—very few—were or had been at one time. Most were lost, looking for a home, or looking to be part of a family, just like the male recruits. They didn’t mind the violence; they were used to brutality, they understood it. They just wanted consistency, stability, and permanence. And I definitely understood that.

Huffing though still grinning, she surveyed the room again like she planned to redecorate. “It shouldn’t matter.”

“What’s that?” I lifted my elbow to the dresser and propped my chin in a hand.

She gestured to the floor lamp in the corner, and then to the bed. “Our surroundings. They shouldn’t matter. Not for—you know.”

*For talking?* “They don’t.”

Her eyes cut to mine, then moved lower to my chin, neck, chest. Her smile lessened and nervousness clung to the corners of her mouth. “No. I suppose they don’t.” When her eyes made it to my belt she sucked in a breath and turned away. “So, uh, why don’t you tell me a little about yourself. Where are you from?”

My attention dropped to the generous curve of her backside. “Nowhere in particular.” I wasn’t going to touch her, but I’d look enough to last a lifetime.

“Nowhere-in-particular is an odd name for a city. Or is that the name of the county?” She was peeking at me again, this time over her shoulder, and had caught me staring at her ass.

I gave her a rueful smile, not caring I’d been caught. She wanted me to look. “Texas.”

“Texas.” She parroted, nodding. “Texas is a big state. You were born in Texas?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She wrinkled her nose again. “Don’t call me that.”

“You don’t like it when us lesser folk address you properly?”

That question earned me a long, assessing look, one completely devoid of nerves. I had the suspicion I was being examined by the shrewd, business-focused portion of Diane Donner’s brain, the one she used when evaluating job applicants or vendors for business deals.

“I didn’t come here to be proper, Repo,” she said, her smile also now devoid of her previous nerves. “So, no, please don’t call me ma’am. And don’t call me Ms. Donner, either. Diane will do just fine.”

I nodded. “Okay. Diane.”

“Good.” Her chest rose with another large inhale and she also nodded. “So, why do they call you Repo?”

“In the early days, I was the repo man. The one sent to repossess property.”

“Like what? Motorcycles? Appliances?”

I shrugged. “Anything we considered ours.”

Diane crossed her arms, one of her hips cocking to the side. “Were you good at it?”

“They wouldn’t have given me the nickname if I wasn’t.”

“Makes sense.” Her head tilted to the side, her attention moving over me once more. “You said ‘in the early days.’ You don’t repossess anymore?”

“Not so much.”

“What do you do now?”

“A little bit of everything.”

“That’s vague.”

“Maybe.”

She grinned. “You know, you’re a lot cleverer than I thought you’d be.”

“I find nothing surprising about that statement other than the fact that you thought about me at all,” I said, not allowing myself to absorb the compliment. No good could come of desiring this woman’s good opinion.

“I already told you in the bar I thought about you plenty.” She said this while crossing to the bed. Once there, she gave it a quick inspection, and then sat. Crossing her legs, she met my gaze steadily. “And I really don’t know why you’d be surprised. You’re the topic of much conversation in town.”

That had me straightening away from the dresser. “Pardon?”

“You heard me. I’m not—I mean, I wasn’t—the only unhappily married woman in Green Valley. You don’t think hoity toity women objectify handsome strangers? Especially ones who look”—she waved her hand toward my body—“like they’d know what to do in most situations. I bet you know how to change a tire, bake a pie, wash a dish, *and* how a sink is plumbed.”

“And you don’t?”

“Oh, I do. My grandfather taught me anything my momma couldn’t. But my husband didn’t.” Unmistakable bitterness coated her words. She uncrossed her arms. Studying her fingers, she mumbled, “He didn’t know much. Which, I guess, is the real reason I’m here.”

*He didn’t know much.*

I turned this statement over in my mind a few times, looking at the words from all possible angles. I’d been certain her aim in coming to the Dragon tonight had everything to do with her pending divorce, and she’d just confirmed as much. But—

*. . . the real reason I’m here.*

“You want me to teach you advanced plumbing?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes.” Attention still on her fingers, she huffed a laugh and grinned. It looked sharp, menacing, and if I’d been anyone else, I

might've been unsettled. "More precisely, I want you to prove something to me."

"What's that?"

Her eyes lifted and I was surprised to see how much anger had risen to the surface, the flash behind her glare, the resentful twist of her lips. I knew anger, I knew resentment. I recognized a bit of myself in the hard look.

"I want you to prove that men aren't worthless."

A new smile curved my lips even as I allowed my eyes to betray confusion. "Then, Diane, you've come to the wrong guy."

"I don't think so." She placed her hands flat on bed behind her, leaning back as her eyes conducted a survey of my body again, her tone introspective. "I think you're exactly the right guy. Because if you can't make a woman orgasm, then no one can."

My mouth dropped open and my eyebrows jumped high on my forehead. She'd surprised me again—not because she wanted me to have sex with her—that much I'd understood well and good in the bar—but because, if I understood her right, she'd never had a—

"You've never . . . ?" I hadn't meant to ask, but *damn*. That was a—well, that was . . .

*That's criminal.*

She shrugged, still glaring at me.

"You have two kids."

Her menacing smile returned. "A female orgasm isn't required for impregnation, Mr. Repo. Just a man's."

I wiped my hand over my face. "Yes. I know that, but—" My palm dropped to my thigh, and I returned her glare.

"Mr. Repo, if I'm right, if you've never given a woman an orgasm, if all men are perpetuating this myth of mutual orgasms during sex as a way to dupe women into a *pipe dream*—pun intended—just say so and I will leave

right now.” She flung her hand toward the door. “I will let you escort me to my car and you’ll never have to hear from me again.”

For some unknown reason, I was also now angry. “How is it possible to be married for over twenty years and never—” I grit my teeth.

“What?” Her eyebrow quirked.

“You know.”

She stood. “Orgasm? Do you have a problem saying that word?”

“No,” I ground out. “Why the hell didn’t you leave him before now if he couldn’t give you a, uh—”

She ignored my question and bellowed, “Orgasm. Orgasm. Orgasm!”

I stepped further in the room, lifting my hand for her to hush. “Yes. Thank you. I am familiar with the word.”

“But are you familiar with *providing* orgasms?” She pointed at me, her eyes narrowing with hostility, and all traces of her earlier nerves and fear long gone. “See, I can say it just fine, and I can do it to myself, but the reason I’m here—the *real* reason—is my doubt that any man ever successfully contributed to one. And by ‘one,’ I mean a female orgasm.”

A frustrated chuckle spilled out of me. “Are you getting paid every time you say it?”

“Does the word make you uncomfortable because you know I’m right? That men are incapable of giving women an—”

I crossed the room in two steps, grabbed a fistful of hair at the back of her head, and brought her mouth to mine. To shut her up. Or, at least, at first it was to shut her up. But then her body melted and molded against my body and her lips parted with a sweet sigh. My tongue was in her hot mouth and her tongue was delicious, and *fuck* but she smelled and tasted like heaven.

Diane’s hands were suddenly everywhere, grabbing at my shirt, lifting it, sliding against my skin, grabbing, massaging. I’d been half hard since she’d slid into the stool at the bar. But now, with her body arching and rocking

against mine, seeking, all the blood in my system traveled south and desire wrestled with reason.

I'd reasoned she'd come here to be used by me, but perhaps I'd had it backward. Diane Donner came here to use *me*. She'd come here to exploit *me*. I was perfectly okay with being used by Diane Donner. Her mouth open and willing, her hands cupping me over my jeans, I couldn't think of a single reason why being used by this woman was a bad idea.

She wanted proof? *I'll give her proof.* But first—

I tore my mouth from hers, held her body away so I could think enough to speak, “How many men have you tested this theory with?”

“I've only been with my ex,” she said, the words breathless, her eyes hazy. She lifted her chin and her nails scored into my sides, her attention on my lips. “Why aren't you kissing me? I told you I don't bite.”

“Well, maybe that's the problem.”

“What?” Her eyebrows pulled together. “That I don't bite?”

I fought another smile. “No, gorgeous. Maybe the problem is that you've only been with one man and that man was a selfish piece of shit.” Even as I said the words I knew they weren't for her benefit. I was talking myself into this.

Maybe the club didn't need the kind of trouble and complications someone like Diane might bring. I didn't need the complications. But, goddammit, I wanted this. *I deserve this.*

She was speaking again, her words clearly meant to taunt, “Or maybe men giving women orgasms is a myth. Maybe all men are just disappointing bags of flesh with nothing to offer the world but their dirty socks and uncleaned dishes in the sink. Maybe you know I'm right and that's why you're talking instead of—”

“Shut up, Diane,” I growled, kissing her again, loving the feel of her, loving the excited drum of her heart, loving the velvet heat of her mouth. Promising myself I'd see her lips wrapped around my cock before the night was over, I walked her backward the short distance to the bed and paused to

kiss her as much and as hard as I damn well pleased before shoving her to the mattress.

She fell to the bed, her eyes opening with surprise, her gaze still hazy.

“Take off your shirt.” I stepped between her legs, using my knee to spread them. “And your bra.”

Diane swallowed and nodded, her expression interested and eager. *Good.* I knew what I needed to do first.

Watching me, the woman tugged off the tank top and reached behind to unclasp the bra. Meanwhile, I assumed the position, kneeling on the floor between her legs. This was not something I did often, but not because I didn't enjoy eating pussy. I liked it fine. But I didn't kneel. Ever.

*This is a special occasion, Jason. You're dining on champagne pussy tonight.*

My lips twisted at the thought, and I pushed the hem of her skirt higher, fitting my hands between the back of her thighs and the mattress to achieve my aim.

But then I was distracted by the feel of her bare skin and the sight of her magnificent breasts as she slipped her arms out of the straps almost shyly. A new shock of white, hot arousal pounded through me. Saliva filled my mouth and I fit my hands in the curve of her back, pulling her forward, and sliding her backside to the edge of the bed.

God, I wanted to *taste* her. I'd never felt so hungry for another person's skin. And hers was so damn smooth and soft, like the petals of a flower, like velvet and silk, like chocolate mousse. My mouth closed over the peak of one breast while I filled my hand with the generous weight of the other and I groaned, mindlessly pressing my painful erection into the side of the mattress.

I sucked and tugged at her nipple, nipping and twisting the center with my lips, eliciting sexy and soft hitching moans and helpless sounding sighs from this brilliant woman. Her legs opened wider, the apex of her thighs moving searchingly against the fly of my jeans. Using a mental crowbar, I

forced myself to slow down, lifting my chin and blowing a cool stream of air against the wet spot and watching the little pink bead tighten and strain.

*Fuck.* I needed to be inside her. Many times. Many, many times. If I dropped trou right now, she'd have her orgasm, but I would only have her once. I hadn't even begun and I already knew once would not be enough. She wanted orgasms? I'd give her ten. Twenty. I'd make up for a lifetime without. I no longer minded that I was on my knees. She deserved adoration. Her body deserved to be worshipped.

Trailing biting kisses up to her neck, I returned a palm to the curve of her lower back and smoothed my other hand down her torso, her side, her leather clad bottom, to her naked thigh. The skirt had lifted high on her hips and I leaned away to admire the sight. Diane Donner, legs open, shirtless, braless, chest heaving, red marks from my mouth marring the perfection of her skin, eyes closed, lips swollen and parted.

With certainty, I knew I'd think of this moment often. I knew I'd bring it forth on cold, lonely nights; I'd hold it in freeze frame, try to remember her taste, her scent, the restlessness of her body. Watching her face carefully, memorizing her features, I brought the knuckle of my middle finger between her thighs and stroked teasingly against the lace covering her pussy.

She shivered, a trembling breath leaving her on an unsteady exhale.

"Open your eyes," I said, fighting to give sound to my voice. I didn't want to talk, but I did want her to see me. I wanted her to watch *me*. I never wanted her to forget who'd made her feel this way.

Her pretty eyes blinked open, cloudy and confused. I could tell at once this—arousal by someone else's hands—was new territory for her and I fought a curse. Kip Sylvester deserved to burn in hell for neglecting the gifts he'd been given.

Lifting my hand at her waist to the back of her neck, I squeezed, making sure I had her focus and attention. "Keep your eyes open. Watch me or I'll stop. Do you understand?"

She swallowed thickly and nodded, her gaze wide and trusting, and I wanted to curse again. This woman shouldn't trust me, but she did, because I was the first man to make her feel good, and that royally pissed me off.

Grinding my jaw against a swelling sense of something I deeply resented—Protectiveness? Possessiveness? Who fucking knows—I took her mouth again in a rough kiss, pulling aside the lace barrier between my fingers and her body. She sucked in a breath, her hands coming to my shoulders and grabbing at my shirt as I slid my knuckle around her clit, circling it, swallowing my own groan when I felt how slick and ready she was.

*More than once.*

Pulling away, I opened my eyes to glare into hers, making sure she'd taken my command seriously. She did. Her stare was on me, foggy with arousal. *Good.*

Licking my lips, I released her neck and set both my hands on her thighs. She whimpered at the loss of my fingers as hers twisted into the fabric of my shirt.

“Please,” she said, the gentle imploring sending a renewed spike of heat to the base of my spine and straight to my dick.

I hushed her, lowering my lips to her neck, kissing the skin just below her ear, and whispering, “Before I fuck you, I’m going to dine on you for as long as I damn well please. And you’re going to let me eat my fill. You understand?”

A sound tumbled out of her, her body stiffening, her breath hitching then panting as I took my time trailing wet, kisses over her breasts, stomach, using the tip of my tongue to lick the soft skin of her inner thigh.

Another shudder wracked her, followed by a breathless, “Oh God,” and I looked at her. She'd closed her eyes, her head lolling back, her lips parted as she gulped for air.

I settled between her legs, not moving, waiting for her attention to come back to me. After a protracted moment, she blinked, shaking herself. And just as our gazes met, I licked her pussy as though she was the most delicious scoop of ice cream, and then I sucked her clit into my mouth.

And, ladies and gentleman, apparently, that's all it took.

She came against my mouth in an instant. A squeaking cry tore from her chest and her fingers twisted in my hair while she pivoted her hips, rocking them against my tongue with unpracticed, needful movements. Her blue eyes were fire as confusion and understanding twisted her features. Bliss mixed with bitterness, tears springing to the corners of her eyelids as her climax went on and on until she eventually flopped back on the bed, gasping for breath as the echo of her tremors receded.

I didn't fill her with my fingers to draw out her pleasure out. No. *No*. I wanted her sensitive, aching and empty, ready for round two of hopefully ten. But first, I wanted Diane naked.

Straightening, I hooked my hands into the waistband of her panties and pulled them down her legs, removing her shoes as well. She didn't help, but she didn't stop me either. And when I tugged at her skirt, saying, "Take this off," she lifted trembling hands to the leather and obeyed at once, her eyes on me.

While she removed the last of her clothes, I made quick work of mine, pulling a condom from the top drawer of the nightstand by the bed. I didn't miss how her gaze strayed to my chest and stomach as I removed my shirt, nor how her eyes widened when I stepped out of my pants and briefs.

Fisting myself to roll on a condom, I watched as her eyes shot to mine and she sat up, her hands reaching for me. "Wait—wait—"

My movements stilled and I managed to rasp out, "You changed your mind?" If she had, I wouldn't try to persuade her. I wanted this woman with a ferocity that unnerved me. Without a doubt, this—what we'd already done, what we were about to do—was not a good idea. It would be better for her to walk away now. I'd deal with the disappointment. I had a lot of practice.

Let me put it this way: if disappointment had been a major in college, I'd have several honorary degrees.

But Diane shook her head quickly, her hands at my hips, her eyes never leaving mine. "No, no. I definitely haven't changed my mind, not even a

little, but—” Her attention moved to my chest and stomach again, lower. She covered my hands. “I’d like to touch you.”

I flinched, blinking like she’d tossed sand in my eyes. “That’s not a good idea.” God, if she touched me? I wouldn’t last a minute. And I wanted to be *inside* her, not blow my shot all over her hands.

Her forehead wrinkled and her gaze turned beseeching. “Mr. Repo, like I said, I’ve only been with—with one other person. And I’ve never had the opportunity to—”

“Diane—” I finished rolling the condom on with one hand and grabbed her chin with the other to keep her quiet; she was too damn sexy when she argued, especially while naked “Now is not the time. If you want me to stop, if you’ve changed your mind, I will stop. No problem. Just say the word. But now is not the time for a fucking debate. Understand?”

She nodded and lifted her chin from my grip, her jaw set, a hard glint in her eyes. I fought a wry smile because I could see her submission was surface deep and only temporary. She wanted to touch me, and she wasn’t going to take no for an answer without a fight. We’d be discussing this matter again before the evening ended, I was sure of that.

Placing a knee next to her hip, I guided her back and to the center of the bed. And because I’m an asshole, I grabbed her chin again, liking the flash of defiance in her gaze. I captured her lips in another kiss, one which she tried to take over. But as I climbed over her body, stroking my dick where my tongue had been moments prior, she yielded.

Actually, she surrendered. And this vision of Diane—naked, vulnerable, stars in her eyes as they locked with mine—made my throat tight and something uncomfortable and hot settle in my chest. I didn’t want to dwell on what it might be, so I redirected my gaze elsewhere and my hand followed. Palming her breast, weighing it, I told myself to enjoy this new view of her, no less erotic than the earlier snapshot I’d taken.

“You have great tits,” I said gruffly, stupidly. I didn’t want to talk, so I don’t know why I said it.

“You have great everything,” she replied on a sigh, her hips lifting searchingly. She began to pant.

Avoiding her eyes, I slid my hand from her breast to her hip, giving her more of my weight as I positioned myself at her entrance. Pushing inside, slow and gentle, I also began to pant.

“Fuuuuuck.” I spoke against her neck, my lungs scorching, my blood heavy in my veins, my heart beating like a drum between my ears, urging me to move, to thrust, to push and *take*.

I couldn’t; not yet. I had something to prove. She wasn’t there yet. I’d have to keep it slow. But, damn, she felt fucking perfect beneath me. Her body fit my body, like she was made for—

“Fuck,” I said again, pushing that last thought away. I couldn’t be having those kinds of thoughts, not when we only had one night.

“I’m trying to,” she said, wriggling, her hands sliding down my sides. “But you’re not moving.”

Bracing my hands on either side of her head, careful not to catch her hair, I lifted myself up, separating our chests and stomachs while withdrawing and rolling my hips as I returned.

Another of those nonsensical sounds slipped passed her lips and her head pressed back against the mattress, her eyes on mine, half-lidded. “Oh God. You are . . .” She didn’t finish. Or maybe she couldn’t.

I continued to flex and roll, making each stroke count. Slow, methodical, purposeful; making sure to touch but also tease; making sure to hit just the right spot at just the right angle.

Her gaze tore from mine and she glanced down at the space where we joined. More confusion and understanding ignited within her gaze and she lifted her hips to meet mine. She said something unintelligible on a whimper, her eyebrows pulling together.

“What?” I asked, angling my head to recapture her gaze. “What did you say?”

“How are you so—so g—good at this?” The words were unsteady and I could see the tension building inside her, that same trusting snare as before making her eyes bright and glassy. “God, it feels so good. How do you make it feel so good?”

Moving one hand to her knee, I brought it up higher, pushing it against the mattress next to her shoulder and increased the force of my thrusts, but not the speed. She sucked in a startled breath and her eyes closed for just a second before they flew open again, as though remembering my earlier threat to stop if she looked away.

I thought about telling her to touch herself. I considered demanding she help me by petting that sweet button between her legs. But no. Not this time. Maybe stubbornly, I was determined she do nothing but enjoy herself. Plus, I liked seeing her like this, struggling, aching, wanting.

“I’m so close,” she moaned, her fingers flexing on my sides, her body restless beneath me. “Repo, I’m—”

“Jason,” I blurted, dipping my hips and rocking as I entered her.

Her gaze sharpened. “Jason?” she asked softly, almost lovingly, and her eyes searched mine.

“Yeah, Jason.”

My heart gave a painful squeeze and I near choked on a sudden flood of something unidentifiable. Damn. *Damn*. I liked that too much, my name on her lips, her knowing me, and the delicious tension building at the base of my spine threatened to release.

*She should not say my name.* That’s it. *We’re done.* Playtime was over.

“Ja—”

I kissed her again, shutting her up and increasing the speed of my invasion. Fitting a hand between us, I tapped her clit, quick and light, another tease, and her whole body tensed just before I felt the spasm of her release clench and release around my cock. Tearing her mouth away to gasp and cry out, her legs shook.

I gave my body permission to take over, take her how I'd wanted, hard and fast.

Inexplicably, I didn't. Instead, I made certain to drive deep and careful, hit the tender, essential places within her body. My hand caught between us still toying with her clit to prolong her cresting gratification.

She came again, a strangled moan of surprise and chants of curses wrest out of her. Diane's legs unlocked and her feet slammed on the bed, her hips pistoning in a careless, greedy rhythm. Then I told myself again to surrender to need. But even as my vision blinded and the coiling tension became an explosion of erotic fulfillment and primal satisfaction, something in my subconscious demanded that I persist in maintaining her pleasure.

*I can make myself more than unforgettable. I'll make myself essential—a drug, a craving. Then she'll give me more than just one—no. No. I couldn't think like that. I wouldn't.*

Diane's moan seemed to go on and on until it became an uninhibited cry that slowly, slowly tapered. And I kept moving, wanting to give her every last second, wanting her to enjoy every last quake and tremor. And when the last of her cries abated, I yielded to the impulse to kiss her again.

My heartbeat now thunder instead of a drum, I took her mouth over and over, my hands greedy for the feel of her body, frantic for it, for her. And with each press of her welcoming lips, I couldn't help but fear each kiss might be our last.

## CHAPTER THREE

\* DIANE \*

“Midlife is the time to let go of an overdominant ego and to contemplate the deeper significance of human existence.”

— CARL GUSTAV JUNG

**M**r. Repo fell asleep. I did not. It was the only thing I’d faked thus far tonight, other than maybe a bit of bravado when I’d walked in.

My slightly sweaty naked body tangled with Mr. Repo’s slightly sweaty naked body as he slept, and the heat between felt less uncomfortable, less mortifying, less shocking than I’d been expecting. And that confused me. The whole evening had been confusing.

Some examples include: he’d put his mouth *down there* and had seemed to enjoy the experience because he’d done it multiple times; we’d had sexual intercourse more than once; and being naked during and after sex had felt natural.

I’d never been fully naked with another person since my momma bathed me. My ex had called it sinful to be naked together, that our bodies were for procreation, not for recreation. Kip didn’t like sweat, or being dirty, or smells other than hairspray and suntan lotion for some odd reason. So, I’d been cool, squeaky clean, eschewing perfume, scented deodorants and flowery soaps at all times for twenty-eight years. *I’m going to buy perfume this week.*

Wearing perfume, using scented soaps and lavender bubble bath were on my to do list, my post-being-married-to-a-feckless-narcissist list. I'd made the list last week, and I'd already crossed off seven items. Granted, those seven items had all been related to eating tasty food, but I'd done it.

After tonight, I'd be able to cross off another three items: have a one-night stand with a sexy stranger, have an orgasm that was not self-administered, and have an orgasm during sex.

Other items on the list included various indulgences of a similar nature: buying myself antique jewelry, taking trips all over the world and staying in fancy hotels, going to Vegas and seeing one of those male-stripper shows, learning how to fly an airplane, learning how to ride a horse, learning to play the piano, learning how to paint. For years, I'd frequently wished I could just pack up, take Jennifer, and leave. I'd loved drawing when I was younger, before I was married, but Kip—

Mr. Repo shifted, his arm around my torso growing lax as he relaxed further into slumber. I nibbled on my bottom lip and squeezed my eyes shut, praying he wouldn't wake up.

The reason I'd pretended to fall asleep earlier was simple: I didn't know what to say. My throat felt scratchy and hoarse from how embarrassingly noisy I'd been, my mind frenzied and full thoughts I didn't feel comfortable confessing to a stranger. I couldn't think of a single appropriate thing to say other than, *Thank you*.

I felt so grateful. But also—as I mentioned—incredibly confused. Why had Mr. Repo done it? Because I'd dared him and badgered him into it?

*Yeah. . . probably.* I sighed. Even if I did badger him, the large, muscley, motorcycle gang member didn't seem to mind that we both smelled like sweat and sex and both odors were being absorbed by the blanket covering us.

I'd thought—when Mr. Repo initially left the bed earlier while I fake-slept—that he was leaving me, period. And that would've been fine. I'd had no expectations of him, none at all! And now that he'd given me what I'd come for (several times), there was no reason to stay.

Instead, he'd spread a comforter over my body, gently fit a pillow beneath my cheek, then climbed back in to hold me.

To *hold* me.

Gathering my back to his chest, he'd slid one arm beneath the crook of my neck. His other hand, big and rough, had stroked from my bottom to my shoulder before grabbing a handful of my right breast. His wonderfully hairy leg had slid between mine, he'd sighed, and then he'd promptly fallen asleep. I'd never had to fake being asleep while someone touched me. It was . . . nice.

*This is spooning.*

Now, don't roll your eyes. Of course I knew what spooning was. I'd spooned before. Not with Kip—never with him—but with my cherubs. When they'd had nightmares or just needed a cuddle, I'd always been Isaac and Jennifer's big spoon. I'd never been the small one, with anyone, until now.

*Has Kip been spooning Elena all this time? Is he her big spoon? Does he make her—*No! No. No. Opening my eyes, I stared into the dim room, just one small lamp casting our sparse surroundings in greyish light.

Acid and irritation coated the inside of my mouth, congealing my sadness and confusion into anger. When I'd married Kipling, he'd been twenty-eight to my eighteen and I'd trusted him. My vows had included obedience. I'd kept my vows; I'd taken them seriously. I'd obeyed. I'd been so obedient, I might as well have been a dog.

My chin wobbled and anger morphed into a monstrous kind of frustration, the kind that stings your nose and clogs your throat, makes thinking and breathing at the same time a labor. *God. I know vengeance is Yours, but if You could smite Kipling Sylvester and make it excruciatingly painful, I'd be very much obliged.*

Despite the violent turn of my thoughts, my darn chin kept on wobbling.

I needed to leave. Now. Before the waterworks burning behind my eyes burst. Before I cried in front of Mr. Repo and likely reinforced his impression of me as pathetic and desperate. I didn't care one way or the

other if he thought I was pathetic and desperate—I *was* pathetic and desperate—but I'd promised myself I would always, always leave every room from now on with my head held high, no matter what.

Inching away from the man behind me, I drew a steady stream of air into my lungs. He must've been real tuckered out because he didn't wake up. Mr. Repo had, after all, just given me more than ten orgasms and had seemed to have at least four himself. No wonder he was exhausted, poor man. The last thing he likely wanted was an awkward conversation in the morning with the pushy woman who'd badgered him to prove his salt. The least I could do is leave him in peace. If I thought it would be well received, I would send him a gift basket for his pains and trouble.

Actually, maybe I would. I didn't have to sign the card, I could just send it along with a note of thanks. Unless he handed out a baker's dozen of orgasms to several random women regularly—which, given his skill, I wouldn't find terribly surprising—he would know who sent the basket.

More and more determined to follow through with the gift basket idea, I hunted for my clothes. Having so many employees, I knew folks needed to be told when they did a job well. Withholding praise wears a person down, makes them feel helpless and weak. Ask me how I know.

*You mean, how you've treated your daughter?*

I sucked in a sharp breath at the thought, biting my lip until it stung as I battled a whole dang mountain of guilt. *Gosh darnit.*

"No," I whispered, sniffing and shaking my head. "No, you will not think about this right now."

Ordering myself around these days never seemed to work and soon my heart and chest seized with self-recrimination because I'd been a terrible, terrible mother. I'd allowed myself to be a tool for my husband to impose his will upon us all. Worse, I was also beginning to suspect I'd taken out my own bitterness and frustration on my sweet, kindhearted, beautiful daughter. *Obedience* had been a vow I'd hidden behind, used to justify shameful behavior. And for what? Scraps of Kip's approval while he lavished affection on—

“Stop it. Stop,” I said under my breath, wiping my eyes with suddenly shaking fingers. When I got home, I’d take a shower and cry. The best place in the world to cry is in the shower. I always cried in the shower. Always.

And then I’d make a new list entitled, *Ways to spoil Jennifer and make up over twenty years of being a horrible person.*

Despite the pragmatism of my plan, my eyes continued to sting and leak. I stumbled, nearly tipping over as I pulled on my clothes and shoes. I’d liked how I’d looked earlier in the evening, but now the leather of the skirt made my undies ride up and the tank top felt like wearing nothing at all. Fisting the edges of my jacket together at my chest, I peeked at the sleeping man in the bed, wanting to be sure he was well and truly in dreamland before working on the locks of the door.

. . . *Goodness.*

I drew in a shaky breath, my gaze wandering over the substantial shape of him, the chaos of tattoos on his impressive bicep and massive shoulder snagging my notice before my attention drifted to the angular lines of his face. His demand that I keep my eyes open and on him while he touched me had not been a simple matter. Mr. Repo possessed a devastatingly handsome face, one I’d never felt comfortable looking at for too long when I’d spotted him around town.

His was a face that always made heat rise to my cheeks and my chest get all fluttery. It inspired sinful thoughts that had always made me feel a lingering shame and a determination to be a better wife, a Godlier woman. Looking at him now, he resembled that famous British soccer player quite a lot, the one with all the watch ads in GQ. The man was just simply physically breathtaking in every possible way.

And I’d badgered him into having sex with me.

With *me*. A bossy, no talent, ignorant country bumpkin who always aimed too high for reasons unknown. A used up and bitter forty-something mother of two adult children, now alone and perpetually unloved after foolishly investing decades in a marriage to a cheater and a liar and an abuser.

Why had Mr. Repo done it? Why had he agreed? Being bossy must've been my superpower, that's for sure. If folks required evidence, they need look no further than the beautiful, capable, sensually skilled man in the bed.

*But there's no badgering your way out of a miserable life, Diane. And your horrid choices.*

My gaze dropped and I turned to the door, swiping at an errant tear rolling down my cheek. I turned the locks and numbly stepped out, shutting the door behind me with a soft snick. Looking left and then right, I frowned at the long, nondescript hallway.

The walls were black, and the florescent lights buzzing above cast everything in a harsh, raucous kind of anti-glow. Mr. Repo's room had smelled like furniture polish and pine; Mr. Repo had smelled like whiskey and heat. But this hallway smelled like bleach and sick. I didn't recall it being so . . . so . . . so *this* when we'd come in. Oppressively depressing and oddly terrifying.

I gripped the front of my jacket tighter at my throat, lifted my chin, and squared my shoulders. *It's just a hallway, Diane.*

Pretty sure we'd come in from the left, I turned that way and strode forward, hesitating when I reached the end of this first hallway and encountered another one, identical in design and stench. My heart kicked up and I glanced over my shoulder, eyeing the bedroom door I'd just exited. This place was a maze. It would be incredibly foolish for me to continue onward without a guide.

But I didn't want to wake Mr. Repo. I didn't want to talk to him. I already felt low about myself, and even though I'd twisted his arm and pushed him into it, the during part of our interlude had been really nice. *Really* nice. It had felt like a gift, actually. A memory I'd cherish, something for me to take out and recall on cold, lonely evenings. An example of me being brave.

I had so little examples of me being brave over the course of my life. I needed it. There had to be another way. Ruining the evening now by *talking* to the man felt—

“Mom?”

I whipped around at the voice and gasped so hard I choked on my own breath. *OH MY GOD!*

Isaac's open mouth broadcasted the extent of his surprise. My son's wide and round eyes swept down as he took a step back, his eyebrows slowly pulling together.

"Uh . . ." I tossed my thumb over my shoulder, but then dropped it, my heart a jackhammer as my thoughts swirled. *No, no, no. You weren't supposed to be here!* The man at the door as I'd entered the bar earlier in the evening told me Isaac wasn't here and wasn't due back for several weeks. I was going to be sick.

His shocked stare moved over my shoulder and then back to me, the sharpness of suspicion there tempered by the persistence of his disbelief and—unless I was mistaken?—a hint of concern. "Are you hurt? Did someone hurt you?"

I shook my head. "No. Not at all."

Confusion replaced disbelief. "Are you drunk?"

I shook my head again.

A severe glare took up residence on his features and he stepped closer, lowering his voice and making no attempt to veil his anger. "Then what the *fuck* are you doing here?"

Gasping at his language, the unsavory word a bucket of ice water to my senses, my motherly instincts kicked in. "Isaac Gregory Sylvester! Good heavens. Watch your words."

He clamped his mouth shut, his jaw working as his glare shifted over my shoulder once more. "Which room?"

"Pardon?"

"Which room did you just leave?"

I stiffened my back. "That's none of your affair," I said, even though what I wanted to say was, *I love you, I miss you. Won't you come visit me?*

If my brain was in chaos, my heart was an anarchist. I hadn't seen my son in ages. He hadn't acknowledged any of us—any of his family—since before he'd returned from deployment overseas and joined the Wraiths. I'd cried in the shower about it, about him, about the loss of my sweet boy, for years—every Tuesday and Thursday, as a matter of fact.

Isaac's blue eyes, so familiar to me and yet not, sliced to mine, pinning me in place. I held my breath. What did he see, I wondered? Did he have any fond memories of his childhood? Did he remember the day we played hooky and I took him to the pumpkin patch an hour north and we'd raced through the corn maze, laughing our butts off? Did he remember—

“Come on.” My tall son wrapped a hand around my upper arm and pulled me down the hall, his jaw continuing to flex like he was grinding his teeth.

I swallowed the urge to ask if he was wearing his mouth guard at night. The dentist had been quite adamant about it after he'd had his braces off. Our son was a night-grinder and he'd wear his teeth down if he wasn't diligent. And who was checking on him? Who was making sure he wore his mouth guard and had his clothes washed in hypoallergenic detergent? Did he have his tea tree oil? His skin had always been so sensitive.

Biting my lip to stifle a sob that tasted like despair, I blinked away silent tears. I couldn't stop them. He was leading me out, I understood that, but I didn't want to leave now. I wanted to sit and talk to him. Just for a minute. My heart ached so badly, my vision actually turned grey for a moment, blackness creeping at the edges.

My head swimming, I tried dragging my feet. “Could we—could we just talk for a—”

“No. You need to leave. Now.” His voice was so hard, whipping out like a lash.

I closed my eyes and let myself be led, wishing we were anywhere else. But then I opened my eyes again because—as painful as this moment felt—here he was. We were together. He might never want to see me, he might never want to know me, but that just meant this was a rare opportunity. I needed to pull myself together. I needed to make the most of it.

“Are they treating you well?” I asked as he turned another corner.

Silence.

“Your hair is so short,” I lamented, missing his blond baby locks, and his longer hair when he’d been a teen. I’d given him his first haircut on his first birthday. I still had the little baggie of hair. I’d intended to make him a baby book, but it was just too painful to contemplate these days. So, I kept it in my office at the Lodge. Sometimes I took it out on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

He paused at a corner, pushing me behind him as he peered around it. Seemingly satisfied, he shifted his hand from my arm to my back and pressed me forward. “No one is up yet,” he whispered. “If we’re quiet and fast, we should be able to get you out without any trouble.”

“I—I parked my car—”

“I know. I saw it in the lot.”

All too soon, we were in the bar area, and then out the double doors, and then in the parking lot making a straight line for my BMW. He turned to me as we approached, his eyes conducting a hasty survey of my features.

“Are you sure you’re not drunk? Can you drive?”

I swiped at my face and sniffled. “Really, Isaac. I only had one drink and that was hours ago. I am perfectly fit to drive.”

He stepped back, taking his hand with him, and crossed his arms. “Then you need to go. Right now.”

Fiddling with my keys, I hesitated, not wanting to unlock the door. “You could come with me. We could . . . talk?” Goodness. I hated how I sounded, this raw vulnerability, hope scratching at my throat. But what could I do? This was my son! I loved him. I missed him.

His stare a stone wall, he snatched the keys from my grip. He unlocked the door. He opened the door. He put me inside the car. He tossed the keys to my lap. He shut the door. He walked away.

And he didn’t turn back.

\* \* \*

I felt like death. Death and what moldy bread looks like.

“Ugh.”

“Momma.”

“Jennifer?” I croaked, blinking but finding the dim room entirely too bright. Each minuscule ray of light felt like a shard of glass piercing my eyes. Laying back before I got a chance to sit up, I groaned. “Goodness, my head.”

A cool cloth pressed against my forehead. It felt divine. “How are you feeling?”

“Like death. And what moldy bread looks like.” I knew I reclined in my bed, and Jennifer sat close by, and . . . *what happened?*

“How much did you drink?”

“Drink? What time is it?”

“It’s four in the afternoon Christmas day.” A pause, then, “You don’t remember?”

“Remember? Remember wh—” *Cheese and crackers!* “Oh no!” I clutched my stomach as the memories flooded my brain.

I’d driven home after being dismissed by Isaac, crying the whole way. Today was Christmas and I was supposed to be spending it alone. In a moment of insanity, I’d consumed brandy this morning. So much brandy. And then everything was very fuzzy. But my stomach felt like I’d done one thousand crunches on an incline.

“When did—what are you doing here?” I licked my lips and that’s when I tasted my mouth. New memories arrived. I’d vomited. A lot. And my daughter had held my hair back.

My. Daughter.

*Have you no shame, Diane?* The sharp voice in my head sounded a lot like my ex-husband's. Maybe because he'd asked that question of me many, many times.

Attempting to breathe through my nose, I winced. "I smell like Belle Cooper's Christmas trifle."

Trifle was a dessert, and how Baptists justified consuming large quantities of brandy (or whiskey, or rye, or bourbon, whatever your pleasure) during the holidays. Belle called it "flavoring." But four cups of liquor in one desert containing six servings isn't flavoring any more than her two-fisted bottom-gropings of young men were hugs.

"Doc has been here. He said you're okay not to go to the ER," Jenn said, her voice full of concern.

"The ER?"

"The bottle was empty when I found you. Some of it had spilled on the floor, but I wasn't sure how much you drank."

I squeezed my eyes shut and that hurt. I stopped squeezing, and that hurt too. "I'm—I'm so sorry, baby. I'm such a disgrace."

"Hush, now," her gentle voice soothed. "You are a woman in pain, going through a rough patch. Everyone deserves a breakdown when their world is breaking down. Don't call yourself a disgrace. Just rest. Please."

I swallowed dryly around the urge to insist that I was a disgrace and I didn't deserve this gentle treatment, but nausea and a full-body malaise kept me from forming words for several seconds.

"Can you swallow anything?" she asked, her hand with the cloth moving away. "Doc said to drink Pedialite. I have a glass for you, whenever you're ready."

I nodded and gingerly lifted my head. Jennifer brought a straw to my lips and the saccharine sweetness of what tasted like sugar-water coated the fuzz on my tongue.

"Blah."

“Cletus got the grape flavor. Doc said it was better than the others.”

I groaned again, laying back. “Cletus is here?”

“No. Not—”

“Please tell me your fiancé did not get an eyeful of his future mother-in-law drunk as a skunk?”

“Momma, please don’t worry about that.” She sounded fretful, worried.

I forced my eyes open, wincing at the dim light. The pain served me right. “Did he see me?”

Jennifer came into view. I saw she was dressed in a red dress and her newly dyed brown hair—her natural shade, as she took after my side of the family and not her father’s—lay in soft, long waves, framing her gorgeous face.

*So pretty.* She’d always been so pretty. *Like an angel.*

My mouth curved at the sight of her, but then I frowned. “You’re all dressed up? Aren’t you supposed to be at the Winstons’?”

“I came by this morning to see if you wanted to come and I—I—” She huffed. “I found you on the kitchen floor with an empty bottle next to you, and you were crying.”

It took me longer than it should’ve, but I fumbled to find her hand and squeezed it. “Oh, baby. I am sorry. I have no excuse. I’m a disgrace and I can only promise to—”

“You said you went to the Dragon.” She squeezed my hand, but her eyebrows were pulled together, her tone fierce. “You said you were with a man?”

I swallowed convulsively, trying to withdraw my hand. “I—”

“How did you get home?”

“I drove home, after.” My voice barely a whisper, I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to think about this now. Not yet.

“You drove drunk?” Her tone bordered on a screech.

“No. No, I wasn’t—I was sober when I left. Completely.”

“But—did he—did he force you—”

“No, baby. No.” Despite the cutting pain, I forced myself to sit up and worked to arrange my features in a mask of calm and serenity. I was good at wearing masks; I had a lifetime of practice. “Please, it was nothing. Please don’t worry about it. It was a—a lapse in judgement, fully consensual, and it’s done.”

“But—”

“Honestly, Jennifer. You don’t need to worry about me. I learned my lesson.” I patted her hand, glad for the lack of light. I imagined the shade of my skin was quite green. “That was the first and last time I will ever go to the Dragon and I will never be so foolish as to drink myself stupid again. I don’t wish to feel like this ever. I swear, I’ve learned my lesson. And it’s so embarrassing, I’d really appreciate it if you didn’t force me to discuss it further.”

Jennifer considered me for a moment, a concerned frown marring her brow, and then she nodded. “I understand. I won’t make you discuss it, as long as you promise me no one hurt you.”

Suppressing the memory of Isaac’s indifference and how he’d thrust me into my car and walked away without looking back, I pasted on a smile. “Oh no, honey. No one hurt me,” I lied and reached for her hand again. “I need to get up and make some bacon and eggs.”

“What? Why?”

I hesitated just a second before telling a half truth, “I heard it’s good for hangovers.” I’d never told Jennifer about how much experience I had with nursing a person’s hangovers. Growing up, if my father wasn’t drunk, he was hungover. Bacon, eggs, sausage, hash browns, and toast with butter—and maybe a Bloody Mary, just to take the edge off.

“Are you sure? You didn’t . . . form an attachment?”

My false smile widened and I shook my head, the simple act causing bile to rise up my throat. Once I had it under control, I said, “I suspect, my darling,

the only attachments I'll be forming in the future are with my grandbabies, when or if you and your future husband decide to give me any.”

She blushed. Even in the low light, I could see the red rise over her cheeks, and my smile grew a little less forced.

*Lord, if Cletus Winston isn't worthy of my girl, please forgive me for murdering him, and also please help me figure out how to hide the body.*

## CHAPTER FOUR

\*JASON\*

“I am not young enough to know everything.”

— OSCAR WILDE

When I came to, I thought I’d dreamt the whole thing. This lasted for a good five seconds before panic set in. It wasn’t a dream and Diane wasn’t here. She’d left, which meant she’d likely been wandering the halls without protection at some point.

“Shit!” After jumping from the bed, I tugged on clothes, still stretching my shirt to pull over my head as I opened the door. But then I came up short.

“Repo.”

I blinked twice. “Twilight,” I said and took a step back, wishing I’d rubbed some sleep out of my eyes before bolting from the bed.

After another few swift blinks, he came fully into focus. Our newest recruit always wore a pissed off expression, but this was something different. And he wasn’t supposed to be here. He was on assignment in Alabama.

“A moment of your time?” He straightened from the wall where he’d clearly been waiting for me and strolled forward.

“I can’t right now.” Straining my ears for shouts and screams, I moved forward to scan the hall. If someone had grabbed her, I hoped she was giving them holy hell right now.

“She’s gone.”

My eyes sliced back to Twilight and narrowed. “Who?”

“My . . .” he lifted his chin, cold blue eyes drilling into me. “Diane Donner. She’s gone. Now, may I come in?”

I didn’t mind the undercurrent of aggression in the younger man’s voice. I was too busy being relieved. It was stupid of her to leave without waking me. It was also stupid of her to come here in the first place, but now I knew she’d been escorted out of the Dragon without incident, and by her son, I could breathe easier. She was safe. That’s all that mattered.

If I hadn’t been in my present state, I would’ve held my ground. But the receding panic left me tired. And sore. I worked out on the regular, but last night had been . . .

Well, that had been something altogether different. I reckoned the new generation of recruits considered me an old man now at almost fifty. But, good God, I hadn’t enjoyed myself like that in ages. *Have I ever? Has any woman ever felt so good? Made me so crazy?* I couldn’t recall anything or anyone that came close. *Maybe Louisa?*

I frowned. *No. Not even Louisa.*

As it was, I nodded, backed up, and gave the younger man room to enter.

“Anyone touch her?” I asked. “Before you found her?”

“No one but you, apparently.” He closed the door behind him. Facing me, his jaw ticked, the intent in his glare clear as fucking day.

“Thank you, for seeing her out.” I took another step back. This kid wanted to beat the shit out of me—not that I blamed him. Finally pulling my shirt over my head, I quickly scanned the room for any trace of the woman who’d filled it earlier.

“How long?”

The sharp question had me bringing Twilight back into focus. “How long what?”

His eyes darkened as his eyelids lowered by half, and when he spoke his tone was a rake over gravel. “I’m a good soldier, Repo. I do what I’m told.”

“You want me to throw you a parade?”

“No. But I don’t want my—” He snapped his mouth shut, blue eyes frosty as they were fiery.

I placed my hands on my hips, drawling, “Your what?”

“When I signed up, I said I didn’t want Jennifer or Diane anywhere near this life. That was part of the deal. I join, they’re safe. Off limits.”

I licked my bottom lip, tasting Diane there—her mouth, her skin, her pussy. Her smell was all over me, making it hard to think straight. *Making everything hard.* “Off limits,” I repeated, my voice dropping an octave and not by choice. *Focus.* “You hold your brothers in such high regard? Don’t want us near your kin?”

Why I argued, I had no idea. Maybe it was simple instinct; I didn’t like being questioned or challenged. He was right, of course. That had been the deal, and it made just as much sense then as it did now. I didn’t want any of our MC brothers near Diane—or Jennifer—either.

Twilight glared at me for a long moment. It felt menacing, but also assessing. This kid was tough as shit. He’d been stationed overseas and he’d seen action. He was also smart, but until this moment, he’d worked hard to hide it. I understood why. Being smart in a club makes you a threat to those that give the orders, and I gave the orders.

“Some folks are made for the life, some aren’t. Jenn and Diane? They aren’t, and you know that.”

“What are they made for?”

“Tea parties and church socials.”

“Oh now, I think your momma is made of sterner stuff than that.”

Something flared behind the young man’s eyes, challenge and hatred, and I realized my misstep. He probably thought I was making a reference to what

had happened between Diane and me last night, so I clarified, “She runs that lodge on her own. That’s big business.”

“Now you want a cut of that business?”

“No. That’s not—listen, Diane Donner can take care of herself, that’s all I meant.”

“She can’t.”

“She is a tough lady.”

“She’s not.” Isaac shook his head, his voice a rasp that carried with it a warning.

“She—”

“She’s not!” he exploded, standing and glaring those icicle eyes down at me. “She’s all smoke and mirrors and false bravado! It’s all fake. She’s as strong as a *fucking* kitten.” Isaac shoved his fingers through his hair, turning away as his face twisted with what looked like disgust. “She trusts too easily. Her loyalty is unshakable but she gives it to the wrong people. She’ll fight like hell for others with iron in her veins, but never for herself.”

I held real still, working to ignore the vice-like tightness around my neck and this time straining my ears for sounds of approaching footsteps. “You’re going to need to lower your voice, Twilight.”

No one raised their voice to me. No. One. Not for any reason. Folks spoke calm or they didn’t speak at all. I didn’t like to be yelled at and I didn’t put up with it. It didn’t bother me when my brothers yelled at each other, but anyone who screamed at me lost the ability to use their voice box. Call it an oddity, call it a quirk, call it scars from an unfortunate youth, I didn’t care.

However, if no one overheard this particular misstep, I wasn’t going to punish it. Just as long as Diane’s son checked himself.

Twilight’s big shoulders rose and fell like he was breathing hard. He turned back to me but still obviously struggled to arrange his features into a stoic mask. “Repo, I haven’t known you long. But you’re . . .”

“I’m what?”

“You’re smart. You get shit done. You’re not ambitious. And you’re not a sociopath.” Twilight—Isaac—stared at me steadily, giving me the sense he was trying to communicate more than what was said.

I nodded, understanding, and accepting the words for what they were and what they meant. This was as close as he probably felt comfortable calling me “a good guy.” No one in the club was really a good guy, but some were worse than others. Razor Dennings, our club president, was a sociopath. But Razor was also smart and ambitious. Yet, he didn’t get shit done. Unless you consider sitting around, throwing tantrums, cutting things and people, and being a scary motherfucker getting shit done.

“So, I’m asking—” Isaac’s jaw ticked. “Do you intend to break her? Is that what you want?”

I flinched at the unexpected question.

He continued. “It won’t be hard. Someone like you? You wouldn’t even have to try. It’d take you a week, three days if you got the time.”

I couldn’t believe my ears even as a swelling of guilt—yes, *guilt*—rose up to strangle my words. “You think so little of her?” I cleared my throat against the unusual sensation. “How could you think her so weak?”

“No, not weak. Trusting. *Soft*.” Isaac tugged on the sleeves of his jacket, his eyes on the wall behind me. “She’s soft, or she was when I knew her, and there’s nothing wrong with that—for people like her.” His stare turned back to me, heavy with both an implied plea and a threat. “But not for people like us.”

\* \* \*

**~Several Months Later~**

I wasn’t stalking her.

I was following her. From a distance. Making sure she was okay. Keeping eyes on her. Just in case.

Not stalking.

*It's the same fucking thing, old man.*

Wiping a hand over my face, I glared at my reflection in the rear-view mirror of the club's Mercedes Benz, the automobile I'd chosen for my respectable alter ego, Mr. Jake Carlyle, to be used when I visited the folks who unwittingly laundered our dirty money. But over the last few months, it was one of the cars I used to follow Diane Donner around East Tennessee.

And I needed to stop.

It hadn't been premeditated the first time. I'd been leaving a sushi restaurant the week of New Years, just days after our one night together and my talk with Isaac—with *Twilight*. I'd told him I'd leave her be, and I'd meant it at the time.

The sushi place in Knoxville was one of the small businesses where I invested our surplus of cash, and I'd spotted Diane across the strip mall parking lot, leaving the bank surrounded by a group of men and women in suits.

As usual, Diane had been dressed to impress in a blue skirt and tailored jacket that I knew matched the color of her eyes, the shirt underneath black or dark brown. I wasn't certain, but I suspected the shoes she wore might've been the same ones from our night together.

Before I could suss out whether I was right, a woman came barreling out of the bank, yelling Diane's name. I'd tensed, transfixed by the scene and stupidly ready to jump in should Diane need protection. The woman made to reach for her and several of the men blocked the woman's path, lifting their hands to intervene.

The woman stepped back, but she also kept on shouting, calling Diane names that made my blood boil. Diane showed no outward sign of distress, but it must've upset her. It upset me. In fact, it pissed me right off.

Moments later, I sat in my car, driving some distance behind Diane all the way back to Green Valley. At one point I should've made a left toward the Dragon instead of a right toward the Donner Lodge. I'd figured there was no harm in making sure she made it back safely.

Once she'd made it to the Lodge, I'd figured there was no harm in waiting for her to finish work, ensure she made it home safely.

Once she'd made it home, I'd waited around to see if she left again, seeing as how I had no place else to be. Hours later, when she didn't leave and the house lights went dark, I'd walked the perimeter of her property for reasons I couldn't explain. *Just to be sure*, I'd told myself.

After two laps around, I realized I'd been gone too long, and so I drove back to the compound. And that was meant to be that.

But then, weeks later, news made it around town that Diane Donner had landed in the hospital. Someone hit her over the head and left her for dead next to Old Man Blount's bee boxes. When I heard this news, the intensity of my anger blindsided me.

I'd told myself I just needed to see her, to make sure she was okay, and I would only stakeout her house for a few days, to ensure the guilty party didn't try anything else. But a few days became a few weeks, and a few weeks became a few months.

And now here I was, sitting low in the Benz at the edge of the Donner Bakery parking lot, watching Diane and her daughter walk to their respective cars. I did this almost every night. Just like I tailed Diane to the Lodge almost every morning. Then I'd go about my day. Then I'd return to watch her leave. Then I'd walk the perimeter of her property at least three times before riding back to the Dragon and repeating the day all over again.

I rarely used the same car twice in the same day and made a point of parking in different spots each time. Usually in the evenings I used my bike and left it at the bottom of the hill, then walked on foot through the woods until the Lodge came into view. Not tonight, obviously.

But every single night, in the stretching minutes between arriving at the Lodge and Diane showing her face, I told myself that particular day would be the last. Yet, just as soon as she appeared—sometimes with her daughter, sometimes with her secretary, sometimes with Cletus Winston, but mostly on her own—I'd change my mind.

And now I was officially a damn stalker.

“You are a damn stalker, Jason Doe.” Tracking Diane until she slipped into her BMW, I gritted my teeth.

I didn’t want anything from her. I honestly didn’t. I’d kept my promise to her son. I’d left her alone, I hadn’t approached her, I hadn’t spoken to her. I’d even gone so far as to deliberately ignore her.

Once, when I’d been trailing her through downtown, I knew she’d seen me. I’d made a point to not look at her and I’d walked right on by.

In the middle of a Saturday afternoon last month, I’d given Wolf’s Old Lady a ride to the store on my bike. By chance, Diane had been there. I’d made a show of being real friendly with Tamara, who’d been happy to play along, and I was fairly certain Diane had watched the whole show from her car.

Isaac had been right when he said our life wasn’t for folks like her. I sure as hell didn’t want her in this life, and so the promise had been easy to keep. But, *goddammit*, someone needed to make sure Diane stayed safe.

She was all alone. She lived by herself. Most everywhere she went, she was by herself. It eventually came out that her ex-husband, his mistress, and his mistress’s psychotic sister had been responsible for leaving Diane for dead by Old Man Blount’s bee boxes, but only one of them had taken the fall.

Just the sister had been prosecuted for the crime and was currently serving jail time, leaving Diane’s ex and his girlfriend to roam free after a slap on the wrist for roughing up Diane’s daughter Jennifer. Now they were missing.

I’d tried to track them down, but I couldn’t tap into the Wraiths’ resources or use our contacts without arising suspicion. And so, I reckoned, with Kip Sylvester and his mistress out there somewhere, someone needed to think about Diane’s safety.

Her car pulled out of the space and left the lot. After her taillights faded, I counted to three and then followed. She made a quick stop at the Piggly Wiggly and shopped while I simultaneously scanned the lot for threats and grumbled at my own stupidity, at war with myself over a woman. *A woman.*

There was only one woman I would stick my neck out for, the only person I would betray my club brethren for, the real reason I'd come to Green Valley in the first place. That woman was my biological daughter.

I used to follow her around, too. Not every day, but once in a while. I'd show up to places I knew she'd be. I'd keep eyes on her. Seeing she was safe meant I slept better at night.

But Jessica had left town just after Thanksgiving last year. I'd briefly considered following her out of town, leaving everything behind here, but that hadn't seemed right. She was a grown woman. Our lives had always run parallel, and the time had come to let her go. Still, I would choose Jessica over anyone, anytime, anywhere, a weakness I'd made peace with long ago.

But this? Following Diane Donner from home to work, from work to home, and spending too much time thinking about her welfare? I was not at peace with this shit.

"Fuck me." I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, watching her move the groceries from the cart into the trunk of her car, crushing the insane desire to stroll on over there and help her unload the bags.

She walked the empty shopping cart all the way back to the store, just like she always did. She then reappeared and I watched her walk across the lot, her hips swaying, the tight fit of the calf-length skirt around her ass and thighs making the modest clothing item pleasingly indecent. She'd put on weight over the last few months and it more than suited her.

Before slipping inside the driver's side, she peeled off the matching jacket and hung it up in the back seat, leaving her in a white V-neck tank top. It was a hot day, mid-summer. She fanned herself, flipping her hair, longer now than it had been Christmas Eve. I watched her smile at a mother and baby; I watched her stop and talk to the local pastor's wife; I watched her laugh at something one of the Williams brothers said as he walked by.

Chris Williams. The cop. He was a flirt. He was also twenty years her junior, but the way he'd checked her out, I didn't think he cared one lick if she was thirty or eighty.

“What am I doing?” My hands tightened on the wheel. “She doesn’t need or want you looking out for her. Leave. Now.”

I didn’t leave.

I had no answers for myself.

So, I stalked.

## CHAPTER FIVE

\* DIANE \*

“There is a time in our lives, usually in mid-life, when a woman has to make a decision - possibly the most important psychic decision of her future life - and that is, whether to be bitter or not.”

— CLARISSA PINKOLA ESTÉS, *WOMEN WHO RUN WITH THE WOLVES: MYTHS AND STORIES OF THE WILD WOMAN ARCHETYPE*

~Several More Months Later~

“**Y**ou know what’s difficult?” The actress gracing my television screen sniffed, blinking away tears and lowering her eyes to the snowy sidewalk. “Loving you, Carter.” She shook her head and my heart twisted wistfully as she added on a whisper, “Loving. You.”

The camera panned to the hero, his square jaw tense, his eyes and mouth betraying inner turmoil. Tall, dark, and handsome hurried forward and he embraced his love while emotion rushed to my eyes. The music swelled. He cupped her jaw. He kissed her.

I sighed. My daughter also sighed. *Ah . . . fictional love.*

I glanced at Jennifer, she glanced at me, and then we sighed together.

“That was a good one.” Her eyes were shining, her smile blooming sweet and misty.

Our tradition every December had always been to watch Hallmark Christmas Movies. Despite everything we'd been through over the last year, all the changes—good and bad—we hadn't broken this tradition. I loved a good, heartfelt, uncomplicated, fictional romance. I always had. And so did my Jennifer.

“Pass the clicker.” I made a grabbing motion with my hand, and she passed it over.

“My favorite was the second one, with the animal shelter and the vet.” Jennifer's smile was dreamy and warm.

“That one was good. The production values are getting better every year.” I scootched forward on the sofa as my eyes moved over the mess of hot chocolate, marshmallows, and the remains of Jennifer's fantastic gingerbread cookies.

She'd used orange peel in the cookies, almond extract in the frosting, and candied ginger as part of the decoration—all her idea. I grinned at the spread of sugar. Everything we'd just eaten used to be contraband under this roof. My *ex*-husband hadn't tolerated sweets in the house throughout our marriage. Truth was, he had me so keyed up about gaining weight, I'd spilled a lot of that anxiety over to my daughter. *Shame on me.*

In the year since I'd kicked the bastard out, I'd put on fifteen pounds and enjoyed every single bite of the cakes and cookies and wine and cocktails that helped me get here. I hadn't traveled yet, but I would soon. Once Jennifer was settled and married, I would take a year off and see the world. *Or maybe more than a year. Maybe I'll only come back to visit.*

“It's getting late and the forecast called for snow overnight. Do you want any more of these gingerbread men?” Jennifer reached to wrap up the expertly decorated cookies.

“Just leave them be.” I stood, shooing away her efforts to tidy. I hadn't told my daughter about my travel plans yet. No reason to discuss such things now when her wedding should be the center of attention.

“Momma, let me help clean up.”

“No need. You’re right, it’s getting late. That man of yours will be storming in here any second if I don’t get you home on time.”

Jennifer pressed her lips together, looking pleased but also suppressing laughter. She knew what I was talking about. “He didn’t storm in.”

“He did too. And he was wielding an axe.”

Jennifer laughed. “That was part of my Halloween costume.”

“Red Riding Hood and the Woods-woman.” I lifted my eyes to the heavens.

“Cletus made an adorable Red Riding Hood.” Jennifer pulled on her coat and turned for the door. “Admit it.”

“He dressed up like the hood of a car, Jennifer. A red car. He’s a nut,” I said, because he was a nut. My soon-to-be son-in-law was one of a kind.

“You know you adore him.” She prodded, wagging her eyebrows.

“Of course I do. But I wish he wouldn’t hide mistletoe all over my house. If he wants to kiss his fiancé then he should kiss his fiancé. He doesn’t need to bring in a hemiparasitic plant or make up stories about it being good luck.”

“He didn’t say it was good luck. He said it would—”

“‘Deliver unto me a very merry Christmas.’ Yes. I remember his pronouncement.” I dismissed Cletus’s prediction and gazed at my daughter with warm affection. “I think I’ve found all of the bunches he left tied to the ceiling, thank goodness. Obviously, he loves you. Actually, it’s obvious he more than loves you. He worships you. And I’m glad because I don’t want you to settle for anything less.”

She gave me a tight, bracing smile, but said nothing. I knew why. She didn’t want me to continue; she didn’t want me to say what was on my mind.

But I couldn’t help it.

“And another thing—”

“Oh dear Lord, please don’t say it!”

“I hope he makes sure you orgasm before he does. Every. Single. Time. Do you hear me? A man—if he’s worth his salt—can do it. He can do it *several* times before, during, and after he pleases himself.” I spoke from experience.

Granted, my experience was relatively new given my age, but it was real-world experience nevertheless. Kip, my ex, may have been as skilled as a handless, tongueless eunuch and as motivated as a sloth in a zoo. But I knew for a fact—FOR A FACT—that not all men were terrible between the sheets. In fact, some men were very, very good between the sheets.

Or on top of the sheets.

Or on top of a dresser.

Or on the floor.

“Momma . . .” Jennifer covered her face and shook her head. “Can we not talk about this?”

“If that man truly values you, he’ll keep you satisfied. I don’t care how many times I have to say it, I don’t want you to—”

“You don’t want me to waste twenty-six years without an orgasm and fifteen years without sex. Yes. I know,” she finished for me. Her soft voice held an edge of exhausted mortification.

But I didn’t care if this discussion embarrassed her. “You need to stand up for yourself early on, otherwise men will just walk all over you and steal your feminine power.”

Her hands fell away from her face. She opened her arms, an exasperated expression on her pretty features. “I have to go.”

“You know I tell you these things because I care about you and your feminine power.” I wrapped my arms around her and squeezed as she groaned. Ignoring the sound, I continued, “I’m ashamed of myself that I never talked to you about these things, that it took your father cheating for me to open my eyes. You know I love my therapist, but I’m also still watching those videos and following that blog about sexual healing, and I think you should too.”

“I’m not watching your videos, momma.”

“I wish you would. That woman is so knowledgeable, and she’ll teach you how to please yourself—”

“I NEED TO LEAVE!”

I may have held on too long, held her too tightly, but . . . I missed her. And I missed hugs.

My ex may not have been good for much, but once my business started turning a good profit, he’d been free with his hugs. He’d been stingy with everything else, though. I’d recently tried to remember the last time we’d kissed and I couldn’t.

In retrospect, given all the facts, I should have realized his abhorrence for good food was the first sign that his soul was black as midnight. I could have blamed my blindness on being so young when we got married, but I wouldn’t. I didn’t shirk my responsibility. I accepted and I learned from it, and I moved on. This last year had been all about guilt and making amends, learning to be better, learning how to do better. Next year would be all about moving on.

The second sign of his dark heart was his antipathy about my satisfaction in the bedroom.

And the third sign was how he treated our children.

Actually, that hadn’t been a sign. How he treated my sweet children was a neon billboard, but I’d been too stupid and stubborn and—

“Momma. Please. I have to go.”

Sighing, I released my daughter, a stab of guilt making it difficult to breathe, and nodded. “All right. But be safe.”

Jennifer gave me one more smile and I admired my beautiful daughter—beautiful inside and out—and couldn’t help but feel sad that she’d been forced to be strong *in spite* of her father, not because of him.

She turned for the foyer and I trailed after her. “Are you warm enough? Can I send you home with anything?”

“No. I’m good. Thank you, Momma.”

“Okay.” I fretted. Watching Jennifer leave never got easier. I longed for the days of her childhood. I would have done so many things differently.

*So many things . . .*

Before I knew it, my girl was out the door, in her car, and waving from the driver’s seat. I waved back, pulling my cardigan tighter around my shoulders and rubbing my arms as I fought a shiver.

It was cold. Cold to the tune of twenty-seven degrees and on the verge of snowing. *Best she goes home now, before the roads get slick.*

Once her taillights disappeared down the driveway, I closed the door and locked it, allowing myself one more nostalgic sigh before turning for the living room, glancing at the Christmas tree, and crossing to the couch.

I was alone. Picking up a cookie, I walked to my bedroom.

Vilma Louise—the life coach I’d been following on social media since my separation—said that I needed to reclaim my feminine power. I’d given it away over the course of my bad marriage, given it to my husband every day I didn’t demand his respect and support, demand that he be a husband to me in all the ways that mattered.

After I’d discovered Vilma Louise, I’d made a few reckless choices. One in particular that—though I didn’t regret it, didn’t regret *him* and what had happened between us—I realized now it hadn’t been healthy behavior.

Sure, he’d administered my first orgasm with a man. And that same night he’d also given me my second, third, fourth, and fifth. But he wasn’t . . . well, we weren’t suited. And that was that.

Vilma Louise had warned her followers many times, saying the worst thing to do after the end of a marriage was jump into bed with someone else, to try filling the void with another person, and I’d done just that. But now I knew better. The next person I had sex with would be someone who wanted *me*, not someone I’d thrown myself at in a moment of weakness.

I was done being weak for men.

Therefore, Mr. Repo and our night together were firmly in the past. As part of my healing process, I found pleasure in *myself* whenever I noticed being alone. It was part of learning to love myself, who I was. I needed to be not just *enough*, but more than that. I was my best friend, my best partner, my best lover.

I took this advice very seriously and credited it with the permanent, satisfied smile I wore most days.

With the warm feelings still floating around in my belly from five hours of Hallmark movies, I crossed to my dresser and took out a black nightie trimmed with red lace, divested myself of clothes, and took my time slipping it on.

Then I let my hair down, eying myself in the mirror and wondering for maybe the hundredth time since separating from Kip whether or not I should dye it red. I'd always wanted to be a redhead. I'd talked about it for years, but Kip said no one would take me seriously if I did.

Well, screw him.

I decided then and there that I would make an appointment with Darla after Jennifer's wedding in the spring and dye my hair red as a cardinal's feathers. I left my bedroom dressed only in the nightie, because why not? I was by myself and it was five days after Christmas. I'd taken the entire week off from work. I could walk around this house naked as a possum if I wanted. No one would see or care.

I tiptoed to the living room, grabbed another cookie, and washed it down with a cup of eggnog—the good stuff with generous amounts of rum and brandy, not the store-bought imitation for Baptists and Seventh Day Adventists—then packed away the remainder of our picnic.

But I did grab the bottle of brandy and a lowball glass.

As soon as the living room was tidy, I claimed the chair closest to the gaslit fireplace, snuggled under a blanket, poured myself two fingers of brandy, and picked up my e-reader.

Since Jennifer's relationship with Cletus Winston, I'd become friendly with his only sister, Ashley. She was helping me plan Jennifer and Cletus's

engagement party and the wedding. Anyhow, Ashley was a reader and she'd given me a list of the best sexy books to read during my alone time. Suffice it to say, Ashley Winston-Runous was now one of my favorite people on the planet.

The wind kicked up, whistling through the trees and rattling the windows. I noticed the snow coming down just before I lost myself in my book. About a half-hour later, the lights flickered off, then on, then off again. I glanced around, seeing they weren't coming back on, and shrugged. I had my fire, blanket, and brandy to keep me warm. My e-reader was fully charged and backlit. If needs be, I could sleep by the fireplace.

An hour passed. Then another. Maybe another after that. I didn't know. I lost track of time. It was a real good book. The plot was better than the sex scenes, so I kept on reading. I was just coming to the second to last chapter—where all the good stuff happens—when a knock sounded on my front door.

Startled, I glanced at the clock over the fireplace. It was past midnight.

*Now who in tarnation—*

Another knock followed, louder this time and lasting for a longer period of time.

Frowning, I reluctantly set my e-reader to one side and wrapped myself in the large blanket. The unknown person knocked a third time, even more insistent than before.

"I hear you, I hear you. Keep your britches on," I muttered, making sure the blanket covered me from neck to ankle, then squinted through the peephole.

*Oh my God . . .!* It was dark, and I couldn't see his face, but I knew who it was. Startled, I stiffened and reared back, my heart jumping to my throat.

"Diane?" he called, his Texas drawl meeting my ears and melting bones.

I blinked into the darkness, holding my breath, unsure how to proceed. I'd spotted Mr. Repo a few times over the past year. We lived in the same township, after all. Of course, I'd been looking for him, but that was beside the point.

*Then what is the point?*

The point is as follows: I'd left him asleep in that bed last Christmas just before dawn, sneaking out of the bar thanks to my son and making it all the way home before bursting into tears. And then, when I saw him next, walking down Main Street toward Walnut, his eyes had skipped right over me, like I didn't exist. And then, the next time I saw him, coming out the of the Piggly Wiggly two months later, he'd had a woman waiting for him on the back of his bike.

In summary, my point is . . . *I don't think I have a point.*

“Open the door, gorgeous,” he said. “It's cold out here.”

Swallowing nerves and apprehension, I called back, “You're barking up the wrong tree, Mr. Repo. Kindly remove yourself from my porch.”

I bit my bottom lip, straining my ears, and waited. Only silence greeted me.

I checked the peephole again and, sure enough, he'd stepped off the porch. The silhouette of him lingered at the edge of it. I could tell by how he was standing that he was, in truth, very cold. My heart pinged at the sight.

I watched him sigh, his breath a cloud of faint white illuminated by the full moon. It was still snowing—a lot—and his black leather jacket was dotted with snowflakes.

“Diane, my bike is under a tree off the main road near your drive.” He lifted his voice, explaining, and I watched him rub his forehead with gloved fingers; the big biker sounded mighty tired. “I spun out on the black ice and crashed. I'm not injured, but my cell don't work. The bike won't start. It's too far to walk back to town or to the club. The only other houses on this stretch are the sheriff and the Winstons, and I ain't knocking on either of those doors past midnight. I'd get shot. Or worse.”

I pressed my palm to my heart, willing it to slow and stepped back from the peephole, my other hand automatically lifting to the deadbolt. But I didn't turn it. A war waged within me.

On the one hand, he was a dangerous man. Second in command of the Iron Wraiths. I knew he had a gun on him, likely more than one. He did bad

things and ordered others to also do bad things. And he was unrepentant. The man lived hard and fast.

But I also knew he made love soft and slow. And then he made love hard and fast. And then he took requests afterward for one or the other.

“Now, gorgeous, I’m asking you to please let me in. Because it’s colder than a witch’s tit out here and I might be literally freezing to death.”

*Shoot.*

He was right and that decided things. I couldn’t leave him outside to freeze to death.

Gripping the blanket tight to my throat with one hand, I unlocked the deadbolt, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

## CHAPTER SIX

\* DIANE \*

“When I was your age, television was called books.”

— WILLIAM GOLDMAN, *THE PRINCESS BRIDE*

**H**e stood at the edge of the porch, his hands on his hips, his chin tilted up to look at me, and he was so damn handsome I had to press a palm against my galloping heart.

“Come on in, then. I can’t have you freeze to death on my porch,” I said tightly, wanting to be clear that I was only allowing him to enter my house under dire circumstances. But then, not liking how rude that sounded, I added, “Have you had supper?”

I didn’t see his smile. I felt it. I felt it in the air, how it shifted, how the snow hurried to the earth and fell both quickly and quietly. For some reason, how the snow journeyed to the ground struck me as poignant, or important. But before I could think too much about it, Repo was climbing my porch stairs.

His motorcycle boots made barely a sound and soon he was almost to the door. I backed up two steps, holding the door open and letting him pass.

Now, I was not a tall woman. I was a short woman. At five feet even, I’d grown accustomed to wearing four inch heels over the course of my life. My ex was five foot eight, fine-boned, and worked his whole life in an

office—and that had suited me just fine. I'd liked that he never overwhelmed me physically.

The last time I'd seen Repo I'd been wearing the aforementioned four-inch heels. And I'd been tipsy on rage. Presently, I didn't have any shoes on. So, a six-foot male with a big frame, broad shoulders, and undoubtedly accustomed to manual labor felt like a goliath.

Regardless, I refused to be intimidated. I was Diane Donner. I was one of the most successful and influential persons of property and business in East Tennessee—aside from Dolly and Daisy Payton and the Leffersbees.

Repo paused just beyond the front door, glancing around the darkness like he could see just fine by the moonlight filtering in through the windows. I closed the door, not letting myself think about *who* I'd just allowed into my house and *what* we'd done the last time we were alone.

No.

I would not think about *that*. I would not think about how he'd made me watch him, how he'd touched me, how his large, tanned, rough hands had looked on my body. I would not think about how he'd savored my skin and palmed my breasts and knelt down and—

“No,” he said, startling me.

I glanced at Repo over my shoulder, feeling flushed. “No?”

“No.” We were standing very close, so I both saw and felt his eyes move over my face as he spoke. “No, I haven't had supper,” came his quiet reply.

“Oh,” I said on a short exhale, realizing quite suddenly that in addition to my racehorse of a heart, I was now out of breath. “Let's get you, uh, fed.” I marched past him, calling over my shoulder, “Take your shoes off, if you please. And there's brandy in the living room. Help yourself.”

In the kitchen, I switched my brain to autopilot and lit a few candles so I could see. I then made the man a turkey sandwich with leftovers from Christmas. Jennifer had brought three kinds of pie, so I cut him a slice of each—pumpkin cinnamon, rum pecan, and coconut custard—and grabbed a

napkin and fork from the drawer. Arranging everything on a tray, and adding a few candles for good measure, I carried it to the living room.

I stopped short, my mouth growing inexplicably dry at the sight of his broad back. Warming himself by the fire, the big man didn't turn as I entered, but I saw he'd taken off his shoes as requested. He'd also removed his jacket and gloves, leaving him in dark jeans, dark socks, and a charcoal grey thermal that highlighted how wide his shoulders were and how his midsection tapered to narrow hips.

He was so . . . so . . . *manly*. Manly in a way I'd rarely been exposed to over the course of my steady, straightforward life.

My ex hadn't been manly. Sure, he'd been in good shape. He'd exercised and taken good care of his body. I thought he'd been enlightened. I thought he'd been sensitive, an advocate for equal opportunity and women's rights, proud of me for being the breadwinner and happy to spend the money. But he hadn't. He'd used the guise of feminism to hide his weakness, selfishness, and impotency.

My father was a drunk and a dissolute disappointment. He'd been a philanderer, soft and spoiled, having stepped out on my mother countless times. I didn't consider him manly either. Quite the opposite. He was weak and bitter.

My grandfather was manly. Of note was he'd been seventy when I was born. I'd only known him in his later years.

The Sherriff was manly in a way that reminded me of Repo now, so was Fire Chief McClure. And they were both happily married to exceptional women. Those Winston boys were also manly. Yet they were young. So very young.

But Repo . . . not too old, not too young, not married. Like baby bear's porridge, he was *just right*.

*Except, you know, a criminal who pretends you don't exist when he's walking down Main toward Walnut.*

"You look like you don't know whether to check your ass or scratch your watch."

“Pardon?” I blinked at him, realizing I’d been standing at the precipice of the room, lost to my thoughts about manliness.

He cracked a half smile. His dark brown eyes, illuminated only by firelight, moved over me with plain amusement. The flames highlighted the angles and lines of his handsome face, making him look distinguished instead of disreputable.

Repo’s attention lingered on my neck and chest, his shoulders rising and falling with a deep breath before saying quietly, “Never mind. Let me help you with that tray.”

“Oh. Oh no. I’ve got it.” I crossed to the coffee table and placed it on the surface, removing the candles and setting them on the table to give us some extra light. I then checked my side table for the brandy. He hadn’t touched it. “Let me get you a glass. Do you want a blanket?”

“No, thank you.” The big man cleared his throat, like he’d wanted to say something else but had abstained due to superior self-control.

I felt his eyes on me as I moved to the sideboard to select a tumbler, noticing that the blanket around my shoulders had become loose. I wrapped it more firmly around myself, then poured a double for my guest before turning and placing it on the coffee table next to his tray.

“Please. Sit.” I gestured to the sofa as I reclaimed my place on the chair by the fire, tucking my legs under me. “Eat.”

His gaze moved over me for a lingering moment, and I watched his chest rise and fall with another voluminous breath before he finally strolled to the sofa, sat, and studied the tray of food.

“This looks . . .” He swallowed, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. “This looks delicious. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” I studied him as I sipped my brandy, inwardly smiling at this rough man and his unexpected display of good manners. The last time we’d been together, he hadn’t been so well-behaved. At one point, I believe he’d told me to, and I quote, “Shut up.”

Granted, I'd shown up at a biker bar, dressed like a loose woman, looking for trouble. In my fine house, surrounded by my fine things, everything was different. We'd been in his world then; we were in my world now.

He ate in silence for a bit, his eyes studying the room, seemingly cataloging all my belongings. At length, when the sandwich was gone and so were two slices of pie, he lifted his chin toward a painting above my head.

"Is that a Wyeth?"

I didn't need to check the painting to answer, but I was surprised he'd recognized the artist. "Yes. Andrew Wyeth."

His steady gaze lowered to me and his mouth, framed by his salt and pepper beard, hitched on one side. "Don't sound so surprised, gorgeous. I'm not as dumb as I look."

I tilted my head back and forth in a considering motion. "You don't look dumb, Mr. Repo."

"Really?" He grinned, a flash of white teeth, a twinkle in his eye. His voice lowered an octave as he asked, "What do I look like, then?"

"Complicated," I answered without thinking too much about it.

"Funny. I was just thinking the same thing about you." His grin deepened and one of his eyebrows inched higher than the other.

I ignored that leading statement, because it couldn't lead anywhere productive, and changed the subject back to art. "Where'd you learn about Andrew Wyeth?"

His grin fell, just a smidge, and he wiped his mouth with the napkin, leaning back on the sofa.

I didn't really expect him to answer, so I was surprised when he turned his gaze to the fire and said, "A woman, not unlike you, thought I required some culture. She thought . . . well, she thought I'd benefit from an education that extended to subjects beyond my upbringing." He glanced at his hands, huffing a humorless laugh. "She thought she could make me something different. Something better."

“Better than what?” I had so many questions, but this one felt like the most pressing.

His eyes cut to mine and I felt the weight of them instantly, like a touch. Like he’d grabbed me with both hands.

“Oh, now Diane. You know the answer to that.” His tenor was low, gravelly, and he gestured mildly to my house as his mouth curved in a sardonic smile. “I’m dirt in your fingernails, gorgeous. No use being polite about it.”

I frowned at his assessment of himself. “That’s an overly dramatic simplification, Mr. Repo.”

“Whatever you say.” He shrugged, his tone still gentle yet holding an unmistakable edge of acrimony.

We stared at each other for a time—me watching him, him being watched, neither of us willing to speak.

Lord help me, I was curious. I wasn’t usually the curious sort, more interested in the doing of things rather than the pondering of things. If a task required more than a half-hour of thought, I was of the mind that it should be delegated. Let an expert handle the details and just give me the summary.

But not tonight. Not with him. Not in the dark. Not after two glasses of brandy, a sexy book on my mind, and silk on my skin.

It was almost one year to the day since I’d walked into the Iron Wraith’s club. Last December I’d called it a Christmas present to myself. I might’ve spent the twelve months since engaging in healthy behaviors, but the memory of my indulgence, with him, had never been far from my mind. And I wanted to know the truth, about so many things.

So, I blurted, “Why did you agree to my request last year? When I showed up at the club?”

His eyebrows jumped a tick on his forehead, his eyes widening a smidge. But his features smoothed otherwise, the tension in his shoulders dissipating. Though the question seemed to surprise him, apparently it also relaxed him.

“What a ridiculous question.” He both smiled and frowned at me, his eyes skating down then up my form.

“How so?”

“A beautiful woman walks into my club, dressed like you were—”

“How was I dressed?”

“Like you wanted to get laid.”

“I guess I said as much, didn’t I?” I mused, grinning and laughing despite myself and the memory. Or maybe because of it. “Okay, go on.”

He chuckled and the deep rumble made me shiver, sent spikes of lovely feminine awareness racing over my skin.

“What else is there to say?”

“What were you thinking? When you saw me?”

“I was surprised, to see you there.” He paused, his eyes narrowing, like he was debating his words.

He bit his lip, chewed on it, his gaze growing distant and hazy as though he were remembering all those months ago.

Finally, he said, “And I didn’t want you to cause any trouble.”

“Did I cause trouble?”

He gave me the slow-spreading, mischievous grin I remembered from the last time we were together, the one that had completely disarmed me and made me forget to be nervous. “More than you know,” he finally said.

I liked his answer, so I pressed for more information. “And what about when we were alone? What were you thinking then?”

He shrugged. “At that point, I just wanted to touch you, make you feel good.”

My smile widened. A tingling warmth spread from chest to my fingertips and low in belly. “And so you did.”

“Yes. I did.” His grin waned even as his gaze heated. Repo swept his eyes over me, or what he could see of me wrapped in the blanket. “And then you disappeared.”

I tilted my head to the side, again his stare feeling like a touch, like he was grabbing me with both hands. “I didn’t disappear. We live in the same place.”

He chuckled again, but this time it was devoid of humor. “No.”

“No?”

“No, Diane. We do not live in the same place.” He leaned forward, his elbows connecting with his knees, his hands clasped in front of him.

Lifting an eyebrow, I challenged, “We most certainly do. In fact, it’s less than fifteen miles between my house and your club.”

“Worlds apart,” he countered simply, but he looked amused.

I scoffed. “That’s nonsense.”

“Nope. That’s reality, gorgeous.”

“So that’s why you never—never tried to contact me? After?” I didn’t feel vulnerable or insecure about our lack of interaction afterward. But I was curious. Simply . . . curious.

He didn’t respond right away. Instead, he watched me, and I noticed his breathing had become shallow.

I pressed, “Do you do that often?”

“What?”

“Have mind blowing sex with women and then move on to the next?”

“Mind blowing?”

“Yes. Mind blowing. Earth shattering. Life altering.” I stood, waving my hand through the air for emphasis, and crossed to the sideboard. I needed more brandy for this conversation.

He stood too, grabbing his glass which I hadn't realized until that moment was empty, and shadowed my steps. I uncapped the liquor and turned, finding him closer—and taller—than I'd expected. But I didn't miss a beat. I refilled his glass, then I refilled mine, then I clinked our tumblers together and angled my chin so I could catch his eyes.

As it turns out, I didn't need to catch anything. He was giving them to me willingly.

“So, tell me, is this your *modus operandi*? If so,” I clinked our glasses together again, “on behalf of underserviced women everywhere, allow me to extend a sincere thanks.”

Before I could bring the glass to my lips, Repo set his tumbler on the side table and wrapped his large hand around my wrist, staying my movements. He shifted a step closer, and I noticed his gaze had grown hooded as it traveled from my lips to eyes.

“Diane,” he whispered, his other hand moving to the blanket covering my shoulder. “Are you drunk?”

I shook my head, my heart all at once in my throat, my chest both heavy and light. “Not yet.”

“Good.” He nodded faintly, guiding my hand to the table and placing my glass next to his. “Because I'm going to tell you something and I want you to remember it tomorrow.”

“Repo—”

“My name is Jason,” he said gruffly. “Call me Jason.”

“Okay. Jason.” I swallowed and nodded quickly as he gripped the blanket and tugged. I felt it slip over my shoulders and fall away, yet I made no move to grab it. I couldn't. I was trapped, a thrilling sense of *déjà vu* holding me hostage.

“The answer is no.”

“No?”

“No.” He formed the word slowly, meticulously, as though imparting a profound truth with great care. “I do not entertain women often. Or at all. I do not take a woman to one of my rooms, and then kneel before her. I do not eat pussy—ever—and I do not wait for a woman to come three times before taking my turn and becoming crazy with how badly I want to do it again. All of it.”

By the end of his speech I was panting. And incredibly turned on. I wondered if anyone in the history of the world had ever been as turned on as I was right that minute. Probably not.

Not helping matters, Repo—I mean Jason—had replaced his hand on my shoulder as soon as the blanket fell away, his thumb pulling the strap of my nightie down my arm, baring my breast. He cupped me. I moaned.

“Now,” he said, no longer whispering; his deep voice wasn’t loud, but it also wasn’t soft, “I’m going kiss you. Everywhere. But not because I haven’t been able to get you out of my mind since last year, since last Christmas when you walked into my club.”

I shivered, my eyelids half blinking and I swayed towards him. “Then, why are you going to kiss me?”

“Because . . .” He bent, turning me, pressing my back against the high table as his hands slipped down my body to my thighs. “We’re standing under the mistletoe.”

I stared at him. Then I lifted my eyes and saw he was right.

The mistletoe. My son-in-law’s mistletoe. The one he’d hid in my house. The one I’d missed. The one he’d predicted would deliver unto me a very merry Christmas.

I gasped just before Jason’s lips met mine, just before he captured my moan and my newly filled glass of brandy crashed to the carpet.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

\*JASON\*

“Midlife: when the Universe grabs your shoulders and tells you  
“I’m not f-ing around, use the gifts you were given.”

— DR. BRENÉ BROWN

**A** nightie.

*A fucking nightie.*

That’s what she’d been wearing under the blanket, and nothing else. If our first time had felt like a fantasy, this moment was straight out of my dreams. God, she felt good. So fucking good. Her little whimper as I massaged her tits and claimed her mouth made me crazy. I must’ve been crazy, because this was never supposed to happen.

I’d promised her son and myself. I’d planned to keep that promise. I’d kept my distance for a year. And if I hadn’t spun out tonight on my way over here to check in on her, to walk her property in the snow and convince myself all was well, then I’d still be keeping my distance.

*You never should’ve come.*

I’d stopped following her. In September, I’d stopped. I’d made myself do it, volunteering for a shit job out of town, and when I’d returned, I’d broken the habit. But then two of the recruits said they’d seen Kip Sylvester’s mistress hanging around the Donner Lodge the week before Christmas.

They'd been at the Lodge scouting a patch of land in the forest to the north as a neutral zone for a meet up with a different club.

My self-control wavered. I told myself I'd check in on Diane for one week, and then I'd stop again. That's what I'd told myself.

She whimpered again and grabbed my wrist as I fingered her pussy, testing how ready she was, because I was more than ready. I was a year past ready.

"Wait. Wait. Hold on now." Diane twisted her face, wrenching her mouth from mine and gasping.

I turned my wrist and captured her hand, bringing her palm to the front of my pants so she could feel what she did to me. She shivered.

"I'm tired of waiting," I growled, bending to taste her neck as we stroked my cock together. "I want you."

"Whoa—okay, okay, okay. Just—ah!" She made a squeaking sound when my mouth closed over the center of her breast and I tongued her nipple, leaving her capable palm at my fly while I circled her clit with my middle finger.

I wanted to touch her everywhere. I needed to feel her, see her beneath me, spread open wide, taking every inch of my cock. Her hips rocked, searching; her body arched, begging; her hand gripped me, stroking.

But then, she stopped. She froze. She pushed me away. And she rushed to the other side of the room, placing the couch between us as she pulled up the strap of that sexy as sin, flimsy, basically see-through nightie.

*Before tonight is over, I'm taking that thing as a souvenir.*

"You stay there." Breathing hard, she held her hands out. "And I'll, uh, stand here."

Her eyes darted all over the dimly lit space, never settling. Unable to hold still, she paced back and forth behind the couch, tugging a hand through her hair and twisting her fingers.

I also breathed hard, and I felt like I'd face-planted into a wall of concrete. Reality settled on my shoulders like a plane crash. I'd broken all my

promises, and though I couldn't be sorry about it, I knew I should leave. If I stayed, I'd do everything in my power to seduce her. And the way I was feeling, I didn't know if I'd be able to leave her in the morning.

So I said, "I should leave."

"What?" She spun to face me, her eyebrows pulled low. "No! No. Absolutely not. It's a frozen hellscape out there right now. Just, give me a minute to think."

"Take your time." I would leave. I'd wait for the right moment, just as soon as she left to put on more clothes, or when she went to sleep. Then I'd figure out how not to freeze to death in the dark while walking miles to the compound.

"I—I have some thoughts." She continued to face me, she also continued to twist her fingers. "And there's some things that need saying between us . . . apparently."

I swallowed around the residual lust and nodded. Under no circumstances would I touch her again. Touching her made me lose my mind. *And break all my promises.*

"The simple fact of the matter is, I am not the same woman who showed up at your bar last year. That woman was hurt, but she was also incredibly angry and bitter. I am not her." Diane stepped closer to the couch, placing her hands on the back of it.

"Okay." I nodded again, her words helping a great deal to sober my thoughts. She didn't want a repeat, she didn't want me. This news was not surprising, even if it did hit me right in the gut.

"For one"—she lifted her chin proudly—"I have more respect for myself. I know better what I want."

"Fine. Message received."

Her frown returned, more severe than before. "What? Wait—no. How can you receive a message when I'm not finished sending it? Please let me just get all this out. Okay?"

“Sure.”

The least I could do after grabbing her like a maniac was listen. And maybe I needed these words too. Maybe I needed to hear the rejection so I'd get it through my thick skull that she was not mine to think about, to worry over, to protect. Then I'd leave her alone for good.

“My point is, I've had a long-term relationship and it was a disappointment in every way it possibly could be. And maybe I'm old fashioned, maybe I'm naïve when it comes to matters of the heart, but I can't help who I am.”

I set my hands on my hips and heaved a silent sigh. “Just say it, Diane.”

Her fingers seemed to dig into the back of the couch. “I want someone to court me.”

And there it was.

I continued staring at her, counting the seconds as they ticked by. Why she couldn't just say, *I don't want you, you're not good enough for me*, I had no idea. Did she think I needed to be let down gently?

*Well, now. That would be a first.*

“I want dinners and flowers,” she went on. “And picnics and romantic gestures. I don't want to constantly be making excuses for someone, for their lack of ability or skill or generosity.”

“Diane. You don't need to say anything else.”

“I don't?” Her featured brightened and she approached the arm of the couch; my eyes snagged on her stiff nipples, barely concealed by the thin layer of silk. “You understand what I mean?”

“Yes.” I tore my eyes away, no point in torturing myself. “You mean you don't want me.”

“What?” she snapped, her head tilting to the side like she needed to inspect me from a different angle. “No! No, you irritating man. Did I say that? That's not at all what I'm saying!”

I glanced over her head toward the room's exit, impatient to get going. I didn't belong here. "Then what do you mean?"

"I mean I want you."

My eyes cut back to hers and as I waited for the *but*, for the rejection—because there was always a *but* followed by a rejection—and I ignored the tightness seizing my chest and what it might mean.

When she kept on looking at me, as though expecting a reaction, I prompted, "But?"

"But nothing." She placed her hands on her hips, her tone salty, impatient.

"There's always a *but*," I said stupidly.

"Fine. Yes. Okay. There is a 'but.'" Her eyes moved like she might roll them, but stopped when they reached the ceiling. "I want you. *But . . .* only if you want me the same way."

I stared at her. It's all I could do because I was so damn confused.

Meanwhile, she peaked at me, nibbling her bottom lip, looking sinfully gorgeous in her little nightie that showcased every delectable curve.

"Do you . . . want me?" The uncertainty in her voice, the vulnerability, hit low in my stomach.

"What?" I choked out, because was hers a real question? How could she not know how much I wanted her? Hadn't I just kissed the hell out of her? Hadn't her breast just filled my palm? Hadn't I just literally said the words, *I want you*?

Her tongue flicked out to lick her lips and she stepped fully around the couch, her eyes huge. "I've been in a lonely, one-sided romance before. I don't want that. I want something deep, something meaningful for both people involved. I'm not saying we have to get married. Lord knows, I've had enough of marriage to last a lifetime. I don't think I'll ever get married again. What I'm talking about is something real, authentic, passionate, but also—above all else—loving. Because what I've never had, what I've never known, is that."

“I . . . don’t understand.” *Did I hit my head? Am I really here?*

Diane took a deep breath and then said loudly, “I want a relationship,” like the words were a painful confession and the only way she could speak them out loud was by near shouting them.

I stared at her for a moment longer before finally asking, “With who?”

Her lips twitched. “With you.”

*What?* “With me.”

“Yes. But a real one, not just—and I can’t believe I’m saying this—not just sex.”

I barely heard a word she’d said, instead repeating, “With me,” again because the very idea was ludicrous. *A relationship with me? Is she crazy?*

“Yes. With you. As I’ve said.”

“But . . . Why?”

“What do you mean *why?*” She frowned, though amusement sparked behind her blue eyes. “Have you met you?”

I could do nothing but stare at her and blink, unable to absorb the meaning of her words. *Was this a joke?*

Fortunately or unfortunately, Diane seemed to have no problem spelling things out. “You’re smart, clever. You make me laugh. You’re good a flirting—extremely good at flirting. And you’re capable, competent, cool under pressure. That’s big for me. That’s number one. I swear, there’s more billionaires on this planet than capable men. You are great in bed and have an appetite that matches mine, both in the bedroom and in the kitchen. And I’m talking about good food, none of that low-fat garbage.” She gestured to my empty plate on the coffee table before settling her hands on her hips. “Also, look in a mirror.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I am. Plus, you seem to like me, even though most folks think I’m arrogant and bossy. Which, they’re right about. I am. And I’m learning how to

embrace it. This is the year of me embracing who I am and what I want.”

“Diane—”

“Jason.”

I couldn’t keep up so I stated the obvious, “I am not for you.”

“Oh really? Why? Am I too old for you?”

“What? No!”

“Then why? Is it because I’m bitchy?”

“No,” I spoke between clenched teeth and without thinking too much about my words. “I don’t consider confident women to be bitchy. I happen to enjoy confidence.”

“I thought you might.” She gave me a smile that looked both knowing and contemplative. “Then what is it? Am I too short? Too thin? Too fat?”

“You’re perfect and you know it.”

She clapped her hands together, tucked them under her chin, and gave a happy squeal as stars blossomed behind her eyes. “You think I’m perfect? Then what’s the problem?”

“Diane, I’m—” I dug my fingers into my hair. *Where do I start?* Garbage. Worthless. So far beneath her. I meant what I’d said earlier; I was the dirt under her nails. *Unworthy.*

“What? A Scorpio? Please don’t be a Scorpio. My astrological sign does not mesh well with Scorpions.”

Rather than laugh, I blurted, “A criminal, Diane. I am a criminal.”

“So?”

“That’s not going to be a problem for you?”

She seemed to consider the question for two seconds before responding, “I don’t think so, as long as you’re not hurting anybody.”

“Do you realize how ridiculous that sounds? That’s what criminals do. We hurt people.”

“Well. Okay. Fine.” She threw her hands in the air. “You’re a criminal. You hurt people. So noted.”

“So noted?”

“Yes. So noted.”

“Just like that? You’re okay with me hurting people?” *I definitely hit my head.* This couldn’t be happening. She would never say these words.

“Not really, but thanks for the heads up.”

I exhaled my disbelief. “This is not a heads up, Diane. You’ll have to be okay with it, because I’m not changing.”

“Did I ask you to change?” She placed a hand on her chest, sounding affronted. “Didn’t I just finish telling you all the things I like about you? If you feel the need to be a criminal, that’s your business. And if I feel the need to be a vain glutton, spending a ridiculous amount of money on shoes I don’t need instead of giving the money to charity where it’ll help folks and do some good, then that’s my business. You know how many people are food insecure in this country? And I have over one hundred pairs of designer shoes. See? We’re both sinful in our own way. So what? We’ll go to hell together with smiles on our faces.”

I tucked my lips between my teeth to keep from laughing and lowered my chin to my chest. This woman bent reality to suit her ambitions. I didn’t know if I was frustrated by her flawed logic or charmed by her determination. Either way, if she’d been a man, she would’ve made an excellent addition to the Wraiths. Hell, she’d probably be running everything.

“Besides,” she went on, “you being a criminal and what you do with other people is beside the point. I’m talking about you and me. Us. Not other people.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No, Diane. You can’t live your life pretending like other people don’t exist.”

She crossed her arms, giving me a look of defiance that sent arousal straight south. I loved that look. It heated my bones and made me want to fuck it right off her face.

“Why the hell not?” She jutted out her chin. “Don’t you pretend other people don’t exist? Why do you get to ignore other people and I don’t?”

Ignoring my body’s building reaction to her, I removed myself a step. “I may ignore the people in your circles, but I have responsibilities to the people in mine. I do not live my life free of others, or their expectations.”

“But don’t you wish you could?” Her gaze turned beseeching. “Don’t you wish you could just tell everyone to go to hell?”

I shut my trap, grinding my jaw. Her question hit a nerve. In the past, I’d taken extended breaks from the Wraiths. I’d left for months, explored new places, immersed myself the life and culture. One of the reasons I’d been so loyal to the brotherhood was because of the freedom.

But that had all changed. I couldn’t leave them unsupervised anymore. They did stupid, evil shit when I was gone, and I always came home to a giant mess.

In Diane’s examination of me, she seemed to sense a weakness, seemed to understand my desire to escape from this prison I’d created for myself, and could tell my lack of freedom was a sore spot.

She exploited it. “I spent the first half of my life worried about other people and look where it got me. Maybe I don’t want to think about *other people* anymore—except my kids, of course. But everyone else? No, thank you. They can take their opinions and jump in a lake. Maybe it’s time for me to just take what I want.”

I inspected her, confusion and disbelief warring with hope and selfishness. “And you want me.”

“Yes. I want you. But only if—”

“I want you the same.” She didn’t seem to realize, but I wasn’t finishing her sentence. I stated a fact. I wanted her. I wanted what she offered.

“Correct.” She nodded and it looked a little jerky, excited, nervous. “Like I said, dinners and flowers and courtship.”

“From me.”

“From you. But also—” Her voice cracked and she cleared her throat, her eyes wide and earnest. “I want to do the same for you. I’d make you breakfast when you spent the night. I’d buy you gifts. I’d take care of you, too. I *want* someone to take care of.”

“You’re crazy,” I said, my heart in my throat, and I didn’t know if I was speaking to her or to myself. I was considering this. I wanted to say yes.

“Maybe I am. But I think you like my crazy and this is what I want.”

I’d chased after a woman before. For ten long years, I’d pursued and attempted to win Louisa Franklin, high society ice-queen. She’d put me through my paces. She’d also betrayed me, leaving me bitter and angry.

Whereas Margaret—my one and only old lady during my time with the Wraiths—had wanted to take care of me, to love me. Except everything she did, every selfless act, turned my stomach. She had no self-respect, no boundaries. I could do no wrong. Her type of desperate, needy love left me cold and adrift.

“What if I mistreat you?” I asked the question before I could catch it. I would never mistreat a woman, not on purpose, but Diane’s words in the bar from last year—about finding someone else once she was drunk enough—still plagued me.

No, we couldn’t do this. We would never be together, not how she wanted. But Diane was obviously ready to try with someone.

“Then I’ll dump your ass,” she said, like it was the simplest thing in the world.

I did laugh then, shaking my head at her. “What if I don’t want to be dumped?”

“You forget, I just survived a divorce from a sneaky reprobate who didn’t want to be divorced, who wanted to take me for everything, who wanted to see me penniless, ruined, broken.” Her eyes narrowed, and the look she wore was scary as hell. “I do not break, Jason. I will never break. I’m too stubborn and I’m much too selfish. So if you don’t want to be dumped, you’ll have to get over it, or else I’d get a restraining order. I have lots of experience with those now. And if you crossed that line, I’d make sure you’d rot in jail.”

“You’d put me in jail?” *Good.*

“Yes. If you did anything to piss me off, absolutely.” She nodded, presumably at the veracity of her words. This plus the spark of determination behind her eyes was one hell of a turn on.

*Say yes.*

I couldn’t.

*You want her.*

I had responsibilities.

*Fuck responsibilities. Jessica isn’t here anymore. You have no reason to stay loyal to Razor.*

“What if I went to jail for something unrelated to you?” I asked, stalling.

“Then I suppose I’d get you a good lawyer.”

“Even if I was guilty?”

“It would depend on what you did.”

“Money laundering.”

“Then I’d get you a great lawyer.”

Now I turned away, walking some distance and shaking my head to clear it.  
“Diane.”

“Jason.” From the closeness of her voice, I knew she’d followed me. A moment later, her hand closed around my arm and gently turned me to face her.

Damn, but she was so beautiful. “What you’re asking isn’t possible, gorgeous.”

“Fine. That’s fine.” Her eyes dropped and her tone grew arch, higher pitched. “That’s perfectly fine. If you’re not interested, I completely understand. I know I’m not for everybody. I rub lots of folks the wrong way, but I am who I am and—”

“No. No, listen to me.” I stepped forward, crowding her space and grabbing her hands. Touching her was likely a mistake, but I soldiered on, pressing them between my palms and making sure she looked at me—truly looked—before continuing. “I am interested. You have no idea. But my life, this life I’m in, it would be a danger to you. If my brothers found out, you would not be safe.”

“I don’t believe that. Bethany Winston may’ve been abused by Darrell, but none of the other Wraiths ever laid a hand on her.”

“It’s not just physical safety I’m talking about. What’s yours—this house, your money, the Lodge, the bakery—they’d expect that to be mine, and theirs by extension. Everything Bethany had before her marriage was squandered by the Wraiths. They took everything from her.”

“But we wouldn’t be married.”

“But you’d be mine.” She would be. I would make her mine, and I’d never let her go.

“Okay, okay. I concede, you have some good points.” She lifted to her toes and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. “But aren’t we putting the buggy before the horse here?”

I leaned forward as she withdrew, chasing her mouth and muttering, “How so?”

“Before we start worrying about your boyfriends at the club, or the upper echelon of society in town, why don’t we go on a date?”

I stared at her.

She twisted her hands such that our fingers tangled and moved them to our sides, leaning forward and pressing her body against mine. “One date. We may not even like each other.”

“I like you just fine.”

“Sure. But how much do you really know about me? Maybe you don’t like the way I order my food. I’m very particular about food preparation. Or maybe I chew too loud. Or maybe you hate the color pink.”

“I don’t hate the color pink.” My eyes dropped to her mouth. I needed to kiss her again.

“Good, ’cause it’s my favorite color. And I don’t think I could date a man who didn’t have pink in his wardrobe.” Releasing my fingers, she slipped her arms around my neck.

I didn’t dare touch her, so I balled my hands into fists. “I do not have pink in my wardrobe. I don’t even have a wardrobe.”

“See? I did not know that. And now I don’t know if we have a future.”

Despite myself, despite the situation, I laughed. And when I did, I saw that my laughter had been her aim, because she smiled big and wide, looking exceptionally pleased.

“But these are the kinds of things, the kinds of questions folks figure out on dates, Jason.” She placed a soft kiss on my cheek, then my jaw. “Favorite movies, favorite movie genres, favorite food, flavors of ice cream.”

“Peaches and vanilla,” I said, my blood heating.

“Good to know.” The words were a playful whisper spoken against my neck. “We can drive to Asheville, take two separate cars. We can both wear a disguise if you’re concerned about being seen. Fine. But what is the harm in going on one date?”

“One date?” I licked my lips, considering it. Actually, I more than considered it. I decided.

“Yes. Surely your Wraiths brothers aren’t going to expect me to sign over the Lodge after a single date,” she said to the underside of my chin, peppering more kisses there and sounding entirely reasonable. “And how would they find out anyway? I won’t tell anyone.”

I could do one date. I could pretend for one evening that I was just a regular guy, worthy of her. We could show each other a good time for one night.

*One date.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

\* DIANE \*

“Another belief of mine: that everyone else my age is an adult, whereas I am merely in disguise.”

— MARGARET ATWOOD, *CAT'S EYE*

I decided to wear a wig. The source of my decision was neither vanity nor frivolity, though I couldn't help but feel both vain and frivolous as I stared at my reflection in the car's flip down mirror.

“Well, you wanted to be a redhead.” I turned my head to one side, then the other, liking the extra length quite a lot, but feeling apathetic about the color.

I'd asked Darla for a red wig that would look real sitting on my head. This marriage between auburn and mahogany was what she'd delivered. It looked real, the hair felt real, the color appeared natural. It was red, it just wasn't *red-red*, you know? It didn't feel daring enough. When or if I committed to red hair, it would be mermaid red.

Then again, at least for tonight, this tamer shade seemed like a good idea. The whole point of wearing the wig and the brown contact lenses was to be in disguise, to allow Mr. Repo and I to meet without being recognized.

*Jason. His name is Jason.*

“But tonight he's Henry, and I'm Beth, and I'm officially ridiculous.” Muttering to myself, I reached for my clutch purse and sighed.

I understood his caution, I did. And I'd be lying if I said it wasn't just a little bit fun to play pretend, be Beth and not Diane for one night so we could be together undisturbed. But it also felt ironic that we should have to pretend to be other people in order to know each other.

Regardless, here I sat, sporting someone else's hair, looking at myself with brown eyes, and wearing an uncharacteristic black dress. I didn't own much in black—only two pantsuits for funerals. I loved bright colors. If the good Lord saw fit to give us colors, I felt the least we could do was wear them proudly.

Exiting the car, I glanced down at myself. The dress was new and ordered out of a catalogue. I tried to pick something I would never wear as my normal self, but was a garment I still liked.

It was knee length on me—it would've been mid-thigh on a taller woman—and had a low, square neckline paired with long fitted sleeves. The risqué neckline, especially paired with my pushup bra, made it sexier than anything else I owned. Other than maybe that leather skirt I couldn't fit into anymore and my new lingerie acquisitions. But no one saw me in those; those were for me.

*Except for Jason. He saw you in that nightie.*

I sucked in a bracing breath, pressing my hand to my stomach to quell the butterflies there. *You will not be having sex with that man tonight, so cool your britches.* Besides, it was yet to be determined if we even liked each other. And I wanted exclusivity, but maybe exclusivity wasn't on his menu. In which case, we'd just have this one date.

I'd promised myself I wouldn't do anything more than kiss him until we made it to a third date. Then, I'd take my time rounding the bases, make him work for it. I'd meant what I'd said. I wanted to be wooed. I wanted someone to *work* for me.

We hadn't done anything after he'd agreed to the date. In fact, we'd shaken hands to make it official, but hadn't touched each other again. But I'd felt his eyes on me for the rest of the evening before we retired to separate rooms.

I'd thought about putting on a robe, or different pajamas, or covering myself with the blanket again, but what would have been the point? He'd already seen me in the nightie and changing into something more modest in order to make him comfortable wasn't my style anymore. I wasn't cold despite the heat being out and we'd been in my house, he'd interrupted my evening, and it was not my job to make him or anyone else feel at ease in my presence.

Ultimately, Jason had slept in Isaac's bedroom, and he'd left early in the morning before I'd awoken, leaving a note on the kitchen table with a cell number and the words, *I'll contact you from this number.*

Part of me had felt listless and depressed after he'd left, second guessing whether I'd actually hear from him again. But then I reminded myself that no man was responsible for my happiness or satisfaction, I had complete control over both, and that was that.

This reminder, that I was in control, served as my mental companion as I pulled open the door to the restaurant and scanned the interior, pleasantly surprised by what I found. These remote places just outside of Asheville could be an assortment of different flavors. Some were homey and cluttered for family dining; some were plain, unadorned and catered to a grab-and-go, no-frills eater; and some were like this, intimate and elegant, full of candlelight and antiques and men in dinner jackets and women in fine dresses.

*Well, well, well, Mr. Repo. Nicely done.*

I found the hostess stand off to one side, but then realized it was actually a maître d' station when an elegant woman about my age or a little younger, wearing a tuxedo dress, gave me a rather snooty looking once over.

"May I help you?"

"I hope so." I lifted my hands holding my Louis Vuitton clutch and rested them on the high-top maître d' station between us, ensuring my three-carat antique diamond ring caught the light. This was all part of the silly dance wealthy people played in order to signal to others that they possessed money and had no qualms spending it. "Reservation under Henry Blake."

The subtle curve of her lips became a tad more friendly. “And you are?”

“Elizabeth Blake.”

“Right this way, Mrs. Blake.”

I strolled after her, holding my head high, suppressing another flutter of tummy butterflies. We walked through the small front dining area, murmurs of intimate conversation and the clinking of forks against plates following in our wake.

Each table was ensconced by a booth, likely to provide privacy for their patrons. Expecting to find Jason in one of these booths, I felt surprised when we weaved our way toward the back of the restaurant where it was significantly darker. The walls were glass, the tables were out in the open but quite far apart, and each seemed to be illuminated only by a single candle set at the center.

Perhaps this was to give a similar sense of privacy as the booths provided at the front?

I surmised the wall of windows overlooked a beautiful valley or a pretty lake during the day, but whatever lay beyond was currently blanketed by the darkness of a moonless winter night.

At last, we approached the back and large shoulders of a man at a four-top set in a corner and far from the other tables. Indoor plants of live peace lilies, hydrangeas, and begonias created a pervious border around it. This, obviously, was a prime spot.

I stepped around the maître d' and placed a light hand on Jason's shoulder. “Hello, darling,” I said, my voice perfectly calm, like we did this every Friday.

He stood gracefully and turned, ensnaring my eyes and my hand as it fell from his shoulder. Goodness. Good-ness. The man certainly knew how to wear a suit.

His mouth quirking to the right, he placed a light kiss on the inside of my wrist. “Gorgeous,” he said, his voice gravel and sex, sending those

butterflies in my belly back to work double-time, and heat to my cheeks and . . . elsewhere.

Flustered. I was flustered. But Jason covered for me smoothly, like he spent all his evenings in fancy restaurants being watched by snooty waitstaff. After taking my long wool coat and handing it off, he ushered me to my chair, placing another kiss against my cheek as he skootched me in.

He even ordered me a cocktail, saying, “My wife will have a champagne cocktail and I’ll have another Hakushu, neat.”

*My wife.*

The maître d' disappeared and I fought the urge to burst out laughing. What a beautiful farce.

“I like that dress,” he said, cutting through my tangle of nerves and absurd thoughts.

Jason sat across from me. I found his eyes trailing downward from my neck to my chest, lingering on the swells of my breasts before continuing their slow, perusing path, ending at my painted nails. The color I’d chosen, aptly named Cherry Popping Red, matched the color of my underwear. I liked doing this; it was a secret source of confidence.

He licked his full bottom lip like he’d already guessed my secret, drawing it into his mouth to bite it.

Pressing my knees together, I released an unsteady—albeit silent—exhale and reached for my water. “I like that suit,” I said, then took a sip, inspecting him over the rim of the glass. Unable to stop myself from giving him an admiring once-over—because that suit fit him like it had been tailor-made to show off every perfect line and angle—my gaze snagged at his jaw.

Where before he’d had a neatly trimmed goatee, he now wore a neatly trimmed, close-cut, salt and pepper beard. I blinked, my eyes darting up to his. The side of his mouth was still quirked, his bottom lip still caught between his teeth. His eyes sparkling with interest as they moved over my hair. He seemed a little dumbfounded, amused but entranced. I liked this look on his face.

“How’d you know I like champagne cocktails?” I asked, pleased by how calm I sounded.

“I guessed.”

I gave him a coy look. “Are you saying I’m predictable?”

“In some ways.” His eyes moved between mine, as though searching. “But definitely not in others.” Leaning forward, he dropped his voice to a whisper. “Is it just really dark in here, or are your eyes brown now?”

Grinning, I set my elbow on the table and also leaned forward. “Dear Henry. My eyes have always been brown.”

He returned my grin, shaking his head.

“But it is dark in here,” I went on, peeking around the barrier of plants surrounding us, doing a double take as I looked out the glass at my left. “Oh my. How beautiful.” The sparse candlelight now made more sense. Beyond the wall of windows, we were offered a view of the stars.

“My thoughts exactly.”

That statement had me giving him an appreciative side-eye. “I stepped right into that one.”

“From where I’m sitting, you are surrounded by starlight, Diane.” He’d already reclined back into his chair, his posture relaxed, his voice conversational, and I marveled at his quiet confidence.

I’d never been around a man who seemed so comfortable in his own skin. In my profession, I’d dealt with plenty of men, business owners big and small.

The waiter arrived with our cocktails, breaking our little staring contest, and I realized I’d never been given a menu.

I was just about ask for one when the man said, “We do have one wine substitution this evening. With our cheese plate, we have a new madeira, but everything else on the chef’s pairing menu is as planned.”

Jason nodded his head and the man left us.

“Pairing menu?” I lifted the cocktail and took a sip. It was stronger than I’d been expecting, but it tasted good. “Did you take it upon yourself to order for me?” I didn’t like that, and would have no problem telling him so.

“The menu here is set,” he explained, resting his hand around his whiskey glass. “The only choice I was given was whether to have a dry dinner, or one with wine pairings.” He paused, seemed to consider me for a long moment, then added, “I didn’t order for you. I know you like fine food, and I didn’t want to spend any part of the night focusing on something other than you. That included what to eat, or whether to order dessert.”

“Oh.” Well then. How nice.

“There’s seven courses,” he continued, a flicker of doubt passing over his expression. “I figured, if we didn’t like something, we’d just move on to the next. Did I—”

“No, no.” I patted the table. “You did exactly right. I freely admit, sometimes it’s a relief to be freed of having to make decisions. But—and maybe this doesn’t make much sense—if you’d been the one to decide everything for me, I wouldn’t have liked that.”

My words seemed to settle his momentary concern and he relaxed once more. “I also liked the idea of being surprised together.”

“You don’t know what we’re eating either?”

“No. They don’t tell you ahead of time. You just get what you get.”

“And you don’t get upset.”

He grinned. “Something like that. Though, if you want to throw a fit at any point, be my guest.”

“No, no. I don’t do that.” I took another sip of my drink, opting to continue to hold it this time instead of putting it down. I didn’t throw hissy fits with those in the hospitality industry. Waitstaff were some of the hardest working folks and certainly didn’t deserve all the petty complaints they received, and I knew this because I’d worked almost every job at the Lodge. Even now, whenever we were short staffed in the dining barn, I’d bus tables and take orders.

But Jason didn't know this about me. How could he? Maybe he thought I was one of those pushy and particular ladies who was never satisfied. Sometimes I could be, but only with my own staff and only when I knew they were capable of better.

Somehow, we'd found ourselves in an uncanny dating valley. This wasn't a proper first date between two people who didn't know each other, who had no perceived notions, true or not. I'd wanted our first date to be a real one; I wanted us to think the best of each other, like we were strangers, and anything was possible.

Licking my lips of residual alcohol, I had an idea.

“So, *Henry*. What do you do?”

His eyes narrowed, gleamed with amusement. “I'm a criminal. How about you, *Beth*?”

“Come on. Play along.” Setting my drink down, I tapped my fingers on the table.

“Why are we pretending? I'm here for you, not Elizabeth.”

“We're not pretending. We're just going to make things pleasant, because it's our first date and everybody puts their best foot forward on their first date.”

“Is that so?”

I cocked my head to the side. “Haven't you ever been on a date before?”

“Not that I can recall.”

“Oh. Well, I haven't been on one in thirty years, but I do know how they're supposed to work.” A spark of worry had me forcing a smile. I'd told him at my house that I wanted a relationship, but were his definition of that word and my definition the same? He'd never even been on a date. Had he ever been exclusive with anyone? “I suppose we should back up. Have you ever been exclusive with anyone?” I worked to keep my tone conversational. If he'd never been in a relationship at his age, then tonight was likely hopeless.

His focus turned inward, like he was working through a puzzle. “What do you mean by exclusive?”

“You know.” I fiddled with my earring, trying to appear nonchalant. “A relationship with just one person, where you don’t—uh—have intimate relations with anyone else.”

Now he looked at me like I was odd and maybe cute. “Of course.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help it, I breathed out a relieved laugh. “Good. That’s good. But y’all never went on a date?”

“Well, no.” His eyes moved up and to the right. “The first time, she wasn’t free—or didn’t feel free, or maybe didn’t wish—to acknowledge me publicly.”

“Huh.” Well, that’s interesting. “And there were more? I mean, you’ve had more than one exclusive relationship?”

“Yes. I had an old lady once. I suppose you could say, dating”—he gestured between us with a finger—“like this isn’t part of our club’s culture. So, no. I never took her on a date.”

“So, just the two? Just the two relationships?”

“Just the two.”

“I see . . .” I nodded, frowning as I thought this over. “And were they very long? I mean, did they last a long time?”

“The first time, I fell hard at a very young age. I made no secret about it. She knew. We were only really together for a few months years later—when I was older but still young—and the end of that situation soured me for a long time.”

“And the second time?”

“Margaret, my old lady, and I were exclusive just a few months.”

My heart sunk and I nodded. I guess I’d been right, Jason was a skirt chaser. I wasn’t interested in developing feelings for a man accustomed to sleeping around as much as he liked.

Jason took a sip of his whiskey. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing.” I forced another smile. “I hope dinner is good.” And I hoped it would be short.

“That’s not the truth. There’s something bothering you.” His attention flickered over me. “What did I say?”

“It’s just—” I sighed. “Well, since we haven’t technically started, and first-date rules don’t apply, I guess I can tell you. The truth is, I don’t know if we’re compatible.”

“Really?” He looked surprised. “Why? Because I’ve been serious with two people, and you’ve been serious with just one?”

“No.” I fiddled with the silverware framing my plate. “It’s like I said at my house. I want a relationship, which—to me—means exclusivity. And it sounds like you’re not used to maintaining that kind of commitment for any length of time.” I shrugged, deciding to spell it out. “I have no interest in a skirt chaser.”

Jason looked like he didn’t know whether to laugh or sneeze. “Diane, you think I’m a skirt chaser?”

“From the sound of things, you eschew long-term commitments. And, well . . .” I lifted a hand and gestured to him. He was just too beautiful and too skilled in the sack. Of course he was used to having his pick of ladies whenever he wanted.

He leaned forward in such a way that encouraged me to do the same, like he was about to tell me a secret. “Gorgeous, I am not, nor have I ever been, a ‘skirt chaser.’ I’m more of a . . .” He paused, his eyes narrowing just a bit, perhaps searching for the right word. “I’m more of a lone wolf. After Louisa, my priorities in life changed, and women in general didn’t hold much interest for me. So if you’re worried I’ll be stepping out on you, or that I’ve developed certain habits that’ll be difficult to break—don’t.”

I made no attempt to hide my examination of him. “You’re saying you’ve only been with two women?”

“No. If memory serves, there was that hot blonde last Christmas.” His eyes twinkled as he teased.

I squirmed, heat coming to my cheeks. “Fine. Three women.”

“I’ve had more than three sexual partners, if that’s what you’re really asking. But I’m also saying I have no habits.” Jason took another sip of his whiskey, essentially finishing it. “And I’ve never had any interest in pursuing more than woman at the same time. For the last twenty-two years, my focus and priorities have been otherwise engaged. Until very recently.”

“Are you saying you think we’re compatible?”

“In this regard, yes. I do,” he said matter-of-factly, like this subject was a box that had already been checked. “And for the record, I would not be happy if I discovered you were a pants-chaser, or kept someone else on the side. What I want from you is, as you say, exclusivity.”

Oddly, it was this last bit that convinced me, and I nodded slowly, feeling more buoyant. “Well, okay then. I guess we should get this first date started.”

“I am your ready student.”

I pressed my lips together to stem my smile. “We’ll see. So, some basics. First of all, on first dates, you should only talk about yourself in humble-bragging terms, never admitting to any flaw that doesn’t make you look better.”

“A flaw that makes me look better,” he deadpanned.

“Yes. If I’d asked you what your biggest flaw is, you’d say something like, ‘Oh, I just care too much.’” I lowered my voice to impersonate him, and this made amusement spark behind his eyes. “Or something like, ‘I’m too hard a worker, I’m too dedicated, I’m too honest.’”

“You want me to lie?”

“No.” I crossed my arms on the edge of the table, leaning forward. “I want you to find a way to talk about yourself—even your flaws—in the most flattering way possible, because that’s what folks do on first dates.”

His gaze lowered to my chest. “This sounds like a job interview.”

“Well, I suppose it is, in a way. We’re both interviewing for the job of being each other’s *exclusive* significant other and I think we’re at a bit of a disadvantage, because we know *of* each other—and that means we have preconceived notions—but we don’t really *know* each other.”

“Like you assuming I’m a skirt chaser.”

I squirmed again. “Well, yes. Like that exactly. And usually, if you present facts without finesse, then there isn’t likely to be another date.”

Eyebrow crooked, he peered at me steadily before saying, “All right. I’m willing.”

“Good.” That settled, I leaned back. “Now, *Henry*, what do you do for a living?”

He seemed to consider things for a moment, then said, “I’m in finance.”

“Oh, really?” I couldn’t stop my smile and my voice was high and squeaky with happiness. The fact that he’d decided to humor me gained him a point and gave me an odd thrill.

“That’s right,” he drawled. “How about you?”

“I work at a hotel.”

“Diane.” He fought a grin. Then he surrendered to the grin and chuckled.

“What?”

“You do not work at a hotel. You *own* one of the most prestigious destination resorts in the United States.”

I waved away his objection and picked up my cocktail for another sip, finishing it and taking note of the waiter’s approach. “Yes, but I can’t say that.”

“I thought you were supposed to present everything about yourself in the most flattering light possible.”

“That is correct, but I shouldn’t sound like I’m bragging. So, I tell a version of the truth that doesn’t make me look bad, but also doesn’t make me look unapproachable. This is especially true for women. There’s a reason why lady doctors have trouble making a love connection. Men are intimidated by success.”

“We’ve already established strong, capable women don’t intimidate me.”

“Does anyone intimidate you?”

He paused, frowning like he didn’t know how to answer.

I huffed. “You can just say what’s on your mind. It wasn’t a trick question.”

“But there will be trick questions?”

“There will be first date questions, and yes. Those can be tricky. Now tell me honestly, is there anyone who intimidates you?”

Before he could answer, the server arrived. I leaned back and allowed him to place a tiny square inch of something in front of me which he called an ‘amused bush,’ or that’s what it sounded like. An assistant waiter poured a glass of white wine for each of us while our waiter told us some facts about the ‘amused bush’ and the wine selection. Then he backed away, leaving us with our bushes.

“Did he say, ‘amused bush’?” Jason’s attention was on the bite-sized morsel of food set in the center of his gigantic plate.

I giggled. “That’s what it sounded like to me.”

“I was hoping you could translate.” He said this like it was an admission.

“Sorry. Our chef is from low country South Carolina. We serve good food, but the names of our dishes reflect the food being served. If you order shrimp and grits, you’re getting shrimp and grits.”

He regarded me warmly, like this information made him like me more. “I guess we should . . . eat it?”

Nodding, I considered how best to place it in my mouth. If I attempted to use a fork or spoon it might roll off the plate. “I’ve never eaten an amused

bush before.”

Jason chuckled, muttering something under his breath.

“Pardon?”

“I said, the last bush I ate was yours.”

I exhaled a sudden, haughty breath, struggling with an odd mixture of pleasure and embarrassment. “Jason!”

“That’s Henry to you.” He winked at me and in the next moment he picked up the food with his index finger and thumb. He popped it into his mouth.

I did the same, albeit more primly, while I told the renewed busy butterflies in my stomach to settle. He and I traded a thoughtful stare as we chewed.

“What do you think?” I asked, reaching for the wine. Inhaling before sipping, I found it crisp and a nice complement to the amused bush, which, honestly, had tasted like a mini pork eggroll. “Oh, try it with the wine.” I lifted my glass toward his.

Dutifully, he drank some of the wine, more than a sip, less than a gulp. “It is good. I like it.” He appeared to be contemplating the food and wine pairing, like he gave the matter a great deal of thought before adding, “That’s good bush, but not as good as your b—”

“Jason, I swear, do not finish that sentence. Good Lord!” I leaned back and covered my mouth with my napkin, struggling to hide my smile.

He didn’t hide his smile. Nor did he moderate his laughter. Nor did he make any secret about how much he enjoyed flustering me.

“You are a bad man.” I said this to my empty plate, unable to look directly at him. The weight of his blatantly admiring stare felt too heavy.

“I am a bad man,” he said frankly, his tone pleased, but then added with a hint of introspection, “And you’re a good woman.”

## CHAPTER NINE

\* DIANE \*

“Grown-ups don't look like grown-ups on the inside either. Outside, they're big and thoughtless and they always know what they're doing. Inside, they look just like they always have. Like they did when they were your age. Truth is, there aren't any grown-ups. Not one, in the whole wide world.”

— NEIL GAIMAN, *THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE*

I gave up the idea of this being *a real first date*—whatever that meant—and decided to simply enjoy myself. We were five delicious courses in with no break to our easy, fun, flirty, interesting, delightful conversation before I remembered that he'd never answered my earlier question.

While he cut into a small portion of spareribs in brown mushroom gravy—which they'd called something else entirely—I seized on the opportunity to ask, “I still want to know something.”

“What's that?” Jason slathered the piece of meat in the gravy, but didn't bend to the fork. He sat straight yet relaxed and brought the bite to his mouth. I'd noticed all through dinner that he had excellent table manners. Not all men did, especially not men his age, who—in my experience—as a group seemed to lack or devalue self-awareness and felt entitled to slob-like behavior.

Jason didn't hunch over his food. He didn't place his elbows on the table. He didn't pick at his teeth with his finger or his tongue. He lifted his wine

glass at the stem, but didn't make a big, pretentious show of swirling it to check the color or bringing it to his nose for an overt, loud sniff.

He was simply capable of and comfortable acting like a gentleman without artifice and stuffy formality, actually listening to what I said, and showing sincere interest while also teasing and flirting like a scoundrel.

I was honestly in awe of him, which was probably why I wanted to know the answer to my earlier question. "Does anyone intimidate you? Truly?"

"Of course." He sent me a quick, wry look. "Would you find that hard to believe?"

Sitting back with my hands on my lap, my spareribs left mostly untouched because I was three bites past full, I studied him. "I would find that hard to believe. What would it take to intimidate you? I bet nothing scares you at all."

"You'd be wrong." The side of his mouth tugged upward, but his gaze—presently fastened to his glass of red wine—held no amusement. "I know some scary motherf—uh—" He cleared his throat. "Individuals. And if I didn't fear them, then I'd be stupid."

The stark quality to his admission made my heart beat faster. It was the first time all through dinner he seemed to be avoiding my gaze.

"Jason?" I waited until he looked me in the eyes and I swallowed at the remoteness I found there. "Are you in danger?"

"I'm not sure how to answer that question," he said, and the ring of honesty to it made me tense.

I leaned forward, checking the dim restaurant behind him to ensure our waiter wasn't nearby. "Do you think any of these scary individuals would ever harm you?"

"Yes."

My attention cut back to his. "What makes you think so?"

"Because they have."

I sucked in a breath. “Jason—”

He leaned forward. “It’s part of the job.” The words were flat, gritty with reality. “They hurt me. I hurt them.”

Frowning, I struggled for the right words. Why would he stay somewhere, working with people who hurt him? Who he hurt? “That’s not right.”

“Might makes right, Diane.”

“That’s not true for everyone.”

“It is, but in your world it’s called capitalism.”

I scoffed. “Are you saying you’re a communist?”

“Not at all. I like the order, the logic and predictability of might making right. I think most folks in this country like it.”

“And that makes it fine and dandy for people to hurt you?” I was honestly trying to understand him.

“It’s not about right and wrong, it’s about reality. We live in a world full of not-right people, and if your boss isn’t cutting on you with knives, they’re probably cutting on you with words or neglect. If you know anyone long enough—boss, friend, lover, child, parent—they’re either going to do one or the other.”

I admired his pragmatism even as I rejected his words, swallowing around a sudden, thick knot in my throat.

I didn’t want that, to be cut, to be a victim of abuse or neglect. Not now, not ever again. And I didn’t want it for him. Nor would I accept that all folks eventually hurt each other.

“Do you really think that’s true?”

“Have you ever known anyone who didn’t?” Though his eyes held no humor, they did hold warmth, softness. He wasn’t mocking me, he was asking honestly. “Have you ever met a person who didn’t cut with knives, words, or neglect?”

“My daughter,” I said, my answer immediate, my chest squeezing with sadness and regret.

His expression seemed to soften further. “Your daughter.”

“She’s . . . she’s an angel.”

“She’s an innocent.”

“No. She’s not. And that’s my fault.” I picked up my wine but didn’t drink it. “Never mind about that. Let’s talk about something else.”

Jason picked up his wine too, considering me over the rim, his eyes kind. “How about more of those first date questions, Beth?”

I nodded, suddenly restless and agitated, also grateful for his willingness to let me change the subject. This might not have been the flavor of first date I’d had in mind, but up until this moment I’d thoroughly enjoyed myself. Our time together had been better than I’d hoped, and I didn’t want tonight to end it on a down note.

“Let’s see.” He studied me. “Favorite movie?”

“Steel Magnolias.” Again, my answer was immediate. His question had been an easy one and I found myself breathing a little easier.

“I’ve never seen it.”

“Oh, you have to. It’s—it’s a beautiful story. It’ll make you laugh so hard, you’ll be holding your stomach. And in the next moment you’re crying. Then you’re laughing again.”

“The best kind of stories.”

“That’s what I think, too.” We shared a smile and renewed heat warmed the places that had gone numb. Feeling a little shy, I took a sip of my wine before asking, “How about you? What’s your favorite movie?”

“*Easy Rider*.”

I barked a laugh, because—after getting to know him better this evening—I didn’t believe that for a second.

He also laughed, his eyes dropping to his half-eaten spareribs. “The real answer is *Casablanca*.”

I perked up at this news. “Really? You like old movies?” *How wonderful.*

“Haven’t seen many movies—don’t get much of a chance. But I was stuck in San Antonio a few years back and they were playing it on a dollar screen.”

“You watched it by yourself?”

“I did.”

“Have you seen it again?”

“I have.” He finished his wine, leaving his fingers on the foot of the glass after he set it back on the table. “Anytime I’m traveling and it’s playing, I like to go.”

I resisted the urge to take another sip of mine. Everything had been so delicious, but I was stuffed. And I didn’t need any more alcohol. I’d been careful. Other than the champagne cocktail two hours ago, I hadn’t finished a full glass of anything. I didn’t feel at all tipsy, but wondered if, just to be safe, I should call for one of the Lodge’s courtesy limos.

“Have you ever watched *Casablanca* with someone else?” I asked.

“No.”

“We should watch it. Together.” I gestured between us. “And you can tell me all the things you like about it.”

He tilted his head to the side in a subtle movement, his attention warming me further. “That’s a nice thought.”

My heart skipped a beat and I frowned. “You say that like it’ll never happen.”

“It might.”

I didn’t like the sound of that, so I decided I wouldn’t push the subject, instead asking, “How about as a kid, growing up? What was your favorite movie?”

He gave his head a small shake and glanced away. “Like I said, I haven’t seen many movies.”

“Have you seen Fried Green Tomatoes? That’s another one of my favorites.”

“No.”

“I think you’d like it. They barbeque someone.”

Jason’s eyes cut back to mine, searching, like he assumed he’d misheard me. “I—What?”

“It’s funny, in a way. What about Sixteen Candles?”

“Wait, did you say they barbeque a person?”

I sent him a smile. “I did.”

“In what context?”

“I don’t want to give it away. You’ll just have to wait until movie night.”

He opened his mouth as though to protest, so I headed him off. “How about Breakfast Club? Or Indiana Jones?”

“No, I’ve not seen either.”

“Do you like Christmas movies?”

He breathed out, not exactly irritated, but something like it. “Haven’t seen any.”

“Sure you have. It’s a Wonderful Life? Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street? Unpopular opinion, but I like the newer one just as much as the black and white one.”

“Just assume I haven’t seen any of them.”

“Well then, that settles it.” I patted the table. “I guess I know what we’re doing on our next date.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Watching movies.”

“I can’t just come over to your house for movie night, Diane.” That sober quality to his gaze hadn’t budged since I’d asked him again whether anyone intimidated him. I wished now that I’d never pushed the subject.

“The name is Beth and I know that, *Henry*. But I can be creative when it comes to getting what I want, and I want to do a movie marathon with you. Hey—have you seen the *Godfather* movies?”

He slid his teeth to the side, his expression caught somewhere between irritation and admiration. “I haven’t.”

“We’ll start there. And since you like *Casablanca*, we’ll watch the *Maltese Falcon*. Oh! I should get a pen and make a list.” I reached for my purse.

“You’re going to teach me all about movies? Expose me to the cinema?” I almost missed the undercurrent of bitterness in his questions since he’d framed them with a teasing lilt to his voice.

“No. I’m going to show you movies I like.” After finding a pen, I pulled out the tiny notepad from the tiny, zippered compartment. Some folks liked to take notes on their cell phones. I was not one of those folks, especially not when I was out to dinner with a man I fancied more than I fancied pie. Which was a lot.

“To give me some culture?” The bitterness eclipsed the teasing.

I looked up from my pen and paper. “Not at all, Jason. I don’t think you need culture. That’s not what this is about.”

“Then what is it about?” His jaw ticked, and I wondered if he didn’t believe me.

Clearly, I’d struck some sort of nerve, so I tried to return to him the kind look he’d given me earlier when he’d struck a nerve. “Honey, this is about sharing something I love with you. I love movies.”

He blinked, his gaze moving over me as though searching for a lie.

So, I asked, “Don’t you want to share something you love with me?”

His chest rose and fell and his eyebrows pulled together in either disbelief or confusion or both. “Do you want to learn how to ride a motorcycle?”

“Yes. Sure. Why not?”

Jason narrowed his eyes. “Really?”

“Do you love it?”

“I do.”

“If you want to teach me, I’d love to learn. What else do you love?”

My heart flipfopped as the tension seemed to drain from his shoulders and his look turned friendly once more. “Traveling, seeing new places.”

“Oh! Me too!” I clasped my hands under my chin and sighed wistfully. “I’ve been to New York and Las Vegas and a handful of places in the southeast, but that’s really it. I wish I could’ve traveled more, but outside of work, there never seemed to be a good reason.”

“I guess that settles it.” His voice deepened and he gave me a single nod. “You show me movies, and I’ll show you the world.”

I held a finger up. “Don’t say it unless you mean it.”

“I don’t say anything I don’t mean.”

We shared another smile, and there he was again, looking at me like I was something wonderful, like he’d been doing all night, and I felt something in me become both settled and frenzied.

*I could grow addicted to that look.*

No. That wasn’t entirely true. It wasn’t just the look. It was him.

\* \* \*

Three days passed and I didn’t hear from Jason after our date. I started to second guess my decision to give him a parting kiss on the cheek instead of doing what I really wanted. Namely, ask my limo driver to make slow circles of downtown Asheville while Jason and I christened the backseat.

He hadn’t seemed to be in any rush to leave the restaurant. We’d closed the place down before my car arrived, at which point I was perfectly capable of

driving from a sobriety perspective, but maybe not from a being-in-my-right-mind perspective.

I'd been giddy, and so happy, and my head had been in the clouds, and I couldn't remember the last time—if such a time existed—I'd had such a wonderful time with anyone. I'd gone to sleep that night believing that anything was possible, that we were at the start of our beginning. Perhaps I'd be able to convince him to run off with me on my travels. He'd said he'd teach me about traveling, hadn't he? Well, perhaps I'd hold him to it.

Fast forward to three days later and I doubted everything.

“What do you think of this one?”

“Hmm? Pardon?” I glanced up from where I'd been gazing unseeingly and looked between the two women, staring at me with expectant expressions. Well, Ashley Winston was staring at me expectantly, but Shelly Sullivan wore no expression at all.

“This one.” Ashley held up the metal heart sculpture, beaming at it and then at Shelly Sullivan. “It's so lovely? And covered in fairy lights, I think it'll be just the thing.”

I forced myself to look at it, consider it, think about it as a centerpiece on the tables in the barn for my Jennifer's engagement party. “Yes. You're right. It's perfect.” I didn't add that all the other samples Shelly had welded together were also stunning. Ashley seemed to have her mind set on this rust and silver colored piece.

“Ten more hearts?” Shelly asked, turning her back to us and shuffling through her workshop.

She and Beau Winston lived on this property, though they didn't own it. I thought it was silly for them to live here in Tanner's shack when everyone in town knew Hank Weller had given Beau Winston the Weller mansion on Bandit Lake. But I supposed the mansion didn't have a big old workshop for metal work like this one, and Shelly Sullivan was some sort of world-famous artist—or so I'd been told by people who knew such things. I'd only ever known her as a surly auto mechanic. In fact, I wasn't sure I'd ever

seen her without grease on her face. The woman cared nothing about other people's opinions.

Old Diane would've judged her for being so peculiar and not taking better care with her physical appearance. She would've said something like, "If you'd only wash your face, you'd be so pretty."

Whereas new Diane wanted to give her a high five and take notes on how to not give a cold crap in hell what other people thought. And maybe also get some grease to smear on my face.

Finished with our lunchtime chores, Ashley and I wandered back to my BMW and slid inside. I thought I caught Jason's scent—just a hint of it—and closed my eyes against the onslaught of irrational feelings.

I hadn't heard from him since our date, but I knew he'd been the one to drive my car back to my house. Since I'd called for the limo, I'd planned to pick up my BMW later in the week. But when I woke up, it was already in my driveway and the keys—Lord knows how he got the keys—were on the dash. And the interior smelled like him. Not overpowering, not as though he'd seen fit to spray his cologne on my leather seats like Febreze or anything like that. More like he'd sat in my seat, and he'd left an impression.

And then, he didn't call!

And another thing—why was it safe for him to drive my car and leave it, la-dee-dah, in my driveway? Hadn't he said a movie night at my house wouldn't be possible? Why could he traipse around all of East Tennessee in my car but not sit in my living room? He'd already paid me a visit without raising suspicion. He'd crashed his bike and spent the whole night in my house.

*He doesn't make any sense.*

One thing was for sure, I didn't like this feeling. I didn't like wondering if he was going to call, and when. It felt reminiscent of the uncertainty I'd lived with while married to Kip. I didn't want to go back there, not even for a visit.

*I can't wait to leave this town.*

“You’re awfully quiet, Diane.”

I started in my seat, realizing I hadn’t pulled out of Shelly’s driveway. “Oh, I’m sorry. I guess I’m just thinking is all.”

Ashley gave me a considering look. “If you don’t like the hearts—”

“No, baby. I love them. To be honest, I couldn’t decide which of the forms I liked better, so I’m glad you made the decision. Any of the samples she showed us would’ve been fine with me. Let there be no doubt, you have exceptional taste.”

“Oh.” Ashley faced forward, but I saw she wore a grin. “That means a lot coming from you.”

“Does it?” I asked, and not ironically. “I’m afraid my taste runs a little too conservative for some and a little too garish for others. I think I heard Karen Smith call my aesthetic ‘Southern Opulence’ and I don’t think it was meant as a compliment.”

“I don’t know about that.” She chuckled and caught my eye.

I sent her a disbelieving look. “Oh, come now. You can be honest. The older I get, the more I put value on honesty, even if it’s unflattering.” I turned the car around instead of backing out of the long driveway.

“I will say this . . .” Her mouth twisted with a smile she seemed to be struggling against. “I am glad to see Jennifer out of yellow dresses.”

Barking a laugh, I turned left at the end of the drive. “Yes. Honestly, me too. And I’m happy with my new wardrobe as well.”

“I was wondering about that.”

“What’s that?” I glanced at her, then back at the road.

“Oh, you know. You’re wearing more pantsuits these days than those dresses you used to favor.”

“I like a good pantsuit. I like how tailored jackets fit—I always have. But I like dresses, too.” Kip had always insisted Jennifer and I wear dresses, and so I’d insisted because it was his will, and my job as his wife was to obey.

But the truth was, I didn't always obey.

I'd snuck a few pantsuits into my office at the Lodge, sometimes changing when I got to work and changing again before heading home. I'd felt guilty then. I did not feel guilty now.

During my married years, when I needed an extra boost to my confidence in a business situation, I wore a pantsuit. It made me feel powerful, especially when most of the men in business I dealt with had a mind to bully me just because I was a woman.

I didn't feel powerful when I'd allowed my husband to dictate my wardrobe. But I refused to dislike dresses just because Kip had been tyrannical about his wife and daughter wearing them. I wouldn't let him take dresses from me. If I felt like wearing a dress, then I was going to wear a dress. And if I wanted to wear sexy black dresses with low cut square necklines, then I would certainly—

“Did I say something wrong?”

“What? Oh. No. Nothing.” I reached over and patted her knee. “I was just thinking about unpleasant times, but that's all in the past now. Tell me what you're thinking for the flowers.”

Ashley tucked her long, dark hair behind her ear and gave me a smile. “I have ideas, but I want to show you pictures. Do you have time when we get back? I have the rest of the afternoon off.”

“Yes. I have no more meetings this afternoon. Let's have some tea and pick out flower arrangements.”

The only Winston daughter sighed happily. “I love flowers. Not growing them, obviously. I don't know that I can grow any flowers expect maybe in a wild field. But I do love getting flowers.”

“Hopefully that man of yours brings you flowers.”

“He does. Often.” She said this dreamily and with a dazed smile on her face.

“He’s a good man,” I said, nodding at my own assertion just as whisper of a prior conversation echoed in my head.

*“You are a bad man.” I said this to my empty plate, unable to look directly at him. The weight of his blatantly admiring stare felt too heavy.*

*“I am a bad man,” he said frankly, his tone pleased, but then added with a hint of introspection, “And you’re a good woman.”*

Now I felt silly about being upset Jason hadn’t texted or called. He’d told me plenty of times that he was a bad man, hadn’t he? Do bad men call? No, no they don’t.

Heaving a sad sigh, I shook my head. “Ah well . . .”

“Now I really wish you’d tell me what’s wrong.” Ashley turned in her seat to face me. “You’ve been sighing half of the afternoon and distracted for the other half of it.”

“Oh . . . nothing.” I waved away my silliness and chuckled. “I tried something and it didn’t work, and I guess I’m disappointed.”

“What did you try?”

“Nothing that matters at the end of the road, but maybe something that would’ve made the journey more fun.” I flicked on the blinker and turned into the Donner Lodge, pulling around the building to park by the bakery. I liked parking at the bakery when Jennifer was working. It gave me an excuse to stop by and steal a hug.

As usual, I backed into a spot during daylight hours because I didn’t like backing out when it was dark. “I know Monsieur Auclair has questions about the bridal shower, too. Are you sure you don’t want to have it hosted here?”

Ashley gasped and I felt her hand close over mine. “Diane, don’t look up.”

I stiffened, but I did as I was told. “What? Why not?”

“Mr. Sylvester is here, and so is Mr. Miller. And they’re both looking right at us.”

My stomach dropped as acid shot up my esophagus. “Damn.”

I really, really, *really* couldn't wait to leave this town.

## CHAPTER TEN

\* DIANE \*

“It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.”

— ORIAH, *MOUNTAIN DREAMER*

“Pants, Diane? Really?” Kip made a disapproving sound. “With your thighs?”

I ignored the jab at my vanity and affixed my attention to Mr. Miller as Ashley and I met them at the edge of the parking lot. We'd purposefully walked toward the administration building and away from the bakery. They'd intercepted us.

“How can I help you, Miller?” I asked, reminding myself to be calm and sound calm.

“I am here to plead Mr. Miller's case.” Like one of those chihuahuas, Kip didn't know how to keep his yap shut.

“Are you?” Ashley's question positively dripped with disdain.

“I am. Diane is holding his cows ransom and he would like them back.”

I blinked once, sending my evil ex a cold stare. I had no plans to dignify his tomfoolery with a response. Miller wanted his cows back; that was true.

He'd been pestering me about it for months. But everything else about Kip's claim was unequivocally false.

"Mr. Miller, that's very unfair." Ashley set her hands on her hips. "Ms. Donner purchased those cows from you at auction for an exorbitant price, but she paid it. And then you insisted she take the cows that very week or else you would charge her a fee—"

Miller lifted a finger. "Now, that was not my—"

Ashley spoke over him. "Which she did. She and Cletus have done a fine job of turning things around considering everything—getting that barn moved, branding, distributing the milk, showing up at farmer's markets, selling direct to local businesses. The Donner Dairy has become a huge success, a star in the crown of the Lodge along with the bakery. And now you want the cows back? No, sir!"

I smiled at the pavement, enjoying Ashley's fervor. I knew her indignation stemmed from how hard her brother Cletus had worked to make the dairy a success rather than how I'd paid entirely too much for the cows. But still, I'd grown weary of Miller's pleas on the subject. He'd been after me for almost a year, calling, emailing, showing up here during work hours, calling me heartless, begging. It was nice to have someone else tell him no.

Kip stepped forward, raising his voice to a near shout. "Now young lady, this is none of your affair—"

"And you! Isn't there a restraining order against you?" Ashley pulled her phone from some pocket in her jacket. "I thought you couldn't come within one hundred feet of Jennifer?"

"That outrageousness expired. I know my daughter was talked into it by those who seek to keep us apart." Kip looked at me, but I suspected he was talking specifically about Cletus Winston, Jennifer's betrothed.

"We'll see about that." Ashley stuck out her chin. "I'll just send Deputy James a text and see what he says. You know he's awfully fond of Jenn and I doubt he'd care if the order expired or not."

"Go ahead and call him. Call the sheriff! I'm not leaving—I have a *right* to be here. This place will be mine soon." Kip sounded so certain, and I knew

he truly believed that one day he'd own the Lodge.

A fissure of fear made it hard for me to swallow. He'd almost gotten half in the divorce. The truth was, if he hadn't gone off and attacked Jennifer last year during a critical time in the court proceedings, he probably would've gotten half of everything. But no judge wants to give a man who abuses his own child—especially when that abuse is captured on camera—half in a divorce.

That said, a different judge felt perfectly fine being lenient when sentencing for the aforementioned abuse. Just thinking about how Kip got off with a slap on the wrists for attacking Jennifer made my red blood boil.

“Then after I text the deputy, I'll give my brother a call. Heck, maybe I'll call all six of them. Maybe we'll have a party. We can celebrate you leaving here and never coming back.”

“Emotional females have no place in negotiations.” Kip's tone was an entire college course in patronizing condescension.

Ashley laughed. It sounded angry, but she didn't stop typing out her message to Deputy James.

I gripped Ashley's wrist and waited until she looked at me. “Don't call Cletus. I'd prefer if he and Jenn didn't know about this.” Jennifer had suffered enough at the hands of her father.

She'd also suffered by my hands. Not physical abuse, but I'd been a monster with my words. I'd bought every hateful insult Kip had been selling—a fact that now made me sick and brought me shame every time I remembered the part I'd played and the choices I'd made.

Being a mother worthy of Jennifer and protecting her from anything unpleasant or stressful—especially anything related to her father—were my top priorities these days. I hadn't protected her when she was young. By God, I'd protect her now.

“Trying to hide your shame?” Kipling piped in.

“No. I just don't want Jennifer to be embarrassed by her father again is all.”

Kip ignored me. “Too late. The stain of your shame, of your selfishness, cannot be hidden.”

Miller interjected, “Please, Mrs. Sylvester. If you would just listen.”

“The name is Donner, Mr. Miller, and I already have listened.” I did my best to project the patience I did not feel. “You have no farm anymore. That belongs to Kipling. So where would you even take the cows?”

“That’s the thing, ma’am.” The former farmer shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “If you give me back the cows, your husband—your ex-husband—has agreed to let us move back to farm.”

I flinched. “Pardon me?”

“If you give me back—”

“I heard you.” I just didn’t believe it.

“Well, what do you say, Diane?” Kipling asked brightly. “Will you start living the life of a Godly woman again?”

“What the hell?” Ashley looked between us and her features narrowed in confusion. “Being a Godly woman has nothing to do with this.”

I spoke to Miller, hoping I could get through to him. “You must see, I can’t just give you back the cows. That’s not an option. We have people hired, jobs at the Lodge. I can’t let those people go.” I didn’t give a fig about those cows. I was determined to travel the world after Jennifer and Cletus got married and part of me wanted to hand the bovines over and be done with this harassment.

But I would never. Cletus loved those animals and he’d done a beautiful job with the dairy. There was no way I’d disappoint him, not even to get Miller—or Kip—off my back.

“And what do you mean ‘give back the cows’? Surely you don’t expect her to just hand them over.” Ashley glanced over her shoulder, presumably anticipating Deputy James’s imminent arrival. “How will you pay for them?”

“He won’t, of course,” Kipling cut in. “She has to prove she’s a good, Christian woman, and this is how. The deal is, she has to give them back—make a gift of them, a sacrifice for her sins—or else I can’t, in good conscious, allow the Miller family to move back to the farm.”

“In good conscious?” Ashley reared back, visibly befuddled, if not horrified.

“That’s right. He can’t afford to pay the ridiculous price Diane did.” Kip sounded so reasonable. The man could make you doubt the sky was blue. “He doesn’t have the resources she has. He built that place himself. It wasn’t handed to him on a silver platter. He didn’t inherit his livelihood like some people.”

“You are a real bastard, Mr. Sylvester.” Ashley said this thoughtfully, like it was a conclusion she’d just reached.

I could’ve told her that, if she’d asked. But presently, I was tired. So incredibly tired. It was time to put an end to this nonsense.

Stepping forward, I put the question to Miller, “If you built that place yourself, then why did you sell it to Mr. Sylvester?”

“That’s not the point, Diane.” Kip folded his arms, his tone lofty. I hated how he said my name, like he scolded a small child.

I ignored him, looking only at Miller and lifting my eyebrows expectantly. “Answer the question, please.”

“I agree with Mr. Sylvester, the status of the farm isn’t the point. You have the chance to do the right, Christian thing. Two hundred thousand dollars means nothing to you, and yet you won’t lift a single finger to help your fellow man in need. It’s your responsibility to make this right.”

Ashley scoffed. “Not you, too? How can you possibly think this is Ms. Donner’s responsibility?”

Meanwhile, I’d had enough. He wanted to play the saintly card? Well, two could play at this game.

“But you see, Mr. Miller, the status of the farm is precisely the point. I can’t give you the cows, knowing you make poor business decisions, knowing you put greed over the safety of your family, knowing that you’d align yourself with an adulterer, a *sinner*. A good, Christian man like you, taking money and going into business with a man like that and his fallen woman?” I tsked, shaking my head as though the loss of his eternal soul might give me a moment of worry. It wouldn’t. “And now you want me to gift you back Cletus Winston’s dairy cows. No. No, sir. God won’t allow it. You will just have to find some bootstraps to pull up.”

The rate of Miller’s breathing increased while I spoke, and he looked white as a sheet when I finished. “You heartless bitch.” The words were barely a whisper. Unfortunately, this was not the first time he’d called me a heartless bitch, and I doubted it would be the last.

“I paid you two hundred thousand dollars for those cows,” I ground out. “An amount I know you split with my ex-husband and his paramour. You’ve had your thirty pieces of silver, Miller. You’ll get nothing else from me.”

“But you’ll get what you deserve!” Miller advanced, finding his voice again, his face going from white to red. For a split second I wondered if he was going to hit me, but then the *whoop whoop* of a law enforcement vehicle dispelled that fear.

Glancing over my shoulder, I watched Deputy James open his cruiser’s door. Even with his mirrored sunglasses on, he looked stern. “What is going on?” he asked, striding over, his thumbs hooked into his belt. I saw he’d left his gun in the car.

“Mr. Miller would like me to gift him back the cows I purchased last year. I have told him no, *again*. And now I’d appreciate it if you helped these individuals to their vehicles.” I tugged at the sleeves of my jacket, not sparing either of them a glance as Jackson James came to stand between me and Miller, apparently reading the violence in the man’s eyes.

“We’ll be back, Diane.” Kip pointed at me. “And you’ll be sorry.”

Jackson took off his sunglasses. “Is that a threat, Kip? That sounded like a threat.”

“No, young man. It was a warning, to my wife.” I didn’t need to look at my ex-husband to know his eyes were pointed at me and they brimmed with pity.

“Ms. Donner is no longer your wife, Kip. And you sold those cows, Miller. End of story.” Jackson made no effort to sound reasonable, or calm, or don any of the masks I’d been forced to wear in order to keep the situation from escalating, and wasn’t that just the cockroach in my pecan pie?

Ashley and I could be calm and reasonable until we were blue in the face and people like Kip would still see us as “emotional females.”

“You have no right to be on her property. She has asked you to leave, and now you are trespassing. If you don’t leave now, I’ll arrest you both.”

“You’ve fallen so far, you disgust me.” Kip backed away, his tone mournful. “I don’t know what can help you now. Only prayers, I imagine.”

“Are you really that delusional?” Ashley gave her head a little shake, again like she was seeing him for the first time, her voice filled with wonder. “You really believe it, don’t you? You believe the words you say.”

“I’ll pray for you both,” Kip said from the small distance he’d put between us. “Though a woman’s soul is but a shadow, a rib of a man’s, I’ll spare you a prayer.”

“All right. Time to go.” Jackson stepped fully between us and the two men, holding his hands up with the palms out. He ushered them away. I didn’t wait to watch where they went, if they got in their cars, or if they drove away.

Making a beeline for the administrative offices, I rubbed my forehead and wondered if the hour was too early for tea with vodka. *Or, better yet, a Long Island iced tea.*

I’d discovered Long Island iced tea over the summer when Ashley and I had initially met to discuss Jennifer and Cletus’s engagement party and wedding. It was the first time I’d been inside Genie’s Country Western bar, but I’d been back several times since.

*I wonder if I can DoorDash a Long Island iced tea?*

“I feel a little dirty now.” Ashley caught up with me and slipped her hand through my arm, giving my elbow a squeeze with hers. “Like, I need to wash off that man’s version of reality.”

I snorted a humorless laugh and squeezed her back. “I met Kipling when I was seventeen. We married shortly after I turned eighteen. I used to eat up his version of morality and misogyny with a spoon and ask for seconds. Goodness, how stupid I am.”

“You are not stupid.”

“But I was. I really, really was. And for such a long time.” My heart hurt. I felt beaten down, numb. Cold.

Kip had seemed like such a gleaming pillar of purity in comparison to my father. Where my daddy eschewed Christian values, Kip had gone to church every Sunday and taught Bible school. Where my daddy had never finished college, failing out and being rescued over and over by his family, Kip had been an educator and self-made. Kip had fine manners and my father had been a drunk brute.

I’d admired Kipling so much. He’d been the opposite of my father in every single way. Or rather, he’d seemed like it. But, in the end, they were just the same.

“He truly seems to think women are lesser. I . . .” Ashley seemed like she was at a loss for words. In my peripheral vision I saw her shake her head. “Some men only respond to the threat of a stronger man. I know that. I’ve seen it in action before now, with my own father. I grew up with it, but it’s been a while. Even I find it hard to accept that those people actually exist and aren’t something out of a distant past.”

I brought us to a stop and wrapped my arms around her. She needed a hug and so did I. “I’m sorry if this brought up painful memories.”

“Even if a woman is stronger . . .” She went on like she hadn’t heard me, like she was too much in her own mind to process anything else. “He won’t listen. Even if you could kick his butt jujitsu style, it seems like he’d never budge.”

Pulling away, I made sure she was looking at me and focusing on me before saying, “You’re right. I could shoot Kip square in the chest, and he’d call it a flesh wound. Furthermore, he’d believe it, even if he was on his deathbed. He’d be at the gates of hell thinking what lay beyond was a Denny’s.” We shared a chuckle, and I was glad to see Ashley coming out of her spell. “Kip would tell everyone—the doctors, the nurses, the specialists—that it couldn’t possibly be fatal because Diane Donner is powerless. Because women are powerless and aren’t capable of anything. That’s who I will always be to him. Kip will never accept a reality where I win.”

She grabbed my hands, her gaze full of concern. “I hope he never comes back.”

“Oh, he’ll be back. And he’ll just keep on coming.” I shook my head tiredly. *But in a few months I’ll be gone and he’ll have to find someone else to torture.* That person would not be my Jennifer. Cletus Winston would make sure of that.

“I wish there were something you could do. Can’t y’all get another restraining order?”

“I can.” I gave her hands one more squeeze and then turned back toward my office. “I’ll file a report with Jackson. We’ll document the harassment today. If Kip keeps on harassing me—which I think is likely—in a few months, I’ll have a case.”

“Oh Diane.” She sounded upset.

I tried to think of something that might make the situation sound less bleak. “This is a private business, of course. I have the right to throw him out whenever he shows his face. Same thing at my house.”

I didn’t add that if I was in public and he wanted to act a fool, then he’d have every opportunity. Worse still, some folks would consider it his right.

\* \* \*

Ashley left a short time after Jackson had taken our statements. The mood of the afternoon murdered by Kip’s mischief, we decided to review the

flower arrangements some other time. Jackson escorted Ashley to her car, promising me before departing that he'd be back later in the day to ensure Kip and Miller didn't return.

Importantly, they both gave me their assurance that they'd say nothing to Cletus and Jennifer about the whole ugly ordeal. I appreciated their understanding. Close as we were to the engagement party, Jennifer—and Cletus, for that matter—didn't need to be fretting about Kipling, not after what they'd been through last year with Kip's mistress Elena Wilkinson and her psychotic sister.

Flopping down heavily in my chair, I glanced at the clock over the mantel of the fireplace, an old French black marble chiming clock my grandfather had purchased in New York City specifically for this office. When it worked, I loved the sound it made as it struck the hour. The sound never failed to remind me of afternoons spent in this very room as a child, watching my grandpa rule the world.

But the clock had stopped working years ago, and I sorta felt that way about myself too.

As far as I knew, the clock had never been moved by anyone from its current position. I dusted around it, and I imagine the maids who'd serviced the office during my grandfather's time had done the same, seeing as how it was far too heavy for one person to lift.

But soon, I'd send it—and myself—away to be fixed. Sure, sending the clock away meant risking harm to it, but wasn't it better to take the risk than to just sit in place and never work? Collecting dust? Being no good to anybody? At least, that's how I felt about myself.

I also suspected the Lodge and Jennifer would be safer once I left. Kip wouldn't come around and give Jennifer a hard time, Cletus and his brothers would see to that. My ex would be forced to let his claim on the Lodge—and me—go.

Since the clock was only correct twice a day, I pulled my phone from my bag to check the time and frowned at the sight of a text I'd missed while dealing with Kipling and Miller.

**Jason:** Waited three days. Calling you now.

The message read like a riddle. I set the phone down, feeling oddly breathless and angry. Then I snatched it up and began typing my scathing reply. But before I could, the phone vibrated again.

**Jason:** Google told me I had to wait three days after a first date to call the woman I can't stop think about if I don't want to come across as desperate. Did I wait long enough or is this Google thing bullshit?

A surprised laugh bubbled out of me, and I pressed my fingertips to my lips. And just like that, all the disappointment and frustration I'd been carrying around because I hadn't heard from Jason after our date simply evaporated.

With a happy smile, I deleted the scathing reply and typed something new.

**Diane:** In the future, please ignore Google and call whenever you'd like.

An uncontrollable smile bloomed, and I giggled with glee when those tantalizing three dots appeared, warning of an incoming message. If Monsieur Auclair had been present, he would've looked down his nose at me in disapproval, staring at my phone like a teenager with a crush.

Oh well. *C'est la vie.*

But then in the next moment the dots disappeared, and I almost jumped out of my skin because my phone rang. Jason was calling me. Sucking in a steadying breath, I closed my eyes and told my heart to behave. Then, clearing my throat, I answered his call.

"Hello?"

"Gorgeous."

I tried very hard not to feel like a schoolgirl talking to the boy she liked, and I failed. "Hello, Jason."

He made a short, happy humming sound. "I do like how you say my name."

"Well good. Because I do like saying your name. What's up?"

"You said to call whenever I like."

I needed to stand up. One cannot simply sit still while one is overwhelmed by reciprocated feelings. “So, I did. How are things?”

“I miss you.”

Closing my eyes again and pairing it with a full-face scrunch, I struggled to contain my excitement and managed an only slightly self-contained, “And I miss you.”

“What are you doing tonight?”

I fiddled with the front of my jacket, lamenting the loss of corded phones. Those springy plastic cords were great for fiddling with while on calls. “I don’t know what I’m doing tonight. I guess that depends.”

“On what?”

“It depends on what you have in mind.”

He chuckled. The deep, rich, rumbly sound vibrating in my bones. “Oh now, I’m not sure I should say what’s on my mind.”

Fireworks bursting in my heart, I muted my side of the call and *squeed*, doing a ridiculous dance in my office. If anyone had walked in, they would’ve thought I’d fallen off my rocker.

“Diane? Are you there?”

Hurriedly, I un-muted the line. “Yes. I’m here.” I had to clear my throat again; it was not accustomed to creating such a forceful *squee*. “And if you’re asking me if I’m free tonight because you’d like to get together, I am.”

“How about now? Can you leave early?”

“Uh . . .” I tried to think. I knew I didn’t have any more meetings, but I did have some errands to run for Jennifer.

“I haven’t seen you for three days.” He said this like three days was the equivalent of three decades.

“Before that, you didn’t see me for longer.” I giggled. Just full on giggled. Like a giggling giggler. This was Jason’s influence on my good sense and

maturity level, heaven help me. “And before that, you didn’t see me for a year.”

“Maybe. But that was before Henry got a taste of what spending time with Beth would be like.”

I turned and leaned fully against the wall, *swooning*, placing a hand over my swelling heart. “Can I meet you at my place in an hour? I have a few errands to run for the bakery.”

Jason hesitated before suggesting, “How about I send you an address?”

I meandered over to the mantel clock, tangentially wondering if I could send for someone to come fix the clock where it resided. “What kind of address?” Why send it away if it could be fixed in place?

“An address to a house with a gate. I’ll send the gate code, too.”

“How far away is it? Whose house is it? Is it your house?”

He chuckled. “It’s not too far from the Lodge. You can interrogate me about the rest once we’re there.”

“If we’re not meeting at my place, then I’ll need to change.” I glanced down at my pantsuit. There was nothing wrong with it, I knew that. But Kipling’s dig earlier about my thighs echoed between my ears. My thighs wouldn’t be as visible if I wore a dress. “Two hours?”

“Diane, don’t go home and change. Come as you are.” His tone was an odd mix of commanding and beseeching, but mostly commanding. It didn’t upset me, but it did make me want to take my sweet time changing and getting ready before heading over to this mystery house, just to be contrary.

But then he added, “It’s you I want to see, gorgeous. Not your clothes.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

\*JASON\*

“Raise your voice until you are heard. Look however you want, be whoever you want, and demand people pay attention to you. Stop taking what you’re given, and demand the space in life you want.”

— K.F. BREENE, *MAGICAL MIDLIFE MADNESS*

**I** *t’s too soon.* I tossed a log on the fire and considered adding another.

I could still smell the new paint. Then again, I’d been the one who’d been doing the painting. The windows had been left open for days with the fans going nonstop. I couldn’t leave everything open anymore, not if I wanted the inside warm enough when Diane arrived.

*It’s too soon. You should’ve waited.*

Inspecting the new couch, new chairs, new rug, and freshly painted walls with no pictures or art, I cursed under my breath. What the hell was I doing? Playing house at my age? What the fuck was wrong with me?

Surging to my feet, I pulled out my phone to check the time. She’d be here any minute.

It was too late for second guessing now. Diane was on her way over and this was either going to freak her out and she’d run off, or she’d . . . *How the fuck do I know?*

That woman was many things, but she was not predictable. Our date, for instance, had ceased being predictable the moment she'd arrived with brown eyes and red hair. I hadn't told her to go into full-on spy mode. That was all her, and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't loved it.

Just like I'd loved all her teasing, how smart and quick she was, and how each answer to my questions rang true, of plain honesty and a low tolerance for bullshit. The woman was straightforward and surprising. I trusted her and she kept me on my toes. How about that for a combo?

The sound of the gate opening made me grit my teeth. I wasn't nervous. I didn't get nervous. I was . . . something—but I wasn't nervous!

Scratching my beard, I marched to the door and opened it, stepping out of the house I'd been fixing up since that night I'd crashed my bike outside Diane's place and she'd suggested we go on a date.

Leaving things to chance wasn't in my nature. She'd wanted a date, that's all she'd asked for, and that was fine. I wasn't going to pressure her. She could take me or leave me, fine. But I would be prepared if she took me.

*House. Privacy. And new paint.* If she didn't want anything I offered, so be it.

Her car pulled around and I caught myself frowning at the BMW. It was far too recognizable. When we did this again, she'd need to drive something different.

"Now are you going to tell me whose house this is?" she asked as soon as I'd opened her door.

I offered my hand. She took it. She stood. Her lips were pressed together like she was fighting a smile. I didn't fight mine.

"If you want information, you'll have to give me something in return." I held her hand fast in mine, closing the door as she stepped closer.

Diane swung our hands back and forth and tilted her head to the side as though to get a better look at me. The visible spark of defiance behind her eyes made me glad I'd taken the time last week to fix the outside lights. I really loved that look.

The front of the house where we stood was dark as dusk, the sun low enough in the sky to stretch the house's shadow over us. We'd get a nice show on the back deck in about two hours. *If she stays.*

"You want something in return?" Her eyes narrowed. "Like what?"

"A kiss would be a good start."

Her grin broke free, but she lifted a disapproving eyebrow. "Are you going to extort kisses from me every time I ask a question?"

I held still except for my grin. "Well?"

"Well what?" Her eyes moved between mine.

"That was a question." Not releasing her fingers, I slid her hand and mine around her back and brought her body closer. "You want an answer, you know what you have to do."

Her mouth fell open and she gaped at me for a full second before busting out laughing. Diane then pressed her forehead against my chest and we laughed together.

"You are a bad man," she said to my shirt, still hiding her face.

I fit her jaw in my palm and gently tipped her head back so I could take what I wanted, and also so I could see her face before I did.

"I know," I whispered, admiring the shape of her eyes, the little point at her chin. I then lowered my mouth to hers.

At the first press of her lips, I slid my hand at her jaw into her hair, angling her head further back. I wanted inside. That kiss on the cheek she'd given me after our date had been plenty sweet, but it had also messed with my head. Did she really have that much self-control? Or were things between us more one-sided than I thought?

Her lips parted on a sigh, and I licked at the entrance, teasing her. She moaned, her arms coming up and around my neck, holding me fiercely as her tongue searched for mine.

*Good.* I had my answer.

Satisfied and smiling, I lifted my head. Her lashes fluttered open, her eyes dazed and dreamy.

“Yes,” I said, still hungry for her, but assured I’d be kissing my fill before the night was over.

Her eyebrows pulled together like she was confused, and she blinked. “Yes what?”

“Yes, I am going to extort kisses from you every time you ask me something.”

Diane’s confused frown slowly morphed into a smile that couldn’t quite decide whether to be pleased or outraged. “Is that so?”

“It is.” I bent again to claim my prize, because she’d asked another question.

\* \* \*

“Of course I love it. I love that we have a place to go, to meet, but—” Diane turned and pressed her mouth to mine, clearly payment for whatever she was about to ask. “Why can’t we just meet at my house? You could hide your bike. My place is set so far back from the road, no one would see you coming or going.”

We stood in the freshly remodeled kitchen. The cabinets weren’t new—I’d only had time to refresh the cabinet and drawer faces with a paint sprayer—but almost everything else was new, pulled from other properties and businesses that fronted for the Wraiths.

Once I’d brought her inside and taken her coat, she’d kicked off her shoes without being asked and toured the house with me. Only one of the four bedrooms was furnished, and the second bathroom still needed some TLC, but the master had a big, four-poster queen bed. If or when the time came, I didn’t want to sleep in a king bed with her; it’d be like sleeping alone and that wasn’t the point at all.

We needed towels for the bath, and—eventually—I hoped she’d bring an overnight bag, but most of the other essentials were in place.

“I already have the subscription services set up on my TV.” She gestured to the big screen television hung on the wall in the family room and the Blu-ray / DVD player beneath it set on a console. “Then we won’t have to re-buy all the movies I want to show you. We can rent them through a streaming service if I don’t already own them on Amazon. Or I guess I could login to my accounts from here. Does this place have internet?”

“I don’t mind buying them. I won’t be able to relax at your house.” I handed her a glass of wine. “No one knows about this place but me. No one will come looking for either of us here.”

She frowned in question, and I decided to give her a freebie answer.

Leaning a hand on the white quartz kitchen counter behind her, I kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose. “Your house is too close to the Dragon, gorgeous. If I’m spotted, it’d be easy for them to follow me to your place, watch me go inside, wait for me to come out. I have people who give me notice if I’m being asked for, if someone’s looking for me. We’re a good forty-five minutes from the compound here, which gives us a head start if we need to get out of town.”

“We?”

“I meant me.” I stole a kiss, and not because she’d asked a question. “If I need to get out of town, a head start is helpful.”

My stomach curdled with something ugly, something like guilt, so I kissed her cheek and nuzzled her neck, taking a moment to enjoy her skin and heat, and allow the discomfort to pass.

But I refused to be sorry that I’d staked out Diane’s house last year. Now I knew her place was not an option for us. Despite what she thought, I had almost been caught coming and going a few times, simply due to the proximity between the Iron Wraith’s compound and Diane’s property. It was one of the main reasons I’d stopped checking in on her.

Or, more precisely, it was one of the main things I’d repeated like a chant in my head in order to force myself to stop. What was the point of following her to keep her safe from her ex and his mistress if my doing so just put her in danger from the Wraiths?

“I guess you make good points.” Diane angled her head, giving me better access to her neck and ear. “Plus, if I’m honest—and I am—I guess I like the idea of it.”

“The idea of what?” I whispered, nibbling on her earlobe.

“Of a new place, away from everyone, just you and—” Her breath hitched as my tongue swirled in her ear and the hand not holding her wine gripped my arm. “You need to stop that if you don’t want me spilling this red wine on your nice, new floors.”

Reluctantly, I pulled away and looked at her. “Then I’ll take that as a yes.”

“I wasn’t aware you asked a question,” she said, her voice breathless. She wasn’t meeting my eyes, and I noted she’d set down her wine glass.

“Fine. Will you come here to meet me, so we can spend time together?”

Her hand on my arm slid up my bicep, lingered. “Will we only spend time together here?” Diane lifted to her tiptoes and kissed my neck. “Or will we still go out sometimes?” Another kiss, this one placed on my collarbone as she tugged down my T-shirt.

My hand behind her on the counter moved to her waist, my fingers flexing as she continued her kiss assault. “We should do both, I think.”

“Do you care what I think?” She dragged her lips along my collar to my clavicle and I teetered on the edge of desire and reason.

“I always care what you think.”

“Do you?” Another kiss.

“More than you know.” She was barely touching me but my body didn’t seem to know the difference.

“Then why does everything you say sound like a command?” *Kiss, kiss, kiss.*

“Stop doing that unless you’re in the mood for a different kind of command.” I grabbed a fistful of her hair but didn’t pull her away.

I hoped she kept on doing what she was doing. And then I hoped she'd obey when I lifted her up on the counter, removed every single stitch of her clothes, and ate my first meal in this kitchen.

I felt her smile against my neck a moment before she stopped her kissing. Diane wrapped her arms around my torso and turned her cheek against my chest. Her chest rose and fell with a sigh. My hand relaxed in her hair.

She snuggled closer. "This is nice. I could get used to this."

Even though I was too ravenous to respond, I conceded to myself that this was nice. I stroked the back of her head, neck, and upper back, my hand stopping at her shoulder blades. Rubbing a slow, tight circle there, I turned my cheek and rested it on top of her head. She sighed again.

"Thank you," she said after a time.

My body had calmed enough for me to ask, "For what?"

"For doing all this work so we can see each other. For wanting to keep me safe from the things in your life that hurt you."

"That won't ever touch you." I held her tighter, the ugly sensation in my stomach returning. "You never need to worry about that."

\* \* \*

I made a pan of chicken in rice. Diane didn't seem to mind the simplicity of the supper. After watching the sun set on the deck while sitting cozy under a blanket, we wandered back inside. I got the sense she was looking for a reason to stay, so I showed her the DVDs I'd already purchased: *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *Steel Magnolias*, *Casablanca*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *The Godfather Trilogy*, and—as a joke—*Easy Rider*.

She rolled her eyes at *Easy Rider* and selected instead *The Maltese Falcon*. I ended up liking the movie. It sucked me right in.

But I didn't like it enough to pay attention once Diane Donner's ass was on my lap and her teeth were biting my neck.

One minute we were watching the movie, sitting close with a bowl of popcorn between us, and the next minute she'd set the bowl aside, climbed on my lap, straddled my hips, and said, "Hi."

We hadn't expressly talked about it, but I got the sense she wanted to take things slow. Why else would she leave me after our first date with a kiss on the cheek? Earlier, in the kitchen when I'd offered to boss her around, she'd stopped her kissing torture right there and then, like she was shy about taking it further.

Thus, presently, I told myself to sit back, fold my hands behind my head, and let her do whatever she wanted. But I wasn't pushing her for more, not until she spelled out what was on her mind.

We just kissed at first. Her fingers danced around the fabric of my neckline but didn't stray. That went on for a while, and I was surprised at how much I enjoyed simply that—just kissing this amazing woman.

Then her hands grew bolder, sliding down the front of my T-shirt to lift the hem an inch, the backs of her knuckles playing against the ridges of my stomach. She lifted her head, pressing her neck to my mouth. I took what she offered, sucking on her skin.

It wasn't until she grumbled, "Why aren't you touching me?" that I allowed my hands to wander as well.

I massaged her back over her silky, button-down shirt. I gripped her waist and hips, loved on her neck and jaw with hungry, biting kisses. Touching and pinching the clasp of her bra beneath her clothes at her mid-back, I released it.

Her hips shifted restlessly as I neglected her breasts and opted instead to hold her jaw still so I could capture her mouth again, tangling our tongues, stroking hers with mine, and reveling in the wet, intoxicating heat.

Without taking off her shirt, she somehow managed with jerky movements to remove her bra, flinging it somewhere behind me as we kept on kissing, on and on. But she yanked her mouth from mine, gasping for breath when I used the tip of my finger to trace a light circle around her nipple.

Shivering, she whimpered, the sound needy and greedy as she arched her back, trying to force more of her breast into my palm. Of course, I obliged, massaging each of the perfect weights with both hands. She moaned.

Emboldened, I moved to lift her shirt, but she shook her head, capturing my wrists. “No, no. Please, not yet. Not this time.”

Fire in my lungs, I bit her shoulder to keep from demanding more, a painful and pleasurable spike pounding into the base of my spine. I didn’t understand what this was.

Was I disappointed? Frustrated? Or did my body enjoy her refusal?

“Do you want me to convince you?” I slid my hands back to her perfect tits, rediscovering the pleasure of touching and arousing a woman—and becoming aroused—through layers of clothes, reacquainting myself with the exhilarating frustration of boundaries.

She huffed a laugh that dissolved into another moan as I tongued her nipple through the fabric of her shirt.

“I bet you could convince—” she started, but then her breath hitched as I rolled my hips, wanting her to feel the hard press of my cock, wanting her to know how much her refusal tortured me.

Her fingers spasmed at my shoulders. I sucked her nipple into my mouth through the silk, giving it a punishing nip.

She cried out, but she also shook her head. “No. No, we shouldn’t,” her voice was high-pitched and whiny, and I don’t know why I loved the sound of it paired with the words she’d spoken, but I did.

I swept my thumb back and forth over the wet patch of her shirt. “Just let me touch your skin, here,” I said.

Her body shuddered; her hands were everywhere, now sliding under my shirt but not pushing it off. “No. No, Jason.”

I knew she’d say no. Somehow, I knew, no matter how much I asked, no matter how good I made it for her within these boundaries she’d set, she was going to say no. And somehow, I also knew she wanted me to ask, to

push, to make things harder for her, to torture her in return, maybe even to beg.

“I want you so much.” I continued using my tongue to toy with her breast, employing a hand splayed on her lower back—and still above the fabric of her clothes—to pull her closer. I wanted her closer. I wanted to be surrounded by her.

Rolling my hips again, I ground out, “Do you feel that? That’s what you do to me.”

She pressed down, grinding her fully clothed open legs against my equally clothed erection, and it was all so damn sexy for some reason. Why were her denials and obstruction so exciting?

Knowing we weren’t allowed to do more than this, this groping and petting over my T-shirt and jeans and her business attire, knowing *this* was all that would happen and wanting so much more, had me perilously close to coming.

Which meant now I was the one saying, “No. Wait—gorgeous—wait a minute,” and pulling her hands from my body and turning my face to the side to avoid her lips.

I wasn’t coming in my pants like a fucking teenager. No. No way. I. Would. Not.

Diane rocked on top of me again and I sucked in a breath between my teeth, my hands released hers to grip her hips. “Stop,” I demanded. “Hold still.”

She did. She held perfectly still except for the rapid rising and falling of her chest.

I also struggled to catch my breath, slow the beating of my heart, and communicate to my dick that blue balls were on the horizon. I’d touched her body, but I hadn’t touched her skin. And yet she had me wound tight, searching for an unsexy thread of a thought and finding nothing but carnal wishes.

What I needed was this woman off my lap.

Firmly, I lifted her hips and set her aside. I then stood and stiffly paced over to the kitchen, leaning my hands against the center counter and bowing my head. I breathed in. I breathed out. And I didn't allow myself to imagine how disheveled Diane must be after our groping, grasping make out session.

“Are you mad at me?”

I shook my head. “No. Just need a minute.”

A pause, then, “Should I go?”

“I hope you don't.” I knew my words were tight and short, but I was still so damn hard and it wasn't getting any better. The sound of her voice, knowing she was *right there* but entirely out of reach was doing crazy things to my head.

“I've never done that before,” she said, and it sounded like she was talking to herself.

“What's that?”

“Made out with someone.”

My head came up and I straightened from the counter. Looking over my shoulder at her, I couldn't stop my frown. “What?”

She still sat on the couch where I'd left her, but she'd turned her body. Her eyes fastened to mine. “I've never made out with someone. My ex and I, we didn't do that, not once. And the only other person I've been with is you, so . . .”

*What the fuck?*

I think I must've been in denial until that very moment. When she'd come to me over a year ago and dared me to prove men could pleasure a woman, I'd assumed that her ex had tried and failed to please her. Trying and failing was one thing. But never trying at all?

*I am going to kill that man.*

She laughed, like something was funny or wonderful or both, and it yanked me out of my murderous aspirations.

“I can’t believe how much fun that was,” she said, her eyes sparkling at me, so happy.

I felt my mouth curve despite the discomfort in my pants. She laughed again, then pressed her fingers to her lips.

“Sorry. I just—” She shook her head and then let her smile free, beaming at me. “That was so much fun. Right?”

Breathing out a laugh of my own, I bowed my head again, giving her my back. It had been fun. But I *hurt*. I was going to have to take things in hand—often, twice daily probably—if we kept having this kind of fun.

“Hey Jason, can we do it again?” Diane loud whispered, her voice full of hope.

Grinding my teeth to stop a groan, my knuckles grew white on the counter. She wanted to make out *again*? She wanted to touch and tease and do nothing more? She wanted barriers between us and anything more than over-the-clothes forbidden?

“Yes. Of course. Anytime you want.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

\*JASON\*

“When we find ourselves in a midlife depression, suddenly hate our spouse, our jobs, our lives – we can be sure that the unlived life is seeking our attention.”

— ROBERT A JOHNSON

**A**fter Diane left for home, picking up my preferred bottle of lube was no problem. Sex shops are always open late. While I was there, I’d walked down the vibrator aisle and wondered if I shouldn’t pick one up for her.

I didn’t like the idea of Diane being without a means to satisfy herself, even if I wasn’t going to be the one doing it. A woman has needs, and I wanted hers met. Often.

Ultimately, I’d decided against it. For the time being. Maybe when we were together a bit longer, she’d let me take her to Big Todd’s. Then she could weigh her options and pick out just what she wanted. *Maybe she’ll let me watch.*

“Dammit.” I grimaced, bracing a hand against a hallway wall at the compound. I did not need mental imagery of me watching Diane touch herself. I already walked around half-hard all the damn time.

I’d been randy as a teenager for the past several weeks, ever since our first night together at the safehouse. Finding time during the day to ease the pain

wasn't an option. Thus, I woke up early to take care of business, and I settled round two at the safehouse after Diane left each night.

We'd been meeting there nearly every afternoon and we hadn't done anything more than make out.

Well, that's not true. We did other things. We talked a lot. Flirted. We pulled up maps and I'd shown her all the places in the world I'd visited while she looked at me like I was something amazing and brand new. I made her dinner. She made me dinner. We played poker and I taught her how to cheat.

We also watched movies on the couch, during which we'd invariably make out like two horny, fumbling, virginal teenagers.

It was . . . torture.

But God help me, the more I thought about it, the more I looked forward to it, and the more I dreaded the end of this phase. I couldn't keep my hands off her when we were together. I couldn't stop thinking about her when we were apart. I didn't have to put on a show to appear angry and irritable and aggressive while at the compound. Every single wasted second in that hellhole pissed me right off and I found myself wondering more and more why I stayed.

Jess was gone. I'd always planned to leave after she took off. So why had I stayed this last year?

*She's sharper than a katana, all her poise and self-confidence is justified, and I go to sleep every night thinking about her eyes.*

“Repo!”

My head snapped up and I scowled at the young recruit named Charms—eyes wide, movements agitated—at the end of the hall.

“You coked out?” I barked the question. “I told you to lay off that shit.” Even before Charms had come to us, he'd been an addict. It was the reason he was still a recruit and not a member. Addicts made the worst drug dealers.

But whether Charms remained in his current position wasn't my call. Product procurement and sale flowed through Wolf; he had the largest number of direct reports.

"No, no. It's Wolf and Duck." He backed up, waving his hands for me to follow. "They've—shit! Well, just come see. They're inside the bar."

I made a sound of frustration, but I followed. Even though none of whatever had happened with Wolf and his boys should've been my business—I wasn't Romeo, and I certainly wasn't Razor—it seemed like more and more no one could do anything without dragging me into their dumpster fire emergencies.

My area of expertise has always been the money. All the money flowed through me and only me. I worked alone and I had no direct reports, but not because it was my preference. Razor didn't trust anyone but me to do the job or touch the funds. The only person who might've objected to this—Romeo, a.k.a. Darrell Winston, second in command—couldn't be bothered to care just as long as he ate well and never had to think about it.

Personally, I thought it was crazy of Razor, our President, to entrust such a critical area to just one person. If I hadn't secretly taken Catfish under my wing—one of the more levelheaded, business-minded members—and taught him the basics, no one would know what I did, how I did it, how to access the accounts, where the money was kept, who my contacts were except for Razor. In fact, I doubted even Razor knew. It's not like I could write this stuff down and put it into a binder for reference.

But then, Razor *was* crazy. So . . .

"Come quick!" Charms called from up ahead.

Tuning another two corners, I pulled out the burner cell Diane used to send me messages and checked for new texts. It wasn't necessary for me to watch where I was going while I walked. I could navigate these halls in the dark.

**Diane:** I know what movie we're watching tonight.

I smirked at that, debating whether I could stop for a moment and type out something before Charms came back searching for me. A frenzied shriek

echoed down the hall, coming from the direction of the bar, and I reluctantly decided to answer Diane's message later.

Not picking up my pace for the last few hallways, I moseyed into the bar and surveyed the scene.

Viper was up on the bar top while Gears seemed to be conducting an impromptu surgery on his shoulder. Viper appeared close to passing out and was likely the screamer I'd heard earlier. To my left, Duck was sitting in a chair. His neck an angry red and purple, he'd clearly been choked with a rope. Wolf was next to him, his lip busted, two black eyes blooming, and—from the way he was holding his side—it looked like maybe a few broken ribs.

Placing my hands on my hips, I sighed and glanced at Burro. He was behind the bar, his arms crossed, a rare expression of anger on his features.

“Who was it?” I asked Burro. He'd know the full story. He might editorialize, give too many details, provide details that weren't relevant, but at least he'd tell me the truth.

“Guess.” Isaac—uh, that is, Twilight—strolled out from behind the bar, his arms filled with bags of ice.

Closing my eyes, I rubbed my forehead and meandered over to the part of the bar Viper wasn't bleeding all over. “What did you do?” I asked tiredly.

“We didn't do shit!” Viper yelled, then released a yowl.

“They were doing deals on his land,” Gears ground out, sounding more tired than irritated. “Hold still, boy.”

We needed a new doc, or maybe even a nurse. Gears wasn't great at patching up wounds, but he was all we had these days. He used to manage black-market acquisition, but that had moved to Catfish some years back and Catfish had been working to rebuild the group. Losing the chop shop years back meant black-market yields were shrinking. I'd tried to help resurrect this, and so had Christine—Razor's old lady—but we'd both seen our efforts stall.

“What are you going to do about it?” Wolf slurred from his spot next to Duck, his question obviously meant for me.

“About what?” I tapped the bar top, sending Burro a commiserating look. *These fucking idiots.*

Twilight handed out the bags of ice like popcorn at a baseball game, answering my rhetorical question flatly, “About Romeo’s son.”

“Oh? Which one?” I asked, like I didn’t already know.

“Billy! Goddamn Billy Winston, fucking up Wolf like that.” Charms threw his hands up. “He needs to be handled.”

I shook my head, chuckling because nothing was funny. “Well, it ain’t gonna be me. You want to deal with him, you deal with him.”

“Razor needs to be told,” Wolf choked out.

“Go right ahead.” I gestured to the hallway. “Be my fucking guest.”

“Y’all shoulda killed him when you had the chance.” This bit of wisdom came from Viper, the dumbest among us.

“It’s not like they didn’t try,” Duck croaked out, rubbing his bruised neck. In addition to red and purple, it was turning blue and green and it was a wonder he could talk at all.

“Why can’t he leave shit alone? Why is he always after us?” Viper twisted his head toward me while Gears snipped at the excess thread holding the muscle together. Next, he would apply Steri-Strips to hold the skin together.

“Y’all were on his property, dumbass!” Burro banged on the bar top, making everyone jump. “You want to tell us again how he’s after you? Each time y’all drag yourself in here with a broken nose, rib, whatever, courtesy of Billy Winston, it’s because you’re not respecting the truce. You stay away from his sister, you stay away from Scarlet, and you stay away from his land.”

Duck wheezed something that sounded like agreement.

But Viper grumbled, “It’s Romeo’s property.”

“No. The house and all that land was left to Ashley’s fella, the game warden.” Burro poured himself a shot, downed it, and then proceeded to pour one for me and one more for him. “None of it belongs to Romeo, none of it. And Billy has made his position clear on the subject time and time again. You step on that land, you approach his women, you’re gonna get hurt.”

“You don’t need to remind me.” Duck rubbed his right thigh, and I doubted he realized what he was doing. The injury was old, but I knew it still bothered him.

Billy Winston had broken Duck’s leg years ago, before the kid had been a full member. The young recruit thought he’d mess with the Winston brother because everyone was a little afraid of Romeo’s second boy.

That had been Duck’s first mistake—thinking.

He and another recruit threw their empty beer bottles in the bed of Billy’s truck and made sure they shattered, filling it with trash and broken glass, pissing in it, taking a dump. Billy had come upon them in the act and knocked them out cold. They were lucky he hadn’t broken more than one leg each.

Tossing them unconscious in the bed of his truck, he let them roll around in broken glass and piss and shit before dumping them outside the club. He’d left a note, stapled to Duck’s chest—something about it being bad manners to leave one’s trash in another person’s yard.

He’d also signed the note. Just his first name, but we didn’t need more than that. Recruits and younger members talked about him like he was the boogie man. I encouraged it.

Point was, Billy Winston didn’t fuck around and I wasn’t getting in his face. Especially not when these assholes had been in the wrong.

“Don’t do deals on the old Oliver property,” I said, calm as you please, my glare cutting to Wolf. “You know better.”

“He dumped all our product. I’m out ten grand.” Wolf returned my glare best he could, considering. “Razor needs to know. He went too far this time.”

For maybe the hundredth time since Jessica had left Green Valley with Duane Winston, I wished I could leave. I was so damn ready to leave all this bullshit behind.

Pushing the shot back to Burro, I strolled toward the front exit leading to the lot. “This is your responsibility, Wolf. Not mine. These are your people. You want Razor to know, you’re gonna have to tell him yourself.”

He wouldn’t. No one wanted to talk to Razor Dennings, especially not when there was nothing but bad news to share.

I’d just made it to my bike when Burro came busting out of the bar, waving his arms. “Just a minute! Wait. I got something to tell you.”

I straddled my bike. “Text me.”

“No. This is something I think you’ll want to hear.”

Settling in the seat, I pulled my helmet off the handle and I leveled Burro with an impatient look. “Don’t make me late.”

“I won’t. I won’t.” He finally made it to my bike, huffing and puffing. “Listen, so, here’s the thing—you know that farm up on High Hill? The one Principal Sylvester wrangled away from that Miller fella last year?”

My movements stilled. “What about it?”

Principal Sylvester was Kip Sylvester, Diane’s ex-husband. Many of the recruits and members from around this area called him Principal Sylvester because that’s how they thought of him: as their old high school principal.

Burro put his hand on his hips. “Word is, the new owner—”

“Kip Sylvester?”

“Yes, Kip. Word is, he wants to sell it. Miller’s son says Kip has been dangling the possibility in front of their family, and even brought Miller to the Lodge to—”

“The Donner Lodge?” Now I was listening with interest.

“Yes, the Donner Lodge. Kip told Miller he’d lease the place back to him if Miller could talk that dragon lady—uh, Twilight’s momma—into giving

Miller back the cows. You know, the ones she bought last year at a price that raised eyebrows.”

For once I felt grateful for Burro’s habit of giving too many details. “Kip and Miller went to the Lodge? And did they get the cows?”

“No, no.” He gave a sad shake of his head. “The way his son told it, Miller and Kip tried everything. They threatened and begged, tried to reason with the lady, but she sent them away. She was with Ashley Winston, so maybe —”

“Wait—they threatened her?”

“Ashley?”

“Not Ashley,” I said between clenched teeth. “D—Ms. Donner. They threatened Ms. Donner?”

“Oh yeah, they tried. She wouldn’t budge. You know what she’s like—uh—well, I guess you might know better than most of—”

“When was this?” I balanced the bike between my legs and lifted the kickstand. My helmet dangling from my fingers, I backed it out of its spot. I didn’t start the engine, I wanted to hear Burro’s response first.

“Oh. I don’t know.” He scratched his chin. “I talked to the younger Miller last week, so it was before that, but after New Years for sure. The point is, that land might solve our problems, if it’s for sale. We can reopen the shop. It’s out of the way and there’s a level field in the back, behind the house, and—”

“Gotta roll, Burro.” Setting my helmet on my head and clipping it in place, I brought my bike to life and steered around the barkeep, leaving him in the dust kicked up by gravel.

\* \* \*

I didn’t head straight over to the safehouse.

It was my night to cook dinner and I needed to swing by the store, which was why I'd been leaving when Charms had stopped me in the hall. But now, knowing what I did about Sylvester and Miller and Diane, I needed a drive first—to clear my head, calm down, and think things through.

Her ex had threatened her. He'd *threatened* her and he was still walking around on two working legs. That farmer had threatened her. She'd stood up to them both on her own. On. Her. Own. That was unacceptable.

I'd been on my own most of my life before joining the Wraiths, without the means to defend myself. She was vulnerable to their threats, and that was not okay with me.

Who had her back? Who had she told? Who did she trust with her safety? Obviously, she hadn't told the Winston boys. If she had, they would've done something immediately, and they would've noticed she disappeared every night after work, and they would've followed her, and I would've had a visit from Cletus. Or Billy the boogie man.

I wanted it to be me. I wanted her to trust me. But the longer I drove around aimlessly, the more I understood wanting this was impossible. How could she trust me with her safety if we weren't together in private *and* in public?

I couldn't step up for her if we were a secret, and we had to maintain the secret to keep her safe from the Wraiths.

Pulling into the Piggly Wiggly parking lot—I still needed to grab food for dinner, and I expected Diane at the safehouse in an hour—I decided that the impossibility of the situation meant I needed to take a page from Diane's book. I needed to be more creative.

But first, she and I needed to talk.

As I removed my helmet and fastened it to the handle, I resolved to tell her the truth about keeping watch over her last year, not just because she deserved to know what type of person she'd tied herself to, but also because I wasn't going to stop. I couldn't.

If we were together, I had to keep her safe, and that was that. She had to tell me when someone threatened her. I had to be in her loop. Stepping off the

bike, I moved to walk across the lot and into the store, distracted by my own thoughts and not particularly noticing my surroundings.

I would tell her. But the fact remained Diane might call things off tonight, once she learned the truth.

I stumbled a step and heaved a sigh, heading for the meat counter. *I'll just have to accept it.* If she didn't want us to be together when she knew the truth about me, if she didn't want me interfering, watching, keeping an eye on things, then . . . *I'll leave Green Valley.*

I didn't want to leave her, but I would. Because I couldn't stay close by and do nothing.

Coming to the only possible decision given the impossibility of the situation, I finally turned my focus outward and inspected the butcher's case. The safehouse didn't yet have an abundance of spices, thus I liked to pick out pre-seasoned cuts to simplify prep. Tonight I wanted to make something nice, grilled steaks maybe. A fancy vegetable. I'd also pick up a good bottle of wine and maybe a box of chocolates. No harm in buttering up the biscuit before taking a bite.

But before the man behind the counter could approach, a raised voice caught my attention and I turned over my shoulder.

*Is that Diane?*

*"I said get your hands off me."*

That was Diane.

I sprinted toward the sound of the scuffle, rounding the canned food aisle just in time to hear Miller threaten, "I'm giving you one more chance here. You better take it or you're not going to like what happens next."

What I saw turned my vision red. He had his hands on her, he was *touching* her, holding her forearms in his meaty grip. His face lowered to hers, his eyes wild. Instinct had me reaching for the man's neck before he had a chance to do a double take.

Miller managed just a choking sound before I had his arm behind his back, him turned and body-slammed to the floor.

Diane squeaked, clearly startled.

“You don’t touch the lady,” I said, my knee at the center of his back. His shoulder had about two more inches of give before I dislocated it or broke it. “Say it.”

He tried to groan something, but I’d knocked the wind out of him.

“Stop! Please, stop!” She wasn’t screaming, but she did sound frantic.

I didn’t stop. I gave his arm a tug.

Miller huffed and puffed and wheezed out, “I don’t touch the lady. I don’t. I swear, I didn’t—”

“You don’t talk to the lady. Say that, too.” My voice quiet, I glanced up and down the aisle. It was clear of spectators. For now.

“I don’t . . . talk . . . to her,” he managed through his pain and struggling to breathe—both of which made me feel better.

Immediately, I released him and turned to Diane. Her big, beautiful eyes were fastened to my face, looking at me like I was a stranger. I grabbed her hand and marched us both down the aisle, stopping at the end of it.

“Go to your car. Drive to the turnoff just before Moth Run. I will meet you there.”

“I have groceries in my cart back there and—”

I turned and looked at her over my shoulder. Whatever she saw in my features had her lifting her chin, defiance sparking behind her eyes. I thought she was about to argue, and so I mentally calculated how likely it would be for us to draw no attention when I tossed her over my shoulder to carry her out.

Luckily, I didn’t need to. She gave me a jerky, unhappy nod and twisted her hand from my grip. In the next moment, she’d walked around me.

And then she was gone.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

\*JASON\*

“Mrs. Miniver suddenly understood why she was enjoying the forties so much better than she had enjoyed the thirties: it was the difference between August and October, between the heaviness of late summer and the sparkle of early autumn, between the ending of an old phase and the beginning of a fresh one.”

— JAN STRUTHER, *MRS. MINIVER*

To say the atmosphere in Diane’s BMW was charged would be a gross understatement. I half expected to be struck by a bolt of lightning.

She was angry. So was I.

“Are we going to drop the BMW off before heading over?” she asked testily from her spot in the passenger seat. Diane had been using a long-term rental car for driving to the safehouse since I’d pointed out how recognizable her car was.

Presently, I drove. I’d left my bike hidden at the turnoff.

“No.” I adjusted my hands on the steering wheel and checked the rearview mirror. Taking the time to swing by her house now was out of the question.

She huffed. “I don’t know why *you’re* angry.”

Saying nothing, I flipped on the blinker as we approach our turn, reminding myself to obey all traffic laws and to not speed. The last thing we needed

was one of the sheriff's deputies finding us together. They'd call it in just for the novelty of it. Flo McClure—town source for all rumors, true and false—would then spread it around like jam on toast.

Diane huffed again. "I do not approve of how high-handed you were."

"High-handed," I repeated. *High-handed?* That wasn't high-handed. She hadn't seen high-handed.

"Yes. Back there, with Farmer—Mr. Miller." Diane tugged at the sleeves of her suit jacket. It was the blue one I favored that matched her eyes. "I was perfectly capable of taking care of things myself."

I said nothing, otherwise I'd shout, and instead continued staring out the windshield. When the silence persisted, Diane began to fidget. My anger deflated, just a little, punctured by guilt.

She didn't enjoy lulls in conversation. I knew this; she'd confessed a few days ago that silences—especially tense ones—made her fret. My silence wasn't a punishment and I hoped she knew that. But I wasn't ready to talk. I couldn't. Not yet. I was just . . .

Just—

Diane threw her hands up and blurted, "Well, this isn't going to work."

I cleared my throat of gravel before asking, "What's that?"

"You being the silent type." The words were an accusation. "You are, you know. You're the strong and silent type. Tall, dark, handsome, strong, and silent. And I'm one of those talking people, I guess. I don't mind silence when I'm alone. But I want folks talking because I want to know what they're thinking."

"You want to know what I'm thinking?" For maybe the seventh time since sliding into the driver's seat, I had to remind myself to stop strangling the steering wheel. My knuckles were white.

"Yes, I do." She kept on fidgeting. "So just tell me."

"Fine." She wanted to know? Fine. "You are not capable of taking care of Miller yourself."

“Ex-excuse me?” She roared, twisting in the seat and pressing her back to the passenger side door. “What makes you think—”

“That man wants to hurt you,” I seethed. “You ain’t safe around him.”

“Mr. Miller? Puh-lease. A dairy farmer from High Hill can’t do anything to me.”

I suppressed the urge to shout and ask if she was stupid. She wasn’t stupid. She was the smartest person I knew. So why was she acting so fucking dumb?

Inhaling through my nose, I kept my jaw locked and pointed out the obvious, “Any person lacking in morality, or with intent and desperate enough for violence, can do a great deal of harm to anyone they please.” I slid my gaze to hers and held it as I steered around the switchback. I knew these roads like I knew the hallways in the compound; I could navigate them blindfolded if needed.

Diane glared at me. Then she opened her mouth like she wanted to argue. Then she snapped it shut and pointed her attention out the passenger side window.

We stayed like that for a while, and I was grateful. It gave my heart a chance to stop beating like an angry drum and reason to return.

This was the problem. *This*. Right now, right here.

This was why I needed to tell her the truth about following her last year. I didn’t want to fight. I didn’t want to sneak around and undermine her wishes. She needed to know who I was, what I was like, what she’d signed up for.

*Am I ready to walk away?*

Swallowing around a painful tightness, I gave my head a shake. It didn’t matter if I was ready. Life and truth don’t wait until you’re ready. She needed to know, and I needed to tell her.

“Well, I suppose I should send you a gift basket then.”

I narrowed my eyes in confusion, her statement nonsensical. I wondered if she'd been talking for a while and I'd been too inside my head to notice.

“What?”

“For rescuing me,” she spat, clearly still mad as hell. Turning back to me in a huff, she crossed her arms. “I am grateful. I am. But I’m also angry. He doesn’t listen to me. He’s been after me about those cows for months. I can’t get him to leave me alone.”

“You should’ve come to me.”

“No. No!” Diane gave her head several quick, frenzied shakes. “I shouldn’t have to and that is exactly why I’m angry. Thank you for helping me, really. Thank you. I don’t know if I approve of the manner in which you helped. But thank you anyway. I *was* scared. But what makes me so angry I can barely breathe is that I say no, and he doesn’t listen. I say no, and I’m not believed. It makes me want to learn karate or some other martial art so I can kick butt, and I hate it. I don’t want to have to know how to kick butt. I want people to listen to me, to my words, I want them to mean something. Why can’t a woman’s words count for more than a man’s violence?”

“Diane.” I tried to soften my voice because I was about to point out the obvious. “That is not the world we live in.”

It certainly wasn’t the world I lived in. Might made right. I understood that; I relied on it. There was a simplicity, an order to it, for men like me.

But I was coming to see, for a woman like her, there was no order to it. Only the chaos of powerlessness, uncertainty, and fear.

“I hate it,” she repeated on a murmur, turning her eyes to the forest beyond the road. “I do. I hate it so much.”

And that’s all she said for the remainder of the drive, leaving me to wonder whether at the end of the day, when I’d told her the truth about what I’d done, she’d hate me too.

\* \* \*

Once we were inside the house, I took her jacket, knelt to take off her shoes, and walked her to the chair in front of the hearth. After tucking a blanket around her lap and shoulders, I lit a fire in the fireplace.

Diane was the silent one now, her forehead furrowed, her eyes staring forward. And I was the one who wanted her thoughts. I didn't have a right to them, not until I told her the truth, but I wanted them anyhow.

We didn't have much for dinner, and certainly not the feast I'd had planned to butter her up. I made do. I found all the fixins for tacos and an unopened bottle of white wine in the fridge. After I'd set the meat to cook on low, I poured her a glass and brought it to her in the family room.

"Sorry I'm so quiet," she said, her gaze pulling at me as I handed over her drink. "I don't like it when others do it, so I shouldn't be doing it either."

"No." Sitting on the wide brick hearth a foot off the ground, I stirred the fire and added another log. "You be quiet if you need it."

I felt her attention on my face, the intensity of it, and I struggled to tell her what needed to be said. I didn't know how to start.

"Who are your people?" she asked out of nowhere. "I know you're from Texas, but who are your parents?"

"I don't have people." I gave her my eyes and a small smile so she'd see I spoke the truth.

She tilted her head. "Are you saying a stork brought you to the Iron Wraiths, fully formed, wearing black leather and brass knuckles?"

The words and her delivery made me chuckle. She was funny, when she wanted to be. "No. I have biological parents."

Now her stare sobered, like she absorbed the words I didn't say. She asked gently, "Did you ever meet your parents?"

"I did."

Diane looked a bit uncertain. "Do you not wish to discuss it?"

I didn't wish to discuss it, but I did find I wanted her to know. "My father—my biological father—already had a family when he impregnated my mother. He didn't want to leave his kids and wife, and my mother kept me until I was about three. She couldn't deal with me anymore, so I went into the system."

"You weren't ever adopted?" Diane's breath seemed come haltingly, like she was bracing herself for worse news than this.

"No. I was not adopted. I was raised in homes, a lot of them." I ensured my voice held a finality, communicated that this topic was off limits. I did not wish to discuss anything related to the homes. Even with her.

She blinked, looking away from me, her eyes now glassy. "I see," she said, and I suspected she needed another minute with her thoughts.

I stood and walked back to the kitchen, turning off the meat. Then I moved on to chopping the tomatoes, lettuce, and green onions. She joined me at the kitchen island, setting her mostly untouched glass of wine on the counter.

"Did you ever meet your father?" she asked quietly, her tone respectful.

"Yes." I nodded, using a knife to push the green onions off the cutting board and into a waiting bowl. "When I was, oh, I guess about sixteen, I ran away from the group home where I lived and tracked him down."

"How'd you do that?"

"Rural Texas is one little community after another, each basically the same. I knew where I was born, so I went there. Didn't take long, with the right questions asked to the right people. Small towns have a long memory for scandal."

"Did you . . ." Diane picked up the block of cheese I'd laid out along with the grater and got to work. "Did you confront them?"

"No. I lied about my age and got a job where my daddy—I mean, where my biological father worked, Franklin Ranch. He was a low-level ranch hand, but I watched him, studied him, and we became acquaintances. He and his wife had four sons, he had no need of another, and he retired shortly after I arrived."

It was strange, saying these things out loud. I'd never told anyone any of this. I'd thought it might be difficult to speak the words. It wasn't. Almost like this story belonged to someone else, someone long dead and buried along with whatever hurt and hopes they'd carried.

"What about your mother?" Diane dusted the back of the grater, the bits of the cheese there falling into the pile she'd made.

"She'd settled down a few towns over, married a lawyer, got a divorce. She had no children, but I got the sense she'd never wanted any."

"Huh." Diane continued to study me, like she found my story heartbreaking and fascinating, but mostly heartbreaking. "And you never told them who you were?"

I picked up as many of the taco fixins as I could carry and brought them over to the kitchen table. "Didn't see a reason to."

"How can you say that?" She turned, keeping her eyes on me no matter where I walked in the kitchen. "You were—are—their son."

"No, I wasn't." I returned to the stove and spooned the meat into another waiting bowl. "I was never anyone's son."

Diane exhaled, it sounded sad. "Jason."

"No, Diane. Listen." I put the bowl on the counter and gave her my full attention. "There wasn't space in their lives, and I wasn't going to demand something they had no desire to give. They gave me up for a reason. I didn't belong to them just like they didn't belong to me."

"Haven't you ever belonged to anyone?" Her frown severe, her words tinted with anger, everything about Diane—how she stood, how she glared, how her hands opened and closed on the countertop—screamed restlessness and frustration. But not pity, and that was good at least.

"I haven't," I admitted, keeping my tone plain and taking the dirty pan to the sink. I'd never belonged to anyone, and that was the truth. But also, it was all I'd known. Hard to miss something if you've never known it.

“Well! That’s just—” The cut off words were sharp with irritation, and I glanced over my shoulder to look at her.

I didn’t need to. She’d marched to the sink and stood at my side, glaring up at me with a ferocity I’d never seen in her before. I’d seen her fierce, but not like this.

“What?” I tried to read in her expression why she’d be irritated with me and guessed at the reason. “Telling my biological parents who I was wouldn’t have done any good. It would have just—”

“Forget those people.” She waved away my explanation, flinging her hand to the side like she was flinging my biological parents out of existence. “Do you want to?” she demanded, and the question had a ring of challenge to it.

My eyes moved between hers. I didn’t understand what she was asking. “Do I want to see them again?”

“No.” Diane inched closer, her tone quieter. “Do you want to belong to someone?”

Rearing back, I turned completely from the sink, and watched the scowl on her gorgeous face morph into something soft and searching.

“Because—” She lifted her hands like she might grab me for a hug, but then stopped herself, folding her twisting fingers under her chin. “Because I’d like you. I’d like you to be mine. Very much.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

\* DIANE \*

“I am incapable of conceiving infinity, and yet I do not accept finity. I want this adventure that is the context of my life to go on without end.”

— SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, *LA VIEILLESSE*

I could see I'd shocked him.

Which meant I needed to make my case before he found his wits enough to reject the offer. “I’m not in my twenties, Jason. Or even in my thirties. I’m not looking for a good man to start a life with or start a family, build a home. I’m middle-aged, hopefully at the center point in my life, a woman past all those youthful considerations and worries.”

“Are you saying . . .” He swallowed, his eyes still moving between mine like he expected me to take it back or disappear. “Are you saying you want a future with me?”

“Yes. I do. I don’t know if it’s a forever future, but I’m not sure I believe in forever anymore, and I don’t think I want to.”

Jason lifted his chin and the move felt defensive. “How do you mean?”

“I once committed myself to a forever of unhappiness, of low self-worth, of struggle to please another person. I’d resigned myself to it, thought of it as a Godly duty. I’d made my bed, and I was going to sleep in it come hell or

high water, because that was the noble thing to do. But now the idea of forever makes me cringe.”

“What?” He lifted a teasing eyebrow, but he was obviously still struggling with how to respond to my offer. “You don’t think staying committed in a marriage is noble?”

I could see he wanted to lighten the mood, but I wanted him to know where I stood. I told the truth, “No. Not always. Not if one party is shouldering all the burden, not if both people aren’t striving to be worthy of that commitment, and especially not when one of those people is a sociopath. Staying in a marriage like that isn’t noble, it’s spiritual suicide. And I don’t think Saint Peter would take kindly to me knocking on the pearly gates without my spirit.”

A surprised chuckle left his chest and he crossed his arms, leaning a hip on the counter. I got the sense he was still uncomfortable with the idea of belonging to me. And that was fine. If he didn’t want it, if he didn’t want a future with me, so be it. But I needed him to understand that a future between us was possible.

At least, from my perspective, it was possible.

“Jason, the considerations I’d been taught were important when I was younger aren’t a factor now.” I shook my head for emphasis and dared to take back the step he’d ceded. But then I halted because he winced, his eyes falling to the floor at my approach. “All I want, all I need from you, is honesty and care. That’s it.”

He made a slight sound, like my words pained him, and my brain went into overdrive. How could I convince him? And if I couldn’t convince him, how did I backpedal fast enough to not ruin everything? How did I get us back to where we’d been?

*Damn it, Diane! You should’ve kept your big trap shut.*

Why did I always want more? Why couldn’t I just let things be?

“Listen, I—” Now I stepped back. I sensed he needed space and for once in my life I wasn’t going to push. “You already know how I feel about you.

And I'll be just fine if you don't want more than what we've already got. I don't want to ruin this thing between us for however long it lasts."

Jason shook his head, his face scrunching tightly, and he closed his eyes. "No. No, I—Diane. No. I do want more than what we've already got, and you haven't ruined anything."

"You do?" I couldn't help the reedy note of hope that entered my voice or the way my heart gave a happy leap.

He opened his eyes, but he still didn't give them to me. "I have to confess something."

"Is it as serious as you look?" Inspecting him, my heart quit its happy leaping. In fact, it sunk while I held perfectly still.

"I don't know." He rubbed his forehead, and then glanced up abruptly, his eyes hooking into mine. "I'm not great at gauging what severity means to civilians."

"Civilians meaning not motorcycle folk?"

"And nonmilitary folk."

"You were in the military?"

"I was, but that's a discussion for a different time." He tore his stare from mine and walked past me, mumbling something that sounded like, "Or maybe never."

"Of those two options, I chose a different time over maybe never." Now he had me nervous. I followed him into the family room, glancing at the food on the table and deciding it could keep.

He stopped in front of the fireplace and added another log, his big body restless.

"So then, what's this confession that you don't know whether is serious or not?" I decided to stay standing. He stood. I should stand.

"There's no pretty way of telling you this." Jason turned and faced me, and a full-on eye-collision followed.

My heart squeezed and my mind jumped to the worst-case scenario. “Is it about Isaac?”

“No. No, not really. Not at all, actually.”

I exhaled my relief. “Then out with it, even if it’s ugly.”

“Okay.” He nodded, his thumbs hooking into his jean pockets. “That night I spun out—”

“Christmas?”

“Was it Christmas?”

“Yes.”

“Well then. On Christmas, when I crashed my bike, the reason I was there in the first place was to check on you.”

I stared at him, thinking about that for a second. But it made no sense. “Pardon?”

“Two of my recruits were . . . well, they happened to be on Donner Lodge property the week before and they saw your ex-husband’s old lady sneaking around, like she didn’t want to be seen.”

I flinched. “I have so many questions. First, old lady—that means his woman? Elena? His mistress.”

“That’s right.”

“And what were your recruits doing—what were any of your fellas doing—on Donner Lodge property?”

“It’s not unusual.”

I flinched again. “That’s not what I asked.”

“We’re getting off topic.”

“Are we?”

“We are. What they were doing there isn’t important.”

“Were they dealing drugs? Are they planning to steal cars? Or thief the cabins? Please tell me my patrons are safe.”

“Your patrons are safe. The Lodge isn’t a target, it’s a neutral spot. No one uses it. We’re not a threat to you or your business.”

I searched my brain, trying to figure out why on earth the Iron Wraiths would want to loiter on Lodge property. “Then why do they—”

“Diane, focus. Your ex’s old lady was there, sneaking around.”

“So you said.” My arms felt suddenly useless at my sides. I crossed them.

“Why would she be there?” He put the question to me like I would have any idea why that crazy lady did anything.

“I don’t honestly know. I haven’t seen her since her sister was convicted last year and they got off with barely nothing at all after what they did to my Jennifer. Were there any justice in the world, they’d both be six feet closer to hell.”

He stared at me, as though considering how—or whether—to continue.

I uncrossed my arms and scratched my shoulder. “Well, so, you stopped by on Christmas to check on me? When one of your young gentlemen spotted Elena at the Lodge sneaking? That’s your confession?”

“Not quite. I . . .” He turned, glanced at the brick hearth, and lowered himself to it, catching his head in his hands and covering his face. “Last year, after you were attacked—”

“When?”

His head shot up. “You were attacked more than once?”

“Uh—no. No. Just that once. When I got hit on the head and dragged over to burning bee boxes on Old Man Blount’s farm.” I’d woken up in the hospital and had been treated for smoke inhalation.

“I worried about your safety.” He stood again, pacing to the couch but not sitting.

“When?”

“When I found out what happened. So, last year, I got in the habit of checking in on you.” He seemed bracing, watchful.

And I was so confused by what he’d said, I didn’t know how to react to it. “Let me get this straight. Last year, when that nut job put me in the hospital, you found out about it and then started checking on me? Last year you did this?”

“I did. And I might’ve gotten carried away with it.”

*Carried away?* “What does that mean?”

“I used to follow you, in the morning, to make sure you got to work okay. And then in the evenings, I’d make sure you got home,” he said. Just like that. Just like . . . *that*.

We stared at each other while I processed this information. But I couldn’t process because it sounded so farfetched.

“Are you . . . are you saying you followed me around?”

“I did.” He nodded firmly. “And before I left at night, I’d walk your property a few times, making sure all looked well.”

I took a step back, unsure if—*No, no. This is weird, Diane. This is stalking.* “Why would you do that?”

“I don’t have a good reason.”

My mouth fell open and I took another step back. “You were spying on me for no reason?”

“I wasn’t—that wasn’t my goal.”

“Then what was your goal?”

“Your safety.”

“I—I was perfectly safe.”

“You were hit over the head, left for dead, and almost did die due to the smoke. The person who’d done it wasn’t apprehended for weeks after. And who was checking up on you?”

Goodness. He seemed to know a lot about it. “Well, Jennifer came over and stayed. And Cletus—”

“Cletus Winston was only there for your daughter. When she stopped nursing you, he left too. He wasn’t looking in.”

And Jason would know, because he’d just admitted to *spying* on me.

But, perhaps irrationally, that question he asked struck a chord. “I don’t need anyone checking in on me. I have an excellent security system.” Who was checking on me? No one. No one was checking on me. I was responsible for myself.

“Oh? Really? Then why didn’t it catch me, from March until September, walking your property?”

I had no answer to that.

“No one was checking in on you.” He said this slowly, emphatically, like I didn’t understand the implications of being alone.

But I knew. This last year, coming home to an empty house each night, I’d covered my loneliness with bravado and my fear with distraction. I’d never lived alone before. I’d gone from my father’s house to my husband’s house.

“No one had eyes on you—on your house, on your land,” he went on, the look in his eyes begging me to understand. “Your ex and his old lady, they’re not good people. They are bad people, and I would know. I needed to see you were safe.”

“But why? I wasn’t—we barely knew each other then.” I rubbed my forehead with agitated fingers, not knowing how to feel.

“I can’t explain it other than you . . . meant something to me.” Jason lifted his hands out to his sides, like he surrendered. “After our night together, as I’ve told you, I couldn’t stop thinking about you. I needed to know you were looked after.”

None of this made a lick of sense. “Why didn’t you tell me? If I meant something to you, then why not talk to me? Or—or contact me? Why not —”

“I promised your son I wouldn’t.”

That brought me up short. “Oh.”

“I know he was the one to escort you out of the compound that night, after.”

My attention dropped to the floor. “I see.”

I turned and walked to the kitchen table, wondering if I should just leave. Any sane person would leave. Instead, I gripped a kitchen chair and tapped my fingernails on the back of it, sifting through all this new information while eyeballing the food on the table.

“We should eat.” He’d made food. It would be a shame to waste it.

Darting from the table, I grabbed two dishes from the cabinet and whatever silverware we might use from the drawer.

By the time I made it back to the table, Jason had drifted over, his expression hard. “I think it would be better if we didn’t do this tonight. I think maybe you should go.”

I deposited the plates on the table—across from each other—then turned back to the kitchen island to grab the meat. “I’m hungry.”

“Diane,” he said, his voice low with something that sounded impatient but also resigned.

It was the resignation that firmed my resolve.

“Babydoll.” I spun and set my hand on my hip. “I am hungry. And I don’t know what to think about your confession, but I do know we both need to eat. Let’s eat. We can discuss you spying on me some other time.”

\* \* \*

Jason drove me home after dinner.

I’d tried to keep things light, ask him questions about topics that typically put him in a good mood, like his previous travels, or when he would teach me how to ride a motorcycle, but he didn’t wish to speak much. I filled the

silence, telling him all about the plans we'd finalized for Jenn and Cletus's engagement party. Then I told him about the new staffing decisions at the Lodge. Then I'd told him about Monsieur Auclair's training, how well it had gone, and how the man would be fit to take over operations if or when I ever needed him.

But when I'd mentioned Cletus Winston and the dairy, Jason had stood up, his chair scraping against the floor, and walked to the coat closet. He'd grabbed my jacket and bought it over.

"Come on," he'd said, pulling my chair out and lifting my hand. "It's time to go."

I'd filled the silence in the car too. Talking about the dress Jennifer had already selected for the party and how we were planning to wear matching colors. "But her dress will be more youthful than mine, of course."

Based on how his temple kept jumping, I'd wondered if he was grinding his teeth. I'd needed him to talk. I didn't think he was angry with me. If I'd read him right, he'd appeared angry with himself.

The next few days weren't easy ones, and definitely not as fun as they had been. Jennifer and Cletus's engagement party was just around the corner and I couldn't seem to stay focused on all the last minute details.

One might think Jason's confession would lead me to scanning the horizon, looking for him every time I walked to my car in the morning and at night, but I didn't. If he still watched me, well . . . I honestly didn't know how to feel about that. After Miller's actions in the Piggly Wiggly, I kinda liked the idea.

I did text him a few times, asking how his day went, telling him about mine. I suppose this was my continuing attempt to fill in the silence between us because this time it felt like a giant, gaping, empty hole in the center of my chest.

I missed him. I missed how solid and sure he was. I missed his teasing and flirting and quick comebacks. I missed his smile and how he seemed so comfortable in his own skin. He'd made me feel more comfortable in mine,

and I missed that too. I loved that my pushiness and bossiness and sharp tongue didn't seem to bother him one lick. He took me in stride.

After six days of not seeing him, I sent Jason a message once my last meeting of the day ended.

**Diane:** I want to see you. Are you free today or tomorrow?

After sending the text, I frowned at it, feeling heartsick at the thought of having to wait until tomorrow. Luckily, I didn't have to wait long for his response.

**Jason:** Tonight. Normal place. Wear jeans and a jacket.

Jean and a jacket? I tapped my bottom lip. I didn't think I owned a single pair of jeans. Kip had always said jeans were for farmers, a belief I'd espoused whenever my daughter had dared to wear a pair. But did I actually think jeans were for farmers?

I did not know. I would have to run down to the Merryville Mall and see for myself.

I typed out a response to his message, then deleted it. This went on for a while, likely because I had so much I wanted to say. I wanted to tell him I missed him, but I wasn't sure whether we had a future now. I wanted to ask him why he thought it was okay to follow me around. I wanted to ask him so many things, none of which were conducive to text messages.

Finally, I sent a lukewarm,

**Diane:** Okay. See you then.

Grabbing my purse, coat, and keys, I locked up my office and left the Lodge to go shopping.

\* \* \*

Kip—unsurprisingly—had been wrong. Jeans were for everybody. The sales lady had said the pair I currently wore made my backside look fantastic and I had to agree.

Since I'd been in Merryville anyway, I stopped by the fancy grocery store and picked up some fancy foods, figuring I could prepare a no-pressure picnic-like dinner of cheeses, cut up fruit and veggies, crusty bread, pâté, and dips.

Armed with my jeans and groceries, I drove over to our house and wasn't terribly surprised Jason hadn't arrived yet, though my heart would tell you I was disappointed. I had no use for miring in discontent. I grabbed as many bags as I could handle and made for the front door. A glass of wine and a warm fire sounded like a nice way to wait for Jason's arrival.

I returned to the car for the second load of bags and the tell-tale sound of an approaching motorcycle met my ears. Forgetting the bags for now, I turned at my trunk to watch the gate open and Jason drive on in. He stopped just next to me, pulling off his helmet to regard me but not cutting the engine.

My heart gave a little flutter at the sight of him, all his rugged handsomeness, and most especially at the way his eyes traveled over my jean-clad legs and hips. Then he tilted his head, motioning that I should come over.

Wanting to talk to him, but not wishing to yell over the hum of his engine, I walked over.

Before I could utter a word, he held out his helmet. "Put it on."

I rocked back on my heels. "You want me to put it on?"

He nodded, pushing it into my hands. "Put it on and climb on."

Squinting at him and smiling, I did as he commanded. "You still make everything sound like a command."

"Please," he said, the side of his mouth curving upward, his handsome eyes twinkling back at me. "Better?"

I laughed, standing still so he could adjust the strap at my chin, the food and my open trunk forgotten. He then held my hand and helped me on. No sooner had I straddled the bike behind him and put my arms around his torso did he take off. I gave a little squeak, and I felt his chest rumble with a laugh.

“Where is your helmet?” I scolded, squeezing him tighter.

“On your head,” he said, sounding pleased with himself.

I didn't get a chance to chastise him further because he accelerated. My heart climbed to my throat with the indescribable sensations of exhilaration and fear twining together in my stomach. We drove until the fear became fearlessness, until the press of his warm back to my front and the vibrating seat between my legs and the wind in my face felt like flying.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

\* DIANE \*

“Aging is not 'lost youth' but a new stage of opportunity and strength.”

— BETTY FRIEDAN

**E**ventually, Jason slowed the bike. As we pulled over at what initially looked like just a thicket of bushes and tall trees, I spotted a narrow, cleared space between the trunks and hedge. He offered his hand. I took it to disembark from the bike, my legs a little unsteady. This was the first time I'd been on a motorcycle. All things considered, I felt like I'd handled the thrilling unsteadiness of it well.

Jason carefully pulled the bike into the small clearing, presumably to hide it and us from the passersby on the road, then finally cut the engine. I'd followed him in, and he held out his hands for the helmet.

I passed it over, and then belatedly lamented the state of my hair. It must've been a fright.

“You're beautiful,” he said, watching me pat at my hair with a soft smile.

“I'm disheveled and messy.”

His eyes kept on twinkling. “I've seen you messier.”

That made me blush and I breathed a laugh, twisting away from him so he couldn't see the red staining my cheeks and neck. My embarrassment was

quickly forgotten as I came face-to-face with the view. Our little house had a view off the deck facing west, mostly of the sky and treetops. We'd often watched the sunset from there.

This was something different. We must've been facing due north. The sun to our left was almost fully cloaked by a puffy cloud and, yes, the sky was certainly beautiful with its oranges and pinks and purples. But below, instead of just trees, entire hills and mountains spread out before us, the blue mist clinging to the valleys.

"We must be really high up." I shivered because it was cold and the wind lifted up my hair. I had to smooth it back and twist it to keep it from flying around my face.

"We are." I heard and sensed Jason come up behind me a moment before something warm, heavy, and smelling of him settled on my shoulders.

I glanced down and realized he'd placed his leather jacket on me. "Aren't you cold?" I frowned up at him. "I already have a jacket."

"I'm not cold," he said, coming to stand at my shoulder, his deep voice hitting me like another blanket of warmth.

We stood for a bit, looking out over the shifting mists in the valleys, admiring the speckled last rays of sunlight as they graced the leafless trees and evergreens on the mountains. I thought about this moment, and all the moments that had come before, and how much I'd treasure them no matter what happened between us next. For once, the silence didn't make me squirm or fret, probably because I dreaded the end of it.

Which was why I was surprised when I heard myself ask, "If I break things off because of you following me around last year, what will you do?"

"I've been wanting to leave Green Valley for a while," he said, his answer immediate, like the matter hadn't required any thought.

I reared back and looked at his profile, this information catching me unprepared. "You'd leave? Because of me?"

"No. Not because of you." His eyes were narrowed and focused on the horizon. "Because of me."

“Because you followed me?”

“Partly, but not really. I know, if I did stay, I’d probably . . .”

“What?”

Frowning, he glanced at me. “I’d fret about your safety, with your ex out there and his woman, with Miller running around. I’d drive myself crazy if I stayed and wasn’t able to ensure your safety.”

“So, you’d leave?” I faced him fully and tugged his jacket closed against the wind. “And the Wraiths would be okay with that?”

“I would leave, and they wouldn’t have a say. When I’m ready to go, I’ll go.”

“And they won’t come after you?”

He scoffed. “They could try, but their reach isn’t what it used to be. I’d keep out of the southeast and I’d be fine.”

Something in me relaxed at this news and how sure he sounded just as something else excited and tensed. I found myself batting away crazy thoughts like, *Maybe Jason and I could run off together.*

See? Crazy.

I needed some perspective. Folks don’t go running off with men who follow them for months. It simply wasn’t done. He was probably the jealous type, and I wouldn’t be allowed to speak to other men. Then it would get crazier and crazier the longer we were together. He likely wouldn’t let me out of his sight, and I’d be stuck in another bad situation.

*Except . . .* He didn’t seem at all like that.

But then, I’d never been a good judge of character when it came to my personal life. In business, I could read people like a book. But when my feelings were involved, I’d always let hopes cloud my judgement. And I hoped Jason wasn’t a jealous, possessive jerk. Perhaps I hoped it so much, I’d decided it was true.

Inspecting him out of the corner of my eye, I watched carefully and asked, “What if I’d gone on a date when you were watching me last year? Would you have followed me?”

“Yes.”

I heaved a sad sigh. *Well, there’s my answer. He is a possessive, jealous—*

“This wasn’t—isn’t—a possession thing,” he said haltingly, almost like he could read my mind and knew the direction of my thoughts. “I wouldn’t have intervened, I wouldn’t have interrupted. There were a few times I saw you flirting with folks and it didn’t—I wasn’t upset. Chris Williams, for example.”

“That young deputy? What? I did not flirt with Chris Williams!”

Jason lifted an eyebrow, his mouth twisting to the side like he thought I was cute. But there was no jealousy there.

I huffed. “Okay, maybe I did flirt with Chris Williams.” The young deputy and I always went to the Piggly Wiggly on the same night of the week at the same time and he was a cutie pie. “But it was harmless. I am old enough to be his momma.”

“But you are fine enough to catch his notice. Most men are visual creatures. He liked what he saw and age has nothing to do with it. And if you and Chris—who, I admit, is a fine young man—had ever taken that step, I honestly would’ve been relieved.”

“What?” I felt my spin stiffen. “Why?”

“I wouldn’t need to run a background check on Chris Williams, and then you would’ve had someone to keep you safe from your ex and his woman. And, apparently, Miller.”

I squinted at him, trying to spot a lie. “Is that true?” If his words weren’t the truth then Jason was a world class liar.

“That is true. Prior to us trying to make a go of this, who you spent time with was none of my business, as long as they didn’t do anything to make it my business.”

“Like what? What would make it your business?”

“If they harmed you.”

*Huh.*

I turned back to the view. “So, I’m supposed to think of you like a guardian angel instead of someone who invaded my privacy?” I wasn’t sure who I was asking, him or me.

“I’m no angel, gorgeous.” In the darkening dusk he sent me a look that had a shiver racing down my spine, but not a bad one.

Clearly, I needed more therapy, because even after knowing what he’d done, I still wanted him. Badly.

“And I’m not saying what I did was fine and dandy,” he continued, sounding frustrated. “It wasn’t, I freely admit that. I knew it wasn’t right when I did it, and I know it now.”

I felt like we were about to hit the same wall in the conversation we’d encountered the last time we discussed this. How did we move past it? How did this become okay?

“Then what do you want me to say?”

“I reckon I’m asking for forgiveness, Diane. Not understanding, not when I don’t rightly understand it myself.”

That made me laugh. “Does it make any sense that I understand, but I’m not sure if I can forgive?”

His forehead wrinkled. “You understand?”

“If I could put eyes on my kids all time, if I could follow them around to ensure their safety, and that was something they wouldn’t consider a huge invasion of privacy, then you bet I would. But I love my children. I love them. I think about them—”

“All the time,” he finished.

“But you didn’t—I mean, you say you did think about me all the time. And, admittedly, I thought about you all the time, but I wasn’t out there following

you around.” I gestured to the forest and road beyond. “For heaven’s sake, we were only together one night.”

*And yet, it had been one heck of a night.*

“In my own fucked-up way, keeping people safe is the only means I have available to look after those I care about.” His tone took on a thoughtful note, like perhaps he was talking to himself. “I haven’t cared about many people. Three, maybe four in my life.”

“Are you seriously telling me you’ve made a habit of following around folks you care about without their knowledge? I’m not the first?” I couldn’t decide if this new information made things better or worse.

“I have,” he admitted easily.

I shook my head, at a loss. “Like who?”

“Like my daughter.”

If I hadn’t been standing still, I might’ve fallen over. “Your *what?!?*”

“My biological daughter.”

“You—I—pardon me?” My feet stumbled back on their own; I needed to see him better. “You have a child?”

He made a sound in the back of his throat, a rumble and a denial, and he said, “Not really. I contributed a bit of DNA, and the woman I was with at the time gave birth to her nine months later.”

I stared at him. I couldn’t believe this.

Actually, I could believe it. But I still couldn’t believe it. “Did you want a baby?”

“No. And I’ve taken steps to make sure it never happens again.”

“Meaning?”

“I’ve had the surgery,” he said plainly, and he sounded unapologetic about it. “Condoms are to prevent disease. But I couldn’t get a woman pregnant, not even if one broke.”

“But . . . you didn’t want the child?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“I don’t understand—”

“I wasn’t given a choice one way or the other. I didn’t know there was a child until years later.”

“God,” I gaped, covering my mouth. “What happened?”

“Louisa decided—”

“The mother?”

“The biological mother. She had a sister who was married but had difficulty conceiving after their first. The sister and her husband are good people—the best kind of people—and so Louisa gave the baby to them.”

“Are these people part of the Wraiths?” I asked, now on the edge of my proverbial seat.

“No. The opposite,” he said with a wry note.

I wasn’t sure what that meant, but I had more pressing questions. “What did you do when you found out?”

“I moved here.”

“Because she lives here? Your daughter?”

He nodded. “She did.”

I glared at him and his short answers. “Have you ever met your daughter?”

He rubbed his jaw and looked away tiredly. “I don’t particularly wish to discuss it.”

“Well, that’s too bad.” I set my hands on my hips. “Because I wish to know.”

A smile tugged at his lips, but his eyes grew hard. “Diane.”

“Nope. Don’t you ‘Diane’ me. I’m entitled to a little invasion of your privacy after you spied on me for months. Now spill it.”

He faced me, his smile falling into something flat and as rigid as his eyes. “I don’t owe you anything, not if you’re here to call things off.”

Hemming and hawing, I looked at the darkening sky and mountains—now mostly in shadow—and finally settled on, “Well who says I’m here to call things off?”

“Aren’t you?” he pushed, not sounding at all angry. He sounded firm but accepting. “If it were me, I’d have called things off as soon as you told me the truth.”

I sent him a sideways look. “Perhaps you would’ve called things off. Perhaps you would’ve forgiven me immediately. Folks enjoy making claims about knowing exactly what they’d do in every situation, but the truth is until it’s staring you in the face and it’s *your* situation, you don’t know a damn thing. It’s all a guess until it’s real and real decisions have to be made.” I’d learned this lesson over and over during and after my divorce.

All the people who’d felt entitled to tell me what they would’ve done in my situation—

*You should’ve left him earlier, it’s what I would do.*

*You should give him another chance, it’s what I would do.*

*You should give him half the Lodge, it’s what I would do.*

*You should cut him out without a penny, it’s what I would do.*

—they didn’t know. Until it’s you, you don’t know.

“Don’t tell me what to do. It’s my choice to make,” I snapped, still weary of folks and their opinions. “And don’t think for one second you know what I’ll do.”

He breathed a laugh, lifting his eyes to the heavens. “Woman, I never know what you’re going to do. And the last thing I want to do—or would *presume* to do—is try to make your decisions for you.”

“Good.” I nodded once, firmly. “Now, I’d like to pretend for a bit longer to be upset, if you don’t mind.” I sniffed, looking down my nose at him the best I could, considering he was so much taller than me. “If I forgive you now, then it sets a bad precedent for the future. Therefore, I’m going to need to see some groveling, including time spent on your knees.”

He stared at me like I was nuts. But then he laughed again, this time with a fair amount of wonder. “You’re not upset anymore?”

“I know I should be. But I’m not,” I said and realized at the same time. Goodness, what was wrong with me? *So many things, Diane. There is not enough time in the day to make a list of all the things wrong with you.* “And I guess there’s more evidence of me being wrong in the head, if you needed any.”

He appeared truly stunned. “You forgive me?” Jason reached for my hand, like he couldn’t stand not touching me for a moment longer.

“I guess I do. But if we do ever go our separate ways, I don’t want you doing it again.”

“If we go our separate ways, I’ll be leaving Green Valley, so you don’t need to worry about that.” His words meant to reassure me had the opposite effect.

Grabbing his other hand, I moved closer. “If I’d called things off tonight, would you have left the Valley?”

“I’m already packed.”

“Are you pulling my leg?”

“I’m always packed. But, yes. I would’ve left tonight.”

“You thought I was meeting you to end it?”

“I did.”

A shock passed through me, followed swiftly by a horrible feeling of loss. “And you would’ve been okay with that?”

“No. But I’d accept it. I’m not here to drag you down to my level, Diane. I’m not here to ask that you accept my reality and excuse the choices it leads me to make. I know I can’t bring that shit into your world, into this thing between us.”

“Honey—”

“I don’t expect we can keep this going forever, but you’ve won me over. Until you get bored of me—”

“Or you get fed up with me.” I lifted my arms and twined them around his chest, loving how—with his jacket on my back and his big body at my front—he surrounded me.

“For however long this lasts . . .” Jason bent to me, slid his nose slowly against mine, teased my lips with his “I want to belong to you.”

\* \* \*

We made a blanket picnic in the family room when we got back. But first, we laughed at how I’d left the rental car’s trunk open and half of the groceries exposed to the elements. Luckily, no chipmunk or black bear had stopped by to ravage our unattended food.

I loved that even though I’d been silly and absentminded, instead of chiding me, Jason had laughed like it was all a good joke. I loved how freely he laughed. And I loved how I never felt like he was laughing at me.

We watched his favorite, *Casablanca*, while sitting next to each other on the floor, the cheese and crackers and pâté spread out between us. Jason cleared away the food at the part where the lovers see each other for the first time. I’d planned on helping, but I couldn’t move. The film held me transfixed. I’d seen the movie before, but the chemistry between Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman’s characters struck me differently this time, made me breathless. It also made me sad because I remember how the film ended.

Once all the food and containers were out of the way, Jason returned with a new bottle of wine—I hadn’t realized we’d polished off the first—and I

accepted the glass he handed over. But then, after taking a moment to consider the two glasses I'd already consumed, I set the wine to the side.

I'd never been a drinker. With my daddy being an alcoholic, I hadn't minded that Kip was a tea toddler . . . er, teetotaler. A teetotaler. Not toddler . . . *but kind of a toddler just the same.*

The internal musings of my mind had me pressing my lips together to keep from laughing. Kip had been a toddler. Ignorant. Throwing tantrums if he didn't get his way. Needing to be fed and babied and coddled. Everything done for him.

I slid my eyes to the side and studied Jason's face, which was mostly in profile. My gaze raked over the thick salt and pepper beard, the strong line of his jaw, his delectable lips and nose and eyes. He was so handsome. But Kip was handsome too. So was Bethany Winston's husband, Darrel. Square jaws and thick hair and expressive eyes don't make a man.

Thoughts and actions make a man, specifically the ability to take action and a willingness to think. And, I supposed, that's what made a woman too.

I'd peeled off both jackets earlier, which left me in my thin but warm cashmere sweater, a thin and not warm long-sleeved T-shirt, these new jeans, and a pair of cotton socks. Plus, you know, a bra and underwear—burgundy to match my nail color.

I then made a quick assessment of what he wore: dark grey long-sleeved Henley, thick dark jeans, wool socks, and presumably some underwear. My sweater counted as one extra layer. I removed it.

The movement drew Jason's notice. "Are you hot? Do you want me to close the fireplace vent?"

He always built a fire whenever we arrived and tonight hadn't been any different.

"No. I'm not hot." *Not yet.* "You can leave it open."

His eyes narrowed, just a millimeter, and his gaze lingered on me, like he was suspicious.

I gave him my best innocent look.

He sighed. “Diane, I don’t believe—”

Using his shoulder to brace myself, I straddled his lap.

Jason’s jaw slid to the side, his teeth scraping, but his hands rested on my thighs and squeezed.

“Hi there,” I said, smiling my flirty smile.

Jason swallowed thickly, his smile grim, his eyes heat and hunger as they tangled with mine, but he said nothing. Bending my head, I slid my nose against his and brushed our lips together, an echo of what he’d done out on the ridge when we’d made up and he told me he wanted to be mine.

“I missed you,” I said, my hands sliding down the front of his hard body. I loved his body. I thought about it, and all the things I knew it could do, so much more often than what would be considered decent. “I—”

He grabbed my hair at the back of my head and forced my mouth down to his before I could say another word. The sounds of the movie faded and we kissed, frantically.

After so many days apart, I didn’t know if I’d expected our typical slow build this time, but nothing about this could be described as slow. I didn’t know when my hands had lifted his shirt, or when he’d unclasped my bra, or how long our mouths had been fused together, but when I turned my head to breathe, his fingers were digging into my hips as though to push me off.

“No—no.” I pressed down, grabbing fistfuls of his shirt. “I need you.”

“You need to get off, right now. Or I will,” he warned, holding me still.

The hard length of him between my legs told me he was serious. He would come soon if I didn’t give him some space. But I didn’t want to give him space, not this time, and I wanted him to come. I wanted to make love to him—or, I guess, have sex with him, if that’s what it was—and I was tired of waiting. The torture between us had been a thrill but denying myself tonight didn’t feel like an option.

Releasing his shirt to move my hands down his chest and stomach, I grabbed the hem of my T-shirt and took it off along with my bra. He leaned back, watching me warily.

But then his eyes strayed and he breathed a curse before growling, “What are you doing?”

“Won’t you touch me?” I whispered sweetly, leaning forward to feather a soft kiss to his eyelid, taking his hands from my hips and bringing them to my body.

“Diane—”

“I need you, Jason.” I kissed his other eyelid, releasing his hands since they obeyed my unspoken command and were presently lavishing my breasts with tender care. “I need you inside me.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

\* DIANE \*

“We'll never be as young as we are tonight.”

— CHUCK PALAHNIUK, *RANT*

**H**e breathed out a tremendous breath and in the next moment he'd lifted me, rotated us both, and pressed my back to the blanket. I tugged on his shirt. We took it off together, his movements impatient. As soon as he was free of it, he was on me again, his mouth covering mine, hands everywhere.

No words passed between us. I gave him no direction and he didn't seem keen to give me any either. Working together, we kissed and removed my pants and underwear, the texture of his warm, rough hands sending goose bumps racing all over my skin. He bit my neck and I unzipped his fly. He spread my legs and I pushed down his jeans, his finger giving my center a tender, testing stroke, making my breath hitch and my brain go wild with want.

“I need you,” I said, clawing at his pants to push them further down his thighs, desperate to feel him.

Jason swatted my attempts away, and then grabbed my wrists, pinning me to the floor. He made a rumbly sound against my neck as he licked and bit and kissed me. His legs moved between my legs. I don't know what magic he worked, but his jeans were soon cast off and I gasped as his thick, hard,

naked erection nudged against my entrance just before sliding up, stroking that hot button between my legs.

“Jason!”

Moving both my wrists to one on his hands, he lifted his hips, nudging me again, and took his time sliding his free palm down the length of my body, grabbing and massaging and teasing my bare skin the whole way.

The back of his knuckles rubbed a teasing circle around my center in a touch that felt intensely possessive. He pushed two fingers inside me slowly but roughly, moving in and out several times, with no attempt at finesse, saying something that sounded like, “Mine. This is mine.”

I didn’t argue, seeing as how I’d asked him to be mine a week ago. That said, I was still my own person for heaven’s sake, and even though I was presently lost to lust and the promise of his capable hands, if he thought for one moment—

Abruptly, he released his hold on my arms and withdrew. I whimpered, immediately reaching for him. But again, he batted my hands away, placing hot, wet, tonguing kisses down my body before lifting my hips and fastening his mouth on my sex.

My back arched, my eyes slammed shut, and I bit my knuckle to keep from crying out. He’d sensitized the flesh with his fingers, those hard, punishing, too-rough invasions, and the dichotomy of his soft, hot, slippery tongue now almost made me come apart.

He hummed, licking me like a lollipop. “You like that?” *Lick*. “Hmm?” *Lick*. “Tell me.” *Lick. Lick.*

“M—more.” It wasn’t enough, and yet the tease of it was overwhelming. He held me just on the edge.

“Ask nicely.” *Lick, lick, lick.*

“Ah! Please.” I tried to reach for him, or move my hips, or force him to somehow give me what I needed. But he held himself away.

“Beg,” he said, circling my center with just the tip of his tongue.

I covered my face, feeling too much, too needy, overheated. “Jason, please! Please.”

“Good girl,” he said.

But then he was gone again, and I forced my eyes open just as he settled on top of me, once more grabbing my wrists and pinning them on either side of my head.

“What—Oh. *Damn.*” I bowed forward as far as I was able given how I was restrained. He’d entered me with a quick, merciless thrust and it felt—he felt, I felt—beyond description. My eyes rolled back in my head as I closed them, and I decided I would not describe this. I would simply try to hold on and enjoy myself.

Jason wasn’t slow and soft, or even particularly gentle, but when I opened my eyes, I found his gaze blazing over my body. He watched my breasts move with each push of his hips, then they traveled lower to watch where we joined. He made a grunt of satisfaction, and it felt a bit like being used, like I’d become his sexual plaything and he was greedy for me, the sight of me under his command, famished for it, and I didn’t at all mind. It made me feel powerful and I loved it. I didn’t understand why, I couldn’t think, but I loved being handled and desired in this way.

“I’m coming inside you,” he told me, his teeth nipping at my jaw before he dipped his mouth to my ear and whispered hotly, “And then, I’m kissing every inch of your body before I make love to you again.”

I could only moan as the first sparks of my orgasm burst behind my eyes, my body locking, becoming nothing but hot sensation. His pace quickened and he held himself above me, taking his pleasure from my body, giving me so much in return.

I came, crying out nonsense, the muscles deep inside in my lower belly coiling and releasing until I thought I couldn’t stand it. I lost myself to the pain and pleasure. It lasted and lasted, and he pulled my hair, forcing my chin back for his mouth to claim, his movements rough, demanding, perfection.

I didn't care. I didn't have a single concern about what he did, how he touched me. I trusted him. There is no conquering what has been freely given. I couldn't wait for him to come, and then play with me again, tease me, talk dirty, use me.

I loved the anticipation of it, and I knew—Jason being Jason—he'd never leave me unsatisfied.

\* \* \*

“Diane Donner, you are positively *glowing*.”

“Why, thank you, Beau.” I grinned at the Winston twin, taking the compliment rather than saying something like, *You are too kind*. This was my only daughter's engagement party and I was going to enjoy the ever loving heck out of it.

Also, I felt like I *was* glowing. I felt like my feet hadn't touched the earth in days. Jason and I . . .

*Siiiiigh*. And, just for the heck of it, *swoooooon*.

Even though we'd spent almost every night these past few weeks together and had parted over coffee and pancakes this morning, he'd shown up earlier this afternoon, sneaking into my office to give me hot kisses, wish me luck, and tell me how gorgeous I looked.

He'd also given me gigantic, antique tanzanite ring, saying it matched my eyes. The center stone must've been four or more carats and I'd gasped when he'd slipped it on my right hand.

“This belongs to you,” he'd said, then added, “A reminder that I do, too.”

Leaning in, he'd given me another kiss, and he'd backed me up against my desk, and he lifted my skirt, and . . .

Well.

I'd wanted to be swept off my feet, hadn't I?

These last weeks with Jason had been perfect. He'd been perfect. He'd taught me how to ride a motorcycle and, you know what? I was a natural.

Work had been perfect. Spending time with Jennifer and Ashley leading up to the festivities had been perfect. The party preparations had been perfect and now the decorations were perfect. I'd thought the night might be too chilly, but I'd been wrong. The weather was perfect.

But more importantly, my daughter had squealed with delight when she'd seen how Ashley and I had pulled it all together.

Presently, Jennifer and I had just finished with the receiving line—everyone had been so nice—and were now standing with Beau Winston and his lady love under the canopy of string lights Ashley had artfully arranged between the Moreno glass chandeliers.

If I was glowing, Jennifer looked positively heavenly in her lovely red dress. I wasn't surprised; she was an angel. I was so proud of her and the woman she'd become despite everything she'd experienced. I could've just burst with happiness.

"You do look pretty, Diane," Shelly Sullivan said, drawing my attention away from Jennifer and to the lady mechanic's gently smiling face.

Surprising myself, I blushed at the compliment because, *goodness!* Shelly was stunning when she smiled and didn't have grease on her face. I'm talking otherworldly beauty.

"Thank you," I croaked out. My brain short circuited for a moment and I could only nod with a big, dumb smile on my face.

Happy conversations ebbed and flowed around us. A few latecomers tapped me on the shoulder while Jenn and I were talking to Beau and Shelly, mostly to offer congratulations and hugs. I hadn't yet seen Cletus. I'd been told he'd arrived, but I hadn't spotted him when Jennifer and I walked in.

He was supposed to come join us, but I wasn't going to push it. My future son-in-law and I were starting to understand each other, and that was enough.

“It’s awfully nice to see you both looking so happy,” Beau said, drawing my attention back to his summer sky eyes. “I helped Shelly with the welding of those hearts, you know. I did about half of the work.”

Shelly slid a glare to her beau and a smirk tugged at her lips. “That’s very funny.”

He laughed, giving her a kiss on her cheek. “You’re funny.”

“I’m never funny,” she said.

“You’re always funny,” he said, looking at her like she hung Jupiter in the heavens. “Come on, tell us a joke.”

I studied the two of them. There never was a more unlikely pair. I smiled right along with their friendly banter. Jennifer did too, gazing at the members of her new family like she might be just as much in love with them as they were with each other.

“Okay.” Shelly gave an easy nod. “Here’s one: what is the difference between a welder and a comedian?”

“What?” Jenn, Beau, and I asked in unison.

She lifted an eyebrow and deadpanned, “A comedian tells jokes.”

All three of us erupted in laughter, which also made Shelly laugh, and I sent a little prayer of thanks upward for these people and this moment and—

“Oh no,” someone to my right said, and I was jostled by an elbow. A few folks gasped and an odd kind of energy pressed at my back as conversations rippled to silence behind us.

Frowning, I turned my head to see what the matter was, and then I saw them. Kip and Elena. Standing at the entrance to the party. Looking determined to ruin it.

“Oh Good Lord.” I turned back to Jenn and gripped her arm, whispering urgently, “Do not turn around. Don’t give him the satisfaction.” Stiffening my spine, I pulled in a deep breath and lifted my chin, preparing to do battle. “I will deal with this.”

Turning from my daughter, trusting Beau and Shelly to keep her safe, I walked to the barn doors and straight to the smirking, smarmy faces of Kip and Elena.

“Diane.” Kip said my name as though it tasted like farts and spoiled milk.

No matter. I didn’t care what he thought of me. I simply needed him to leave Jennifer alone.

Punching down the urge to scream at the man and demand he feel shame for his selfishness, I cleared my throat and leaned forward to whisper as calmly as I could muster, “Kip, if you are here to talk to me, we can certainly—”

“We have every right to be here!” Elena hissed, shoving her face in mine, her eyes glittering with insanity.

I stumbled back, the crazed quality to her expression unsettling me and tying a knot of unease in my stomach. Working to ignore the attention fastened to us from all directions, I frantically searched my brain for an answer to this problem. How did I get them to see reason? Or, since that was unlikely, how did I keep them calm and quiet until the sheriff made his way through the crowd?

Before I could think of anything, Kip stepped forward, nearly colliding with Elena. “Well, isn’t this nice. I guess the invitation to my own daughter’s engagement party got lost in the mail?” The words were shouted so everyone could hear and the knots in my stomach twisted.

He wouldn’t be reasoned with. He was here to make a scene, and that was that. Furthermore, there was nothing I could say or do to keep him from making that scene. I’d have to just . . . wait. Wait out the storm and hope—by the time Sheriff James arrived—Kip and Elena hadn’t done too much damage and the evening could be salvaged.

Grimacing, I struggled to keep hold on my composure. But I wished Jason had been with me. I knew my hands were tied, but I wished I didn’t have to do this all alone. I wished he was here to hold my hand.

Abruptly, big, sturdy fingers reached for mine and my eyes shot up to their owner, my heart leaping to my throat, because for an impossible fraction of a second, I thought my wish had come true.

But it was Billy Winston who stood at my shoulder, not Jason. And Hank Weller was walking past him to stand at my other side. The second oldest Winston brother gave me a kind smile and the knots eased, just a bit. My burdens had lessened because this strong, sweet, capable young man was willing to share them temporarily.

Just knowing I wasn't alone, just knowing someone had my back and wouldn't let me face these demons by myself, made a big difference.

And yet, as I turned to face those two demented charlatans again, I couldn't help the persistent wish that it had been Jason at my side. Not because I didn't truly appreciate Billy's gesture, but because Billy wasn't my person.

Jason was my person.

I loved him.

In that moment, I knew it to be true. My heart ached and I longed for him. If Beau and Shelly had made it work, so could we. As soon as this night ended, I would bite the bullet and ask him what had been on my mind. Once Jennifer and Cletus married, I would ask Jason to run away with me. He'd said he could leave any time and we had no reason to delay our life together.

Because if or when I faced demons, he was the one I wanted at my side.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

\*JASON\*

“At an early age I learned that people make mistakes, and you have to decide if their mistakes are bigger than your love for them.”

— ANGIE THOMAS, *THE HATE U GIVE*

I left the grounds of the Lodge after taking my sweet time making Diane feel good in her office. I then went on a walk in the forest, waiting for night to fully descend before hiking back under the cover of darkness.

Now, hours later, I found myself in the unusual position of strolling around with a smile on my face even while feeling disappointed I hadn't seen my daughter. Giving the barn a wide berth so as not to be spotted by any of the townsfolk, I narrowed my eyes at the partygoers one more time, searching for the only two people I wanted.

Diane had worked hard on the party, and I wanted it to be a huge success for her sake. But Diane wasn't at the party—not that I could see—and neither were Duane and Jess. I'd spotted the James family—the sheriff and Louisa's sister as well as their son Jackson—and I'd spied Beau Winston, Duane's twin, with his woman, but no sign of my daughter.

I hadn't asked Diane if Jess would be present for the party because I'd just assumed she'd be there. Diane still didn't know that Jessica James was my biological child. She hadn't brought the matter up again during our time together and neither had I.

*Oh well. There's still the wedding.*

Sneaking into the wedding would be more difficult since it would take place during the day. I'd likely have to wait until the nighttime reception to sneak a glimpse. It didn't make any sense, this need to see my Jess happy and well, but I'd long ago surrendered to the compulsion. Fighting it just made me miserable. And I—

*Shit!*

I dropped to the ground, my heart taking off at top speed as several shots were fired from somewhere to my left. I'd been nearly past the bakery on my way to the north woods when the sharp, ricocheting sound cut through the dark night. Holding my breath, I waited and listened. A single thought cut through the riot in my mind: *Where is Diane?*

Slowly, new sounds reached my ears over the rushing of blood between them. Screams. Panicked screams coming from the direction of the barn. I'd just decided to run back that way and look for her again when more shots rang out followed by the unmistakable sound of glass breaking nearby.

The shots weren't coming from the barn. They were coming from the parking lot on the other side of the bakery. And Diane wasn't at the party.

Cold dread slithered down my spine and I was up, running for the parking lot, my heart in my throat, my brain oscillating between desperate pleas to any deity that would listen and murderous intentions if I found her injured. If she'd been shot, if she's hurt, I would—

I couldn't swallow. I couldn't think about it. Thinking about her being hurt, losing her, it sent black to the edges of my vision, momentarily crazed with fear. She couldn't be shot, and that was that. I wouldn't allow it.

Finally, I made it to the lot and tucked myself close to the bakery so as not to make a shadow or draw notice should the shooter still be present. I scanned the lot. My blood ran ice cold.

*Diane.*

There. Just a few feet away. There she was, kneeling next to the opened driver's side door, holding something, quiet sobbing pleas spilling out of

her.

Not taking a moment to think, I ran over, crouching low as I reached her. “Diane!”

“He’s dead. He’s dead.” She was looking at her hands and in the next moment she showed them to me. This close I could see they were covered in blood. Inside the car was her ex-husband, blood blossoming against his white shirt and on his face.

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing.

*What am I seeing?*

I grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a little shake, wanting to force her eyes to mine. “Diane, look at me.”

She did. But I didn’t think she actually saw me. Even so, I asked, “What did you do?”

She shook her head, her chin wobbly. “I don’t know.”

*Safe. Keep her safe.*

“Come on.” I pulled her up by the arm.

“He’s dead,” she whisper-sobbed.

“I know,” I said grimly, determination sharpening my thoughts, giving me focus and purpose.

Her ex-husband was dead. But no matter what she’d done, she would not be the one to pay for it.

\* \* \*

We made it to the safehouse just past nine and I carried her inside. Placing her gently on the couch, I tucked the blanket around her. She stared forward unseeingly, and she hadn’t said more than five words since the parking lot.

She was in shock.

She'd been in shock when she'd knelt next to her ex's dead body in that parking lot. She'd been in shock when I dragged her to the bakery to wash the blood from her hands. She'd been in shock when Jackson James banged on the bakery door, demanding we open it. She'd been in shock as we ran out of the building and into the north woods, sliding down the slope to where I'd parked my bike. I hadn't bothered with a helmet. I'd put her behind me, commanded her to hold on, and then we'd left.

And now here we were. Safe. For now.

I poured her a glass of brandy. She had to be cold, but she wasn't shivering. The shivering would come later, I reckoned.

"Here." Crossing back to her, I tenderly lifted her hand and pressed the glass into it. "Diane." Waiting until her eyes drifted to me, I crouched down and guided the drink to her mouth. "Drink this."

Her gaze on me still hazy, Diane did as she was told, drinking a gulp. She winced at the burn. I took it as a good sign.

Staying low next to the arm of the couch, I pulled in a deep breath and asked gently, "Can you tell me what happened?"

Her stare dropped to the glass and she swallowed convulsively. "I don't even really know."

I didn't like her tone, so small and quiet. This wasn't her. Fear clawed at my throat. I cleared it, forcing it down, pushing it away. "What do you remember?"

"I . . ." Diane's attention came up again, but she didn't look at me. I got the sense she was looking at her memories. Then she said, "Isaac."

I held still. I didn't even breathe.

"Isaac shot Kip," she said, her eyes filling with tears. The drink in her hand shook and I took it from her before it spilled. The shivers had started; the adrenaline was leaving her system.

In one motion, I stood and sat close to her on the couch, gathering her body against mine. "Are you sure? Are you sure it was him?"

She gave a jerky nod, speaking in a rush, her throat tight. “I saw him. He walked up to the car and he shot inside. I heard him. I heard him speak. I heard him after he shot Kip. It was him. His voice. My son shot—oh God!”

Diane turned her face to my chest, the mournful, keening sound she made sent a tremble through me. I closed my eyes. She cried and cried. It wrecked me. I held her tighter. I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to let her go.

Minutes, maybe hours later, when her tears were spent and my arm was asleep, I was able to get a few more details out of her.

Apparently, her ex and his mistress had shown up at the engagement party and made a scene. The sheriff had stepped in and sent them both on their way. It had taken a while and some strongarming, but the sheriff had won in the end. Diane said she’d seen them leave and she didn’t know why Kip had come back later.

The reason I didn’t see Diane at the party was a simple case of bad timing. She’d been present for the early part of it, then went with the sheriff to send off Kip and Elena. She said she’d then stopped by her office to cool down for a moment before returning to the party. At the party, she couldn’t find Jennifer or Cletus anywhere.

She’d tried sending them text messages to determine their whereabouts—which she showed me—and received a text from her daughter in reply.

**Jennifer:** Meet me in the bakery parking lot.

Diane was in the parking lot because of the text from her daughter, and she arrived just in time to see her son walk up to Kip’s car, bang on the window, and then shoot inside. The timing of it—Diane arriving and Twilight shooting just at that moment—sent cold suspicion through me. Had he planned this? Was he trying to frame his own mother?

*He just killed his father. Framing his mother isn’t a stretch.*

Careful to keep my tone calm and even, I asked, “Then you ran up to the car? After Twi—uh, Isaac ran off?”

“Someone else was in the car. He told whoever it was to get out. And that person ran, he ran after her.”

“Her? Are you sure it was a her?”

“I think so. It was either a woman or a very small man.” She nodded, staring at the empty brandy glass. She’d finished it after crying all her tears. I wasn’t going to pour her another.

“You opened the door? When you got to the car?”

“I did,” she confirmed. “I wanted to help, if I could. I wanted to keep him alive.”

I bit back a curse. If she opened the door, her prints would be on it.

“I thought I could save him. I thought, maybe if I put some pressure on the wound. But he was already dead.” Her voice cracked and she closed her eyes, her fingertips coming to her forehead. “What am I going to do?”

I wanted to ask her to leave with me. Now. Tonight. But I didn’t. I couldn’t. If she left, folks would assume it had something to do with her ex’s murder. And I didn’t think she was ready to leave her daughter or her son. Even asking her to consider it now would be selfish. I swallowed the urge. I needed to do what was best for her, what she wanted and needed.

But if I thought for a second she’d turn over her son, I would’ve urged her to do so to save herself. By the looks of things, Twilight had tried to frame her. She owed him no loyalty.

But Diane wouldn’t give him up to the police. She would never. That wasn’t who she was. There was no point asking.

Thus, while she’d been crying, I’d thought up a backstory. It wasn’t great, but given the facts of what actually happened and what we had to work with, it would have to do.

“I have a lawyer, a good one. I’ll call her,” I said, giving her a gentle squeeze. “I’ll take you back to the Lodge and drop you off at your office. You’ll grab your keys and—”

“My keys aren’t at my office. They’re in one of the cabins, where we changed and got ready for the party.”

“Okay, even better. I’ll drop you off there. I want you to get in the bed, roll around in it, make it messy. Then get your stuff, grab your keys, walk to your car, and drive home.”

“I’m driving home?”

“You won’t say anything to the police until your lawyer arrives, but your story is that you left the party with a terrible headache and rested in the cabin. Then, when you woke up, you drove home. That’s your story.”

Diane was quiet for a moment, like she was thinking this over. “But what about the text from Jenn?”

“Just say you didn’t see it. Say you texted them and when you didn’t hear back, you got fed up and left.”

“I—” She breathed out. “I don’t know. I—”

“Or you could tell them the truth.”

She snapped her mouth shut and shivered. After a long stretch of silence, she said, “No. No, you’re right. It isn’t great, but it’s a story. And I can’t think of a better one.”

“Genevieve will keep you safe. You can tell her the truth, tell her about me, tell her about us. She’ll help you.”

Diane shook her head. “I can’t tell her about Isaac. I can’t. I don’t want anyone to know. I can’t put him in danger like that. God!” Leaving her now empty glass on her lap, she covered her face. “God, Jason. I don’t want him to go to prison for this. His father he was—” She made a sound that was something between a choke and a sob “His father treated him very poorly. As far as I know, he didn’t hit him, but he did demean him and bully him. I tried to keep him safe, I did, but Kip was—I’m so pathetic. This is my fault. I should’ve left Kip years ago. If I had, none of this would’ve happened. This is my fault. I should have kept my babies safe.”

“Shh. No. No, this isn’t your fault.” My chest seized as I shushed her and stroked her hair. I couldn’t have her believing she was responsible for this. The terror and guilt in her voice, the anguish . . . She wrecked me all over again.

*If only she hadn’t touched the car. If only she hadn’t tried to save her ex.*

I needed her to calm down. We needed to get her to the Lodge. She needed to drive home and stick to the story, wait for Genevieve.

And then I needed to find Twilight.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

\*JASON\*

“The one thing that unites all human beings, regardless of age, gender, religion, economic status, or ethnic background, is that, deep down inside, we all believe that we are above-average drivers.”

— DAVE BARRY, *DAVE BARRY TURNS FIFTY*

Using the Mercedes registered to my alter ego, I dropped Diane as close to the Lodge as I dared, but plenty close for her to sneak in the back way and make it to her cabin. As she left, I successfully controlled the urge to catch her hand, pull her back in the car, and take off. We could leave Green Valley and all her troubles behind. Tonight.

It would be so easy for us to make a new start somewhere, wherever she wanted. We could simply disappear and never be found. In my almost fifty years, I hadn't acquired a family or loved ones, but I'd acquired plenty of money and every kind of resource necessary to establish a new identity.

But I had to let her go. I knew this. If the events of the last several hours had proven anything, it was that I belonged to her completely, but she could never be mine in the same way. Her children would always own most of her. Strangely enough, I was mostly okay with that—except where Twilight was concerned.

If that little shit had framed his mother, what I did to him would likely make Diane hate me forever. *A bridge to cross should the time come.*

After the door shut and she disappeared, picking her way through the darkness alone, I couldn't control the notion that I'd just made a mistake and I was angry, just for a minute. I didn't have more than a minute.

Genevieve needed to be contacted. Twilight needed to be located and dealt with. Instead of wrestling my impulse to jump out of the Mercedes and carry her back, to take off into the night and never look back, I decided to start setting things in motion for us to disappear, together if that's what she wanted, or separate if that was her preference.

A call came in from one of my contacts at the sheriff's station not long after sunrise, telling me that they'd brought Diane in for questioning. I wasn't surprised. Even so, the news hit me like a punch in the stomach. She had to be exhausted. She'd been through too much. I hoped she would stick to the story and wait until Genevieve arrived before making any statement.

That's all I had. Hope.

I returned to the compound mid-morning after seeing to as many items on my task list as I could. When I arrived, I found Twilight missing. No one had seen the recruit yesterday or today, he wasn't in his bunk, and he wasn't answering his phone. I feared he'd skipped town now that he'd framed his mother for a murder he'd committed.

Accepting Burro's offer of a whiskey before noon and sitting my tired ass in a stool, I wondered if this had been the kid's plan all along. It would be an easy conclusion to leap to. I'd leapt to it earlier.

That was out of character for me. I'd never been the type to leap to hasty conclusions. But then, I'd never been gone over a woman like this either. Maybe where Diane Donner was concerned, I was all about hasty leaping.

As I sat on the stool, my elbows on the bar top, my head in one hand, the empty shot of whiskey in the other, logic and the luxury of time had me backpaddling from my earlier assumptions.

Diane had said Twilight spoke to someone inside the car after he'd shot Kip. A woman. And that woman had run off, with Twilight in pursuit. Really, I was too old to be staying up all night. My brain was tired, slow. If

I'd been well rested and not hungover on adrenaline and misery, I felt certain I'd be able to suss out the puzzle.

“Repo.”

Lifting my head, I blinked bleary eyes until Twilight's face came into focus, standing to my right, wearing a pissed off frown that appeared permanently carved into place and staring twin daggers down at me.

He looked at me as though I was his own personal Judas. “You and I need to have words. Now.”

I stared at him, at the set of his jaw, the violence in his expression. He was angry. With me. Close to irate. But more importantly, he was here. He hadn't run off.

“I reckon we do,” I said, standing slow, suppressing a grunt as my bones and muscles resisted. Gesturing for him to exit out the way he must've just walked in, I picked up my jacket and keys from the bar. We weren't discussing Diane here. These walls had ears.

Some of the brutality behind his features waned. “You okay to ride, old man?”

“No,” I said, tossing my keys over. “You're driving.”

He seemed surprised—still pissed, but also surprised—and he nodded.

Soon we were in the Mercedes, and he pulled out of the Dragon's parking lot. I studied him for a bit, just long enough for us to make it to the Parkway, before I said, “Start talking.”

“What the fuck are you doing with Diane?” The question exploded out of him.

It was a fair question. But I wanted my answers first. “Why did you shoot your father?”

The younger man flinched, blinked. The angry cloud dissolved, punctured by shock.

“I—” Twilight's mouth opened and closed.

*I really shocked him.*

“And why did you frame your mother for it?”

He flinched again, looking at me like I was crazy. “What? I didn’t!”

“She saw you. She recognized you.”

His eyes now pointed out the windshield—but maybe focused more in his own mind than on the road—and he croaked, “When?”

“Obviously, last night. When you shot Kip Sylvester in front of her.”

He sucked in a breath, his eyelashes fluttering, clearly putting two and eight together. “She was there?”

Working to clear away the cobwebs, because this next part was important. I watched him carefully as I said, “You know she was there. You messaged her, using Jenn’s phone.”

A choking sound arrived before he blurted, “I certainly did not.”

‘Certainly did not.’ *Well now, don’t he sound so proper.* He barely had an accent. I squinted at him, looking at this new person behind the crude, surly mask he’d always worn. This here was *Isaac*, the real him. Not Twilight, the Iron Wraiths recruit.

But the discovery of his mask was irrelevant. I needed to stay focused.

“Well, someone did frame her,” I said, sighing tiredly. “Who else could it be?”

“I thought I . . .” he said on a breath, and I knew he wasn’t here in the car with me anymore, he was somewhere else, thinking through his assumptions. “What did she do? Is that why they brought her in?”

Convinced he told the truth, that he hadn’t framed Diane, I filled him in on everything as I knew it to be true. “This is what happened—your mother received a text from Jennifer to meet her at the bakery parking lot. She arrived and saw you shoot into your father’s car. You then yelled something at someone, and that someone left the car and took off. You followed. Your mother ran to your father’s car and tried to save him—”

“Fuck!” Isaac banged on the steering wheel.

“She opened the car door—so they got her prints on the car now—and she did her best to compress the wound.”

“He was already dead. When I shot him, he was already dead.”

Rather than ask the obvious, which why Isaac would shoot a dead man, I said, “Start. Talking.”

“It was Elena, she—she hated my father. She wanted him dead, and she wanted to pin it on my mother. She asked me to help. She thinks I hate my mother. I don’t.”

“So what happened?” The parkway was long and without tight curves. We’d be able to stick to this road for a while.

“I knew she was going to do it, and I knew when. I told her I wouldn’t help, but that I wouldn’t stand in her way.”

Anger did a great job of clearing my head. “You were going to let her frame Diane?”

“No!” He sent me another look like I was crazy. “I was there, waiting for her—for Elena—to make sure she couldn’t frame my mother. To make sure the police caught her and only her.”

“What?” That didn’t make any sense. “Why didn’t you just stop her?”

“I wanted him dead.”

I leaned my elbows on my knees, my face in my hands, and shook my head. Sons and fathers. I’d never had one. Isaac had wanted his dead. What a fucked-up world for little boys like us.

“Okay.” I leaned back in my seat, shaking off the odd moment of melancholy. “Fine. You wanted him dead. Take me through what happened last night.”

“I got there.” He sent me a brief, hard glare. “I saw your bike.”

“Okay, then what?” I asked dismissively. I didn’t have time to explore that road with him right now.

“I walked up the side of the hill. Elena had told me what she was planning to do and when. She was going to strangle him and then throw the rope in the pond at the Lodge. Then she’d give an anonymous tip where to find the murder weapon. She’d said she’d already put the rope in my mother’s office—a big roll of it—and had cut off a length to use.”

I struggled to think, piece it together. “Is the rope still there?”

“As far as I know, yes. But it wouldn’t matter. Because my plan was to wait until Elena had done it, then shoot him in the chest. Then I’d put Elena’s prints on the gun and leave her there to be found.”

“But that’s not what happened.”

“No. I changed my mind. I didn’t want him to die. When it came right down to it, I couldn’t do nothing. But I was too late. She changed the plan. She made it all happen quicker than she’d said. When I got there, she’d already strangled him.”

“You shot him anyway?”

“I did. I couldn’t let her pin it on my mother. He was dead when I shot him. I told her to get out of the car—that’s what my momma heard—and Elena ran. I chased her down and knocked her out in the forest. I took her glove off, fired again while she held the weapon, and left her there to be found with the gun.”

“Huh.” I rubbed my jaw. “I don’t understand. If you left Elena with the gun, with her prints on it, where is the gun?”

He made a frustrated, grunting sound in the back of his throat. “It’s missing.”

“Missing? How is that possible?”

“I don’t know. They found Elena but not the gun. She was knocked out, just where I left her, but no gun.”

Maybe I was too damn tired to put the pieces together. “Who has it?”

“That’s the question.” He rolled his shoulders, his voice tight. “Without it, Elena is under suspicion, but now so is my mother.”

The young man sounded cooler, calmer. His good-ol'-boy Tennessee accent was returning. The surprise of my questions had worn off. He was finding his composure, wrapping himself in it. My window of interrogation was at an end.

“Turn here.” I pointed to a wide shoulder. “We can go back now.”

“Not yet,” he said, his hands flexing on the wheel. “I saw you. I saw you and her leave together on your bike.”

“I don’t have time to discuss this. Turn around at the next shoulder. We’re finished.” I rubbed my forehead.

He passed another turnoff. “You’re going to make time.”

“It’s none of your business.” I needed to check in with Genevieve, find out what happened at the sheriff’s station. Then I needed to get some sleep—just three hours should do it—then I needed to see Diane. She needed to know Isaac had shot Kip after the man was already dead.

“You promised,” he said, sounding less angry than disappointed. “You promised me.”

Maybe it was the lack of sleep, but I suspected it had more to do with the events of the last twenty-four hours. Life is short. Mine had sucked, mostly. I didn’t have good news, ever. And this was good news to me. This was my good news amidst all the shock, fear, and inconvenient timing. I couldn’t tell Diane; I couldn’t make my good news just another something else she had to deal with. Isaac might’ve been the only person I could tell.

“I’m in love with her,” I said. Finally.

I don’t know if he looked at me or what his reaction was. I didn’t know if he believed me. I didn’t care. I loved her. I loved Diane and I felt grateful for the chance, for the weeks leading up to right now. With everything blown apart and gone to shit, at the least—at the very least—I had that. And that was a fuckuva lot.

“What?” His question came sharp and sudden, like a crack of thunder.

Shrugging, I repeated myself, “I’m in love with her. I’m in love with your mother.”

“Who the *fuck* do you think you are?” he seethed, pissed off all over again. This was the same anger he’d been carrying when he approached me at the Dragon just a half hour ago.

“If I could, if she’d come with me, I’d take her away. Today. With me.” I wasn’t talking to Isaac, I was just talking, maybe even daydreaming a little. “I would’ve taken her away weeks ago if I thought there’d been a chance in hell she would’ve gone with me.”

“Of course she’ll never go with you,” he ground out, leashing the sharp edge of his voice, lashing out with words instead. “You are nothing compared to her. You aren’t worthy to breathe the same air. You are nothing.”

“I know that, *Isaac*.”

He flinched at my use of his real name, and he also slowed the car, pulling onto a shoulder. But he didn’t turn around. Diane’s son faced me. I faced him. And we regarded each other.

“How long has this been going on?”

“For a while. Since this Christmas.” I had no reason not to answer, but I made sure he knew how tedious I found his questioning and his company. He wasn’t saying anything I hadn’t thought myself. But it wasn’t up to me, and it wasn’t up to him to determine my worthiness. It was up to Diane.

“Not since last Christmas?” he challenged, his eyelids drooping.

“No. I left her alone, I didn’t speak to her. I kept my promise.”

“Until you didn’t,” he said, cold and matter of fact. “So what changed?”

“I crashed near her house on Christmas night. I spun out in the snow and ice. My phone was busted, and it was freezing. She let me in.” I told him the facts, but I gave him nothing else. No regret. No apology. He could kiss my ass.

Isaac shook his head, and I thought I saw some of his anger ease, replaced with something else. “You promised.”

Unexpectedly, guilt picked at my ribcage. I looked at this young man, my hard-ass exterior slipping just a little. Keeping promises meant a great deal to him, apparently. Or, mine had, for some reason.

*His eyes are the same color as Diane’s.*

“I know,” I said, my voice gentler than I’d planned. But I was tired. Now that we were talking like this, I simply said what was on my mind, “Believe it or not, it’s the first time I’ve broken a promise. The very first time. But I have no regrets. If I knew then what I know now, I would’ve broken it sooner. I would’ve told you to go to hell and done what I wanted over a year ago. Because she is the best thing that has ever happened to me. She is so much light, she blinds me. And I love her. I need her more than I need to breathe.”

He shook his head, his glare becoming something else, and it felt heavy with disappointment. “You’re a liar and you’re a piece of shit.”

“No. I’m not. I’ve never been a liar.” I wiped a hand over my face, took a deep breath, and settled him with a level stare. “And I’m not a piece of shit, not anymore. Breaking that promise was the best thing I ever did, for Diane and for me. Because I’m the one that got her out of there when her hands were covered in blood, and she was in shock, and she’d just seen her son shoot his father. I’m the one who listened to her cry and held her that night while her heart broke. I’m the one who called a lawyer and helped Diane craft a story because she doesn’t want to see you go to prison. And I’m the one who will do whatever it takes—*whatever it takes*—to keep her safe now.”

Isaac stared at me, assessing, giving nothing of his thoughts away. Even if he had been giving his thoughts away, I was too tired to do anything with them. I didn’t need his approval.

I just needed him to drive back to the Dragon.

“Your mother is, and from this point forward always will be, my first and only priority. That’s who I am now. So, turn this fucking car around right

fucking now and take me back to the Dragon so I can get some damn sleep.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

\* DIANE \*

“I feel thin, sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread.”

— J.R.R. TOLKIEN, *THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE RING*

“**W**here is that darn sugar?” I mumbled to no one, twisting at the waist and blinking around the kitchen. I thought perhaps I’d make an attempt at normalcy and bake something, but I couldn’t find the sugar. I needed sugar to bake something.

Unable to locate the sugar, I began to cry.

Covering my face with both hands, I slid down the cabinets to the floor, pulled my knees up, and cried and cried and cried. Sugar was just another final straw after a long series of final straws. I was living in a nightmare, I couldn’t seem to wake up, and—I was ashamed to admit it, but—I had no idea how much time had elapsed since the event.

I’d taken to calling that night The Event since I couldn’t very well think of it as “the night my son committed patricide during my daughter’s engagement party.” That would never do.

And then, of course, there was the other event.

A few days after The Event, I’d received a note in my mailbox, black marker on a white piece of paper, and it had read,

*I have the murder weapon with your fingerprints. Turn over those cows to Farmer Miller or go to jail for the murder of Kip Sylvester.*

It had been unsigned, but it didn't take a genius to know who'd sent it. What the hell was I supposed to do with it other than be terrified? I'd never been blackmailed before. I had no one to talk to, no one to tell.

Jason had been MIA since he'd dropped me off at the lodge and he hadn't texted or contacted me either. I didn't know for certain why he'd decided to keep his distance; I wanted to trust he had a good reason; but I missed him. I wanted to talk to him. I wanted him to hold me. I needed him. I felt like I was going crazy.

The one time I'd tried going into work, people I'd known for decades had looked at me like I was guilty of murder. Or maybe it was my imagination. Or maybe I was off my rocker. Regardless, I'd stopped driving into work since The Event. Just the thought of driving anywhere felt overwhelming.

That first morning after The Event, Jeffrey James brought me in for questioning and Jason's lawyer had been a life-saver. Afterward, Jennifer and Cletus had picked me up from the sheriff's station and taken me home. Jennifer knew something was wrong beyond just the circumstances of the situation. How could she not? But what could I say? *I saw your brother kill your daddy and now I might go to prison for it. Could you please help me locate the sugar?*

There was simply nothing to say other than sticking to my story. I would sit tight until there was a reason not to sit tight, such as Isaac coming under suspicion. Most of my internal deliberations were guilty half-thoughts, incomplete tails of wishful thinking, and remorseful musings about how I should've left Kip earlier.

The only complete thought I'd been able to manage since The Event was this: if they suspect Isaac, I will confess.

Sniffling and all cried-out, I wiped under my eyes with the back of my hand and stared unseeingly at nothing in particular. Where could that sugar be? I'd looked everywhere and it wasn't like it had sprouted legs and strolled out of my house. On the other hand, with the way my luck was going,

perhaps my sugar container had gained sentience and fled the pantry, likely taking the vanilla with it since I couldn't find any of that either.

And speaking of missing essential ingredients, where the hell was Jason?!

I shook my head, inhaling deeply, and wondering if I should take another shower. I'd taken lots of showers since The Event. I was pretty sure I'd taken one earlier in the day . . . unless that was yesterday?

A foreign sound coming from somewhere down the hall sharpened my fuzzy focus and I peered through the kitchen doorway. *Is that . . . what is that?*

I pushed myself to standing and stared down the dim hall. My mind was slow to work, but the noise had sounded like something sliding against something else, like a window being opened. *Or am I imaging things?*

"Diane?" came a whispered voice and I flinched, holding my breath.

My Jennifer and her Cletus had been checking in, but they always used the front door, obviously. I couldn't think who would be coming in through my —

"Jason?" I whispered back just as the answer dawned, gaining a hesitant step forward.

Then he was there, emerging from my bedroom and into the hall. I sucked in air made of pure emotion and—you guessed it—I cried.

He rushed forward into the kitchen and scooped me up in his arms. He held me tightly against the cool leather of his jacket and the warm, familiar, soothing scent of his body.

"Am I awake?" I asked between hiccupping sobs. "Am I dreaming this?" I think I must've been clawing at his jacket. Instinct told me to grab on and not let go. If I touched him, then he was real, then he couldn't run off like my sugar and vanilla had.

I felt him fit a palm against my cheek and tilt my head back, promptly pressing kisses to my forehead, cheeks, and lips. "I'm here, I'm here. I got you."

I supposed it was a lucky thing I'd cried before he'd arrived because I didn't have many tears left. Soon we were swaying together in the middle of the kitchen; my ear against his solid chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heart; him holding me while I caught my breath.

"I came as soon as I could," he said softly. "You've had police and sheriff cars driving by every hour or so. I needed to learn their routine before I could sneak in."

"Why are they watching me so closely? Do they think I'm going someplace?" I snuggled closer, already feeling better, stronger, less aimless. Suddenly, I had so many questions.

"I don't know, but I'll find out." He placed another kiss on top of my head, and then—without warning—he scooped me up in his arms and we were moving toward the living room.

Jason walked us over to the couch and sat down, arranging me with my legs over his lap, his arm between my back and the end of the sofa. He encouraged me to rest my head on his shoulder, within the nook created by the curve of his neck.

"Before I ask how you're doing, I have to tell you something." He stroked the side of my face, his big palm then lowering to continue the movement over my arm, back and forth.

"Wait!" I jumped up from his lap and ran to my bedroom where I'd tucked away the threatening note from Mr. Miller.

When I returned, Jason was already standing near the sofa. He frowned between me and the paper I held in my hands. "What is this?"

I shoved it at him. "Read it."

He took a moment, read it, scowled, read it again, and then crumpled it. "I'll kill him."

"No! Don't do that. Just . . . just let it be. I didn't touch any murder weapon." It felt good to be the one calming someone else down. "I just thought you should see it, know about it. Do think he could fake my prints

on it? Do you think he could do that?” I couldn’t stop the tremble of worry in my voice any more than I could’ve halted my crying earlier.

“Come here.” Jason tossed the note to the coffee table and reached for me, sitting us back down on the couch and arranging me on his lap again. “Forget about Miller. Let me and Isaac deal with him.”

“Isaac?” I asked breathlessly, my heart jumping to my throat. “Is—are—” I couldn’t think, I could barely breathe.

“I have news.”

“Is it good news?” I asked, bracing for bad.

“I think it is.” He gave me the gentlest of smiles.

On pins and needles, I rested my temple on his shoulder and pressed my forehead to the side of his neck. “I could use some good news.”

“I spoke to your son, the day after—”

My head whipped up. “Let’s just call it The Event. You talked to Isaac?”

“I did. And, Diane, he did not kill your ex. Kip was already dead when he shot into the car.”

I shook my head. *What?* What in tarnation? Why would—and how—and why was—and—

“It was Elena.” Jason’s eyes were bright and clear. “Elena did it and wanted to pin the murder on you. Isaac stepped in to protect you.”

I’d barely moved this morning, had maybe walked thirty steps, but I found I couldn’t catch my breath. “How is . . .? I don’t understand.”

Jason gave me a quick kiss, encouraged me to return my head to its prior resting place, and told me the story of his drive with Isaac the morning after The Event. Even by the end of the story, I still couldn’t believe it. We were quiet for a long time after he finished. I soaked in the details, my heart lifting and sinking and lifting again while I sorted through every implication.

“Isaac wanted to protect me.” Goodness, what a relief! This part felt like the best news. He hadn’t killed his father. He’d been there to save me, not kill Kip.

“That’s right.” Jason gave me a little squeeze.

“But I’m still the main suspect? Because they can’t find the gun and they don’t believe my story?”

“Correct. For now. The fingerprints on the car are a problem. They think they’re yours, but they can’t prove it. It’s a good thing you haven’t been back to work much, and you should stay home as long as you can. Don’t go out in public and don’t touch anything they might be able to lift a print off of.”

I swallowed around new fears. This whole time, I’d been so scared for Isaac. Now the fear I felt was for myself. “What am I going to do?”

Jason leaned away, gently gathered my face in both hands, and looked at me in the eyes. “Diane, we’re getting through this. One way or the other, I will not let you go to jail. Do you understand? You will not go to prison for this.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. Diane, I have money stored away. I can have new identities almost ready—driver’s licenses, passports, credit history, college transcripts, bank accounts, credit cards—whenever you’re ready. I’ll be ready.”

He—*what?* “I—I can’t do that.” Could I do that? Could I just leave everything behind? The Lodge, my daughter, my son, the town, all my friends, everything? Sure, I’d been planning to leave and travel after Jennifer’s wedding, but not like this.

“I’m not pressuring you.” Jason threaded his fingers into my hair, kissing my lips once, twice, three times, like it was an impulse he’d been fighting. “I didn’t tell you this to give you more to fret over. I’m telling you to give you less to worry about. If or when you decide you want to leave, it will be easy. I will make it easy.”

“It won’t be easy, Jason.” I encircled his wrists with my fingers and held on. “And I’m not talking about having no money or being on the run. I’m talking about leaving my daughter. And my son. I love them.”

“I know. I know that’ll be hard.” He seemed to be at war with himself, like he wanted to tell me something and yet held himself back. “Gorgeous, that’s why I wanted you to know. I don’t think it’ll be necessary, but you don’t have to worry about how to disappear if it comes to that.”

I believed him, and I was grateful, so I nodded, though I felt numb. And when he kissed me again, I kissed him back with everything I had, feeling less numb. And when he touched me, I was so grateful for the distraction and the warmth of feeling. I needed him. I needed his heavy body over mine. I needed his hands on my bare skin, making me hot, making me breathless, making me forget.

But when he held me after, and day turned to night, and he had to leave me, the fear crept back in like a thief.

I was so scared.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

\*JASON\*

“I do not think, sir, you have any right to command me, merely because you are older than I, or because you have seen more of the world than I have; your claim to superiority depends on the use you have made of your time and experience.”

— CHARLOTTE BRONTË, *JANE EYRE*

I returned the next day to see Diane. Instead of a cruiser, a big surveillance van—feds from the look of it—sat on the side of the road, pulled off just before her driveway, not making any effort to disguise their intentions. They were obviously staking out Diane’s house and property, listening in, watching who came and went, and that made no damn sense.

Wanting to punch something or someone, I sped on by and returned to the Dragon, my mind racing. I considered sneaking into her house, going around the back. I didn’t dare risk it, not until I could figure out where their eyes and ears were pointed. The last thing either of us needed were the feds knowing about us.

Mood dark, patience thin, I pulled into the bar’s parking lot and whipped off my helmet, cursing under my breath. I walked past a small group of my brethren towards bar entrance, unable to figure why the feds would be parked outside of Diane Donner’s house. This wasn’t a federal issue. This was the murder of one man in a small town.

“Hey, Repo,” one of the group called over. “Wolf is—”

“Wolf can go fuck himself,” I growled, not sparing the mixed gathering a glare as I made a sharp left. I didn’t want to go in through the bar while my head brimmed with violence and frustration. I was liable to put my fist through a face instead of a wall.

The whole day had been shit.

After leaving Diane’s place the night before, I couldn’t stop thinking about the blackmail note from Miller. Chances were good Miller was bluffing.

However, there existed a small chance that Miller had put Diane’s prints on the gun, and he wasn’t bluffing. Jethro Winston had done this very thing once under my orders, giving the police hard evidence on a biker in a rival club. We needed the man gone, out of the way, but we couldn’t afford to make him disappear. If he disappeared, suspicion would turn our way and we’d have a war on our hands. Neither Jethro nor I wanted that.

The man had been guilty of the crime, but the police lacked the necessary non-circumstantial evidence. Jethro placed the prints on the murder weapon and left a tip with the police where to find it.

We’d used the police, we’d avoided a war, and the man was now serving life in prison for a murder he’d committed.

I knew lifting prints and placing them on a weapon was entirely possible, and this possibility—that Miller’s letter wasn’t a bluff—was enough to make me want to find Miller and force him give me that weapon.

The other fantastic news of the day had come from my identity and papers guy in Texas early this morning. More paranoid than the Unabomber and less social, which never bothered me any, Ivan checked out folks he did favors for prior to sending the final product. Then he triple checked and checked again.

Ivan had the papers ready for Diane and me. That was the good news. Even though Diane didn’t want to go, didn’t want to leave her children, I would rest easier if we had the new identities.

But he wouldn’t send them.

When he'd been checking out Diane, he'd also checked out her children and discovered Isaac Sylvester was D-E-fucking-A. Drug Enforcement Administration. Isaac was a goddamn fed! Loaned out to the FBI and now—obviously—working undercover here, with us.

And the feds were outside Diane's house. This smelled too much like horseshit to be a coincidence.

Throwing open one of the back doors, I marched to my office, paying no mind to anyone I shoved past on the way.

I needed to prove to my anti-social, paranoid ID guy in Texas that my request wasn't a trap, I was telling the truth, and Diane wasn't bait. Ivan needed to be convinced he wasn't a big fish the feds were hoping to catch through me. The delay and new hoops to jump through were frustrating, yes. But learning of Isaac's undercover status? And he was giving me shit for breaking a promise?

Stomping down that hall, I swung a left then a right. If I'd discovered this information last year, I would have—

*Done nothing.*

More muttered curses seethed out of me. I would've done nothing to Isaac, but I probably would've disappeared, taking my stockpile of cash with me. Even before Diane and I decided to give things a try, even last year, maybe even for the past several years, my loyalty to Razor and Romeo, to my brothers, to this place, it had worn threadbare.

We'd always operated outside of the law, absolutely, and I had no problem with that. But evil is evil, and the more prevalent it had become from members other than just Razor, the less I gave a shit about the Iron Wraiths.

Turning the last corner, I yanked off my gloves and stuffed them in the jacket pocket, pausing when I found my office door cracked a sliver. In no mood for bullshit, I pushed it open, prepared to lay into whoever had deigned to enter without permission, but stopped short at the sight of a blond head, sitting in one of the chairs facing my desk, his back to me.

*Isaac.*

I shut the door behind me, locked it, and didn't bother pulling off my jacket. I doubted we'd be here for long.

"What do you want?" I asked, rounding the desk.

He met my glare, held it, and said like he was the one giving orders, "She needs to leave. As soon as possible, she needs to leave."

"I don't accept that. We're going to prove her innocence." Diane didn't want to leave. I wanted whatever she wanted, and I would make it happen.

"Repo . . ." Isaac leaned forward in the chair, his movements meticulous and purposeful, like a predator.

I couldn't believe how blind I'd been. This kid was no brother; he was no biker. He was too polished, too schooled and proper and way too fucking smart. How had I not seen this before now?

"She can't stay," he said. "They're going to do everything they can to pin this murder on her. They think she's guilty."

"How can you know?" Standing behind the desk, I crossed my arms. "Who is your contact?" His contact was someone with the feds, I'd bet my left arm on it.

"I can't tell you." He gave his head a subtle shake. "But I can tell you they plan to arrest my sister—Jenn—if they can't gather enough evidence to arrest my mother."

"Why would they do that?"

"To put pressure on my mother to confess. I can't figure out who Elena's accomplice is. She must've had someone there to help her."

Narrowing my eyes, I examined him. "But you have a theory? You think you know who the accomplice is?"

His frown intensified. "If Elena came to me, it serves to reason she also went to Jenn and made the same offer. But I know now it wasn't Jenn, and Jenn has no idea what really happened that night. The will is scheduled to be read and my contact also said—"

“Wait, let me guess.” Walking around the big piece of furniture, I came to stand directly in front of him, leaned back on the desk, and dropped my voice to a rough, slow whisper. “Is your contact the DEA? Or is it the FBI?”

Isaac didn’t even flinch. He just sighed, looking tired. “How long have you known?”

“Doesn’t matter. All that matters is Diane. Why do they think she’s guilty?”

“The fingerprints on the car and her story. They can’t prove it yet, but when they find a way to lift her prints, they’ll know it was her who opened my father’s car door after he died. And they know you went to see her yesterday. They know.”

“What—” Now I flinched. “What do you mean they know?” How could they know? I’d been so careful.

“It’s what they were waiting for. They know you’re involved. They had a tip last week about the two of you. You, uh, you helped her with Mr. Miller? At the Piggly Wiggly?”

“Shit.” I closed my eyes briefly, absorbing this information.

“Someone saw you. Someone saw you step in and defend her, and then they saw you talking, and that someone went to the sheriff and now they think you helped her kill Kip.”

My brain on fire, I turned away from Diane’s son and faced my desk. All this clutter, all this mess. It looked like garbage to me. Everything looked like worthless trash. In one swipe, I cleared the desk. A bottle of booze and several empty glasses hit the wall, shattering upon impact. It didn’t make me feel any better.

“Repo—shit!” Isaac stood and moved to the side of the desk, his hands up. “Listen to me—you have to calm down. Destroying your office isn’t going to do any good. Think. They’re after you. That’s why the feds are here.”

I spun in a circle, grabbing my head. “Then I’ll turn myself in to the FBI, give them whatever they want.”

“No. She’ll still go down for murder. Like I said, they think she’s guilty.”

“How do you—”

“Because I *know*. One of my friends warned me. They’ll keep her in jail as a way to hold leverage over you, forcing you to testify and bring this whole place down.”

“One of *your* friends?” I got in his face. “And these are the people you work for.”

Cool as ice, he said, “There’s a critical piece of missing evidence.”

“The gun.”

“Yeah, the gun. If we could find that with Elena’s fingerprints, then we could exonerate my mother. But all the evidence right now points to Diane.”

“Not even your testimony? You were there, you saw Elena do it. Tell them.”

His voice lowered to a barely-there whisper. “My testimony is shit and it doesn’t get her out of jail, it only blows my cover.”

“Then blow your fucking cover.”

“I’m her son.” He gestured to himself with both hands. “No one is going to believe me. She goes to jail, and I go to jail as her accomplice, and they still use her as leverage over you.”

“You are an officer of the law, and you’re telling me they’re not going to believe you?”

“That’s what I’m telling you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ve lied before. They know I’ve lied, it’s all on my record, but they don’t know why. I’m on very thin ice right now.”

I inspected him. “What did you lie about?”

“It’s not important. My point is, I am not the pristine witness my mother needs me to be. They won’t believe me, and I don’t blame them. I wouldn’t believe me either. The feds might need me in place with the Wraiths for

now, but they sure as hell don't trust me. And if I blow my cover to testify for my mother—and thereby working counter to their case against you—I will be cut loose to fend for myself.”

“You mean fired.”

“Or I'll be in jail as an accomplice to murder. And who do you think the Wraiths will come after once my cover is blown? Once you're cooperating with the prosecution?”

I didn't need to think about my answer. “You. Jenn, your momma.”

“That's right. Don't you see? Either way, Diane has to leave. If she doesn't, she's in danger, Jenn is in danger. We have to keep them safe.”

“You mean, you have to keep yourself safe.”

“No,” he ground out. “If I'd been worrying about myself, I wouldn't have shot my bastard father in the chest after he was already dead. I would've walked away and let that woman frame my mother, and it would've worked. That lady is crazy, but her plan would've worked without me throwing a wrench in it. Now, at least, Elena is under suspicion from the Knoxville PD and the sheriff's investigation, which has bought us some time. But time is running out.”

“So, what? Diane has to give up her whole life? Everything she's built? Leave you kids?” There had to be a way to save her from this without her leaving everything behind.

Isaac seemed to hesitate, his glare cutting to the door, then back to me. “We should go somewhere else, to finish this discussion. But I think I know someone who can help.”

“Who?”

His hands came to his hips, and he sighed tiredly. “I think we should talk to Cletus Winston.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

\* DIANE \*

“All grown-ups were once children... but only few of them remember it.”

— ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY, *THE LITTLE PRINCE*

The first time Isaac showed up on my porch, ringing the doorbell like visiting his momma was the most natural thing in the world, I about fainted from shock.

He said, “Momma,” and stepped forward, wrapping his massive arms around my body to give me a big, tight hug.

I felt so fragile from all the upheaval and uncertainty over the last few weeks, and now this? I wondered if I would break in his arms. My baby was here, talking to me, hugging me. If this was a dream, I never wanted to wake from it.

When we parted, my eyes stung even as I greedily devoured every detail of his sweet, handsome face. He held still, allowing me to cup his jaw and inspect him, like he knew I needed a moment to find my way to the other side of this silent bewilderment and gratitude.

When I met his eyes again, he captured my hand, gave it a squeeze, and let it drop. Then he walked past me into the house, calling over his shoulder, “What do you have to eat? I’m starving.”

On stupefied autopilot with my heart in my throat, I shut the door and followed him inside. First, I made him a sandwich. Then, we sat across from each other at the kitchen table. He hadn't been in this house in almost ten years. In this moment, watching him eat a sandwich in the same seat he'd occupied as a toddler, as a child, as a teenager, I simply could not keep my chin from wobbling. I swallowed it down, all of it, not wanting to make a fuss.

This was the first time I had him with me in forever. Crying and blubbering all over Isaac was not an option. I wasn't sure why he was here, but I suspected Jason had sent him for some reason. No matter, I'd take whatever scraps I could get. But I would ask him about his nightguard and whether he was still grinding his teeth.

Before I could, Isaac's eyes ensnared mine and he withdrew a piece of paper from his jacket, passing it across the table. "May I have some water? Or orange juice if you have it, please," he said, lifting his chin toward the paper. It had only been folded once.

"Okay, baby," I croaked out, managing a wobbly smile and picking up the paper as I stood.

Walking to the fridge, I opened the door and the paper at the same time. In Isaac's handwriting, it read,

*I believe the authorities are listening to everything said in this house. When I visit, say nothing about the investigation. I'll be visiting you at odd times for the next few weeks. Pretend like it's not unusual. Do not discuss anything related to Kip or Miller. Be calm and act as though everything is fine.*

*The time has come for you to leave Green Valley; if you don't, you will likely go to prison and/or be used as a bargaining chip in order to get Repo to testify against the Iron Wraiths. The authorities know you and Repo are involved and believe you and he planned Kip's murder together.*

*In a few weeks, you will leave here dressed like me and take my bike to the Dragon. Repo will meet you. From there, the two of you will disappear.*

*Please don't fight us. This is the only way to keep you safe.*

My head spinning, my hands shaking, I stared into the fridge without seeing a single thing within. I already suspected what the first part of the letter revealed. Jason had been leaving me letters on my back porch for a while, always typed and unsigned. I'd found the first note two days after the only time he'd visited me weeks ago.

In his notes, Jason hadn't come right out and said, *The FBI has you under surveillance*. His letters read more like code, but he'd made references to several movies we'd watched before *The Event*, where the entire premise of the story had been the FBI staking out a house. Needless to say, I'd caught on and had been careful to say nothing significant since.

I'd wanted to write Jason notes too. I'd wanted to tell him I missed him, but I didn't dare leave anything outside. I couldn't guarantee one of my letters wouldn't be intercepted and I had no idea when he left his letters, his timing had been so sporadic.

*But with Isaac visiting now . . .*

Folding my son's note as quietly as possible, I cleared my throat and asked, "Is grapefruit juice okay? I don't have any OJ."

"Yes, please," he said calmly, normally, like he didn't have a care in the world.

My gaze cut to his and we stared at each other. He might've sounded unconcerned, but my baby boy seemed to be sending me a hundred sympathy cards with his eyes, the sight of which steadied me. I needed to be strong; I didn't want him worrying about me; I didn't want Jennifer to worry about me either.

Grabbing the bottle of grapefruit juice, I closed the fridge and crossed to the cabinet. My brain whirled with questions, but I was able to answer most of them once I paused, took a deep breath, and considered the matter. Jason had said he would be arranging papers for us, new identities, and I supposed the fact that he knew how to do that in the first place addressed a lot of my concerns.

Basically, the majority of my worries about running away boiled down to whether or not I trusted Jason. I trusted him to keep me safe. I had every confidence in his ability to make us disappear. Apparently, he was the expert, and I'd never had a problem delegating.

*I guess that's settled.*

Feeling calmer, I realized it was past noon and I hadn't consumed any food. Still standing in front of the cabinet, I withdrew two glasses instead of just one. I also picked up a pen and a notepad on my return to the table, tucking the paper under my arm so I could carry everything without making two trips.

Sitting across from Isaac once more, I poured his juice, then mine, and then opened the notepad. I wrote while I spoke, "I keep meaning to ask, are you still wearing your nightguard every night?" When Isaac didn't reply right away, I glanced up from my writing and looked at him.

My boy was smiling. At me. I nearly fainted again.

It wasn't big—his smiles never were, not even when he was a little kid—but he was definitely smiling, and his gaze was warm, like I'd said something very amusing.

"Yes, mom," he said. "I'm wearing my nightguard."

"Because you know what the dentist said. If you don't wear it—"

"I'll wear down the enamel on my teeth," he finished, his tone flat. Perhaps he found my question tedious? And yet, his little smile persisted.

"Well," I said, wrestling with my own smile and returning my focus to my list of questions on the piece of paper. "I just wanted to be sure. You know I worry about you."

"You mean you worry about my teeth."

"Yes, and the rest of you, too," I mumbled without considering my words, giving most of my attention to my list of written questions.

He spoke around a bite of food, "You shouldn't."

“That’s like telling the sun it shouldn’t rise, baby.” I scanned my hastily composed list. Satisfied, I passed the notepad to him. “It’s going to rise, no matter what you say or think or command it to do. The sun rises. Mothers worry.”

He lifted an eyebrow, his mouth flat as an ironing board. But Isaac wore his amusement in his eyes. He always had.

Taking another bite, he glanced down at the list.

1. How long can you stay?
2. Are you in any danger?
3. If I give you a letter for Jason, can you take it to him?
4. What’s going on with Miller? Any news? Did you and Jason talk to him? I’ve been fretting over his note. He’s so crazy about those cows, who knows what he’ll do.
5. Does Jennifer know about the surveillance?

Isaac, frowning thoughtfully at the list, held his hand out for the pen, saying, “I thought next time I might bring my laundry over. If I fix that squeaky step on the porch, will you do my laundry?”

I placed the pen in his hand, my heart fluttering and my insides warming with happiness at the mere thought of seeing Isaac again and getting a chance to do his laundry. I know, I know, mothers are weird. But we can’t just stop wanting to nurture and fuss over our chickens simply because they’ve hatched. That instinct will always be there, until the day I die.

“I would be happy to.” I took a sip of my juice, finding it tart and sweet. I frowned, examining the grapefruit juice. This was the first time food—any food—had tasted like anything at all in weeks.

*Since The Event.*

Standing from the table, I paced back to the fridge and opened the door once more. “I think I’ll have a sandwich too.”

Suddenly, my stomach rumbled, and I felt extremely hungry.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

\*JASON\*

“It is dangerous to be right in matters on which the established authorities are wrong.”

— VOLTAIRE, *THE AGE OF LOUIS XIV*

“**I**’ve always wanted to know something.”

“What’s that?” I glanced up at Isaac from where I sat, my back against the wall of the house, my butt on the deck. He stood over me, stared down at me, and held an empty rocks glass.

I’d come out to watch the sunset and hadn’t made my way back inside yet. Instead, I’d stared at the sky as the light faded, drinking whiskey and wishing time away. Dusk had turned to night. I couldn’t stop thinking about or anticipating tomorrow.

*Twenty-four hours from now, Diane and I will have disappeared.* It was bittersweet. She’d wanted to stay for her kids. I’d failed her. But we’d finally be together.

Isaac sat next to me on the deck, resting his back against the wall and gestured for me to pass the whiskey. “How did you end up here?”

Handing over the bottle, I stared at the younger man. If he wanted an answer, he would have to be more specific with his questions.

Seeming to understand, he added, “I mean, how did someone like you end up working for Razor Dennings and Darrell Winston? They are pure evil. But you’re . . .” Isaac poured my whiskey into his waiting rocks glass.

“Someone like me?”

“You’re smart, but you’re not evil.”

“Oh? You don’t think so?”

“I don’t.” He frowned. “You do your job, keep your head down, stay out of the way. But you draw a line with the recruits—you don’t let them beat up on women or bring in underage girls. You set boundaries for their criminal behavior, reigning them in when they go too far.”

“And that makes me not evil?”

He took a sip and didn’t wince at the burn. “It makes you something.”

“I’m not telling you my life story, cop.”

Isaac chuckled. “I didn’t ask for it, perp. But you could’ve done anything, and you chose this.”

I huffed a laugh without humor. “Oh? Did I? Did I choose this?”

“You break the law.”

“Fuck the law.”

Diane’s son grimaced, making a face so similar to his mother that a spike of something sharp and painful drove the air from my lungs. I missed her. Over my life I hadn’t allowed myself to miss much: Texas barbeque, catching glimpses of my daughter around town and seeing her smile or laugh, the thrill of traveling to a new place and learning how to blend into its culture, the taste of good whiskey, and everything about Diane Donner—even her grimaces.

I missed her so much, I hadn’t done anything but plan for our escape since the night of the murder. I missed her so entirely, even after many glasses of this fine whiskey, it was Diane that I tasted on my tongue with every swallow, inhale, and exhale. I missed her beyond reason; time had not

dulled it. Time had honed it, sharpened it, and I'd started to wonder what I would think about when we were finally together and missing her didn't occupy every moment of every day.

*Twenty-four hours.*

"You may've come from nowhere, have no people, but you were in the Army," Isaac said, ignorant of my internal turmoil. "I know your record. You saved people, you made a difference. Out of all the places in the world, why are you *here*?"

"You're right. I came from nowhere, I have no one." I turned my head from the younger man and stared unseeingly into the dark forest.

"Most people your age long for their youth."

"People who long for their youth, for a simpler time, are really just longing for an existence of blissful ignorance, where other people's struggles and suffering are conveniently kept quiet so as not to ruin their good time, or their ability to sleep at night. No such time has existed for me."

Isaac's swallow was loud in the quiet night. But wisely, he said nothing.

I went on, "Subscribing to the rules imposed by a society that has always failed me has never seemed necessary. Law and order didn't give a shit about me—not when I was a kid in those homes, not when I was a runaway, not in the Army, not when I got back from overseas. Never. They never have. Fuck society and fuck law and order."

I felt his eyes on me, willing me to keep talking.

For reasons I didn't understand, I volunteered, "I needed to live here. I needed to be in Green Valley to be close to someone."

"Who?"

I ignored the question and instead said, "I've always been good at multiplying money, especially dirty money. Razor offered me a job and a place."

"And you accepted?"

“Yes. I did. As long as I was loyal, quiet, and got shit done, they left me alone. And I went into it with my eyes open. My choice.”

“Knowing what they’re like, why would you give them any loyalty at all?”

“Because they’re honest.” I shrugged. “Razor and Romeo don’t care about me. I never mistook their interest in and exploitation of my abilities as care, not once. But at least they’re honest.” I glanced at Isaac, smiling grimly. “At least they didn’t throw themselves parades, pontificating about their Christian values while turning a blind eye to anything that doesn’t directly affect them. They ain’t Christians, they’re the pharisees. This country is full of hypocrites. Razor and Romeo, they’re scum and they’re crazy, but they’ve never pretended to be anything other than just exactly that.”

Done with my rant, I gulped down the rest of my whiskey. We sat in the stillness, my final words echoing between us. Slowly, I became aware of the nighttime noises: frogs calling to each other, crickets singing a chaotic song. An owl hooted and for whatever reason, the sound reminded me of a night—a long, long time ago—when Jethro Winston had brought his little sister, no older than fifteen, to the compound.

I’d immediately called Billy Winston. I’d then stood outside standing guard over her, waiting for the most responsible of the Winston boys to pick her up.

At one point before he’d arrived, she’d turned to me and said, “Thank you. I think you saved my life.” Her chin had wobbled, and she’d sniffed, pressing her lips together bravely.

Ashley Winston was just a few years older than my Jessica and her own feckless brother had turned her over to the wolves. She’d trusted him. And that had been her mistake.

None of the Wraiths were trustworthy—not Ashley’s father, not her brother, none of them. But she’d been just a kid. Adults trusting other adults was one thing. I believed in free will and self-determination. Folks made their bed; they needed to sleep in the consequences. But kids trusting the wrong adults didn’t deserve nasty consequences. They deserved protection and patience.

That's when I'd ordered the cattle iron and started branding anyone who brought in a teenage girl.

"I used to have freedom here," I said, contemplating my empty glass. "But I can't leave them alone anymore."

"The Wraiths?" he asked.

"Yeah. And I know—I've known for a while—the next time I go, I can't ever come back."

"It's worse than I thought it would be." Isaac nodded. Maybe he understood.

We traded a look and he added, "When you go, leave the branding iron with me. I'll stop them. Catfish will help me. He hates it, too."

"Thank you. I'd appreciate that." Lifting the bottle between us, I poured the younger man another glass, then refilled mine, thoughts going off in another direction, following the river of my tipsy state of mind. Unsurprisingly, it turned to Diane. "You know, I don't believe that a bad man can be with a good woman and not want to change for the better." Rubbing my jaw, I stared at the amber surface of my whiskey. I didn't want to drink any more. But for whatever reason, holding it made me feel better.

"I don't think that's true."

"Oh, you don't?" I chuckled at the young man's certainty. What did he know? Twenty-nothing, at the start of everything.

"No." Isaac shifted on the ground next to me, and I felt his cold blue stare fasten to the side of my face. "I think it's more like, a good man can't be with a good woman and not want to change for the better."

"I'm not a good man."

"Aren't you?"

"Is that a joke?" Now I laughed for real. "You've seen me deal out punishments."

"All of which were deserved."

“I launder drug money.”

“If you ask me, all drugs should be legalized anyway.”

I stared at him, my eyebrows shooting to my hairline. “You work for the DEA.”

“So? I have a brain, don’t I? Have you seen what happened in Portugal? Drug related deaths down by 90%. Who is the real bad guy? The drug dealer? Or the government that profits from making them a crime?”

“Isaac, you can’t tell me you think I’m worthy of your mother.”

“I don’t.” His unnerving stare broke from mine and settled on his whiskey. “But she does. And you make her happy.”

“That’s enough?”

“I’ve never seen her happy before. My whole life, I’ve never seen her laugh for real when it wasn’t just the two of us, or us and Jenn. So yeah,”—he shrugged—“life is short, and that’s enough. But, Repo, Razor Dennings is a big fish for the government. So is Romeo Winston, so are you. You and my momma have a better chance on the run than you do if you stay here. Don’t do anything stupid. Leave tomorrow as planned.”

I shook my head, closing my eyes against more than just the night. “That’s not the kind of life I want for her.” I hated that I hadn’t been able to make all of this go away for Diane. I needed to close out reality, just for a little bit.

“Too bad. Nothing you can do now. Just . . .” He hit my shoulder and I looked at him, raising an eyebrow. “Make her happy,” he said, the three words a command, and added in the same tone, “and don’t ever come back.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

\* DIANE \*

“Wrinkles should merely indicate where the smiles have been.”

— MARK TWAIN

**T**he moment I opened the door and looked into Isaac’s face, I knew the time had come for me to leave.

“Hi, Momma,” he said, just like he’d done for the past several weeks; except this time, something about his voice—or the anxiousness in his eyes, or perhaps his posture?—rang of finality. “Am I too late for dinner?”

“Of course not. Give me some sugar and I’ll heat something up for you.” I tried to smile as I offered him a cheek for a kiss, but my stomach couldn’t decide whether to sink or swim.

Was I scared or excited? I had no idea.

I know y’all will think I am a looney, but the weeks following Isaac’s initial visit and leading up to this moment hadn’t been terrible. Yes, I was still under surveillance and suspicion for murder. And yes, I hadn’t seen Jason in over a month, which made nights torture and my heart feel like a pin cushion during the day.

But I felt certain I would see Jason. I felt certain, one way or the other, this would all be over and we’d be together. Also, my children had been visiting me. They didn’t stop by at the same time, but I still got a chance to visit with them both, and I’d treasured every minute of it.

Isaac always brought his laundry and ate everything I put on the table, letting me fuss over him and his sensitive skin. I'd even managed to make him laugh a time or two. Plus, he gave me hugs. So many hugs. Nothing is quite the same as a hug from your child; it's like being wrapped in contentment and happiness.

Whereas, whenever Jennifer came over, she insisted on fussing over me. I thought at first that either Isaac or Jason must have looped Jennifer in on the plans for my departure before I had the chance to tell her. She seemed to know all about it the very first time she stopped by after Isaac's initial visit. But it had become clear that Cletus was the mastermind behind my escape plan, and of course he'd told her everything.

Jennifer hadn't liked the idea. We'd passed an afternoon writing notes back and forth about it—and about Jason—but our time had been rudely interrupted by Mr. Miller shoving his way into my house, making threats and being loathsome.

Anyway, enough about that odious man.

Because of the ongoing murder investigation, I'd missed my daughter's wedding shower. Even if I remained in town, I would miss her wedding for the same reason. In the end, even Jennifer appeared convinced that I had no choice but to eventually leave Green Valley and go on the run.

As I closed the door behind my son and swapped stares with him in my foyer, I recognized that *eventually* was finally upon us.

"I have steak and fried cauliflower. Is that okay?" I asked, pressing my palms to my stomach. It was in riots.

"That sounds great. I also brought laundry." Isaac handed over a canvas satchel along with his helmet. He looked pointedly at the bag. "Do you mind starting those now and I'll come back to get them later? I can't stay long."

I knew what was in the bag. I'd been preparing for this moment for weeks. But preparing for something, no matter how much, didn't mean I'd ever be ready for it.

I waited to speak until I was sure my voice would sound normal. “Sure thing, baby. The food is in the fridge. Help yourself while I see to these. Do you mind if I turn some music on? I’ve been playing old records recently.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, I turned from my son and walked blindly into the living room. Once there, I dropped the bag and helmet to the couch, flipped on the record already on the player—Louis Armstrong’s All Time Greatest Hits—and squeezed my eyes shut. Notes from *What a Wonderful World* filled the room and I bit down to stifle a sob. The music would hide the small sound, but I needed to get control over myself before I started bawling.

Would you believe that I’d been both looking forward to and dreading this day? I missed Jason. I missed his teasing and flirting, his sweetness and thoughtfulness. And I missed his roughness, too. I was also restless to do something other than hide in this house where I didn’t feel particularly safe. The way things were, I couldn’t fully be part of either Jennifer or Isaac’s lives. I reasoned, in a way, I’d already left Green Valley.

Even so, the thought of actually, physically leaving my babies behind persisted in strangling me.

I felt Isaac’s fingers curl around my arm. He turned me a split second before his solid arms surrounded my shoulders. My son pulled me into an embrace and I pressed myself against his chest, doing my best not to burst into tears. My heart hurt. I felt hollow and dazed.

“I love you,” he whispered, the words barely above a breath, almost lost as Louis Armstrong began playing his trumpet. “I wouldn’t let you leave unless I trusted Jason to keep you safe.”

Bursting with feelings, I nodded because I didn’t trust myself to speak. I wished I could talk to Isaac freely, openly, using our voices instead of pen and paper and whispers. I wanted to say goodbye. I wanted to tell him so many things.

“Forget about this place. Be happy, Momma.” He rubbed a circle on my back. “You deserve it.”

He held me. We swayed to the music, dancing together until the last notes of the song reverberated from the speakers. Then we had no more time. The clock was ticking. I sniffled, but I didn't cry.

This was it. The moment had arrived.

While Isaac made noise in the kitchen as though fixing himself steak and fried cauliflower, I started the washing machine with no clothes inside, and then numbly changed into the outfit he'd brought me. Soon, he'd walk me to the door and talk about how he needed to leave, how he couldn't stay longer, how he'd see me again.

He wouldn't be the one leaving and he wouldn't see me again. He wasn't the one who couldn't stay. He wouldn't be the one wearing his helmet or riding his motorcycle back to the Dragon to meet Jason and a new life on the run.

I would.

And after tonight I knew there was no coming back to Green Valley, my old life, or my sweet children. There was only moving forward into the unknown.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

\*JASON\*

“We don't see people as they are. We see people as we are.”

— ANAÏS NIN, *LITTLE BIRDS*

I experienced no relief when Diane, driving Isaac's bike, pulled into the Dragon's lot. I hadn't seen her in ages—I ached for her, to see her and touch her, to be with her—but none of that mattered right now. We had a mission and I reckoned we had a long way to go before I'd allow myself the luxury of contemplating anything but her safety.

Once we were in Listvyanka, on Lake Baikal, safe from US extradition, maybe I'd breathe easier.

Diane parked Isaac's bike at the end of the row. I lowered her kickstand before she cut the engine. She didn't remove her helmet and carried only the clothes on her back. We walked to my bike. Saying nothing, she hopped on behind me. We departed, leaving the compound, all the Iron Wraiths, and the last twenty plus years of my life with no time to spare and without a backward glance.

This plan—having Isaac visit his mother for weeks until his coming and going didn't seem suspicious or noteworthy, and then having Diane pose as her son, wearing his helmet and tailored versions of his clothes in order to leave her house undetected—had been Cletus Winston's idea, but it had come with a caveat.

The third Winston sibling had demanded that his betrothed be given a chance to say goodbye to her mother. She wanted a proper goodbye, not one written on paper and passed back and forth over a kitchen table. Reluctantly, I'd agreed. I didn't like it—the sooner we left, the safer she would be—but I'd agreed. For Diane's sake.

We didn't speak on the drive to the safehouse where we'd had so many happy times. A car—a new car with Texas plates, registered to a man from Texas who didn't actually exist—waited for us in the garage. Once Diane and Jennifer said their goodbyes, I would drive us to Dallas where we'd catch the plane, and I doubted I'd sleep a wink until we touched down in Russia.

Finally, after what seemed like hours but couldn't have been more than forty-five minutes, we reached the gate of the safehouse. As it opened, Diane's arms tightened around me, and when we parked at the far end of the circle drive, she tore off Isaac's helmet.

“Where's Jenn?” she asked close to my ear the moment I cut the engine. “They were supposed to be here already, right?”

I removed my helmet. I wouldn't be needing it anymore. “They're here,” I said slowly, listening for sounds of Cletus, or anyone else. “If I know Cletus Winston, he parked elsewhere.”

“What? Why?”

“Trust issues.” Still scanning our surroundings, I took her hand and helped her from the bike.

Diane looked up at me, lines of worry between her eyebrows, and my chest tightened. Greedy for the sight of her eyes and lips, I took a second to look my fill, noticing small differences in her appearance. She'd lost weight. Her eyes were too big. Her lips were thin. Her skin wasn't peaches and cream but rather an unhealthy shade of skim milk. This beautiful woman I'd been dreaming about for weeks was finally here, with me, within arm's reach, but all was not well.

I'd have to be blind to not notice Diane was terrified.

“Hey, come here.” I took Isaac’s helmet from her fingers and fit it over one of the handlebars, placing my helmet on the other side before wrapping my arms around her. Time was short, but right this minute my woman needed comfort. I held her.

And even though I’d been determined to not be relieved, or anything but diligent and watchful, my resolve wavered. Diane was here, finally in my arms. A surge of gratitude ballooned and overwhelmed me. No matter what happened in the near or distant future, for this moment, we were together.

And that—for now, and after so many weeks apart—felt like more than enough.

\* \* \*

Instead of staying at the safehouse just long enough for Diane to pack, get ready, and allow her and her daughter to say their goodbyes—which had been the original terms of our agreement—Cletus asked Diane to recount her version of events from the night of Kip’s murder. Listening and watching as Diane relived it all again had me wishing I was free to put Cletus’s head through a wall.

But I wasn’t free. I belonged to Diane, Diane belonged to Jennifer, and Jennifer belonged to Cletus. As long as the sneakiest of the Winston brothers remained important to Diane, I wouldn’t lay a finger on him.

I watched Jennifer during the tale, cataloguing her expressions and trying to read her thoughts. The young woman made no secret about her disdain for me—which didn’t bother me any—but she obviously also felt scared for her mother. That did bother me.

Diane couldn’t walk away from Green Valley if it meant her daughter lived in a state of perpetual misery and worry. Soon they’d say goodbye, and if Jennifer broadcast her fear then like she broadcasted it now, Diane would never leave.

Thus, once Diane finished recounting the events and excused herself to the bathroom, leaving the three of us alone, I said, “Jennifer.”

Diane's daughter blinked, staring around the room like the sight of it confused her, but she didn't look at me.

So I repeated, "Jennifer," and waited until her focus landed on me where I stood next to the table. "You don't know me, but I keep my promises. I will take care of your mother. She will want for nothing, and she'll be safe."

"Except her family," she said flatly. "She'll want for nothing except her family."

I heaved a silent sigh. She was right. I'd have to figure a way for us to communicate with Diane's kids without risking her safety. Maybe if Jenn felt certain her mother was reachable she'd be less fretful.

I was just about to make her a promise along these lines when she said, "I still don't understand why you were there that night. Why were you there, Mr. Repo?" Sounding and looking exhausted, her intelligent gaze flicked over me. "You never answered. Were you there for my mother? To see her?"

"That was part of the reason, yes." I wouldn't lie to her, but I saw no logic in volunteering all my reasons for being present that night.

"So why else? What other reason did you have? Hmm?" She crossed her arms, her glare full of challenge. "Did you plan this?"

"No."

"Then why were you there?" she demanded in a rough whisper, visibly angry.

I met her challenge steadily for a second, determined not to answer. Telling Jennifer the truth about Jessica being my daughter would serve no purpose other than adding another layer of uncertainty. I didn't know Diane's daughter; I had no idea how she'd react to the news. Maybe it would make the woman less likely to trust me when she already barely trusted me at all.

I looked to Cletus for help. He knew Jennifer, he knew how she'd react, he wanted Diane safe. I'd let him make the decision. And he did.

"He hoped Jessica James would be there," he said plainly.

We traded a look—mine bracing, his apologetic—and I hoped to God he knew what he was doing. Diane needed to leave. But one word from her daughter and she'd stay. She'd go to prison.

“That makes absolutely no sense,” Jennifer ranted at both of us. “Why on God’s green earth would Mr. Repo care if Jessica James was . . . was—” Abruptly, the anger drained from her features and was replaced just as suddenly with understanding.

I held my breath.

“Are you Jessica’s father?” she blurted, her eyes full of wonder.

Lowering my eyes to the floor, I absorbed the impact of her words. Hearing them all together like that, out loud, from someone else, struck me like a blow and I struggled to swallow.

Eventually, I managed to return her stunned stare and to say, “Not in any way that matters,” and hoped this would be the end of it. I hoped this information would stay between the three of us and I hoped this revelation didn’t jeopardize all my meticulous plans to keep Diane safe.

She looked at me like was something different, someone new, a puzzle she was working frantically to solve. Shaking her head, she asked, “Why didn’t you—”

“Tell her?” I laughed, frustrated. “Why would I do that? Why would I ruin her happy life?”

“But—but you’re her—”

“I’m not. The sheriff, that’s her daddy. Janet, that’s her momma. Jackson is her brother. They’re her family, not me. Jessica has always been where she belonged. How much of a selfish asshole would I have to be to take her away from people who were always better equipped to love and care for her than I’ve ever been?”

“What about her mother?”

I chuckled again, my mouth turning sour with the taste of old wounds. “That woman didn’t know how to love. She knew how to have fun, how to .

. . . make money. How to be brilliant. How to be cold. But loving came about as naturally to her as walking with two legs comes to a snake. No. Jess . . . Jessica James isn't mine." I closed my eyes against the onslaught, wishing again for the freedom to do as I wanted, to leave, to ignore this woman's questions.

But I didn't have that freedom. And even now, standing here under this young person's judgement and scrutiny, I didn't really want that freedom. Just like I didn't really want the freedom to tell Jessica the truth. If I'd felt free to blow up Jess's world, then I wasn't a man worthy of her.

I wanted Jessica happy, and I wanted Diane safe, and if either of those things meant giving up some of my freedom, then so be it. Freedom at the direct expense of another person's wellbeing was the worst kind of evil. It was selfishness masquerading as liberty, hypocrisy wearing the clothes of perseverance and grit. I wanted none of it.

"Then why show up at our engagement party?" she pushed.

I opened my eyes then and looked at her. I wouldn't argue. I wouldn't justify myself. I had my reasons, they were the right ones, and that was enough.

But then she whispered, "You love her," and emotion rushed to her eyes. "That's why."

This proclamation a new assault striking me square in the chest, I held still as I worked to shove down the ancient regrets and sorrows her statement unleashed.

She wasn't finished. Her chin wobbled, her gaze holding both accusation and understanding as Cletus wrapped his arm around her. "You love her. And that's why you want what's best for her, even now. That's why you stayed close but never intervened. You love her, and that's why her happiness matters more to you than what you could've gained as her father if you'd made it known." She shrugged, but each of her words cut me like a razor. "You love your daughter, Jason," she said, using my real name, which made everything worse.

Pulling in a raggedy sigh, I stared at her, giving her my attention and nothing else. For some reason, this information about me had clearly made a huge difference to Jennifer. Tears leaked from her eyes, but she no longer looked at me with distrust. Something within my chest relaxed and a tightness eased even as worry—about and for Jessica—twisted in my gut.

But I couldn't think about this at present. Maybe Jennifer would tell Jessica, maybe she wouldn't. I hoped Diane's daughter would do the right thing and keep it to herself. Regardless, it was out of my hands.

Diane and I would be leaving tonight. I'd take her to safety, places the arm of US law held no sway. We'd be together, and that's all that mattered. For now.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

\* DIANE \*

“To be half a century plus is wonderfully exciting, because I haven't lost any of my past, and I am free to stand on the rock of all that the past has taught me as I look to the future.”

— MADELEINE L'ENGLE, *A CIRCLE OF QUIET*

“**A**re you sure you have everything you need?” Jennifer paced to the open closet again, inspecting the sparse few garments remaining on the hangers.

Jason had shopped for me: luggage, clothes, toiletries, a book to read on the plane, everything. He'd even purchased hair dye, ten different brands of it. Luckily, Jennifer knew which shade would match my new fake ID and how to apply it without turning my hair green. I'd only ever had my hair fixed at a salon. If she hadn't helped me, I would've been lost.

But now we were done with my hair, the packing, and everything else. All that remained was saying goodbye.

“I have everything, I'm sure,” I said, working to keep the turmoil and emotion from my voice. Poor Isaac had let me cry quietly on his shirt without complaint. I would not do the same to my sweet Jennifer.

With a wistful sounding sigh, she turned from the closet and folded her arms, her eyes landing on my designer jeans and traveling upwards.

“You don’t look like you.” Her voice cracked, her focus stalling on the luxurious black cashmere sweater I’d pulled on over a black long-sleeved shirt. “You never wear black, or jeans. You always said farmers wear jeans.”

“Oh baby, come here.” I opened my arms for her. She all but leapt into my arms. Holding my sweet girl tightly, I pet her hair and kissed her cheek. “I’m not supposed to look like me, baby. I’m supposed to look like Elizabeth Blake.”

Jennifer heaved a watery sigh. “I know you have to go. I *want* you to go, and I want you to be happy. But I wish you could stay.”

An essential something within me bent, maybe even fractured, at the despair in my darling girl’s voice. I found myself convulsively swallowing, glaring at the ceiling while I wrestled with guilt and fear and sadness and a trembling chin.

*I will not cry. I will be brave in these last moments with my daughter. I will be the source of strength for her now that I couldn’t be as she grew.*

“You know I love you, right?” I asked, kissing her cheek again. “You know, no matter where I go and what I’m doing, you have my heart.”

“I know, Momma.” She held me just as tightly, sniffing, no longer trying to hold back the tears. “And I love you. And I know you’ve always wanted to travel, so maybe I just need to think of this as an extended vacation.”

We both chuckled at her reframing of the situation, and she pulled away. I gripped her arms to keep her from going too far. “This isn’t forever. I refuse to believe that. I will see you and hold you and kiss your beautiful face again.”

Nodding, Jennifer wiped at her eyes. “I know. Cletus said he’d talk to Jason about finding a way for us to safely communicate. Maybe we can come visit you wherever you are.”

“I’d like that,” I said, but uncertainty spun like a top in my head and stomach. I didn’t know where we were going, or for how long, or how we’d pay for it. I’d decided to trust Jason, and I would, but the not knowing ate at me.

As soon as we were in the car, I'd extract more details from that sexy man of mine. I'd probably have to get a job wherever we went, and even though I had no idea how to manage applying for a position under an assumed identity, I wasn't at all afraid of hard work. I'd been working since I was fourteen; I'd worked while raising two kids (three if you counted my man-child husband); I could do most jobs at the Lodge. Maybe I'd be a maid. There'd always been something about cleaning up messes and seeing everything set to rights that soothed me.

"He loves you, you know."

I blinked my girl back into focus. She was no longer crying.

"Jason. Mr. Repo. He loves you." A smile broke out on her tear-stained face. "In fact, I think he has it pretty bad." She laughed again.

I didn't laugh and my stomach swirled something fierce, and I couldn't help but wonder at myself. Here I was, on the run from the law, a fugitive, feeling nervous about a man I liked—a man I loved—and his theoretical feelings for me. We'd been apart for so long during this ordeal, what if he—

*No. No. I wouldn't entertain the thought.*

But I would say this: I didn't wish to be a burden to him. My whole life, I'd bent over backwards for a man who never loved me, who used my inexperience and vulnerability against me like a weapon. Both Kip and my father had wielded my insecurities masterfully. I wouldn't—couldn't—be in a one-sided relationship ever again.

As my late friend Bethany Winston used to say, *If you don't want someone to get your goat, don't let them know where it's tied.*

I'd thought, after leaving Kip, I would do her one better: If you don't want someone to get your goat, don't let them know you own a goat. Make them think you're goat-less. Besides, goats are messy. They eat everything and poop everywhere. *And yet, I do like their cheese.*

But then I'd met Jason, and not only did I let him know I had a goat, I'd handed it right over.

Therefore, if at any time he grew tired of my company, I'd figure things out on my own. I would not stay where I wasn't wanted, suffering with unrequited feelings. Fugitive or not, life was too short to waste time loving someone who doesn't have common sense to see my beauty and strength enough to love me back and treat me well.

And that was that.

"I'm glad we got the chance to say goodbye, where we can talk properly," Jenn went on, arranging our hands such that our fingers twisted together and swung back and forth gently between us.

"Me too, baby," I said, staring deeply into her eyes, memorizing her face until I could see her again. It wasn't like I could bring a picture of her with me. Etching these last few moments on my memory would have to do. "I'm so sorry I'll miss your wedding." Just the thought made me sick to my stomach, missing my own daughter's wedding.

"Oh, don't worry about that." She shrugged, the side of her mouth curving upward. "Knowing you're safe, off with someone who cares about you deeply, traveling the world and having adventures—that'll keep me smiling."

"You're too good, Jennifer." I cupped her jaw, breathing in as much as the tightness around my chest would allow. "You are an angel. Make sure that man of yours treats you like one."

"He will." A small, secretive smile hovered over her mouth and behind his eyes. "He treats me very well and makes me very happy."

"Good." I nodded, and before I could stop myself, I added, "And I cannot stress enough how important it is that you always orgasm first."

Jennifer pulled her hands from mine and covered her face, groaning. "Good Lord, mother."

"I mean it!" I peeled her fingers away, leveling her with my fiercest glare. "If he doesn't see to your pleasure, don't let him have a moment's peace. Do you hear me?"

She nodded, cringing, her earlier tears swept away by my latest words. Good.

I would leave my daughter because I had to. But I'd be damned if she spent her life without every kind of love, without someone to cherish and treasure her—body, mind, and spirit.

Cletus Winston was a good man, and I trusted him to treat her right. But if he didn't, if I found out he ever neglected or hurt my baby . . . well.

I was already on the run for one murder. What difference would a second one make?

\* \* \*

We traveled all through the night. I didn't mind. I was too keyed up to sleep. Despite the earlier pledge to myself that I'd question Jason about where we were going, I found I was too tired to talk. As morning dawned, throwing our shadows on the road on a long stretch ahead of us, a strange kind of resolve awoke within me, rising at my back with the sun.

I was not with my daughter or my son. I was lost to them. But it would not be forever. I would find a way to return, and it would happen before Jennifer and that man of her made me any grandbabies, or before Isaac met a woman and settled down. I would not miss both of my kids' weddings and I would be a proper grandmother one day.

Perhaps it would never happen, but fixing my mind on the goal made me feel better, more in control.

"Life is so strange," I said and thought in unison, though I hadn't planned to speak at all.

Jason glanced at me and then back to the road. "How so?"

Since he asked . . . "Just when we think our path is set and we're cruising along toward the inevitable tomorrow, the good Lord sees fit to throw a sexy, sweet motorcycle man in my path to shake everything up."

A reluctant looking smile tugged at his mouth. “I seem to recall it being the other way around. It was you throwing yourself in my path, wasn’t it?”

“Well, who can keep track of such things.” I flicked my hand this way and that. “My point is, I can’t believe we’re here. Together. And this our life now.”

“Driving to Texas in a Volvo isn’t our life for long.”

Turning in my seat, I gave his profile my full attention. Goodness, how I’d missed just looking at his handsome face. “Oh? Then what is our life?”

Jason rubbed his chin, looking calm and thoughtful. “Well, let’s see. It’ll start once we reach Russia. And then, after that, maybe Morocco. Or Ethiopia.”

My eyebrows skyrocketed and I felt acutely breathless. “We . . . we’re going to Russia?”

“Yes.”

“Why? And . . . how? And what—how will we pay for such a thing?”

Jason adjusted his rearview mirror to account for the glare of the sun, his lips forming a faint smile. “Russia is one of a few countries that don’t have an extradition treaty with the US, and I know Russian better than Amharic, Darija, Arabic, or French.”

“You  *speak*  Russian?”

He chuckled, presumably at my tone. But you could’ve knocked me over with a feather. What was going on?

“I speak a little, enough to get by in big cities. But we’re going to a resort town and most everyone there speaks enough English or German. We shouldn’t have too much trouble getting around.”

Heaving a tremendous sigh, I shook my head and looked out the front windshield. “Well, okay then. We’re going to Russia. But how am I going to get a job if I don’t speak the language?”

Jason sent me his trademark expression that was half frown, half grin. “Why would you need to work?”

“I assume we’ll need to eat and a roof over our heads.”

“You assume correctly. But, Diane, gorgeous, that’s all taken care of.”

“You already found us jobs?”

“No,” he drawled, his frown clearing to reveal nothing but pure amusement. “I have money. Lots of it. You won’t need to work unless you feel moved to do so.”

My stomach twisted at that and I sunk lower in my seat, shifting to one side to keep the rays of sunshine in the side mirror from blinding me.

“What’s wrong?” Jason’s hand settled on my leg and he gave it a squeeze, a frown knitting itself between his eyebrows.

“It’s just . . .” I shook my head, facing him again. “I think we need to get something straight.”

“What’s that?”

“I love you.”

His hand on my thigh tightened and then released, but his features didn’t change. He just kept on staring forward, eyes on the road, jaw set. The only sound inside the car was the rotation of the wheels over the pavement.

Maybe he didn’t hear me?

“I’m in love with you, Jason,” I repeated, my tone matter-of-fact because this information was matter-of-fact. “I’m telling you now so you go into this with your eyes wide open. I absolutely refuse to become a burden to you. And if you don’t feel the same way—or think you could, given enough time—it’s not too late for you to turn back and send me on my way.”

In response to this, his hand slid further up my thigh, his fingers moving more toward the interior of my leg. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed yet,” he said, his tone also very matter-of-fact. “But I need you, Diane.”

That wasn't what I'd expected him to say. Therefore, I peered at him. "You don't need me. No person *needs* another person."

"I do. I told myself I wasn't going to tell you now, not until we were all settled someplace safe."

"Tell me what? What are you talking about?"

"I can't think about my life without you being part of it." Jason reached for my hand, curled his fingers around mine, and lifted my knuckles to brush a soft kiss there. "When I think of the future, I think of you and me. I can't see any other path for me."

"Jason—"

"I'm in love with you." Squeezing my hand tightly, he brought our joined fingers to his thigh, pressing my palm there, like he was holding me captive through the simple touch, like he'd never let me go. "And you're a better person than me, because I would not be okay with sending you on your way. Wherever you are, that's where I'll be. Always."

Now I was breathing hard, unable to believe my ears.

Except . . . why shouldn't I believe them? He'd said the words, hadn't he? I'd been sitting right here, hadn't I? I had no reason not to believe Jason; he'd never lied to me. He'd always told me the truth, even when doing so cast him in an unflattering light.

And if I believed him, that he loved me and needed me, then I guess everything was all settled.

"Okay then." I nodded, turning my palm up to tangle our fingers together, breathing in a deep breath for the first time in what felt like forever. "I guess it's all settled, then."

"I guess it is," he said. He wore no smile, but I heard one in his voice.

"So, Russia."

"That's right."

I leaned closer to him, wanting to give him a kiss. “Then Ethiopia, or Morocco?”

“Correct.”

“And we’ll do what? Just lay around?”

He tilted his head back and forth as though considering. “Lay, stand, sit, bend over.” Jason turned his head and gave me a saucy wink. “The position doesn’t matter to me.”

I laughed, actually laughed, and smacked his arm lightly. “You are a bad man.” Goodness how I missed him, this. Everything when we were together felt so effortless even if I was blushing half the time. I loved it.

“Never any doubt.” Jason lifted my hand again, kissing it again.

But then he licked and nibbled at the spot between my fingers. My breath caught because it felt . . . incredible. Like he’d just revealed a secret passageway between my hand and clitoris.

“You should let me make love to you on the plane,” he said lightly, like we were discussing what to eat or which movie to watch.

“That’s . . . very tempting.” I’d meant to say, *That’s impossible*.

“I don’t want you thinking about what could go wrong.” He continued teasing me with his lips and tongue as he spoke. “I don’t want you worried about the future. Don’t think about it. Just trust me to take care of you.”

“You don’t get to tell me what I can think about.” I tried to sound grumpy but instead I knew I sounded breathless. Good gracious, I loved that tongue.

But I didn’t tell him that I wasn’t all that worried now that we were together. Perhaps it didn’t make any sense to most folks, but I’d always been someone who trusted the experts. Jason was an expert in traveling and disappearing. He loved me and he’d keep me safe, just like I’d keep him safe too.

“No. I don’t get to tell you what to think about. But that’s not what I’m doing,” he rasped out, his voice deep and persuasive. Paired with his tongue

between my fingers, I was positively squirming in my seat. “I’m not demanding anything, Diane. I’m just telling you my wishes.”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, you make everything sound like a command. And enough of that. We can’t pull over and you’re getting me all twisty.” Restless from his seductive torture, I pulled his hand toward me and placed it benignly on my knee. “Fine. If your wishes are that I not worry about the future, what do you *wish* I’d think about?”

Unleashing a full grin, his eyes slid to me. “How about all the ways you plan on pleasing me.”

I barked a laugh, surprised even though I shouldn’t have been. Making a show of rolling my eyes, I didn’t try to hide my grin. It felt so very good to grin. “Is that so?”

“That is so.” He was smiling too, but his tone belied his seriousness.

“Any hints? Any special requests?”

“Surprise me,” he said, taking back his hand to scratch the side of his jaw.

“Don’t I always?”

His smile waned and he looked thoughtful. “Yes. You do,” he said, his voice sure and sober. “And no matter where we ultimately end up, I don’t want you to doubt for a second that I am completely yours.”

“And I’m completely yours.” I tugged on the seatbelt so I could lean forward across the arm rest and place a kiss on his cheek, unabashedly sniffing him before leaning away. He smelled just like I remembered, and a heady nostalgia both soothed my mind and squeezed my heart.

Funny to think Jason and I now had memories. We had habits and traditions, a past to recall, filled with good times and, yes, even a few surprising and tragic ones. And here we were, at the midpoint of our lives, starting completely over with new names, new identities, but ultimately none of that mattered.

What mattered? Well, let’s see. . .

To start with, I knew Jason would always make sure that I came first, both literally and figuratively. As I'd told Jennifer countless times, that was *essential*.

Also, he loved me—bossiness and all—and he showed it with more than words. Of note: the words were also very nice.

I trusted him. He trusted me. I enjoyed his company and he seemed to enjoy mine. We didn't have a lot in common, but that just made everything so much more interesting, and what we did have in common—the ferocity with which we loved, our pragmatism, our perspective on accepting the things we could not change but giving gratitude for our gifts—made all the difference.

The previous chapter of my life was at an end, an entirely new one was set to begin, and wasn't that a bit of a miracle? The past twenty plus years of my life—everything but my children, of course—might eventually become nothing but a footnote in my story. How wonderful that we as people could reinvent ourselves, have new loves, a new life, new adventures, a future that wasn't predestined.

My life would have more than three chapters. I'd been an obedient child, and then I'd been a dutiful wife, and then I'd been a recovering divorcee. I didn't quite know what I was now. On the run from the law, tragically separated from my children, and yet, also on journey with a man I loved.

I trusted him to take care of keeping me safe, and he trusted me to take care of him. I might not have any idea how our story would end. But a beginning based on mutual love and trust seemed like the perfect foundation for a future.

Certainly, neither of us were perfect. And perhaps that made us perfect for each other.

**-THE END-**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Penny Reid is the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of the Winston Brothers and Knitting in the City series. She used to spend her days writing federal grant proposals as a biomedical researcher, but now she writes kissing books. Penny is an obsessive knitter and manages the #OwnVoices-focused mentorship incubator / publishing imprint, Smartypants Romance. She lives in Seattle Washington with her husband, three kids, and dog named Hazel.

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SNEAK PEEK: JUST FOLKING AROUND, GOOD  
FOLK SERIES #0.5

PART ONE: NOVEMBER 2015

*“I know I walk a fine line between being a respected actor and being what they call a sex symbol.”*

— EVA MENDES

“**W**e’re in Mayberry. This is Mayberry. And I think the entire town is at this wedding,” Lina whispered, wearing incredulity and fascination beneath her flawless application of makeup. Whatever Lina thought or felt at any given moment always shone like a marquee on her face. This made her an excellent method actress but also a terrible liar.

I didn’t contradict her even though the name of the place was Green Valley, not Mayberry, and I doubted those assembled for our mutual friend’s wedding reception encompassed an entire town. The white tent was full, but I wouldn’t call it crowded.

Lina had arrived in Green Valley yesterday, whereas I’d flown in just two hours ago and hadn’t seen anything of the town. But if this place was at all similar to where I grew up, I understood her comparison to the fictional city of Mayberry from *The Andy Griffith Show*.

“I’m telling you, the downtown is one and a half blocks by six blocks, has two hardware stores and no Sephora. It’s a film set waiting to happen. I can see it now—a new quirky TV dramedy about lumberjacks and the bakers who love them, hokey and/or plucky background music included.”

Grinning at Lina's description, I took a sip of my water. "Maybe there's a woodworking culture here. Don't look down on people for enjoying their wood."

"Ha ha," she deadpanned, but then smiled. "You and your innuendos are the highlight of my day."

"Are there any other kind of innuendos? Speaking of which, want to invest in my new pornographic breakfast cereal venture called In-u-end-O!s?"

She grimaced and laughed at the same time. "Please don't tell me what the shape of the cereal would be. I think I can guess."

Chewing on my straw, I winked at her, and she rolled her eyes. I always used a straw whenever possible. Even these so-called stain lipsticks fared better and lasted longer if one drank through a straw.

"Look at all these beards," Lina muttered, her eyes darting over the wedding guests. Seeming to shake herself, she sent me a look. "Oh, I forgot. You grew up in Ohio."

"So?"

"So, it's the cold part of the country. People probably have lots of beards there. It might as well be Michigan." She shivered, her wince increasing.

"Never say that to someone from Ohio. And never say the reverse to someone from Michigan." I may have left my hometown the day I turned eighteen, but the Ohioan in me—who still had the odd craving to play euchre around Thanksgiving and missed the changing of seasons—objected.

She scrutinized me. "Is this about sports? Is that why I shouldn't say the thing about Michigan?"

"Of course."

"It's always about sports with you midwesterners." Lina's gaze moved from me and narrowed at something over my shoulder.

Likewise, I glanced around the white wedding tent without focusing on any details, not wanting to commit eye contact with anyone, instead absorbing

the general splendor of our surroundings. I felt a sudden, strange pang of restlessness and anxiety. Sienna Diaz had somehow achieved the impossible in her wedding décor: understated yet opulent. I was not surprised. Sienna Diaz built her brand as Hollywood's reigning sweetheart on achieving what everyone had believed was impossible.

But I hoped Sienna wasn't making a mistake. In addition to understated opulence, from the outside looking in, her rushed wedding to a park ranger from small-town Tennessee looked and felt like a big, horrible mistake.

*Too late now. It's done. Poor Sienna.*

With that depressing thought, and despite attempts to keep my gaze unfocused, Ana Ortega caught my eye and waved. I gave her a bright smile and waved back, telling myself to avoid that side of the room. She and I were up for the same role—a busty damsel sidekick in a Scrumdicker blockbuster—and my callback was next week. I didn't want her to inadvertently psych me out. Ana was good people, but I wanted that role.

Holding up a glass of champagne from her spot across the room, Ana pointed to it and mouthed, *You're not drinking?*

I shook my head, gesturing to my water and mouthing the words, *Early flight*. My departing flight was early, but that wasn't the reason why I wasn't drinking. I never drank at industry events. My first year on the West Coast taught me that lesson quite well. It also taught me that sobriety makes other people uncomfortable, so I learned to fake being buzzed like a pro.

Ana thrust out her bottom lip, in the universal facial expression for *That's too bad*.

“So many beards . . .” Next to me, Lina's muttered lament snagged my attention. It sounded as if she found the sight of so many jawlines adorned with hair alarming.

I pretended Lina—whose back was to Ana—had said something funny, grateful she'd had the idea of being each other's plus-one. Lina and I were never considered for the same film roles, mostly because she preferred indie films that made important statements in lieu of money. But then, she descended from Hollywood royalty and could therefore afford to make

statements rather than a paycheck. My mom had just recently—and tentatively—started to warm up to my chosen profession, though I think my latest film may have put a damper on her enthusiasm.

It's true. I'd been topless, full-frontal shot, arms over my head, tits filling the frame. For the record, I was not ashamed of going topless and it absolutely *was not* a reaction to my messy split from Harrison Kent. First of all, it was for work, and I'd accepted the role before Harrison had cheated on me; secondly, I loved my breasts; and thirdly, there is no thirdly. I was determined not to let anyone make me feel bad about showing off parts of my body I loved, doing a job I loved.

I just wished . . . *sigh*.

I just wished there were some way to both live my life on my own terms and spare my mom the judgy looks. She'd been through enough.

"Well, we have to do something when it's cold outside," I said brightly, turning so that I was no longer in Ana's line of sight.

Lina moved her narrowed eyes to me. "Wait? What? What are we talking about? You grow beards when it's cold?"

"Sports, Lina." I shook my head at her. "I'm still talking about midwesterners and sports."

"So, when it's cold, you go outside and watch sports?" Her eyes rounded. "That makes no sense."

"No. We sit inside and watch sports."

My friend made an impatient sound, setting her empty champagne glass down on a nearby table. "That reminds me—I've been meaning to ask, what is a toboggan?" We were standing near a tray of both water and champagne, making it easy for her to reach behind me and grab another glass.

"Really?" I looked between her and the champagne flute. "You've been meaning to ask me what a toboggan is?"

“Yes. I keep forgetting to ask. I read the word in that dog sled movie Jorge is making and—anyway, you’re the only person not originally from NYC or SoCal that I know. What is it?”

I had to laugh at her. “You know you can search the internet and find answers to your most pressing questions anytime you like. You don’t need to save them for me.”

“Ugh. I hate the internet. There’re so many people there. Just tell me.”

“It’s a dog breed,” I lied, watching her. She was so gullible.

Lina was Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* and I was the seagull. Except, unlike the bird in the movie, I purposefully misled her with fictional explanations for the mundane stuff everyone should already know. Lina lived under the sea, in the magical kingdom of beautiful people and champagne problems.

In our odd-couple friendship, I was the expert on real-people things, like how to pump gas, drive cars that weren’t Teslas, use physical keys to unlock doors, and how to interact with non-touchscreen tech. She’d once encountered a rotary telephone like the one my great grandma still insisted on using. I’d convinced Lina—for ten minutes before setting the record straight—it was a device for Morse code that sent telegrams.

“A dog breed?” Lina nodded thoughtfully. “I guess that makes sense . . .?”

“No, it doesn’t make sense because it’s not a dog breed, Lina.” Now I was laughing for real. “If you want to know, stop being lazy and get thee to the internet.”

“Just tell me.” She curled her lip, adding on a whisper, “Don’t make me go on there.”

“Excuse me.” A baritone voice paired with a gentle tap on my arm had me automatically turning. Moving my hair behind my shoulder, I tacked on a polite smile, preparing for a fan or—worse—someone coming over to ask me about my callback this week. Instead, I came face-to-face with one of these bearded boys with whom Lina seemed preoccupied.

Inspecting him quickly—flower at his lapel, tux, brown beard, thick, dark lashes framing eyes that weren't hazel or blue but something in between—I felt my lips curve on their own. I recognized him. He was one of the groomsmen, which meant he might've been one of the brothers of the groom. At the church, he'd been sandwiched between a huge, blond-bearded Vikings-esque male and a young Matt Bomer-ish /specimen with neatly trimmed facial hair and blue eyes that glittered like diamonds.

I will admit, the men at this wedding had been quite a sight with their broad shoulders and capable-looking hands, seven of them standing at the altar like a buffet of mouthwatering masculinity. Or maybe a casting-call line for a lumberjack version of James Bond? Point was, even I—determined to be disinterested in men, romantic relationships, or any form of distracting entanglement—was not unaffected.

I'd been affected.

Squirming in the church pew as I'd sinfully devoured the assorted eye candy in the bridal party, I'd sort of started to understand why Sienna had initially decided to stay in this two-hardware-store small town. *But . . . to marry it? To be impregnated by it after knowing it for only six months? To trust it?* No. No way.

Just the thought of finding myself in a similar predicament made me break out in a cold sweat and gave me itchy palms. I'm positive I'd had nightmares similar to Sienna's present reality. And so, I worried for her.

But back to the dish of mouthwatering masculinity that had just tapped on my shoulder.

"Yes?" I asked smoothly, stepping closer in bold invitation. Boldness was my default. If I was going to be rejected, I liked to know right away.

Also, I'd decided earlier (after the Magic Mike lineup at the church) that I wasn't opposed to partaking if an interesting man-snack materialized. Someone outside of industry circles. A local. Beard optional. Someone who was obviously interested in me (since breaking things off with Harrison, I had a strict policy of never chasing my snacks) but who also wouldn't make tonight into a whole *thing*.

That said, I would not be having a one-night stand with a brother of my good friend's new husband. If this guy was one of Sienna's brothers-in-law, he was off-limits.

The guy gifted me with a smile that seemed real but also foreign on his face, making me think he wasn't a person who smiled often. "I'm Cletus Winston, Jethro's brother. Sienna has spoken of you with great esteem."

*Well, darn. That's that. No "man-handling" this one. Ha ha! Get it? No manhandling.*

And what a shame. Cletus Winston's formal tone paired with his southern twang reminded me of the accents in *Gone with the Wind*. Honestly, I'm always looking for an opportunity to be reminded of the love story in *Gone with the Wind*. I had strong feelings about the dynamic between Rhett, Scarlett, and that tepid vanilla pudding of disappointment, George Ashley Wilkes.

Anyway, I liked how this guy spoke despite his unfortunate hillbilly name. Sienna's husband's name was just as cringey. What had their mother been thinking? *Cletus? Jethro? Yikes!* Especially when there were so many other great, strong southern names, like Mason, or Walker, or Marshall, or Jackson . . . or *Rhett*.

"Sienna is the best," I said—because she was the best—and gave this Cletus person a second look. The man wore a tuxedo and wore it well, but he also looked like someone who stepped out of the pages of "Little Red Riding Hood" and yearned to wield an ax instead of a bow tie. He was good-looking enough under all that hair, but definitely not my type.

In case you haven't guessed, my type was a Rhett Butler—a man who wore a tux the way he did everything else: with ease, charm, and a flavor of self-confidence that trended more witty-sardonic than egotistical.

Cletus Winston, brother of the groom, stepped to the side and twisted slightly at the waist, gesturing over his shoulder, and apropos of nothing said, "My friend over there is a police officer, local law enforcement."

Bemused, I moved my attention to where he pointed and found another man about the same height as the unfortunately named Cletus. This one was less

stocky, with decidedly less mountain-man vibes, and he was not in a tux. The man wore an extremely well-tailored three-piece suit in dark blue that fit his athletic body nicely. Quite, *quite* nicely.

My eyes lifted to the man's face, and I studied him. Good forehead; great hair, sunny blond with texturing spikes of brown and gold; straight, strong nose; symmetrical features; angular jaw in an oval face; close-cut beard that showcased the slight cleft in his chin. Extremely attractive, but not in the polished, too-perfect Hollywood, metrosexual way that now super turned me off.

Presently, the officer's gaze of indeterminable color shifted from me to Sienna's brother-in-law and then back, his surprise unadorned by artifice. Obviously, the man had not been expecting to be introduced to me. Also obvious, he recognized me, knew who I was, and—based on where his eyes had just landed—he'd likely seen the topless scene in my latest movie.

Interested in me—check.

Not in industry circles—check.

Local—check.

*And a police officer, eh?*

“Oh? Is he?” I asked.

“He is.” Sienna's brother-in-law nodded, his tone still formal. “And he's got handcuffs with him. Just FYI.”

My attention cut back to this Cletus person, and I pressed my lips together to keep from laughing. *Oh, I see what's up.* “Thanks for the tip.” I made a mental note to give Sienna shit about this.

While filming with Sienna two years ago, I'd joked once—just once—that I would be the first on set for the handcuffing scene near the end of the movie since being cuffed during sex always got me off, and she'd never let me live the stupid words down. I'd said it to shock her and anyone else listening at the time. Bravado always helped me conceal nerves and doubt. You know that old saying? *Fake it till you make it.*

But Sienna hadn't been shocked. She'd laughed like she thought I was a weirdo and sent me faux fur-lined handcuffs for my birthday.

"No problem. Have a nice evening," the brother of the groom said. And with that, he administered a bow of sorts and strolled away.

*Well, okay then. That was weird.*

Giving my attention back to the officer, I discovered he'd recovered quickly, his earlier surprise now mostly gone. He wore a small, secretive-looking smile, like he had *thoughts*. Like he found his friend's antics and the unexpected spotlight of my gaze amusing rather than uncomfortable or flustering.

His abrupt and successful recovery kinda sorta flustered me. I blinked. My boldness offset by confusion, I hesitated.

"Invite him over, or I will," Lina said after a protracted moment, surprising me as she came to stand at my shoulder.

"He has a beard." I made sure my tone sounded teasing as I continued to inspect this handsome stranger who didn't appear at all starstruck. "Are you sure you want to talk to one of these bearded lumberjacks?"

"But it's a short beard, and look at that chin, and that suit." She sucked in a breath through her teeth, making a slight hissing sound. "Mr. Police Officer aced the assignment."

I breathed a laugh and, shaking myself out of the strange self-doubt, crooked a finger toward Mr. Police Officer. He in turn cocked an eyebrow, placing a hand on his chest as though to say, *Who? Me?* innocence written everywhere except his eyes. Those were nothing but trouble.

A little flutter of excitement squeezed my chest, and I breathed through a sudden, unexpected burst of anxious energy. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the unanticipated crackling and warmth of electricity racing over my skin as our gazes continued to tangle across the room, and I crooked my finger again.

"This one is mine, Lina," I decided and said at the same time.

“Raquel. You know how I feel about chin clefts. Cary Grant has my heart forever. Rock, Paper, Scissors?” she pleaded.

I watched as Mr. Police Officer crossed the room toward me, took note of the smoothness of his gait, the graceful confidence of his movements. “Nope.”

“Ugh. Okay, fine.” At the edge of my vision I saw Lina cross her arms. “But if it doesn’t work out with you two, I get dibs next time, if—God forbid—we ever come back here.”

“Totally fine with me,” I said, lowering my voice to add, “You know my rule.”

“Since Harrison, the heart-breaking twatwaffle, never the same guy twice,” she said under her breath just as the handsome man in blue made it to where we stood.

“Hi.” Lifting my chin, I offered my hand to the stranger. “I’m Raquel Ezra.”

“I know.” He didn’t smile, but his eyes, which I could see now were a deep, warm brown, danced. My heart stumbled over itself as he slipped his palm against mine, bringing the back of my hand to his lips. Brushing the barest hint of a kiss there, the texture of his beard teased my knuckles. Both sent lovely, spiky shivers up my arm and to my fingertips. “Jackson James. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Jackson James? Now that was a name I could appreciate. Part of me, the seriously goofy part, wanted to respond with *Charmed, I’m sure*.

I forced myself to hold his gaze until he released my hand, and only then did I turn to Lina. “This is Lina Lestari.”

He shifted the brunt of his charm to Lina, and I drew in a silent, steadying breath. *Okay, settle down Rae. Play it cool. Be cool. Be who he expects you to be.*

“I’m a big fan, Ms. Lestari. It’s an honor.”

These statements pulled a smile from Lina—no small accomplishment—and she offered her hand, which he took and shook gently.

Lina squeezed his hand tighter and shuffled a half step closer. “I know who you are.”

“*You* know who *I* am?” This seemed to surprise him, but he took her statement in stride, a small, skeptical grin blooming on his lips. He had nice lips, the bottom one much fuller than the top.

“I do,” Lina said. “Your sister is, uh, Janet. Right?”

“Janet is my mother. My sister is Jessica.”

Lina nodded quickly. “I met them yesterday. Your sister is hilarious. She’s dating one of the Winston brothers? The one with the red beard.”

“Yes. That’s correct.” The officer’s eyes narrowed just a fraction of an inch, his voice a modicum tighter, but still a deep, delicious rumble.

Before I could process the subtle shift in his mood, Lina’s smile grew dazzling. “Tell me something, Mr. Police Officer.”

“Anything, Ms. Lestari,” he responded immediately, using her hold on his hand to maneuver himself between us. “But I feel I must tell you, I’m a deputy sheriff. Though you can call me Mr. Police Officer if it pleases you.”

His voice was nice. And his accent was *real* nice, very Rhett-like.

“Okay, deputy.” Lina tilted her head to the side. “Can you tell me what a toboggan is?”

“I absolutely can tell you what a toboggan is. Just let me grab a water here . . .” Somehow he managed to free his hand from her grip, and in the next moment he reached behind me. His chest brushed against my shoulder while his proximity offered the faintest tease of his cologne, a warm, toasty blend of citrus, sandalwood, and . . . *Is that jasmine?*

My lashes fluttered as he withdrew, leaving the faint impression of his scent behind, and my mouth felt dry and useless. *God, he smells good.* I loved me a good-smelling man. There was nothing on earth like it. Three things in life had no substitutions: a perfectly roasted marshmallow; the first cool, crisp day of fall after a long, hot summer; and the closeness of a warm, good-smelling man.

*Don't mess this up, Rae.*

Okay, look. I'd been in a self-imposed dry spell for over two years. Yes, my career came first, and any prolonged involvement with a man right now would only serve to distract me from my goals, ambitions, and meticulously crafted plans, because men could not be trusted. Period. I had to keep my eye on the prize, but that didn't mean I wasn't thirsty for something delicious.

Don't you ever get thirsty?

*That's what I thought.*

So, assuming I could keep my inner oddball in check, and he continued to press all my buttons without trying, and he was interested—which I was eighty-five percent certain that he was—and he didn't say or do anything to reveal himself as a tepid vanilla pudding of disappointment, chances were really good.

The sexy officer straightened, his eyes dark and hooded as they met mine, that wonderful spark crackling between us. But then, giving his gaze back to Lina, he said, "A toboggan is a hat."

I laughed, barely avoiding a snort, but I did wrinkle my nose as I spoke without weighing my words, "No. Don't listen to him, he's pulling your leg. It's not a hat."

The deputy glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, his gaze striking me as both hot and sharp, though his tone was conversational. "Yes, it is a hat."

"No." I faced him fully, my neck heating. "It's a sled."

He gave me the entirety of his attention, his forehead lined even as a small smile spread over his features. "A toboggan is a knit hat, Ms. Ezra."

I shook my head, now grinning uncontrollably for reasons unknown. "You are wrong, deputy. It's definitely not a hat."

He pursed his lips, his right eyebrow rising as he watched me with eyes that still felt sharp and hot, but now also assessing. "All right. How much do you want to bet?"

“Bet? You want to bet me that a toboggan is a hat?” Little did he know, I loved to bet. I loved games—chess in particular—but only ever when winning was a sure thing. Everyone but Lina knew a toboggan was a sled. Maybe he wanted to lose a bet with me?

His eyebrow hitched higher, and a faint shadow of challenge squared his jaw. “Yes, ma’am.”

A wonderful little thrill, a spike of something hot and promising ignited low in my stomach at how he’d said the word *ma’am*.

Still grinning, I crossed my arms beneath my chest, careful not to spill my water. “Fine. What are the terms?”

His cognac eyes brightened and moved over me as he rubbed the close-cropped beard on his jaw. “How about, if I’m right—if a toboggan is a knit hat—then you let me show you around Green Valley.”

“And if a toboggan isn’t a knit hat?” I lifted my chin, deciding not to mention that my flight tomorrow left first thing in the morning; if he wanted to show me around, it would have to be right now. Regardless, it didn’t matter, because a toboggan was a sled, not a hat.

He shrugged like it didn’t matter, apparently certain he was right, even as his gaze grew in twinkly intensity the longer it held mine. “Name your price.”

“If I’m right, then—” I paused, needing to swallow.

The side of his mouth hitched, such a flirty little curve, and my stomach erupted in butterflies. No lie, I hadn’t felt anything close to this since Bryce Littleton’s soccer ball landed on my lap freshman year of high school. He’d been a senior, experienced, and very, very hot. I’d been . . . none of those things. But the soccer star had winked at me and that simple action had detonated my first lust explosion, just like what I was feeling now.

Bryce Littleton had also turned out to be one hell of a good time. In truth, he’d been the only hell of a good time I’d ever had. No one else had come close.

Decided, I reached up and curled my fingers around the deputy's tie, slowly tugging it and him toward me as I leaned forward and, hoping my bravado made me sound badass instead of ridiculous, whispered in his ear, "If I'm right, then you—"

Lina thrust her phone at my profile, announcing, "He's right. A toboggan is a hat."

I flinched back, turning to face her, but didn't release his tie. "What?"

"I internet-ed it. It's a sled *and* a hat. But the bet was that a toboggan *isn't* a hat, so you lose." She wiggled the phone, a smirk on her purple painted lips. "Guess you're getting that VIP tour of Mayberry."

**\*\* END SNEAK PEEK \*\***

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SNEAK PEEK: HOMECOMING KING, THREE  
KINGS BOOK #1

## CHAPTER 1

**\*Abby\***

“**T**o bang, or not to bang? That is the question.”

Frowning at the empty highball glass I’d just set down, I debated how to best respond to my friend’s noteworthy dilemma. “Are we talking about a guy? If so, I recommend making a pro / con list.”

“No. My hair.” She tugged on the tips of her tresses, tossing her bag to the stool at her left but not removing her jacket. “I love your bangs—*love love love* them.”

“Oh. Thank you.” I set a second highball glass next to the first and shoveled ice into both, checking my watch.

Kaylee was an hour early, not that I minded. She usually shuffled in ten minutes before closing on the nights she had custody of our car, already wearing her pajamas and a silk bonnet on her head. By then Walker, my boss, would be playing *Never Gonna Give You Up* by Rick Astley over the bar’s speakers. He had this automated to happen every night, four times in a row, even when he wasn’t here. It was his way of driving out the stragglers.

Currently, a herald of the season, *Run Run Rudolph* by Luke Bryan, reverberated from overhead even though Thanksgiving wasn’t for another week. But it was cold enough outside to see my breath, and little clouds with every exhale always made it feel like the holidays to me.

“I’m tired of this haircut.” Now Kaylee tossed her long hair over her shoulder, sliding into the stool adjacent to the one holding her bag.

I gave Kaylee’s hair a quick once-over. I liked her hair just fine, so I said, “I like your haircut.”

“Thank you. I like it, too.”

Closing my right eye, I peered at her through just the left. “If you like your hair, then why change it? Why change something if you like it?”

“Because I’ve had this haircut since law school.”

“You just graduated.” Giving the liquor my full attention, I poured two ounces of gin in one glass, then the other.

“No I didn’t.” Her tone told me she thought I was a nut. “I graduated three years ago.”

“Has it been that long?” *That can’t be right.* Three years? Had it already been three years?

“Yes. And just because something is working, doesn’t mean something else might not work better. How will I know what or who the best version of myself is if I never change? If I never try something new?”

“Or—and just hear me out—you could keep a haircut you already like and use this restless energy to try something extra. Enrich yo-self.” I reached for the tonic tap.

“Says the woman who has no concept of the passage of time and lives like a mole.”

“Hey, moles are blind. My vision?” I pointed to my eyes using my index and middle finger. “I have twenty-ten vision, baby.” I topped off the highball glasses with tonic from the spout.

Kaylee tapped her fingernails on the surface of the bar. “When was the last time you were up before two in the afternoon?”

“So, you’re saying I’m nocturnal? Moles aren’t nocturnal. If you’re going to compare me to a nocturnal animal, then use an owl.” I mimicked talons

with my fingers. “One of those big, badass owls, who see everything because they can turn their head around in a circle like that nice, misunderstood girl from *The Exorcist*. I am a third person narrator in a novel. I am—”

“You are not omniscient.” She giggled, reaching over the bar for the cherries.

I smacked her hand before she could touch the condiment dish. “Don’t do that. It’s unsanitary.”

Sitting back and sulking at my successful defense of the cherries, Kaylee crossed her arms. “So what should I do? Take an art class?” Her tone sounded crisp with disdain. “Next thing you’ll suggest is yoga. Why does everyone always suggest art and yoga?”

“Well, I’m not going to suggest freebasing if that’s what you were hoping for.” Spearing lime wedges with toothpicks, I tossed them in the glasses and carried the drinks to the server pickup just a few feet away. I caught Ingrid’s eye across the room to let her know the gin and tonics were ready for table six.

All current customers had been served, the gin and tonics were the last orders of the late-night rush. None of our regulars were in the habit of popping by in the middle of the week after midnight. Basically, unless an unexpected crowd ventured in from the cold for a night cap, I was more or less done for the evening.

“At least the suggestion of freebasing would’ve been unexpected.” Kaylee tapped her long nails against the top of the bar, glancing towards the office. “Is Mr. Sexy Bossman here? Wearing those real nice bootcut jeans and erotic flannel shirts?”

I squinted in warning and meandered back to her. “Walker is not here tonight, and you know he’s married.”

More than once, I’d had to pretend to be Walker’s daughter when customers became aggressively amorous. Technically, he wasn’t old enough to be my dad, but they always bought the ruse. There was just something about him that made folks tip big and lose their morals. Maybe it was his crooked

smile. Maybe it was his authentic Texas drawl. Even his big, fat wedding ring didn't seem to discourage them. It was like they took the platinum band as a challenge.

“Still married?” Her mouth dropped open. “To that scientist lady? How did that even happen? They make no sense. Forget it, maybe I will try freebasing.”

Noting that table four and seven were in the midst of packing up their things, I admitted, “I'll be honest, I'm not even sure what freebasing is.”

“You wouldn't. But I submit for your consideration: art, yoga, journaling, turmeric, veganism, and green tea—the sum total of suggestions for ‘trying something new’ that are socially acceptable because everyone has to be enlightened in order to pass the bar for self-actualization.” She lifted her eyes heavenward. “What if I don't want to be self-actualized? If I wanted to yoga, I would've yogaed already.”

I smiled at my friend's haughty rant and studied her. Kaylee's dark eyebrows were pulled together such that two deep wrinkles appeared between them, and her mouth slanted with a frown, but I thought she still looked amazing. Her long, light brown hair was down and styled in waves, makeup painted the contours of her face, and she wore a tight, white shirt beneath her jacket that showcased the confidence she had in the shape of her body.

Distracted by her attire, I asked, “Where did you come from? Work?”

“No. Home.” She reached over the bar, lightning fast this time, and plucked a cherry out of the condiment tray.

I narrowed my eyes on her. “I said, don't do that. It's unsanitary.”

“Whatever happened to going out for a beer? Watching a football game? *You* are my only normal friend,” Kaylee fretted, ignoring my scolding and popping the cherry into her mouth. She reserved the stem to twist between her fingers.

“Nash likes football.”

“Ex-boyfriends don’t count. Why must everyone insist that I live their version of my best life? Why, in this entire world, are you the only one of my female friends who isn’t suggesting quinoa and meditation? What if my best life is pulled pork and video games?”

“This is not true. You have plenty of female friends who are not of this opinion. Plus, you don’t like video games and I thought I was a mole-woman.” I loved Kaylee, but she had a tendency to get carried away by the emotion an idea inspired—like, say, rage—rather than look at all the facts. In short, she loved to react.

“It’s like they enjoy being miserable,” she continued raving like I hadn’t spoken, “and then being smug about the depths of their enlightened misery.”

Laughing, I leaned against the counter behind me. “Maybe these people are not miserable. Maybe they do sincerely love quinoa and meditation.”

“Impossible.” She dismissed my statement with a flick of her wrist.

“And maybe you should stop judging other people’s life choices.”

“You always say that. But one day, I’ll be a judge, and then it’ll be my job. I need to practice being judgmental now so I’ll be ready when the time comes.” Kaylee grinned.

“Okay, your *honor*, smug enlightened misery aside, I just don’t understand wanting to change something about yourself you already like. If you like your hair, don’t change it. If you don’t like your hair, have at it.”

The song switched to Frank Sinatra’s version of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* just as the bell over the front door jingled, announcing one or more new customers.

“Be with you in a sec.” I called without looking toward the sound, keeping my eyes on Kaylee as I reached for a few drink menus and cocktail napkins.

“See, I knew you’d say that, too.” She leaned forward, lowering her voice. “Your statements are unsurprising, and I am unsurprised by your unsurprisingness.”

“Gee. Thanks.”

“You’re in a rut, Abby.” Now her eyes turned soft. “You do the same thing every day. You wear the same thing every day. You eat the same thing every day. The only thing you change is the color of your nail polish and your hair cut.”

“And look how happy I am.” I glanced toward the door to count the newcomers, but found only a single, solitary man, already sitting in a stool at the far end of the bar closest to the door.

A huge, enormous, colossal mammoth of a man. He was so big and tall, the rest bar seemed to shrink in comparison.

Great. *Just . . . great.*

“Who is that? Is he a regular? Why do you look so irritated?” Kaylee glanced between my face and the man, keeping her tone hushed even though we were too far away for him to overhear our conversation.

Even so, I also lowered my voice. “It’s just, we’re less than an hour until closing and he’s not a regular. Convincing non-regulars to finish up and head out can be . . . annoying.” And he was big. And he was male.

This wasn’t always the case, but—in my experience, maybe nine times out of ten—a big, burly guy coming into the bar so close to closing didn’t typically want a quick drink.

Her gaze stayed on him, assessing. “He’s hot though, right?”

“Is he?” I grumbled, putting back all but one drink menu and one cocktail napkin.

“Uh, yeah. Very. And he looks familiar.” She placed her elbow on the bar, narrowing her eyes as she leaned an inch toward him, as though to see him better in the dim light. “I thought you had owl vision? Who does he look like?”

The truth was, other than noting this person’s size and gender, my vision was blurry with visions of my future and tonight’s likely unpleasant

conclusion: Ingrid and I coaxing him to leave, failing, and then having to either call Walker at home or the security company.

I didn't care if this stranger was objectively the hottest man in the world. After tonight I had three nights off. Anyone making me work late my last shift prior to three nights off was a blobfish.

"Whatever."

My voice must've hinted at my thoughts because Kaylee tore her attention from the man, her eyebrows raised expectantly. "Why do you always sound so irritated when there's a hot guy? Why do you dislike hot guys?"

"Hot guys have hot guy problems, which are like first world problems on steroids," I mumbled.

"Come on, everyone likes hot guys. It's biological. There's nothing you can do about it. You have no choice."

I would've argued with her, told her that I had nothing against hot guys in general, but she made a sound of protest before I could speak.

"Abby." Her eyes were full of sympathy. "Eventually you're going to have to date someone."

Ugh. *Not this again!*

"Do I, though?"

I'd tried dating. In fact, I'd even tried marriage. Everything about it was a disappointment, on so many levels. This topic was why Kaylee and I currently shared just a car instead of a car and an apartment.

"Yes." She looked so earnest and concerned. "You can't let one bad experience—what? Eight? Nine years ago?—dictate the rest of your life."

"Can't I, though?" I tucked a drink menu under my arm.

"You can't. You must get back on the horse."

"Must I, though?" I tapped my chin.

"Yes you—" Finally recognizing my attempt at deflection, she snapped her mouth shut and gave me a flat look. "Your dense barrier of sass notwithstanding, you know getting out there, putting yourself out there, would be healthy."

"Why can't you let me live my best life, Kaylee?" I tossed her words from earlier right back at her. "Maybe *my* best life is pulled pork and video games." Legit, I loved both pulled pork and video games.

She scowled but her words were teasing, "This is a good time to tell you, I, and others, consider your contentment with life a personal attack."

I laughed. "Here, let me go serve this hot guy real fast and then you can continue to beat this dead horse that you still insist I take for a ride."

Utilizing her cherry-snatching-ninja skills, she grabbed my wrist before I could move away. "Wait. Wait." Her eyes darted to the end of the bar and then back to me, whispering, "What if, instead, you flirt with the hot guy?" Kaylee indicated to the man with her chin, like I wouldn't know to whom she referred. The man's presence felt like it inhabited one tenth of the available space in the bar, there was no missing him.

I blinked at her. "Why would I do that?"

She seemed to search my face. "If you flirt with him, I won't bring up dating again for—for . . . a month."

Typical Kaylee. Life was one big bargaining session. She was only happy when she was negotiating or arguing.

"One flirting encounter buys me a month?"

"I promise." She drew a finger in the shape of a cross over her heart.

"Make it three months and we have a deal."

"Deal," she said quickly, her eyes brighter, happier, like my agreement was a victory for her. "Three months. And maybe unbutton the top button of your—"

I twisted my arm from her grip. "I can flirt without showing my boobs."

"Yeah, but you have really nice boobs and they deserved to be admired by someone other than me."

"So noted."

"And take off that ring!" she loud whispered.

Grunting, I did remove my grandmother's diamond ring from my third left finger, my shield against handsy and aggressive patrons. But I did not adjust the buttons of my shirt as I slipped the antique ring onto the middle finger of my right hand and walked down the long galley to the giant stranger. If he was perturbed by my lack of attentiveness thus far, he showed no outward signs. The man's eyes were on the screen of his phone, his arms braced on top of the bar, dress shirt shirtsleeves rolled up, broadcasting some seriously tantalizing forearm action.

*Hmm. Maybe I should've unbuttoned the first few buttons of my shirt.*

Exposed male forearms, in my opinion, were the equivalent of exposed female cleavage. Tits for that, *er, tat*. I meant, Tit for Tat. Right.

"Hey, what can I get you?" I asked, placing a drink menu and the square napkin on the bar while studying what I could see of his features.

Dark blue or dark gray shirt, the top three buttons undone, tie loose and slightly askew to one side, a bright white undershirt beneath. He'd pulled off a coat and it hung on the back of his stool. His hair was short on the sides, longer on the top, and either light brown or dark blonde. The color was impossible to tell given the dimness of the room and the reddish glow of the Christmas lights decorating the liquor shelf behind me.

He had a nice forehead, what I could see of it, but his face and focus remained fastened to the screen of his phone as he responded in a monotone, "Beer. Amber. Whatever you've got on tap, please."

"Sure thing. You want a pint or--"

"Pint is fine, thanks."

*Polite.* I'd say he had a nice voice except it remained monotone.

Stepping to the side, I grabbed a pint glass and positioned it under the tap of our most popular amber.

Somewhere to my right I heard the distinct and obnoxious sound of Kaylee clearing her throat, an *Uh—ahem—ahem—ahem*. Sliding my gaze to the side, I found her eyes wide with meaning. Sensing her dissatisfaction with my lack of flirting, I shrugged, like *What can I do?*

She waved an exasperated hand toward her chest, then the big guy, her eyebrows high arches, and then tugged at the neck of her already lowcut top, mouthing a word that looked like ‘buttons’ but it might have been ‘boobs.’

I pressed my lips together, removing my eyes from hers. Again, what could I do? The guy was into his phone way more than the idea of flirting with a female bartender. I wasn't currently, and never had been, in the habit of crowbarring men into noticing me. Live and let live, I say!

The glass filled, I placed it on the napkin near his elbow. "You want to start a tab?"

"Please." Still without looking up, he set down his phone, pulled out his wallet, and placed a credit card and his driver's license on top of the bar. I swiped up both, my brain telling me to look at his birthdate even as my eyes strayed to his photo and the name beneath it.

"Be right b—ba—ack." My mouth fell open as I stuttered, ending my sentence with a silent gasp, my eyes bolting to the stranger who wasn't a stranger at all. I gaped, stupefied, caught within a snare I'd fashioned years and years ago.

*Oh dear Lord in heaven.*

Rex.

I gaped. I gaped and gaped and gaped, stared and stared and stared, my mind reeling. *But how? And when? And how? And—*

“Uh ahem, uh ahem, *UH ahem.*”

Kaylee's obnoxious throat clearing snapped me out of my stupor and I quickly turned before Rex spotted my shock-trance. I stared blankly, not sure what to do next, not remembering whether I was coming or going, my breath tight in my lungs, my heart racing. *Hells bells.*

Rex McMurtry.

Yes, before you ask, he was *that* Rex McMurtry, the star defensive end for the Chicago Squalls, philanthropist, and sexiest man alive according to all the lists. Here. In my bar. Technically it wasn't my bar, but it kinda was my bar because I'd worked here since my junior year of high school as a dishwasher, then busser, then server, now bartender. Therefore, I liked to think of it as my bar.

Anyway. I wasn't dumbfounded because I'd just come face to forehead with a bonafide A-list celebrity. I was shooketh because I'd just come face to face with my elementary, and middle, high school crush. And it had been a brutal crush in the same way the cocktail of teenage hormones and inexperience are brutal.

Rex was the only boy's name I'd ever doodle next to mine in notebooks, the only guy I'd ever had sex dreams about—sorry if that's TMI, but here we are—and the sole reason I'd gone to football games or any other optional school related event.

I'd joined Girl Scouts in sixth grade because his mom was the troop leader. I'd started drinking coffee my freshman year so I could sit in the diner across from where he washed and detailed cars during his spring and summer after-school job. Recalling *now* about my actions *then* did not fill me with nostalgia.

I hadn't been boy-crazy. I'd been Rex-crazy.

And now, there he was.

**\*\* END SNEAK PEEK\*\***

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