

NATASHA
L. BLACK



my ~~fake~~
HUSBAND

MY FAKE HUSBAND

NATASHA L. BLACK

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Introduction

**She can take my last name.
As long as I can have our baby.**

Childhood crushes are fickle.
Yet this one is sweet and sticky like honey.
Trixie is in need of help, and I'm a certified hero.
Married to me, she can get the loan to buy the building her shop is in.

Our close quarters are combustible.
Flirting turns sexy.
I've got a bad crush on my wife.
Danger lights the fuse that smolders between us.
Fake married friends with benefits?
You could say it's complicated.

**So what happens when you really fall in love?
All I know is that I'm keeping her for good.**

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1

Trixie

“He’s a bum. I’ve told you a hundred times. You have to get out from under this guy,” Kiera said.

“Believe me, I’d like to. I just can’t afford it right now. He never listens to me,” I lamented.

“Are you eating? What are you eating? I can hear you.”

“Nothing,” I said, trying to swallow too-big pieces of BBQ chips.

“It’s crunchy. It’s chips isn’t it? God, I miss chips.”

“Sis, give up the Keto. I’m telling you, pork rinds are bad news. They are not better for you than these sweet ass barbecue chips I have here. Totally wholesome. Made from potatoes, not pig fat.”

“Don’t disrespect pig fat. Bacon is excellent,” she protested.

“Yes, it is, but it’s not everything,” I told her.

“I miss potatoes so much. Sometimes I lay awake and think about how much I’d like to have, like, a real burger with a bun and some fries. Not just a big slab of meat with more meat on the side.”

“You’re allowed to have vegetables,” I said.

“I know, but vegetables suck. All the good ones are potatoes.”

“That’s it. For your birthday I’m getting you a five-pound bag of Idahos.”

“You bitch. I’d probably eat one raw,” she said. I laughed.

“What am I going to do about this pipe? I’ve looked it up on YouTube and tried to fix it myself. Six different ways. Nothing works. It’s been leaking for months and that rat bastard Jimmy won’t call me back.”

“He knows you want him to live up to his lease agreement and have the plumbing fixed before you drown in your own flower shop. So of course he’s not answering you.”

“You have a point,” I sighed.

“Tell me again why you can’t just buy the building?”

“Um, I don’t have a trust fund. It will cost thousands of dollars to fix the

plumbing, plus the cost of the building and the taxes on it. I'm doing fine with the shop, and I make my house payments on time, but I just got my industrial cooler paid off last year. I don't have enough collateral for the bank to take a chance on me. I'm a small business owner in a small town. And I'm a woman. Unmarried," I smirked to myself.

"So if you were an unmarried man with a business they'd be like, look how dedicated he is to his work, he's going to be successful, let's give him the loan? Once he's established, he'll start a family. But with you it's like, she's wasting those ovaries working all the time, and she's not getting any younger. I know."

"Yeah. And my ovaries are over here, creaking with age, mumbling about how I'm too busy to even go out with anyone."

"You could always deliver flowers to the fire station by mistake," Kiera teased.

"That's a stupid mistake. The fire department is all men. Who sends flowers to a guy? I mean, not in a sexist way, but we are in rural North Carolina. It's not like traditional masculinity isn't loud and proud."

"You're missing the point—stay with me here. You can be like, 'oh, I must've written the address down wrong, silly me! Why, Damon, I'd forgotten you worked here. How have you been?'"

"You're doing a stupid high-pitched voice. I do not sound like that," I said.

"You so do. Besides, he's still single, right?"

'Yeah. I can't figure out why. I mean, look at him. Tall, great body, gorgeous smile—he's a fireman, and he coaches little league. His resume says boyfriend material, but that grin says *let's do it in the truck right now.*"

"So that's your kink? Doing it in his truck? Honey, he was a hound dog in high school, but I think he probably has better tricks than pickup truck sex by now. Why won't you just ask him out?"

"Kiera, I realize you're married and don't remember having to date. In fact, you never had to date as an adult with a job and responsibilities and the horror of having to look him in the eye every time you see him in town the rest of your life if he says no and that he thinks of me as a friend or more likely that he doesn't think of me at all," I blurted out.

"Well, that's a lot. Listen to me, Tig," I smiled when she used my childhood nickname. "I know he's good-looking, and he's a good guy. But he's no better than you."

“I never wanted to be another one in a long list of—conquests?” I asked. “Is that what they’re called?”

“Fuck buddies,” my little sister supplied. “Hook-ups. Whatever. If you ask him out, don’t say conquest, it’s so uptight.”

“I’m not offering to be Damon Vance’s,” I dropped my voice to a whisper even though I was alone, “*fuck buddy.*”

“Come on! Have some fun. Also, whoever said the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach didn’t know the truth.”

“I’m so afraid of what you’re going to say right now.”

“His dick. That’s the way to his heart. I knew this at nineteen! How do you not know this?”

“If you try to tell me dirty sex things you did to my brother-in-law when you were a teenager, I’m going to puke in the sink. Please stop. And the only man I’m dealing with right now is Jimmy the landlord.”

“That is absolutely no fun. Damon would be way more fun. You know he would be.”

“Yes, he’d be fun. He’s a fun person and a good guy, but he’s not for me. I want more than a hook up with a hot fireman.”

“If you have the option of a hookup with a hot fireman, take it. I would if I wasn’t, you know, married till death do us part,” she sighed. “I really want some chips.”

“I love you. Goodbye,” I said, hanging up.

How had a call with my sister, who I missed so much since she moved to Savannah, end up being all about Damon Vance? We grew up in the same little town, our moms were friends, and he was always nice, but he was older, and we didn’t know each other, not really. I knew the way his stubble glinted with a flicker of blonde in the auburn when he was overdue for a shave. I knew that he was the damn hottest specimen of man God ever put on this earth. I also knew that he was a playboy.

Women threw themselves at him. I’d seen it happen in a bar, at the diner, once at the public library downtown. They went overboard with the flirting and asking him to help with a button or a bracelet or reaching something off a shelf, and then they touched him as if by accident. He was like woman catnip. I wasn’t about to try to compete with that or become part of that crowd. I sighed out loud and the bell on my door jingled. I turned and nearly choked when I saw the man himself.

As if I’d conjured him up, Damon stood in front of me. Six foot three,

broad and strong, exactly the kind of firefighter that they put on calendars for fundraisers. He was in jeans and a T-shirt, nothing fancy, no sexy uniform and hat or anything. But he was plenty hot enough to make me fumble around with my cell phone, which I was still holding in my hand while I had been thinking about him. I knew color rushed to my cheeks. I felt warm and flustered around him.

“Hi,” I said, my voice going chirpy.

“Good to see you Trixie,” he said. “How’s the flower business?”

“Oh, it’s—blooming,” I said and then put my face in my hands. “Why did I say that? Ugh! It’s fine. The flower business is fine and not completely cheesy like what I just said. I—guess I’m tired or something. I usually answer questions like a normal person.”

I was babbling like a thirteen-year-old faced with her crush. Then he smiled at me kindly.

“You were probably real busy when I came in, and I just startled you is all. Now I was hoping you could help me pick out some flowers for my little sister. Laura’s having a baby.”

“That’s great! Her and Brody make a real cute couple,” I said.

He smiled again. “Yeah, they really are. It’s super weird still that my best friend is married to my little sister, but they really are happy. So I’m happy. I just want to show them that.”

“Well, I seem to recall ‘say it with flowers’ was a slogan way back when. You can’t go wrong with roses, but if they seem too serious, daisies are a sweet choice.”

“Roses do seem a little formal,” he said, “I never thought about it that way, but I always thought roses were for lovers.”

“And funerals,” I pointed out. “Sorry. I don’t know why I don’t have a filter today. It’s just that a lot of people order roses for casket arrangements—partly because they symbolize love and partly because they’re showy and expensive.” I said. Why did I keep talking? Why?

“If you don’t mind my saying so, you’re awful cute when you’re embarrassed,” he said with a wink.

Oh my God. Damon said I was cute and winked at me. I wanted to do a fan girl squeal like a total moron, but I’d save that for later. I was shocked that I managed to keep from humiliating myself further and just smiled at him a little shyly.

“So embarrassment’s a big turn-on for you?” I blurted out.

Jesus. Why? Why did I go there? I was so awkward that I wished there was a Socializing Police that could come by and shoot me with a tranquilizer dart to put me out of my misery.

He grinned, looking a little bashful himself, "I didn't mean it like that," he said. He was doing his adorable Southern gentlemen routine now.

"I'm sorry. I cannot be held responsible for what I do with my mouth today."

His eyebrows shot up.

"What comes *out* of my mouth, I mean. I won't blame you if you just turn around and walk out, I swear. Damon, I'm sorry." I was blushing red as a beet, and I knew it.

This was why I never had a chance in hell with the man. I acted like a fool every time he spoke to me, always had. It was like my IQ fell out or something. I was so embarrassed I wanted to crouch down and hide behind the counter with the ribbon. Maybe if I did that, he'd just go away. I was about ready to burst into humiliated tears.

Then he laughed. He had such a good laugh. It vibrated through me and made me feel less miserable.

"I haven't had a laugh like that in a good few weeks, Trixie. I'm sure glad I came in here today. There's nobody who makes me smile like you do, I swear."

I felt myself just glow when he said that. Even if it was something you'd say to make a really awkward kid sister feel better, I was going to take the compliment with more grace than I'd done anything else thus far.

"Thank you, Damon. That's kind of you since I'm making an idiot of myself today."

"You're not an idiot," he said, and his handsome face, those aqua blue eyes looked so sincere that I started to melt under that gaze. "You've got a real way of making people comfortable. I bet that's part of why your shop is doing so well. That, and your flowers are almost as pretty as you are."

I leaned on the counter, placing me about four inches away from where he leaned on the counter. I blinked fast, trying to absorb the impact of Damon saying I was pretty. I didn't preen or touch my hair. I just looked him square in his eyes and wished he'd kiss me when the fact was it crossed my mind that he was close enough that he could. I could feel the warmth coming off his skin, but it made me shiver for some reason. A few seconds of silence, and it was like electricity was zinging around between us like lines of

lightning trailing all over the shop. I wasn't sure if that was chemistry or if I was just that attracted to him.

I was close enough I could see that he'd shaved, that his perfect square jaw was smooth. His eyes looked tired, I thought. There was tightness at the corner of his mouth that I wanted to smooth away. I thought wildly of touching him, pressing my fingertip to the corner of his mouth, maybe leaning closer to see if he'd kiss me. Thirty seconds of eye contact and the man could melt my panties right off. As it was, I shifted back a little, broke the moment off, my thighs pressed together.

"So can I get you some daisies for Laura?"

"That'd be real nice," he said.

"It was nice of you to come get flowers here when the grocery store's got them right by the checkout. I get a lot of funerals and some weddings, Valentine's Day, but most people, they just buy the ten-dollar mixed bouquet when they're getting ground beef and toilet paper," I said.

"That doesn't seem very special. If you're gonna say it with flowers that kind of says, 'I'm lazy.' I don't buy my beer at the grocery store because I want something good. I go down to the liquor store because it's worth the trouble. Just like this."

"So my flowers are like good beer," I said wryly.

"You could say that. But I stand by what I said earlier. They're just about as pretty as you are."

"I—I'm not great with compliments. Or with talking to people apparently. But thank you."

"No need to thank me. I'm not the one that made your face that way. I just pointed out the obvious. You probably hear it all the time."

"Not really, no. I mean, I was an awfully awkward kid."

"I might remember you running around with skinned knees and a ponytail a long time ago," he said with a smile that was almost fond. "But that's been a few years. You had that killer smile. You still do," he laughed.

I thought he was so adorable I could die. Also, if fourteen-year-old me had known he even looked at me twice I would've died of a heart attack. I blinked at him, needing to change the subject before I totally geeked out.

"I'm glad your dad is doing better. My mom said that your mom told her his new medicine was really helping. I know he's had a hard time."

"Yeah. It's been a big help. And those flowers you sent when he was in the hospital were real nice. And my mom really liked that wax melting thing

you sent along with it.”

“I’m glad. Hospitals always smell bad, and you can’t burn a candle cause of the oxygen, so those wax warmers let you have a little cinnamon smell to make it more homey.”

“Well she uses it all the time at home. I got excited the other day, thought there was apple pie. Fooled me, too,” he said, shaking his head.

I wrapped a bunch of daisies in tissue paper and passed him a card that said congratulations. He signed it and then paid me the total.

“I bet she’ll really like these,” I said. “It’s sweet of you to do that for your sister.”

“Thanks for your help. You have a good day,” he said. Then he gave me the panty-melting smile one more time and left.

I sagged against the counter and wondered if I wanted a cigarette or a new vibrator after that encounter. Maybe both.

2

Damon

The diner was always packed on Saturday morning. Rachel's pies were excellent, but her pastries were incredible. Her apple Danish was legendary, and if you didn't go early, you'd miss out on them.

So Brody and I drank our coffee and waited for the final batch to come out of the oven. We had already eaten our eggs and sausage, and both of us were usually in a hurry. Him because he wanted to get home to my sister, and me because I had a shift at the fire station or I was going to work out or check in on my parents. But we had decided to loiter until we could score those Danishes this time.

"You think we'll find somebody good enough to replace the Gibbs kid that moved last month?"

"Yeah. He was a great shortstop, but there are kids around here we can teach to do a good job."

"I hated to lose him, but when his dad got that new job in Overton—"

"We'll have to play against him. You know he'll play in Overton," I said.

"They have travel ball. He'll probably do that instead of Little League."

"That costs a fortune. Hope Dad got a good job," I said.

"Our lineup's looking strong though, going into the season."

"When are you thinking to do tryouts?"

"Couple weeks maybe, depends on the weather. If it stays clear," Brody said.

"In a few years we'll be coaching your kid," I said, taking a sip of coffee.

"It's crazy," he said, but he was smiling. "So when you gonna settle down? Give our baby some cousins?"

I shrugged, "I guess I just never found the right girl."

"You've sure tried a lot of them on to see if they're the right one," he chuckled.

"I'm glad for you guys, really," I said, "but it's not for everyone."

“You don’t want a family?”

“Sure I do. But with the right person. Not just whoever’s nearby,” I said.

Then I lost my train of thought. Trixie walked into the diner and went right to the register. Rachel waited on her, scooped a hot Danish into a paper sack and handed it to her. My mouth watered, but not from the sight of fresh pastries.

She was petite but curvy, her dark hair rippling glossy over her shoulders and halfway down her back. She and Rachel chatted. Something made her laugh, and even in the crowd, I could pick out her giggle. She had a great laugh, and I felt a rush of just wanting to be close to her. She took her coffee, her bag, and left. My eyes followed her all the way to the door. She never looked up, never waved or even saw me. Not that it mattered. We didn’t exactly travel in the same circles even though our moms were very close. I saw her a lot growing up, but years had gone by as we’d hit adulthood. Until I went in the flower shop the other day, I had only seen her in passing. Like this. I always saw her, always took notice.

Startled, I looked at Brody, who had just flung a sugar packet at me.

“What?” I said.

“You were staring. No one over the age of thirteen should be that obvious,” he laughed.

“Staring? I was watching to see if Rachel brought out the rest of the Danishes. Obviously.”

“Bullshit. You should ask her out already. You’ve only been mooning over her for years.”

“I am a firefighter. I do not moon,” I said hotly.

“You were staring at her ass like it was—”

“Shut up,” I said.

“Why don’t you ask her out? She’d say yes. You’re not the only one who stares. I’ve seen her watching you, too.”

“Bro, my mom and her mom go way back. So if I want my mom all up in my business, that’s one sure way to get her attention. If I ever considered asking Trixie out, my mom would be all over it. Trust me, it’s better left alone.”

“If you say so. But it doesn’t look like you’re leaving well enough alone. I saw where the flowers came from, the ones Laura liked so much.”

“What? Flowers come from flower shops,” I said.

“Right,” he said, but his look said ‘bullshit.’

The fact was, I liked her. I always had. I wasn't pining away or anything, but she was beautiful and voluptuous, and I'd imagined having her in my arms more than once over the years. Still, I was reluctant to get involved with her. If we did get together, our families would expect us to have a serious relationship. Then if it didn't work out, both families would be uncomfortable around each other. I could conceivably ruin my mom's lifelong friendship with Trixie's mother. They'd take sides, and it would turn out messy and unpleasant. So I could keep my recurring fantasies about Trixie to myself and avoid complications.

3

Trixie

When I unlocked the back door to the shop, dragging in early and half asleep to get a start on the arrangements for Allie Greer's bridal shower, I heard a slosh. As I pushed the door open, water slid out onto my shoes. I flipped on the light to see my entire shop and workroom standing in three inches of water.

"Shit," I said flatly. I felt—angry, defeated, miserable. I dialed Nicole's number.

"Can I borrow your wet vac?"

"Sure, what for?"

"The three inches or so of water flooding my shop right now," I said, my voice shaky.

"It's just a small wet vac. Do we need to rent one?"

"I'll head down to the hardware store and see what they've got," I said, "Thanks."

I waded through the mess, stopped to glare at my just-paid-off walk-in cooler that had shorted out and died as a result of the flooding, and found the water shutoff in the back. I cranked it and then leaned my forehead against the pipe. I slogged back through to the door, climbed in my car, legs and feet soaking wet, and drove to the hardware store and rented the two biggest shop vacs they had. I barely wedged them into my little car and drove back to the shop. By then Nicole and Michelle were waiting outside, both gamely carrying a bucket, towels, and Nicole's tiny wet vac. I wrestled the two vacuums to the door and set them down. Then I threw my arms around my best friends.

"I love you guys," I said, trying not to snifle. "I'm sorry this is such a mess. I don't know what—"

"Yeah, yeah, you're lucky to have us," Nicole said, hugging me back. "Let's get in there and get you cleaned up."

“Exactly,” Michelle added. “We got this. Armed with towels and a giant rental vacuum, Let’s do this.”

I managed a wavering smile because I love my friends and they were trying so hard to be funny and sweet about this mess.

We got to work, and I kept dialing Jimmy the useless bastard. His outgoing voicemail message kept announcing to me that he was out of town and would return calls beginning the twentieth—about ten days from now. While flowers were decaying to wilted slime in my destroyed cooler. I heaved the clammy wet vac to the door and dumped the reservoir full of nasty water outside. I was wet and cold and dirty and pissed.

I called another plumber. The first three, including one I used to babysit, goddammit, refused to extend thousands of dollars of credit to me for the necessary repairs. My parents didn’t have that kind of money, and I didn’t have that kind of limit on my business charge card. The urgency drained out of me as we vacuumed, emptied, mopped and cleaned for hours. There was not going to be a quick fix that got me back up and running in a few days. No one was going to help me because I couldn’t afford it. I thought bitterly that I wished one of my cousins had grown up to be a plumber. A Baptist preacher was nice to have around, but praying over the pipes wasn’t going to help much in the time frame I needed it.

Nicole and Michelle kept up a cheerful, wisecracking chatter for a while trying to keep my spirits up, but it was pretty hopeless. I sent Michelle to my house and she brought us back diet sodas and dry clothes and the last three towels I had clean. We changed and I took them for sandwiches at the deli to say thank you.

“I can’t thank you enough for what you did to help me. I know you took time off and worked hard and did more than most friends would have done. I love you and I owe you big time.”

“Don’t mention it. So, what’s the plan? Did the last Overton plumber tell you no?” Michelle asked.

“Yeah. I don’t blame him. It’s not like anybody wants to end up hung with the cost of parts and labor on a huge job when there’s not a guarantee I can pay him back quickly. The fact is, all I can think of is two options.”

“Please say winning the lottery isn’t your plan,” Nicole said.

“No,” I rolled my eyes. “I either have to try to sell my house really quickly to get out from under the mortgage payment and then clear out the little storage room over the shop and live there—it has a bathroom, I think. I

mean, it's ancient and probably needs plumbing repairs too, ironically, but it's a possibility."

"No!" Nicole said. "You love your little house! What about a roommate?"

"It's a one bedroom. Nobody's going to pay to sleep on an IKEA loveseat and share my bathroom."

"Well, okay, what about renting out the apartment over the shop?"

"It's an idea, but I'd have to clear it out and clean it up and get the plumbing fixed, which is more money I don't have right now. And it wouldn't generate enough income to pay for the repairs. The only other choice is to give up the shop. Use the insurance money from the cooler—thank God I insured it—to pay the bills on materials I had ordered ahead and to pay off my lease early. Then I go get a job somewhere."

Despair leaked out in my voice and Nicole put her arm around me.

"No. I forbid it. You love your shop and it's your dream. You're a wonderful floral designer and you don't deserve to lose it all over Jimmy the Rat Bastard going on vacation to Florida at a bad time. We'll figure this out."

I hugged her and shook my head.

"Go take a hot shower and we'll talk later," Michelle said.

"What about your original plan?" Nicole asked. "You wanted to buy the building. That way you could take care of it and this kind of crap wouldn't happen all the time. The repairs wouldn't go undone until there's a disaster."

"Well, that's the dream, Nic," I said. "It would solve the problem of having to spend half my time begging my landlord to live up to the terms of my lease. But I can't get a loan for the building without having the plumbing fixed. The bank won't insure it."

"Which idea feels right?" Michelle said.

"Well, the one where I buy the building and take control and make things happen," I said. "But it's a pipe dream. Oh—see what I did there? Pipe." I dropped my head onto the table.

"Maybe it's not," Nicole said. "There's got to be a way to make that work. So do what Michelle said. Go take a hot shower and we'll talk."

"That's what I want to do. I'm glad you reminded me," I said. "Maybe after a shower I'll feel human enough to figure it out."

"Girl, of course you will."

"Thank you for everything."

I hugged them and went home. I took the longest hot shower I could stand

and climbed back into bed. I slept on and off, dreaming alternately of buying the building and making my business a huge success and losing it all and having to shrink wrap meat at the grocery store to pay my bills.

4

Damon

Sunday night, a couple of the guys from the station and I went out for drinks. We needed to play some darts and wind down after a busy weekend shift. There had been a gas leak out in one of the old farmhouses by the county line and a grease fire at the convenience store kitchen, both more of a mess and a headache than a danger. We walked in and felt the country music rolling over us and the noise of laughter, the smell of beer and wings. I took a deep breath, loving every minute of it.

I saw Trixie and her friends at a table up front near the bar. She looked down, and I remembered my mom had told me she had a plumbing disaster a couple days ago, some flooding or something. I would've thought it'd be cleaned up and fixed by now but something about the way she looked told me there was more to it. I broke off from my group and went to tell her I was sorry she had a setback. After all, our moms were close, and it was a small town. It wasn't like gossip didn't get around faster than head lice.

"Hey," I said, taking the empty chair beside her. "I heard you had some trouble down at the shop. I was sorry to hear it."

Trixie looked up at me, her face startled. Those big brown eyes so sorrowful that I had to clench my hands into fists to keep from pulling her into my arms. *Baby, I've got you. It's gonna be okay*, is what I wanted to tell her. I wanted to kiss the top of that head, dark silky hair tucked in under my chin. Why would I think that? Why would I think about calling her baby? I shook my head at how ridiculous I was being.

"Thanks," she said, her cheeks flushing bright pink.

"Is everything okay now?" I asked.

The two other women there, Nicole Renner, our City Planner and Michelle from the library, shook their heads emphatically. Trixie picked up her drink, which looked like a screwdriver, and took a sip. She licked her lips and shook her head as well.

“It’s complicated.”

“Tell me if I’m outta line asking, but wasn’t it just a burst pipe?”

“Yes, and I don’t care if you ask. I mean, everybody knows everybody around here. Why not spread the joy?” she said, and her voice was flat and bitter.

I waved the other guys over with the beers and they joined us at the table. Josh started talking to Michelle about the sci-fi series they were reading for book club at the library, and they teased Kurt because he didn’t read. He proudly announced he hadn’t read a book since high school, which only an idiot would say to a librarian, so we all laughed. Michelle started quizzing him about shows he liked to watch and looking like a doctor trying to solve a mysterious symptom. That man would leave with a reading list as long as his arm, I knew.

“Make him read *Outlander*. God, those books are amazing,” Trixie piped up.

“The show is amazing,” Nicole corrected. “Sam Heughan isn’t in the books. Although if he did the audiobooks, I’d listen the shit out of those.”

“You’d need backup batteries,” Trixie said.

“Rechargeable. It’s the wave of the future. All you need is a USB port,” Nicole said, wagging her eyebrows.

“USB port? Is that what the kids are calling it these days?” I joked.

Trixie smiled at me. A real smile, and it felt like I’d been hit in the head. It was like being knocked sideways and not knowing which way is up. Dizzied by her smile, I wanted another one.

“It’s good to see you smile.”

“It feels good. I’ve had a rough couple days,” she admitted.

“Have you eaten?”

“Not yet. We may get something in a minute,” she said.

I waved a waitress over and ordered some pizzas and wings. I drank my beer and we all talked, trying to cheer her up. Trixie dove for the Hawaiian pizza when the food came, scooping two slices onto her plate, dripping with melted cheese. I watched her take a bite even though it was obviously too hot from the oven. She took a bite, fanned her mouth, eyes watering, and I passed her my beer. She took a drink and swallowed, blinking a lot.

“Needs to cool off a little?” I teased. She reached into Nicole’s water, fished out an ice cube and sucked on it. I lost my ability to tease or do anything but wish—for things I couldn’t have.

Her mom is best friends with my mom. She's off-limits. She's just sucking an ice cube because she burned her tongue with food, not because she wants to look like a porn reel and make me so fucking hard I can't breathe. These pants are going to strangle me. A drop of water melted off the square ice cube and slipped down onto her lower lip and trailed onto her chin.

My hand shot out without permission from me and wiped away the drop of cold water so close to the corner of her mouth. Just that slight touch undid me. I couldn't focus my damn eyes. I felt helpless and ablaze from that touch. I pulled my hand back as she looked at me.

"Yeah, I know, I need a bib, right?" she said, making light of it.

I wanted to make a flippant remark, be funny and casual, but I cleared my throat loudly, so loud she jumped a little. Because between the way my breath was sawing in and out from watching her with the ice cube and the fact that my dick was trying to take over the world with the worst hard-on I'd had since high school, I had just cleared my throat so hard it sounded like someone trying to shove a dinosaur bone down a garbage disposal. Josh laughed.

"You should hear him snore. It's a legend at the station."

"Yeah," Kurt said, "rattles the windows. You gotta make sure you sleep close to the fire alarm in case there's an emergency because his snoring could drown out a siren."

"Remind me never to take you with me if I'm trying to pick up a woman," I said dryly to Kurt. "You are a shitty wingman."

"Are you trying to pick me up?" Trixie asked.

I swear to God, she licked her bottom lip, just the tip of her tongue showing at the corner of her mouth. I wanted to capture it, to cover her mouth with mine. I'd never sat this close to her and talked since we were grown, and the chemistry was hot as hell. I could flirt with her all night. I could do a lot of things with her all night.

"If I was, Kurt would've ruined it by now," I said lightly, "besides, my mom would kill me."

"Still afraid of your mom?" Josh asked.

"Have you met my mom?" I shot back, "she'd kill me and make it look like an accident."

"She would not," Trixie said. "She'd make you disappear and say you ran off with some girl. Then she'd donate all your stuff to the church clothes closet for the needy. Meanwhile, your remains are neatly labeled in the

basement.”

I laughed, “She does have everything really organized there. Seriously, she puts everything in those plastic containers and then makes cutesy labels with her Cricut so it’s easy to find.”

“Damon, box 1, head and torso,” Trixie said, and laughed. It was so good to hear her laugh. Even if she was, oddly enough, laughing about my hypothetical dismemberment.

“You have a dark sense of humor,” I said.

“You have no idea,” Michelle put in. “She’s hilarious, but then you wonder if maybe she’s plotting your death, too.”

“I’m not plotting your death,” Trixie said balefully. “I’m way smarter than that. I’d never make it so obvious or joke around about stuff like that. Give me a little credit. I mean, if I was a suspect, nobody would hire me to do the funeral flowers, so that’s just bad for business.”

I whooped at that, and ate another slice of pizza. We had another round of drinks and then played some darts. Nicole kicked everyone’s ass at darts like it was nothing, and we all groaned and gave her hell about it. I realized about halfway through the evening what a good time I was having, how sitting with the girls had made unwinding with a beer a lot better than if I’d just stayed with those two knuckleheads from work. If it was painful to be this close to Trixie, to want her so much, to feel the simmering, low-level attraction I’d felt for years turn into a supernova in one night, it was worth it to make her smile and laugh when she had been so down.

5

Trixie

I probably ate half a pizza, and I didn't even care. A screwdriver and then some lemonade later, I felt better. Not that I had any new options, but I no longer felt like everything was horrible. After the fun of seeing Nicole beat all the guys at darts because they had no idea she was a badass, I sat down and picked the cheese off another piece of pizza. Zack and Cody or Drake and Josh or whatever the hell the firemen's names were—something that sounded like it came off an old Disney channel show—left. When I got back from the bathroom, Nicole and Michelle had offered to wait for me, but I'd waved them off so they took off as well. I surveyed the damage and sat back down to finish my lemonade. I'd had one drink about three hours and half a pizza ago, so I was sober. I didn't need a ride and didn't need to hurry. It wasn't like I had a shop to open in the morning. If I felt a little glum about being deserted at the bar, it only fit in with everything else going on.

Then Damon came and sat next to me again. "Where'd they all go? Have we been ditched?"

"Looks like it," I said, sipping my lemonade.

"You want a drink?"

"I've got one."

"A real one?"

I shook my head.

I was losing the power of speech because he was too close to me. *Take me home. Put your mouth on mine, take my clothes off, make me forget everything that's making me miserable right now. Give me one night. I won't tell anyone. I don't care if that makes me just another girl who threw herself at you. You'll forget, but I won't.* I felt craven, hungry for him.

"Hey, you look like you're feeling down again," he said.

He touched my chin with one finger, tipped my head up so I met his eyes. Those wild, aquamarine eyes that seemed like something a gorgeous vampire

in a movie would have, a hypnotic, beautiful blue-green gaze.

“Your eyes are insane,” I said. “I’m not even drunk, I just always thought so.”

“Is that a compliment? Is insane a good thing?”

“Definitely,” I confirmed, nodding emphatically, “your eyes are definitely insane in the good way.”

“Thank you. Since we’re saying what we’ve always thought, I love your hair.”

“What?”

“It’s glossy and dark. I like when it’s down over your shoulders,” he said. Then he reached out and lifted my hair, pushed it behind my shoulder and ran his hand down it. What were we doing? Was this the next stage of flirting? The part where it felt like I was going to hyperventilate because he gave me a compliment and touched my hair?

I felt the weight of his gaze, the yearning for more of his touch as he gently ran the tip of his finger down the side of my neck. I could feel the ghost of his touch like it had left a path on my skin, blazed a trail that would show in the mirror if I looked. I knew my cheeks would be stained red from it anyhow. My whole body felt alight and consumed by heat from the way he looked at me. Being the focus of his attention was dizzying, and I wasn’t sure I didn’t want to hide after all. Maybe it was easier not to be noticed, to be the awkward one he didn’t pay attention to.

This was nothing. He touched my neck. His fingers barely skated along my skin before the whisper of a touch was gone. My face flamed, and I had to look away.

“Thanks for sitting with us tonight. It helped take my mind off things,” I said.

“Still feeling down?” he asked, concern in his voice.

I lifted one shoulder in a half-hearted shrug, “I’m okay.”

“Listen, what are your options?”

“Um, let’s see... I can magically motivate my landlord to repair the thousands of dollars of plumbing damage and then have the place professionally cleaned and get my insurance to replace the ruined cooler and take a loss on the flowers I had in stock and on order. Or I can hope to score the jackpot on a scratch-off lotto ticket and buy my building. I mean, that was my goal—buying it, not playing the lottery. I’ve got a little saved, but not much. I can’t get a loan at this point, because I can’t use my house for

collateral. I've got a mortgage on it."

I paused, "I don't have anything of value I can sell. I bought my car used and that was eight years ago. I don't think it's legal to sell a kidney," I gave a bitter laugh.

"So all you need is collateral?"

"Yeah, that's all," I said sarcastically. "Which is like saying all I need is a long-lost rich uncle to leave me a fortune or all I need is my rat bastard landlord to feel generous and give me the building for my birthday. Pretty damn impossible."

"What's the purchase price? I mean, I could lend you the money myself."

"No. That's very sweet of you, but I'm not borrowing money from you. What if something happened and I couldn't pay you back?"

"You mean what if you suddenly became a very different person and started racking up credit card debt with all your tropical vacations and spray tans and flashy jewelry? You have an eight-year-old used car and a one-bedroom house. You're at that shop every waking hour and you're one of the most responsible people I know."

"Look, it's a nice thought, but no thank you. I wouldn't be comfortable doing that. And it's not your job to solve all my problems. But thank you for offering," I said, flustered, wanting to run out the door and hide. He offered to loan me the money? Who does that?

"Not all your problems. Just the financial one. What other problems do you have?"

"Um, let's see. My car has an oil leak. My mom wanted me to get married like two years ago. I can't find my garage door opener. That's about it."

"Trixie," he said. For one second, I didn't hate my name like I always had. "For one thing, I can take a look at the oil leak and probably fix it for you. My house is paid off. I inherited it free and clear from my grandpa. I've never had a house payment so I have a lot of savings. I can help you out. "

"Really? Then why don't you just marry me and find my garage door opener while you're at it?" I joked.

"Okay," he said without hesitation.

Wait. What the hell just happened?

6

Damon

We stared at each other like we'd just been in an accident and didn't know quite what had happened.

She'd jokingly proposed, and I'd readily accepted. That was unexpected, to say the least. I knew she was joking. I registered her sarcasm even as she said it. But I still said okay. What did that mean?

Trixie shook her head. "I was just kidding, Damon."

I glanced down at the table, at her hand, pale and small. I felt a shift, some strange urge to protect her. I covered her hand with mine. As soon as I did, I felt a jolt like electricity, a kick in my blood from the contact. I held her cold hand in mine, warmed it. She was holding my hand back, her fingers laced through mine. I kept looking at them, the way my tanned, work-roughened skin looked against her paler, softer hand. Her eyes met mine, and I could tell she felt the same shock that I had.

I pulled my hand away. "Why not? We're consenting adults. If we were married, you could use my house as collateral to secure the loan. We could use some of my savings for the down payment."

"No way. This is crazy," she said, eyes narrowed. "Why would you do that? Why would anyone do that? Just offer to freaking marry someone so they could get a loan and save their business?"

"It wouldn't have to be a real marriage. Just—like a marriage of convenience. People married for property all the time back in the day. It wouldn't be forever—I don't expect you to like, bear me five healthy sons or some archaic shit like that. We'd just stay married until you had the loan for the building and the repairs and got back on your feet. It's not like you wouldn't make the payments on the loan. I trust you. You're not going to get my house repossessed or something."

"Why, Damon?" she asked again, and I heard her voice crack.

"I don't know. Maybe because I had a house given to me—don't get me

wrong, Laura inherited Grandad's Caddy and sold it to buy a new car and stuff—but not everybody gets that handed to them. It's like I had a head start, so I can comfortably help someone else out. You're in a bind, and it isn't any trouble to—”

“It isn't any trouble to *marry* me?” she asked. “Nope. No way. Giving me a ride home, that's no trouble, or picking up a gallon of milk for your mom is no trouble. Marriage—as in joined in legal wedlock, plus putting up your house as collateral to save my business—that's a lot of trouble. No one is that nice, and there's no way you have, like, middle-class guilt or something.”

I was losing her, and I wanted to keep fighting. “It might be fun; did you think of that? I get to help out a friend, probably get brownie points with my mom...”

“Oh, and I'm sure our moms would totally understand our in-name-only marriage to get me a business loan, Damon. This is insane.”

“A little, but all my best ideas are.”

She just looked at me, her mouth open, her head shaking from side to side.

“Trixie, let me help you.”

She sighed and shook her head again. “I'll think about it.”

“Really? Or are you just trying to humor me?”

“This is a crazy idea,” she stated.

I nodded my head. “I know.”

“Like completely insane. Like certifiable.”

“Sounds like me,” I teased.

“I don't know, Damon,” she hesitated.

Just like that I was holding her hand again, “Let me help you, Trix,” I said.

She met my eyes and all the air whooshed out of her lungs like I'd taken her breath away. She gave a rueful smile that made me want to do a victory fist pump.

“Shit.”

“Is that a yes?”

“That's a maybe. I'll think about it. Even though it's a horribly unfair plan that you get nothing out of. I mean, are you a charitable organization suddenly?”

“Always have been. You'll be the eleventh girl I've married to provide collateral for small business loans,” I deadpanned. “One more and I get a

statue in the town square.” She rolled her eyes.

“I’ll call you.”

“I don’t have your number. If I’m going to give you my name, I think I should have your number,” I said, flirting a little.

She reached in her purse. I thought she was getting her phone to share the contact info with me, but instead she pulled out a pen and flipped my hand over. She wrote her number on my palm in purple ink.

“That’s my favorite color,” I said.

She just smiled at me and slipped out of her chair, “Good night,” she said. Then she leaned over and kissed my cheek. A quick kiss, a brush of soft, warm lips against my skin. I shut my eyes briefly and swallowed hard. I wasn’t sure why, but her kiss on my cheek moved me somehow. I caught her hand as she stood, and I held it.

“You can count on me,” I said. I needed to say it, even though I wasn’t sure why.

“I know,” she said. “That’s what’s scaring me.”

7

Trixie

I called Kiera early in the morning. This whole situation needed my sister's perspective, but I hadn't called her after I left the bar because she had little kids and I didn't want to wake her or them. If anyone called my sister after nine at night, authorities would never find the body.

"So, you're saying that Damon Vance, who you've had a crush on since like the seventh grade, wants to marry you and you have to THINK ABOUT IT? What the hell, Tig?"

"It's not a real marriage. Just a fake marriage for loan collateral."

"Even in a fake marriage, you can see him naked if you ask nicely, I'm pretty sure," she teased.

"Well, I'm not clear on the etiquette in a fake marriage with a guy who takes pity on me because I'm a poor, fatherless waif or whatever who can't afford to buy a building in downtown Rockford Falls."

"I don't think that's a pity proposal. People don't really do that. Maybe a pity dance if you were at prom and your date ditched you to make out with somebody else, but not an actual offer of marriage. That's way overboard."

"It's stupid. I mean, what's in it for him?"

"Maybe he likes you and wants to help because he can. He's a nice guy, sis. Don't overthink it. It's not the worst idea."

"You're crazy," I said.

Kiera laughed. "You know Damon. He's a great guy. He can help you. Not to mention I know you used to doodle Mrs. Trixie Vance in your diary in high school."

"You read my diary? Of course you did. You always were a sneaky little shit," I shook my head.

"Do you have a better idea on how to solve your problem? Your shop is shut down, possibly forever if you don't find a way to get the plumbing fixed and all your equipment replaced. Are you gonna go work at the gas station

selling vapes and chili dogs?”

“No. I could go work for one of the Overton florists.”

“Yeah, working the cash register and doing deliveries. Because that uses your talent,” she said sarcastically.

“That’s harsh,” I said grimly.

“It’s true,” she shot back. “You have a way out of this problem. And the answer happens to be the hottest fireman Rockford Falls has ever seen. What is the downside here? I realize I’m sleep-deprived but I must be missing something. Is there a downside to this?”

“No. I was up all night thinking about it, and the only problem is feeling like I’m taking advantage of Damon.”

“He offered.”

“Technically I proposed and he accepted.”

“Same difference. He was sober and understood the implications of saying yes.”

“He said okay.”

“What are you, the detail police today?” she grumbled.

“Somebody had to make waffles at four, I’m guessing by your mood,” I said.

“Shut. Up.”

“Have you tried *not* giving him waffles?” I asked. “I mean, I know he’s the cutest kid ever and all but...”

“Oh, hey if only I’d thought of that,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Of course I’ve tried not giving him waffles. Why would I voluntarily give him breakfast when it’s still goddamn dark outside? He cries like his heart is broken. He won’t go back to sleep. It’s wake up, make him waffles and watch him play happily or wake up, refuse him waffles and fight the endless tantrum. And by endless I mean he kept going till after nine in the morning. I thought I’d died and gone to hell and it was loud there.”

“Okay, okay. Waffles for everyone, okay?” I said.

“I’m so tired. I wish that my big struggle was deciding whether to marry the hot guy who wants to solve all my problems. Don’t make this hard when there’s an easy solution,” she said wearily.

“I love you. Go take a nap, okay?” I said.

She yawned goodbye and hung up. She might be sleep-deprived, but she was right. There was no downside. I texted her, *I’m doing it. You were right. Never tell anyone I said I was wrong though.*

I knew that message would make her laugh. I also knew it was the truth. If I agreed to marry Damon, I could use his house as collateral to fix my shop and buy the building. I would pay him back, with interest, beginning the first month I had my shop open again. I didn't care if I had to live on ramen noodles and wear worn-out shoes and cut my own hair. I'd repay him. That would be priority number one. Because I could never really thank him adequately, I could at least honor the agreement scrupulously and provide him free flowers for life.

Good decision. Now just try not to fall in love for real, my sister texted back. I chewed on my bottom lip.

Love is the last thing on my mind, I replied, not sure if it was the truth.

I felt awkward about how to approach Damon. How did you contact a guy you proposed to and then freaked out and wanted time to think? Phone call? In person? Hire a skywriter to write, "I accept my own proposal, meet me at the courthouse" above the fire station? It was a business arrangement, pure and simple. So, I just texted him.

If the offer still stands, I agree that marriage is the most practical solution for me. Thank you, I texted him, then waited.

I saw the three dots appear onscreen to show he was typing, and then his message popped up.

That's the most romantic message ever. Yes! It's all so sudden, but YES I WILL MARRY YOU! 1000X YES!

I snorted with laughter, *Lmk what day works for you, goofball.*

I looked up the estimates from plumbers to figure out what I'd need to repair the pipes and electrical damage. I'd already filed for replacement on the cooler and my insurance adjuster was scheduled to come on Tuesday sometime and survey the wreckage. So anytime but Tuesday, I was free to get married. That sounded weird, like being available to meet for lunch or something. Any day but Tuesday I'm free for a lifetime commitment and a legally binding contract, I thought ruefully. My only way out of this mess was to marry a man who didn't love me. I mean, a man I didn't love. At least there was a way out, even if it went through the garden of questionable decisions.

I wouldn't fall for him. My sister had warned me, and as much as I didn't like her pointing out my crush on him, I was a grown woman and knew he was being a helpful friend. A helpful friend with a killer body and a great sense of humor and intense greenish-blue eyes full of mischief and passion. A

grin that made me want to do filthy—no, enough of that train of thought. He was attractive. That didn't mean I couldn't control myself.

Still, after my bath, when I settled down to read, I couldn't get my mind off Damon. My future husband.

I wasn't thinking about making pancakes for him or who would be taking out the trash. I thought about those abs, his shoulders, how he had looked in his basketball uniform back in school, and how he had that Little League shirt from the team he coached along with Brody, and it was so tight around his biceps and his shoulders. The flex of his arm and back as he threw a ball effortlessly to the outfield. No matter how much I tried to concentrate on the book I was reading, I couldn't keep him off my mind. I threw the library book aside and gave up.

Because a fantasy of Damon formed behind my eyes. *Auburn hair in the sunlight, his eyes bright and intense on me. He drops his baseball mitt and strides across the field to where I sit with my mom and his in the stands. He takes my hand, leads me away from the crowd. People stare after us, but I don't bother to turn around. He doesn't even say a word to me. But I know exactly where we're going and why. He opens the door to his truck, and I climb in. We drive off to the falls, to the spot where the couples always went parking in high school. We roll down the windows to hear the crash of the water, to feel the cool spray mist our faces and arms.*

We turn to each other. He touches my face, meets my eyes just for an instant. Then his mouth is on mine, consuming me, a hungry kiss that leaves me breathless. His tongue surges into my mouth, and his hands slide through my hair, anchoring my face to his, so I can barely get a breath. His stubble scrapes my chin and cheek, a sound surprises me, and then I realize I've moaned. I've moaned out loud from kissing him. I must sound like the horniest, most inexperienced girl he's ever met, but it doesn't slow him down.

The next thing I know, he's peeled my t-shirt off and fastened his mouth to my nipple through the lace of my bra. His hot mouth feels amazing, and I moan again and can't figure out what to do with my hands. I weave them into his hair, arch against him, and he sucks harder, making my nipple go tight and hard, my breasts ache with arousal. I know I'm wet between my legs already, and I want him to know it too. I feel this desire for him to run his fingers through my slick folds and feel how turned on he has made me.

I fumble for the button on my shorts. His hands cover mine and rip the fabric in his urgency to get them off. I work his tight shirt off over his head

and marvel at the muscles, the cut lines it concealed. I run my hands all over his chest and stomach, but I have to stop because my breath and heartbeat stutter. Damon's putting his hands on me, easing me down onto the bench seat, looming over me, crowding me. His fingers dip between my thighs and I watch him, the sly grin that steals across his handsome face when he feels the proof of my arousal.

"You want me, don't you, baby?" he asks. I grind into his fingers, and he stops teasing me with gentle strokes, starts parting my slickness and thrusts a finger into my pussy. I clamp tight around the invasion, thinking how good it feels and how I want something thicker, like his cock inside me. He pumps that finger, rubs in just the right place, slides in another long finger and thrusts, letting me ride his hand. I'm gasping, panting, whimpering for him. Begging him for more.

He impales me with two fingers while he catches my nipple in his mouth and sucks, dragging his teeth lightly along the tip until I come, shaking and clinging to him in the confines of his truck cab.

Then he's on top of me, letting me pull down his shorts, telling me it's okay, I can touch him wherever I want. I've wanted this so long that I think I may pass out. I'm hyperventilating. I ask him to kiss me, and he does, a slow, sensual kiss full of promise. My breath heaves in and out. I kiss him back, desperate. My hands flatten on his muscular back, and I bury my head in his neck as he nudges my thighs open, notches his cock at the slit of my sex.

"Please," I whisper to him. "Please, Damon."

When I beg, he kisses my shoulder and drives into me in one deep thrust. He goes so much deeper than I could have imagined, his cock so big and brutal, but tender and impossibly sexy at the same time. I feel myself open for him, and I part my legs more just to hold all of him. I like it so much that I start telling him every dirty thing I'm thinking. Then I'm coming again, unbelievably fast and clenching around him, throwing my head back. I can feel a whisper of cool spray from the falls waft in the open window and mist my heated skin. I hold on to him so hard, and I know I can't do anything but let the frightening pulse of ecstasy take me over, make me thrash and whine as I climax.

When he feels me start to come, Damon grips my hip and drives in harder, deeper, taking all of me, burning away any memory I had of any man before him. I watch his face, the concentration, the way his lips are drawn back over his teeth, the primal way he leans his forehead against mine. "You

can let go,” I tell him. Then he does, he lets go and comes with a fierce burst of heat inside me. I arch my back, greedy for it. Our stomachs touch, our chests, his hand on my hip and his forehead on mine. Then he kisses me, frantic and lush. My arms go around his neck and we hold each other, messy and sweaty and spent. He rolls onto his back and maneuvers me so I can lie on top of him, in his arms. I pillow my cheek on his chest and drift off to sleep in the sweet, summer heat.

When the fantasy is over, and I’ve come down from my climax, I add an item to my list of things to do. Talk to rat bastard landlord about purchasing the building. Hire plumber. Schedule wedding. Apply for loan. Quit masturbating about future husband.

8

Damon

“I thought I came over for chicken and noodles, not for you to give me hell,” I said.

“Come on,” my sister laughed, “you opened yourself up for this one. It’s like you’re begging to be teased.”

“I am not asking to be teased. I’m doing a favor for a friend of the family. Mom, back me up here. You and Mrs. Owens have been best friends for years. So we’re practically family.”

“If you want me to support the intermarriage of family, you’re barking up the wrong tree, son,” she said, dishing up supper.

“That’s not what I meant. You know, I really thought my family would be supportive of this. I know it’s a weird way to get married, and it’s not a real marriage anyway. It’s to get her collateral so she can buy her shop and get it fixed up. It’s really an indictment of the banking system in our country that would rather lend money to a married woman than a single one.”

“You’re a feminist now, bro?” Laura chuckled.

“I’m in favor of equal treatment, yes.”

“Is that why you wouldn’t let that girl on your baseball team last year?” my dad chimed in.

“Thanks, Dad. So helpful. And, no, I didn’t think it was safe or appropriate for her to be the only girl on a bus full of prepubescent boys, and when I suggested her mom drive her to the games, they started talking about discrimination. It was a problem. Thankfully, Brody found her that girls’ travel team out of Overton and got her a tryout.”

“So your fit about women’s rights is a new thing,” Laura said, “that maybe has something to do with how you look at Trixie and always have. Don’t think we haven’t seen the way you stare at her whenever she walks into a room. Last Fourth of July at the Owens’ house, I thought you were gonna fall out of your lawn chair when she brought out the potato salad in her

bathing suit.”

“She was wearing shorts with it,” I muttered.

“Yeah, you remember a lot of details for a guy who wasn’t looking,” Laura teased. “So don’t pretend this is a totally generous impulse with nothing in it for you.”

“There is nothing romantic about this,” I protested and started shoveling in noodles in order to stop the conversation.

“You know, my wife is right,” Brody said, “You just overshot a little. I told you to go ahead and ask the girl out. Not marry her.”

I rolled my eyes and took another big bite, not loving this topic of discussion around the dinner table. It annoyed me that there was truth to what they were saying. I kind of wondered what I’d gotten myself into, and if I was signing up for heartbreak and pining over my wife, who would be right there in my house but just out of reach.

9

Trixie

It only took a week to make arrangements and get a license. My family thought it was nuts, and Damon's family made it pretty clear with their jokes that they didn't think it was a marriage in name only. The fact that Laura insisted on throwing me a bridal shower—just Nicole and Michelle and her and Rachel from the diner—seemed to underline that idea. We had three kinds of pie and then I opened presents that were all see-through mesh nighties or push-up bras with matching garter belts in red and black lace.

"Very funny," I'd said, "we're getting hitched so I can get a bank loan. No funny business."

"Right," Laura had said, "so wear these under your work clothes to feel fabulous if that's the way you're playing it."

"I don't think I want to clean up water damage in a garter belt," I said ruefully.

"You've never tried it, so don't knock it," Michelle piped up.

My dear friend Michelle had gotten me a massage candle and strawberry-flavored personal lubricant. Michelle didn't listen worth a shit. Nicole had produced the only non-horrible gift—a set of creamy pink satin pajamas I'd actually wear.

"Just so you're not walking around in your Tigger t-shirt and Winnie the Pooh flannel pants at home. You need a pair of grown-up pajamas."

"Thank you. Although I like my flannel pants," I said.

It had been a long night and I'd ended up drinking tequila with my pie. Not to mention the fact that my mother had decided to invite me over for breakfast the next morning with my booze headache so she could tell me about the birds and the bees.

"Please stop talking, Mom. I don't need a pop-up book," I groaned, leaning my forehead on my hand.

"That smart mouth won't do you any good when Damon Vance wants

you to fulfill your wedding vows. Here's what you do—”

“Mom, I know!” I said.

“I know you think you know, but those rated-R movies make it look a lot nicer than it is in real life,” she cautioned, “you're going to want to be on the pill if you don't want to get pregnant. Even though you realize I want a grandbaby to rock in my arms more than I want anything in this life on Earth...” she trailed off. “But if you're serious about this ridiculous plan, you'll need to get a prescription for birth control from your doctor. There are also other things—acts—that men enjoy that won't get you in the family way.”

“Jesus Christ on a cracker, Mother, stop! I've had sex. I know how it works and where all the parts go. Please stop. Don't describe acts and don't tell me anything about sex with my father; my ears are going to bleed!” I blurted, unable to take it any longer.

She burst out laughing, “You owe me twenty-five dollars, George,” she called into the living room. “Your father bet me that you wouldn't last past the rated-R movies part.” She slapped her knee and kept laughing.

“You set me up,” I groaned.

“Let a woman have a little fun, child. I don't get to see you in a wedding gown walking down the aisle at the church to marry a man you intend to spend the rest of your life with. I didn't even get invited to the bridal shower, even though I've been wanting to try Michelle's peach margaritas for years. At least let me get what joy I can out of this situation,” she said. “You know I've wanted to set you up with Damon for years now. It's just that you were so serious about your business and he was so busy chasing every piece of ass that walked by.”

“Mom, if you can avoid mentioning piece of ass in a sentence about my future husband, I'd appreciate it.”

“Look, you know he's got a healthy appetite for sex. Don't waste that. He cares about you enough to want to help you out like this. You can capitalize on that and reel him in. I have some issues of Cosmo you should look through if you need to brush up on—”

“Acts men enjoy? No thanks, Mom,” I sighed. “This has been—pretty traumatizing. Thanks for the scrambled eggs.”

I kissed her cheek and left, horrified and amused at the same time, which pretty much summed up my relationship with my mom.

Kiera flew in for the wedding to be my Matron of Honor, so she was the

one who fixed my hair and makeup. She kept watching the same TikTok over again while she twisted my hair just so and pinned it with a pretty silver hairclip shaped like a feather.

“Okay, you look perfect. I mean, since you refused to get a real wedding dress.”

“This is a real wedding dress. It’s a dress that covers my body during my wedding,” I said, practically pouting.

Truth was, I loved my dress and this was my excuse to buy it off my wish list. It came from a cutesy vintage style website with fit and flare dresses that worked with my curves. I didn’t have an Ann Taylor Loft/J Crew body type—not tall and willowy. So this adorable dress with capped sleeves, a scoop neck, and cinched waist above the full skirt made me feel beautiful and stylish in my way. Instead of a veil, I had a comb with a net whimsy on it that Kiera secured.

She handed me a cluster of gardenias wrapped in cream velvet ribbon, the bouquet I’d made that morning. I hugged her impulsively.

“Thanks for being here.”

“I’d never miss one of your weddings,” she said and kissed my cheek.

We sat on a narrow bench until we were called into Courtroom B. Kiera walked in first, and I trailed after her, pretending it was an aisle when it clearly wasn’t, as there was a witness box right behind the judge. I had thought we’d use an office or something that made me feel less like I was facing meth possession charges, but here we were.

Damon wore a dark suit, a white shirt. Brody stood beside him as best man. When I got close to him and the judge, I faltered. I wasn’t sure where to stand or how. This was why real weddings had rehearsals. I giggled nervously. Damon took my elbow, pulled me forward and over until I faced him. I passed my bouquet to Kiera, pausing only to lift it to my nose and bury my face in it for a moment, drinking in the sweet scent. Then I let Damon take my hands. I met his eyes, then looked away.

The judge said things and I agreed to them. When it came time for rings, I looked around, realized I hadn’t bought him one. Brody reached in his pocket and handed something to Damon. My cheeks flamed. I was mortified that he was doing so much for me, and I had neglected to make such a simple gesture for him. I met his eyes in a panic.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, and slid a ring on my finger, a narrow yellow gold band with a little diamond solitaire. I gasped at the diamond, at the

sweetness of it. I blinked back unexpected tears. We finished the vows and it was time for the kiss to seal the ceremony.

I drifted closer to Damon, swayed a little on my feet, face tipped up to his. He bent and brushed his lips chastely to mine, polite, and stepped back. I felt dizzy, felt the electric buzz in my veins that the light, almost cursory caress had set loose in me. I had a wild impulse to fling my arms around his neck and pull him in for a real kiss. I even wondered frantically if we should consummate the marriage to make it legal. Then I recalled that was only for a green card, and probably a rom-com rule, not a real one. So I shouldn't toy with the idea of convincing him we should hook up just once.

Flummoxed by the kiss and my errant thoughts, I let myself be led away. We all rode together to my parents' house. We were having a totally unnecessary wedding lunch. My mom and Mrs. Vance had gotten frozen croissants and made chicken salad sandwiches, fruit salad, and a little two-layer white cake that made me want to burst into tears. It was so sweet of them, and they'd made it nice and elegant in the best way they knew how. There were white candles on the table and a dozen roses from the grocery store. I had a death grip on Damon's fingers as we walked inside and saw it, the white lace tablecloth that used to be my grandmother's, and the pretty china with pink flowers around the rim from my parents' wedding. I swallowed hard.

"Oh, Mom, it's so pretty. It's perfect," I whispered, my voice watery as I hugged her.

We sat down and ate, and Damon leaned in, "I like your dress. Is purple your favorite color?"

"No, it's yours," I said simply. He grinned at me.

"I love the ring. You shouldn't have."

"I wanted to. I don't ever want you to think your first husband didn't care, or for your next groom to think he can get away without giving you a nice ring."

"So you want bragging rights over my imaginary future husband?"

"Basically, yeah," he said. I leaned my cheek against his shoulder for an instant, feeling something perilously close to affection for him.

My mom took a picture as we cut the cake together, making us pose. I told her it wasn't a real marriage, but she would have none of it and kept saying what a beautiful couple we made. When we left, we went to Damon's house. We'd agreed I'd live there for the time being, and he was putting my

name on the deed. That way it was legitimately mine to use for collateral. Still, when it came time to walk into his house, I was suddenly nervous.

Damon, who I half expected to pick me up and carry me over the threshold as a joke, just unlocked the door and led me inside. The old house had been redone, the original wood floors refinished to a warm walnut color. The golden glow of a brass lamp on the table illuminated a stack of library books beside it and his blue couch. A flat-screen hung on the wall over a fireplace. He showed me to the guest room.

“You can have this room. Do whatever you want to it to make it comfortable for you. Welcome home, Trix.” I smiled at his use of the nickname and although I wanted to hug him, it felt awkward and impossible.

“Thanks. I’ll go around to my house and pick up some of my stuff tomorrow. My parents will let me store the rest in their garage so I can rent the place out for a few months. If you need me out before then, I could stay with my folks. It’s just, if I’m not using the house, the rent would cover the mortgage payment,” I said.

“It’s a good idea. Relax. I don’t need you out of here.”

“Okay, thank you. Um, good night,” I faltered.

He rubbed the back of his neck and nodded. “Night,” and headed down the hall. I shut the door and set down the overnight bag I’d brought with me. I wanted to put on my pink pajamas and curl up and sleep. I didn’t even want a shower. I felt weird showering in the room right next to his bedroom. It was a one-bathroom house. What if he had to pee? I could not cope with him being in the bathroom while I showered. I just couldn’t. I’d put on the new jammies and stay in my room tonight. Then tomorrow we could work out a schedule for the bathroom.

I kicked off my shoes, sinking my bare toes into the soft carpet. Then I took the clip and pins out of my hair, feeling relief at the looseness at my scalp when my hair fell across my shoulders. I reached back and unzipped my dress part of the way before it got hung up. I tried to slide it back up an inch so I could try again, or to pull it down with force, but neither worked. It was in the middle of my back, hard to reach, and way too high for me to be able to wriggle out of the dress as it was. I needed it unzipped all the way. In desperation, I grabbed a wire hanger from the closet and tried to hook it through the zipper before realizing that was impossible. I tried to shrug the cap sleeves off my shoulders so I could turn the dress around to see what I was doing, but I only succeeded in trapping my arms in unforgiving satin.

Son of a bitch. I was stuck in my wedding dress. I sighed and marched out into the hall, stopping to knock on Damon's door.

"Um, it's me. Sorry to bother you. I need a little help here," I said tightly.

He swung open the door wearing nothing but a pair of basketball shorts. I swallowed and reminded myself not to drool and that under no circumstances would I allow myself to masturbate about him or this moment ever.

"My, um, zipper got stuck. Could you help?"

"I'll do my best. I'm used to saving kittens from trees, but I can probably manage a zipper," he said good-naturedly. I turned around.

He swept my dark hair over one shoulder so it was out of his way, and I tried not to bite my lip from the light caress. Damon trailed one finger down my spine to the spot where the zipper was stuck.

"I see the problem. It's caught on the material. Just let me give it a little tug."

"Be gentle. I mean, don't rip the fabric if you can help it," I stammered, my voice too high.

"Don't worry, Trix, I'm always gentle. Unless you don't want me to be," his low voice was smoky and suggestive and made my knees go weak.

He gripped the narrow zipper pull in two fingers and tugged first down and then up. Then he touched the place where the fabric parted above it and I felt the small, deft movements of his fingers as he loosened the fabric from the zipper teeth and it slid smoothly down, the backs of his fingers brushing my sensitive skin. I had to stay still, not showing him how his touch affected me.

I held the front of the dress up and turned and thanked him, then shuffled back to my room in a hurry.

10

Damon

Goddamn the inventor of the zipper. Things were going fine until she asked me to help her take off her dress. The dress she picked out because it was *my* favorite color. The way that deep plum-colored satin clung to her curves, molded to her body like it was made for her was almost too much for me. Then I had to unfasten it. I would've thought it was a trick, a clumsy attempt at seduction, but the zipper was actually stuck from eating away at the material beside it, and also I didn't think Trixie was the kind to try and seduce a man. Not even her legal husband.

It took every bit of my self-control to keep from ripping the dress off her. Even that kiss at the wedding had affected me, left me shaken by how much I felt it and how much it meant. When she turned around, holding her dress up to cover herself, Trixie had thanked me. I could tell she was breathing hard, and my fingers brushed her shoulder as she turned around. She practically bolted off down the hall.

Leaving me rock hard and ready. Since I'd heard her door slam, I figured she wasn't coming back out. I went into the bathroom and jumped in the shower. Before the water could even hit me, I had my hand wrapped around my shaft, wishing it was her instead.

Our wedding night was what I thought of. How different it could have been if I'd had my way.

I unzip the dress, push the sleeves off her shoulders, let the fabric pool around her bare feet, leaving her in nothing but lacy panties and a light blue garter—her something blue riding high on her pale thigh. I stand behind her, slide my hands up her stomach and cup her bare breasts, toy with her sensitive nipples until they make sharp peaks between my fingers. I kiss her shoulder and the curve of her neck, the spot below her ear that I'd touched with my fingertips in the bar and made her shiver.

“Oh Damon!” she says, breathing hard. “Oh, yes.”

I like hearing her say my name, hearing her say yes. I decide I want to make her do more of that. I mouth her neck and fondle her nipples. My hands trail down her arms, raising goosebumps in my wake. I take her hands and kiss them. Then I turn her around and kiss her mouth. It's a full, deep kiss, one that leaves us both shaken from the intensity. I stroke her hair, palm her head and lick the roof of her mouth, coaxing her tongue to war with mine, to taste and to want. I run my hands down her back, around her little waist and flaring over her full hips. I slide my hands inside her lacy panties to cup her generous ass and pull her against me so she can feel my arousal.

Trixie tips her face up to meet my eyes. Her pupils are dilated, her eyes feverish with desire. She nips at my bottom lip and my hard-on grows painful, straining against my shorts. I jerk them down and go to my knees. I bite the lace on her garter and drag it down her bare leg. Then I hook my fingers in the tiny ribbon sides of her panties and rip them off. She gasps, winds her arms around my neck, panting with excitement as I bear her onto the bed.

I suck one nipple and then the other before I flip her over on her stomach and raise her hips. I love seeing her like that, her creamy ass, her flushed sex exposed to me. My cock twitches in response to the pretty sight. I slide the wet head of my cock along her slit and she rocks back into me, just like I want her to. Then I plunge forward, filling her, feeding every inch of my long, hard dick into her slick, tight folds. The sounds she makes are filthy and delicious, and the rock of her hips shows me how much she wants more. I buck into her, giving her my all, sliding my hands up her back, around her stomach, plucking at her clit until she cries out and clutches around me, making me come with a final hard pounding thrust, spilling inside her with a roar of my own.

Our bodies slick with sweat, I turn her over tenderly, kissed her lips. She winds her arms around me, and I hold her for a moment. Then my cock grows hard against her again, and I settle her on top of me. Show her how to ride me good and hard until we both shatter again, her inner muscles throbbing around me, her hair in a tangle across her face. I sit up at the last moment and cover her mouth with mine as my climax pours out into her tight pussy. It shakes me to my core, the greatest sexual pleasure I've ever known, with a woman I care for so deeply.

I leaned my forehead against the shower wall, panting from my climax. I wanted her so much it was making me insane. At least I could take care of the temporary insanity on my own. She'd made it clear that this was business,

that we weren't to blur the lines in that way. Not even when it was all I wanted. She was concerned with her business, with securing the loan. I wouldn't make demands on her. Even if I had to take three showers a day.

It didn't help that we had fun together. One afternoon I was home early and caught her streaming the second Back to the Future movie. I got some microwave popcorn ready and flopped down on the couch beside her to watch. Pretty soon, we were debating which of the trilogy was the best.

"They went to the Old West. It's stupid. They were just cashing in on the franchise at that point. You cannot beat the Power of Love musical sequence when he's on the skateboard in movie one," I maintained.

"How can you even say that?" she said, "Doc is the best character in the series! He deserves his happy ending."

"Uh, false! The DeLorean is the best character, bar none. No argument. The DeLorean makes the series. If it had been a fucking Camaro, nobody would've wanted a sequel. It's the gullwing doors and the overall coolness."

"So, you always wanted that car?" she said dubiously.

"Well, yeah," I said, "Didn't you?"

"No, but I had a little crush on Marty."

"Uh, he did the mouse voice in Stuart Little. We had to watch it in grade school. You were crushing on mouse-voice?"

"He was cute in these movies," she shrugged.

"I don't know if I can even look at you right now," I said, mock offended.

She threw a handful of popcorn at me, and I caught a piece in my mouth, crowing my victory.

We watched the last two movies together. She fell asleep with her cheek against my arm during the third movie, which she had proclaimed was her favorite and yet she nodded off at 7:30 trying to watch it.

If I let her sleep against me for a while, it was just to be a good friend, obviously. It wasn't because the fact she felt safe with me made me feel so damn strong, so protective. Like I was a real husband, and she was my real wife. When she stirred, she woke suddenly, realizing what she'd done. She bolted from the couch, staggering and half asleep, talking about needing to make a salad or something for supper.

"I ate a bowl of popcorn while you were asleep. P.S. I was right about the third movie—total cash grab when the idea was tired."

“Then you don’t understand the quality of the third movie. You must be heartless.”

“You have thought way too much about this,” I teased. “Now go get some real sleep. You’re obviously wiped out.”

“I will. Hey, thanks for watching with me. It was fun,” she said a little shyly.

“It was. Let’s do the Die Hard series this weekend when I’m not on call at the station,” I said, feeling weirdly excited about Netflix and no-chill with my own wife.

11

Trixie

Longest two weeks of my life. Sure, things were going fairly well, as long as I didn't think about the fact that Damon couldn't so much as pour a glass of juice without a surge of lust nearly knocking me off my feet. He was nothing but kind and respectful and helpful. He'd even lent a hand in cleaning up the back room at the shop. In short, Damon being wonderful wasn't making me any less attracted to him.

It was deeply distracting. I'd started making dinner on nights we were home, pasta or a salad, once I'd made a pot roast because my mom insisted I make him a real meat and potatoes supper. I liked sitting at a dinner table with him, hearing about his day and telling him about mine.

"Brody keeps sending me sex tips, messaging me teen magazine articles about your first time and how not to be nervous. Is Laura doing the same for you?"

"No, thank God, but my mom offered me some back copies of Cosmo with diagrams in them. Either they legitimately think we don't understand how tab A goes in slot B, or they're completely savage."

"Savage, no question," Damon said. "This pot roast is fucking fantastic."

"Thanks. My mom's recipe. I used a bay leaf and everything. It was like I was channeling June Cleaver."

"You don't have to cook for me, you know."

"I know. But you're doing me this tremendous favor. Opening your home to me and letting me use it as collateral. I can cook you some dinner," I shrugged.

"It's nice. Having supper made for me, knowing you're here when I get home," he said. My stupid heart turned over and I felt all mushy about it.

That was how dinner went. Flirting, accidental blunders admitting my lust and concealing it poorly. It was a minefield of meat and potatoes.

We went to the bank to add my name to the deed on his house and

complete the paperwork on the application. On the way in, I stopped him.

“Something on my tie?” he asked.

“Your tie’s perfect. Are you sure you want to do this? This makes it real. What if I can’t pay this for some reason?”

“Okay, first of all, marrying you was pretty damn real. And I have faith in you. You’ve got a successful business, you’re responsible and loyal, and there’s no doubt in my mind you’ll be fine.”

I was grateful that he believed in me, and it put my mind at ease a little. We sat together while we waited, and I showed him the email from my landlord who wanted out from under the headache of the building and its need for repairs. He essentially said it was mine if I could afford it, and named a price lower than what I had expected. So I completed the paperwork, optimistic for once.

The next afternoon, I was on my knees applying caulk beneath a waterlogged baseboard when I got a call from the bank that my loan was approved. I whooped, and then I texted Nicole and Michelle. They sent back the dancing emoji of joy. I finished up early, booked the plumber, and went to the grocery store. I bought steak and a little ice cream cake for a celebration dinner and picked up a bottle of champagne at the liquor store.

When Damon got home from his shift at the station, I had dinner waiting. I had washed and dried my hair, also taking the trouble to put on makeup. I’d even put on my purple dress for a sense of ceremony. When he walked in, he gave a low whistle.

“You look amazing. What have I done to deserve this?”

“You’re my hero. I say that unironically, too, because you married me and with all your worldly goods to me endowed. I got the loan!”

He ran over and grabbed me in a bear hug and spun me around.

“I’m so proud of you. You’re right. We should celebrate. Let me take a quick shower and clean up. You deserve a date who doesn’t look like he just pulled a twelve at the fire department.”

He kissed my cheek as he put me down. I felt flustered and giggly. I put the supper on our plates and lit a candle on the table. I turned on music on my phone. When he came down in his wedding suit, the collar of his shirt open, I saw that his hair was still damp from the shower. It made my palms itch to run my fingers through it. I bit my lip.

“This looks incredible, thank you,” he said, tucking into his dinner with appreciation.

I talked about which plumber I booked and when he could come, what the estimate was on repairs and how I was going with a cheap but durable laminate flooring for the shop and backroom both, and I planned to install it myself to save money. He offered to help.

“You’ve done so much already, I can’t let you. But thank you,” I said.

“What if I want to help? What if I like taking care of you, Trix?” he said, his voice low and beautiful, seeming to coil around me and intoxicate me.

“I got champagne,” I blurted out and took it out of the refrigerator. “Would you do the honors?”

He got up and popped the cork, poured it into glasses.

“To the flower shop,” he said, “to great success.”

“To my husband,” I said softly, feeling odd and sentimental.

We clinked our glasses and took a drink. He took my glass and set them both down. He brushed my cheek with the backs of his fingers. “You look so beautiful, so happy.” He was looking at me strangely, leaning closer. I spun away, my dress swirling around my legs. I got the ice cream cake from the freezer, brandished it proudly and cut slices for us as a distraction.

When we were done eating, I cleared the table, expecting him to go watch TV or something. But he stayed to help. He rolled up his shirtsleeves, “I’ll wash,” he said. “Least I can do after such a great dinner. I should’ve taken you out on the town.”

“Diner closes at nine,” I quipped.

“Okay, out on a bigger town than Rockford Falls,” he said ruefully.

I scooted over and started drying the dishes he washed and putting them away. We didn’t talk much. The playlist on my phone had ended so the music subsided. When he passed me the last pan to dry, I wiped it, trying to concentrate on what I was doing and not the fact I could smell his good cologne which he’d put on after his shower, seemingly just for me. I breathed it in so deep I wished I could’ve snorted it. It was so good.

I folded the dish towel and hung it on the side of the sink, brushed off my hands and looked around. Damon took my arm and pulled me closer. He crowded me back against the cabinet, his face so close to mine.

“Tell me to stop,” he breathed. I shook my head, breathless.

Damon’s hands were on either side of me, gripping the counter, pinning me there. I swayed toward his chest, tipped my chin up for the kiss I was

dying for. He lowered his mouth to mine. At the shock of that touch, I jolted, my body becoming unstuck. I wrapped my arms around his neck, touched the ends of his hair, still damp and softer than I'd imagined. His mouth rocked over mine. I gasped, parted my lips and his tongue invaded my mouth, questing, exploring, tasting me. I felt myself start to shake as I kissed him back. One of his hands left the counter and pressed into the small of my back, pressing me closer to him.

"I wanted to crush this dress, rip it off you the first night," he said against my lips. I shivered.

"I wanted you to," I admitted. "When you unzipped it—" I broke off and he kissed me again and again.

He kissed my chin, my neck. I was arching into him and clutching his strong back in both my hands. He cupped my breast, stroked his thumb over my nipple, making it pebble hard in response. I whimpered as my breasts tightened and ached under his touch.

He could have me right there, against this counter, my dress pushed up and my legs wrapped around him. I wanted that, wanted the primal surge of him thrusting inside me. I gripped his hair in my fist as he grazed my neck with his tongue and teeth.

My phone rang, splitting the silence in the room and startling me. It was Kiera's ringtone. I jolted away from him, guilty, flushed. I hurried to my phone and answered it so she could congratulate me on my loan.

12

Damon

It was probably for the best that her sister called just then, stopping us from making a big mistake. I liked having her around, but if we ever got together, she'd freak out and bolt. I was fairly sure of that. At least that's what I kept telling myself.

I went and hid in my room. That was the only word for it. I retreated and did a hundred pushups to try to clear my head. When that didn't work and I could still hear the sound of her voice on the phone, I changed to my basketball shorts and went for a run. A long one. Until all I could hear was my pulse beating and all I could do was try to take the next breath. I ran until I had to stop and stretch and then run back at a slower pace. The time on my phone said I'd been gone two hours. I hoped she'd be asleep. But when I walked in the door, I heard the shower. I needed to get in the shower and blast cold water, wash off the sweat and the lust off of me. But she was in there, standing naked under the spray of hot water, torturing me.

I'd tasted her mouth, felt her passion rise and match my own. I'd held her in my arms. There was no place to go from here. I couldn't pursue her. I wasn't going to overstep our agreement again. Not when I'd married her as a favor and there was money involved. I didn't want to be some creep who seemed like he expected sex in exchange for helping her get a loan. It made my skin crawl that she might think that of me. So we were on awkward, uneven footing where she felt obligated to me. That left me hamstrung when it came to taking our relationship to the next level. Beyond being just supportive roommates and tentative friends. When I wasn't with her, I missed her. I wanted to spend more time with her. Including naked time, to be honest. I wanted the cheesy, rom-com montage of curling up on the couch and watching movies together with her in my lap or in my arms, us making breakfast together and laughing when we messed up the eggs or burned the bacon.

I wanted my wife to be mine for real, and there wasn't any way to make that happen in a sticky situation that was more minefield than marriage.

At work, I walled off any thoughts about Trixie. I focused on my job, on keeping people safe, on taking care of grease fires and those idiots that burned drifts in their fields on a windy day. Some fool poured gasoline on his dad's brush pile and set light to it last week. He deserved losing his eyebrows, maybe it'd teach him not to be so cavalier with accelerants. We got it put out, but he'd endangered his entire neighborhood. I gave his parents a talking-to about keeping any kind of accelerant locked up and away from him since he clearly wasn't responsible. I also suggested some heavy chores to keep him busy since he was spending his teenage years acting like a careless dipshit. I may have left out the careless dipshit part, but I felt it.

Fall was a slower season for us. We did tours for the kindergarteners and let them climb on the trucks, did fire safety talks, that sort of thing. In winter, the space heaters and the clogged chimneys would keep us busy, but there was a lull in autumn for the most part. So we were surprised to get an urgent summons from the Overton FD right as my shift was ending.

A big warehouse on the waterfront there had caught fire and it was a bigger and hotter blaze than one fire department could handle alone. So the Rockford Falls Fire Department suited up and took off. We called in three men to take over the station while we were gone. We took the water truck and left the ladder engine behind in case it was needed.

The eerie gold glow hung hazy over the waterfront as we approached. By the time we reached the warehouse, it was an inferno. Even the most experienced guy on my crew swore under his breath when he saw it. No question, that roof was about to go. The blaze could be contained, but the structure and contents would be a total loss. It was too far out of control, and a building wasn't worth the lives of my men. We talked to the Overton chief, smeared with soot and breathing hard, defeat etched in the lines of his face.

"We're gonna have to pull back, treat the perimeter," he shook his head.

"I can help evacuate your crew," I said.

"Thanks. We got a couple guys on the way to the ER in an ambulance, smoke inhalation. They were just stacking cargo in there when the smoke hit them."

"You got everyone out, right?"

"We think so. They were both so knocked out by smoke they couldn't answer questions. Every time we try to get in and search, some shit falls in

and I can't endanger my crew searching for somebody that isn't even there."

"Have you contacted the owner of the warehouse? Did they have a shipping manifest and a list of who's on shift?"

"I've got dispatch making calls, but it'd be too late by the time we get word. Nobody could survive that much smoke inhalation, Vance," he said.

My men and I moved in closer and turned on our SEBA gear for breathing. I barked orders and summoned people down from the ladder truck. The roof was bound to collapse soon, and I didn't want men dying on it. We scouted around the edges, spraying flame retardant and clearing any debris that would feed the flames. As I skirted around the back, I could hear something beneath the roar of the fire. I was so used to the creaking of burning structures, the hiss of flames, that I could tune them out partially. I heard a rhythmic thump, what sounded like a human voice and then thumping repeated.

I looked around. No other firefighters were nearby. I knew it was stupid but I had to do it. I spoke into my radio that I was going in the back because I'd heard signs of life. Then I kicked in the door. I bent low and wound my way through charred detritus and dodged rubble that was burning hot. I went toward the direction where I thought the noise had come from. I heard it again and switched off my earpiece because the Overton chief was shouting at me to get out because the roof was going to go.

I took my ax to the door because it was stuck, and chipped out a hole big enough to step into the small room—an office or storage closet. I was smoke blind, the black smoke too thick to see. I used my headlamp and glimpsed a booted foot. I reached down and grabbed an arm. The man tried to help me but he was mostly overcome. I lifted him and hauled him out as fast as I could. Which was pretty fucking slow because there was a veritable shower of cinders and burning bits of the ceiling starting to pepper the interior of the structure. I batted away anything I could, but I needed my arms to carry the survivor. The smoke was insane.

I stumbled out of the back door and went to my knees. I laid the man on the ground and waved over the paramedics who were standing by. I ripped open the buckles on my coat, pushed back my mask and tried to get cool night air on my skin. I felt raw and blazing hot, the roar of the flames and the fear that crept in as the adrenaline receded made my head pound. It didn't help that one of my guys and the chief from Overton were shouting at me about what an idiot I was and how I could've been killed. I had known there

was a guy in there, and I couldn't have forgiven myself if I'd let him die because I was too scared to risk going in. It wasn't who my dad raised me to be. I would've let them know that if I hadn't been so winded, so hot that I could barely get up off my knees. Someone handed me a bottle of water. I drank some and poured the rest over my head.

After an hour, we had everything under control and I took my crew home. I was exhausted but proud. The medics said the guy I saved was going to the hospital for tests, but his oxygen saturation was already improving. He was going to make it. I had managed to avoid the local news that camped out with their bright lights just outside the safety barricade. It had been a long night. I just wanted to go home, shower, drink about a gallon of water and get some sleep.

When I unlocked the door, about four hours later than I had planned on being home, I found Trixie pacing the living room. When she looked up and saw me, she launched herself at me. I staggered back from the impact, my back going up against the door. She flung her arms around my neck, buried her face in my chest. She was ranting and raving, half sobbing, half angry as hell.

"I heard what you did, goddammit," she gulped out, dragging in a noisy breath. She gripped my shoulders and gave me a shake. "You could have died. I thought you were gone—I called your dad. He said you were just being a cowboy and you'd be fine, but then he asked me to call and let him know if you made it home so even he was scared. It was on the news, Damon! I saw you stumble out and lay down the guy you were carrying and just—go to your hands and knees and rip off your mask and then it cut away to the paramedics working on this guy—how could you do that?"

I held her close, not realizing till I had her in my arms just how badly I needed this. I needed to feel her wrapped around me, proof I had survived.

"Just because you're fearless does not mean that I am!" she practically moaned, looking up at me with her eyes bright with tears. "I could have lost you."

"I'm not fearless, Trix. I was scared as hell. But I couldn't leave a man to burn to death in that inferno."

"I know you couldn't. I know you're a hero, Vance. But I'm not one. I can't handle it."

She buried her face in my neck again, holding on tight. I pressed her against me, held her for my comfort as much as for her own. I reminded

myself I wasn't going to push her, wasn't going to pursue her. So I disentangled myself or started to.

"I know I smell like smoke. I better go have a shower," I said, clearing my throat. My voice was rusty from the smoke I'd inhaled, and I was trying to peel her hands from behind my neck. Finally I ducked my head to get out of the circle of her clinging arms, and she bumped her lips against mine.

"Don't go. Don't do anything right now. Please, Damon. I almost lost you tonight," she said, breathless. I saw her eyes, dark and desperate. I remembered the impact of her body that sent me reeling. I felt her wrapped around me, one leg hooked around my thigh, both arms around my neck, plastered against me. She had given me my opening, had come to me, and I would be damned if I turned her away when she felt more essential than air at that moment.

I grabbed her hips and lifted, and she wrapped her legs around my waist, her strong thighs holding on tight. I dipped my head and took her mouth, spun around so she was against the door. I kissed her, my tongue in her mouth, her sweetness blocking out the bitter smoke that had filled me, taking the taste of fear and death from my mouth and filling me with her instead. I groaned, taking more of her mouth, plunging my tongue deeper. I drew back, nipped her lip with my teeth and got a tiny moan from her for my trouble. She was delicious, she was cold water after the fire I'd survived, she was fresh air dispersing the thick smoke. She was everything clean and pure and bright wrapped around me, clinging to me like she'd never get enough.

"I need you," she whispered against my ear and kissed the pulse point just behind it, her tongue hot and sweet on my skin.

"I've always needed you," I answered her, playing it cool be damned. I'd nearly been killed, and my wife was waiting for me, afraid and hungry for me. I'd give her all of me, hell, I'd do more than that. I'd do anything she asked.

I pressed her into the door, my mouth going to her neck, sucking and licking, leaving a love bite where her neck met her shoulder and making her arch into me. I dropped to my knees and draped a long, bare thigh over my shoulder. I put my mouth between her legs, my tongue hot and wet through her cotton panties. Her hands were in my hair, and I gripped her thighs like she was my anchor to this earth. The sweet taste of her sex as I pushed aside her panties was intoxicating, like drowning in the sea and not caring at all. I was on my knees, worshipping her body, and the miracle was she was

allowing it.

13

Trixie

He started so softly, his questing mouth wet on my panties, then his finger pushing them aside. The brush of his finger on the slick flesh of my sex made me dizzy all at once. Then he took first one tender lip and then the other between his lips, kissing, licking, sucking. My knees were so weak. I tossed my head back and forth against the front door, my nails scoring into the wood behind me. He turned his head and kissed the inside of my thigh, then higher, then tongued my pussy again, and I started to wail. My keening, high-pitched cry started and got louder and louder until I drove my hands into his hair to steady myself, tugging at his scalp, riding his face. I knew my slickness was soaking him, and knew he didn't care. He had a grip on my thigh that might leave a mark as I bucked my hips in desperation.

"Oh yes, yes, please, Damon. Please fuck me!" I said, shameless and needy.

He slid a finger inside me, stretched me and pumped in and out as I writhed, desperate to be filled by more than one long finger. He caught my clit between his lips, laved it with his tongue and lapped at it, sucking, flicking it until I ground my crotch into his face, arching up on one tiptoe and clutching his hair, riding his face until everything splintered apart, and I screamed my climax. Weak, I sank to the floor, to my knees.

Damon pulled me across his knees and held me. "You are so sexy," he said. I mumbled a sound that wasn't even a word at all, and he chuckled. "Now that made me feel like a hero. I made you speechless."

I let him cradle me against his chest right there in the floor beside our front door. I held on to his t-shirt, breathed him in, acrid smoke and all. I started to cry a little, and then I sat up, straddled his jean-clad lap and wrapped myself around him like a monkey and clung. His arms went around me and he held me close, synced up our breathing and stroked my hair.

"I've got you, baby. You didn't lose me," his words were meant to soothe

me, but I shook my head, weepy and sweating, hectic.

“I could have. It could happen any day.”

“It could happen to any of us, at anytime. You could step off the curb—” he broke off, buried his face in my neck for a change. “I could lose you, too, you know.”

“If you hadn’t come out of that building. If a beam fell on you and trapped you, if you couldn’t escape, I would have died. I know it, Damon.”

He took my mouth then, no longer soothing me, no longer talking. He fondled my breasts through my t-shirt, his hands warm and rough, and I sparked to it, to the pinch of my nipple and the way it shot straight to my clit. Then he turned gentle, his touches feather-light, his mouth nipping at mine softly. He rubbed circles on my back and kissed the corner of my mouth.

“If you don’t want to go any farther... If you were just—”

“Are you kidding me? Jesus, Damon,” I said, exasperated.

“Are you saying you don’t wanna stop then?” he teased, his mouth crooking up at the corner.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

He surged to his feet, taking me with him, lifting me, carrying me to his big bed. I held on, awestruck, feeling like I was in a dream. My lifelong crush, hero firefighter Damon Vance, was taking me to bed to do naughty things to me all night. I wanted to pinch myself, but if this was just a vivid dream, I didn’t want to miss it.

I reached for him, pulled off his navy blue RFFD t-shirt and ran my hands all over his chest, every line of lean muscle traced by my fingers. He wore a chain around his neck, a gold cross. I reached for it, pulled it over his head.

“No offense, but I don’t think the Lord wants to see this,” I said, and he howled with laughter.

“I never dreamed you were like this. That you wanted me like this,” he said.

“Have you looked in the mirror?” I deadpanned. “You saved me, saved my business, put a ring on my finger and helped me scrub mildew off my shop walls and re-grouted the sink. You said you had faith in me when we went in for the loan, and I had cold feet. You say nice things about my cooking, and you held me when I was scared tonight. You’re the first person I want to tell good news, and the person who can help me survive the bad when it comes. Was there ever a moment in your adult life when you realized how I felt about you?” I blurted out.

He held my cheek in his palm, looking at me, his eyes full of something I couldn't explain.

"My sister gave me nonstop shit about how I wasn't marrying you out of the goodness of my heart. Because I always looked at you, and that at the Fourth of July last year she caught me almost falling out of my chair watching you."

"I thought you really liked the potato salad, that you were excited to get some before it was gone," I said, flushing pink with pleasure.

"Oh I wanted to get some of something, but it wasn't potato salad. It was the long-legged woman in the cut-off jeans. You have no idea how many times I thought of you in those shorts and that red bathing suit," he said, swallowing hard.

"Tell me you want me. Just me. Tonight."

"I want you. I want to be with you all night, until we go to sleep as the sun comes up. I want to call in sick and keep you in bed all day with me. Don't think my mind is gonna wander, Trix. It never will," he said.

I bit my lip and then pressed my lips over his and sucked his tongue into my mouth. We made out for a while, all hands and mouths and horny teenage groping. Then the way he kissed me turned dirtier, his hands framing my face, his lips sucking at mine, and his tongue touching the corner of my mouth and retreating, baiting me onward. He rolled me on my back, covered me completely with his body, pressed me into the mattress. He kissed my freckles, my cheek and chin, my neck. I was trembling with just the pleasure of his kisses, his soft caress and the weight of his body pressing me deeper into the plush mattress. His hand slid beneath my oversized t-shirt and his fingers slipped over and around my nipples, teasing in closer and then making me bite my lip and groan when his touch skated away from where I wanted his fingers. Then he worked the shirt off of me and over my head, tossing it someplace. He dipped his head and worked my nipple with his lips and tongue until I cursed and begged and shoved my fingers into his hair. One of his hands stole along my side and down my hip. He hooked his fingers in my panties and, little by little, he drew them down my legs until I kicked them away. Then his hand stroked my stomach, sending little thrills up my body before he slipped his long fingers between my legs, sliding around in my wetness, feeling how swollen and tender I must be from arousal, how my sex-starved body was practically weeping for him.

Two fingers breached my channel, sliding in all the way to the last

knuckle, curling, stroking me inside, hitting places that made me clench my inner muscles and say yes about six hundred times. I spread my legs wider, restless and wanting. He rewarded me by pressing his thumb right over my clit, not rubbing but applying subtle, increasing pressure until I felt like he was pushing an insanity button on my body. My legs were kicking out while he pumped long fingers inside of me, twisting them and pressing and then releasing my clit in a slow rhythm that built up in speed and pressure until I screamed, coming so hard that my contracting inner muscles pushed his fingers out, and I was crying his name. He looked at me, grinning. I pressed my fingertips to his lips and he sucked my fingers, his velvet tongue caressing them until I felt a flutter of pleasure in the aftermath of my orgasm. The guy was good. So fucking good.

I sprawled out on the bed, undone, my limbs loose and relaxed. He smiled a little smugly.

Then he scooted up behind me and pulled me back against his chest, cuddling me close. I felt him wrapped around me, so warm and safe, that I let my eyes drift shut. If it hadn't been for the long, hard cock prodding against my butt I would have drifted off to sleep. Instead I laughed.

"I wore you out too much," he said ruefully.

"Not that much," I said slyly.

I rolled over to face him. He reached out and looped my leg over his hip. He pulled me flush against him, my oversensitive nipples brushing his hard, muscled chest. I tipped my face up and he kissed me deeply, giving me slow open-mouthed kisses until I felt molten and undone. I unzipped his jeans, felt his cock, big and hot in my hand. One hand in the small of my back, he tilted me closer, so our bodies aligned. I could feel the head of his cock hot and slick against my sex. I worked back and forth over his length. Rubbing my slippery folds over his hard rod, teasing him and myself equally. It wasn't easy for him to let me take the lead, but his eyes said he was hypnotized by the rock of my hips, the wetness that awaited him. I wrapped a hand around his cock, shocked by how thick he was. I shoved his jeans down and let him kick them away. His skin was hot and velvety smooth, so soft, and I wanted all of it for myself.

Damon dragged me against him, his rigid length sliding against my folds as he aligned my body with his. He held me hard, pressing me down onto his pelvic bone and rocking. My eyes flew open wide and my mouth gaped. That pressure, relentless and tucked close, inescapably against my clit, was the

sharpest, truest pleasure I had ever felt. I met his eyes, and he leaned his forehead to mine, "Trust me," he said, and gripped my hips, rocking me up and down, keeping my throbbing clit in constant contact with the ridge that made jolts of icy champagne bubbles explode in my chest and shook me with a devastating orgasm, so fast, so fierce. I squealed with bright ecstasy, sounding like I was excited to find exactly what I wanted under the Christmas tree. He laughed.

"God, you're beautiful when you come."

He lowered us gently on to the soft mattress and covered me with his big, hard body. The big shaft between my thighs was twitching and jerking with anticipation. He took one of my legs and hooked it around him. In one slow glide, he impaled me with his cock, stretching me and going in so deep it seemed I could feel him in my throat as I bucked, spreading my legs to make room for him, taking all of him in that heavy, relentless slide punctuated with a thrust as he drove home, and I took him all the way to the hilt.

"All. Mine," he said, his teeth gritted. He drew out and thrust back in, pumping and with every pounding thrust into my body he ground out the words, "All. Mine."

His length was so hard and unforgiving, the girth almost more than I could stand. I arched and trembled, gripped his biceps and tipped my chin up. He dipped his head, sucked my neck as he thrust into my body that was so stretched, so tight. The lewd, wet sound of him pumping into me made me moan with pleasure. I was thrashing and saying his name, my nipples rubbing his chest as he moved rhythmically inside me. With one hand he reached down and scissored my clit between his fingers. "Yes, oh, Damon! Damon!" I cried as I tightened and pulsed around him wildly.

His thrusts grew frantic, less controlled, fast and hard until I felt his arms tense in my grip and he seemed to rear off the bed like some great beast and charge into me with a sound like a roar. I felt the liquid rush of his pulsing climax within me. With a shudder, he collapsed, tried to roll off of me as he did, but I grabbed his back and held him fast to my chest, relishing the weight of him, the sweat filming his hot skin as he gathered me against him, breathing hard.

"My God," he said, rolling onto his back and taking me with him. I nestled into his chest, our legs still tangled together. He had both arms wrapped securely around me, and tucked his chin on top of my head. "That was incredible. We were incredible."

“Yeah,” I said breathlessly, “I didn’t even know it could be like that, with you looking in my eyes and—” I broke off, feeling that I was embarrassing myself.

“You’re right. It’s never been like that before for me.”

After a few moments of catching our breath, I snuggle in close. “I was really scared, Damon. You could’ve been hurt or killed in that fire.”

“It’s the nature of the job. I knew that when I started training for it. I grew up with my dad doing this, and it’s normal for me. You tell him bye, say a prayer that he comes home safe, and let go of the anxiety. Because you can’t control it, any of it. The fact is, the risks of my job make it pretty hard to find a relationship though.”

“I can see why. It would be horrible to live like that, in constant fear that your partner wouldn’t come home, that your boyfriend or your husband would walk out the door and that would be the last time, that he’d just die trying to put out a fire, and maybe somebody he saved is walking around living their life and it cost him his own. I can’t imagine trying to survive that, not knowing if you were coming home every time you went to work.”

I was speaking from the heart, looking up at him, practically begging him to tell me some magic spell that would be a balm for my fear, some reassurance that he’d be fine and come home to me even though that was an impossible guarantee to make. His answer never came. He just broke eye contact and stared up at the ceiling, stroking my hair absently. Damon’s body was still there with me, but his mind was far away. I felt him slip away from me, withdrawing. There was my answer. There was no help for it. If I could even admit how I felt, that I wanted to be with him, it would be a life of uncertainty and fear.

What I had really wanted was for him to say he’d make it okay. Our life together would be worth the risk. Because we belonged together and he’d never felt this way before, that it was unique and perfect and there was nothing he wouldn’t do to be with me. That was a fantasy. No one said things like that. Just because I’d been worried and he’d been willing didn’t mean that what we had meant anything to him. In fact, it was likely that I was a one-night stand who happened to live in his house with him. He had all that adrenaline to burn off from the near-death rescue he made, and there I was, needy and tearful and eager. I had offered him my body, and he’d been happy to take me up on it. Nevertheless, that was physical. Maybe that’s all it would ever be.

Restless and a little ashamed, I knew I couldn't lie there any longer. Not with him staring at the ceiling and trying to pretend I wasn't even there. There was no afterglow, no closeness to bask in. It was time to let it go. I slipped out of his arms, extricating myself as gracefully as I could. I was freezing cold suddenly, and ready to spool up under my covers, close the door and block him out, block out the knowledge of what we'd done and what a damn mistake it had been. I had wanted to be with him like that, and that desire had consumed me. My fear after seeing him on the news had tipped me over into desperation. It was my own fault. I'd walked right into heartbreak with my eyes wide open. That didn't make it one bit easier to take though.

Back in my room, body still throbbing from everything we'd done, a pleasurable ache of satisfaction that was bittersweet, I pulled on pajamas and rolled onto my side to get some sleep. I kept thinking about how I'd felt pacing the floor, sick to my stomach and my throat closing up with sheer terror until he walked in the front door and I knew he was okay. I still trembled remembering it. There was no sleep for me, despite how exhausted I was both physically and emotionally. I didn't know what to do with this, with the feelings I had for Damon, the fact we'd made love and I admitted I couldn't face a future of fearing for his life every time he went to work. There was nowhere to go except down the road of regret.

14

Damon

One crazy night, that's what I told myself. That's all it was. She hadn't been prepared for how frightened it made her when I risked my life in that fire. Emotions ran high, and I was riding the adrenaline from saving a man's life and cheating death. Trixie ran into my arms, so relieved and happy to have me home. Nothing could have kept me from having her that night. She had come to me, tear-stained and needing comfort, saying she'd always cared for me and wanted me. I couldn't resist her under the best of circumstances, and after escaping an inferno with my life I was not at peak willpower. I wanted to celebrate, to slake myself in her sweet body and show her how I longed for her.

I had imagined it a hundred times or more, the way it would be when I finally held her and touched her and made her mine. The sweet vanilla scent of her hair, the taste of her that intoxicated me. Her skin was like silk but warmer, and her need had been as great as my own. It had been unforgettable. And it had left me wanting more. I wanted her in every room of the house, in every way I could think of. Instead of doing away with my distracting attraction for her, taking her to bed had made it worse. I thought about her constantly and fantasized about every possible way I could get her back in my bed. Or on the couch or bent over the kitchen table. It just kindled more hunger in me, and that was frustrating. Because there was no answering longing in her face, no unquenchable desire in her manner. She acted like I didn't exist, or if I did exist, I was someone she treated politely, distantly as a stranger.

The distance itself infuriated me. My hands itched to touch her, to stroke and caress. Every time I so much as passed her in the kitchen I wanted to put my tongue in her mouth, slide my hand up her shirt, initiate another cataclysmic round of bed-rattling sex. I wanted to reclaim what was mine. With my mouth and hands and cock. I hardened and throbbed for her, woke

up with my hand around my dick, stroking, an agony of need and yearning for her, my own familiar fist a poor stand-in for her tight, sweet body. She said she'd dreamed about me taking her for a ride in my truck, taking her parking out by the falls. I thought about that night and day, and I felt obsessed by the idea, by the fact that I hadn't gotten to do so many things with her yet. And she was pulling away from me, not letting me in her life, in her thoughts, in her bed.

It was worse than if I had never had a taste of her at all. I was shaky like an addict who couldn't get a fix. The sheer force of our attraction, the chemistry that snapped between us with the extreme pleasure that lashed through me when I came inside her sweet, hot passage was one of a kind. I needed to make her see that. But I couldn't pressure her. It was bad enough that I'd taken advantage of her worry for me after the fire. It was worse that I wasn't ashamed. I wanted Trixie Owens, no, Trixie *Vance*, back in my bed and I'd do whatever I had to. If it meant seducing her, taking her out to the Rockford Falls for a picnic like a date or making out in the back of the theater in Overton or going someplace fancy for snails and champagne, I didn't care. My obsession with her went beyond the physical, although that need was painful. I wanted her back, on my couch, in my arms, laughing at the dinner table. All of it. If I'd lost her over going to bed together, maybe I could get her back the same way. By making her want me, without the threat of danger, just me.

I made her French toast. I folded laundry that I usually forgot. I left a note on the mirror that I'd missed her. I texted her that she was beautiful, that I was thinking of her. Nothing worked. Nothing except my continuing inability to focus on anything other than how good we had been together.

The way we'd come together, combustible, a force of nature. A galaxy exploding, she had said. It had felt that way, catastrophic, life-altering. Then she slipped away from me. A week went by, and I'd taken myself in hand every night alone in the shower, because my body couldn't forget the way her touch had felt and wanted more. She was in my dreams, smiling slyly over her shoulder, just ahead of me, just out of my reach, confounding and seductive.

In my non-dreaming life, she spent most of her time working on the shop as repairs were done and major cleanup handled. When I repeated my offer to help her put in the flooring she'd gotten at a discount, she texted back that she had it covered. I took that to mean she'd watched a YouTube video and

planned to do it alone or with Nicole and Michelle. I didn't want to think some other guy was lending her a hand. Some guy from the home supply store that offered to come in after work and help her out, maybe take her out for a drink. She'd promised me she wouldn't date anyone, and I knew she was loyal and far from foolish enough to accept a stranger's help like there were no strings attached. But I still worried. It ate away at me.

She was gone all the time, often leaving before me in the morning, getting home late, showering and going to bed. Hardly saying a word to me. She didn't act angry. She just avoided me like I was a rabid raccoon that had infested her house and maybe she was too polite to shoot me. There was something about that silly analogy I wanted to share with her, but I was afraid she wouldn't laugh. I was afraid we'd lost that connection, the easy rapport, the joking around.

I had read too much into our night together probably. I had thought she might be starting to feel the same thing for me that I felt for her. I wanted to stay with her. I never wanted her to move out, just wanted her to move into my bedroom and never leave. I wanted our marriage to be real and lasting. I wanted to tell her that talking over supper together and those incredibly stupid TikToks she sent me during the day were the best parts of my life. That kissing her had felt like coming home. That I bought that ring for her because I was more serious than I had wanted to admit, even in the beginning. When I thought this was a crazy chance to take, a backward way to get the girl I had wanted for a long time.

I was pretty miserable. Then she texted to say she couldn't make it to dinner at my parents' on Thursday because she needed to finish the anti-mildew primer at the shop. So I attended the dinner, made her excuses and ate a ton of my mom's meatloaf. I tried to avoid their questions and suggestions, but they were pretty relentless.

"Make her Mom's sweet potato pie recipe. It's fabulous," Laura said.

"You think everything tastes fabulous," Brody teased. "This baby is like a tapeworm, makes her mama eat constantly."

"Do you know if it's a girl?" I asked. "I wouldn't mind having a cute little niece to spoil."

"You'll spoil it no matter what it is, who are you kidding?" my mom said.

"It's way too early in the pregnancy to tell," Laura said, "we have a gender scan in six weeks. The only way to know this soon is an amnio, and thank goodness we don't need one of those because they usually do them if

there are problems.”

“Well, then we can wait,” I said. “What names are you thinking?”

“I dunno—Trixie after my favorite sister-in-law?” Laura teased. “Please tell me you’re boning her by this time. It’s been weeks.”

“Don’t say boning at the dinner table, Laura,” our mother admonished.

“I am not boning her,” I said, my jaw set. Brody snorted.

“I never knew you not to kiss and tell,” he said.

“Stop it,” I warned. “Talk about your kid or being a cop or something.”

“Get her roses. It always worked with your mother. That’s how we got Laura. I pissed your mom off good, stayed out all night with the guys, then got caught lying that I had to go on call at the station, and I was there all along. She knew I was full of shit. I got her some nice wine, some flowers. One thing led to another, and the next thing you know, we have another kid,” my father said.

“Thanks, Dad,” Laura said, rolling her eyes. “So romantic. You screwed up, bought some flowers and got Mom drunk. Beautiful conception story.”

“What? Like you planned that one you’re carrying now?” our dad said.

“Too soon,” Mom said, clearing her throat. “Don’t upset my pregnant daughter or I might just mix up your pills one of these days, you old fart.”

I hooted with laughter, and Laura joined in. Brody pushed back from the table. “I am staying out of this one. Laura, are you full? Do you need a sheet cake and a gallon of ice cream to settle your stomach?”

“Shut up, it’s your giant baby that’s hungry all the time,” she giggled.

My lifelong best friend leaned in and kissed my little sister’s forehead. She cuddled into the circle of his arm. It had taken some getting used to, seeing them together as a couple. But it made me happier every time I saw them together now. The way he took care of her, and she leaned into him, they just seemed like the right fit. It also made me ache a little, because I was seeing them through the lens of Trixie and me, of having been on the inside of a marriage that felt right no matter how it looked to anyone else.

I had to quit looking at everything like it was about us, about me. It was self-centered and it was starting to seem like I was telling myself fairy tales. Dirty ones most of the time, but that was beside the point. I missed her so much. Even knowing that she had repairs and work to do at the shop didn’t help me shake the feeling she was avoiding me. I sighed heavily and got a beer out of the fridge.

“Lite beer, Ma?” I asked, looking at the can.

“What? There was a sale. It’s not like your father can have any with his kidneys. I like to watch my calories.”

“Okay,” I said, putting the can back.

“Boy, let me take you out for a real drink. No offense, Ma Vance, but I think this man could use a real beer,” Brody said.

“You just don’t wanna help with dishes,” my mom said.

“He’s just gonna abandon his knocked-up wife to go out drinking, I see how it is,” Laura teased.

“You literally drove yourself here. And as you keep reminding me, you’re not disabled, just gestating, right?”

“Ugh, I hate when you listen and repeat it back to me. Get out of here,” she laughed, and he gave her a kiss.

Brody and I headed for the bar. We had barely ordered when he asked what I had up my ass.

“Nothing.”

“Are you having feelings about aging and your mortality since the fire?”

“Uh, no. I’m not quite that deep, Bro,” I laughed, taking a long pull of my beer.

“So if it’s not existential dread, it’s the girl. What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Right. So when ‘nothing’ happened, was it not any good? Did she call you somebody else’s name? Was it my name? Because I can’t help it if all the ladies want me.”

“No, asshole,” I snorted, “the only name she was screaming was mine. But it makes no difference. It only happened once, the night of the fire. Since then she basically runs out of the room anytime she sees me.”

“Maybe she thinks you think it was a mistake and she wants to pretend it didn’t happen?”

“I think she regrets sleeping with me. I told her that I care about her. I was very honest with her, and I didn’t try to act like it was nothing. But afterward, she got all weird about me working in a dangerous job and said she could never live like that. Then she just went back to her room and that’s the literal last conversation we’ve had. She won’t let me help at the shop or anything. She answers my messages, but not like she used to.”

“How was that?”

“Fun and sometimes flirty and she used to send me a bunch of stupid TikToks of animals with Siri narration behind them and stuff. Things she

thought were hilarious, and we'd talk about them later and have these inside jokes about." I shook my head, finishing my beer and ordering another.

"So things were great and then you hooked up."

"Basically. I mean, I'm closer to her than anyone I've ever been with. I never had a girlfriend for very long before, much less lived with one, but a couple weeks with Trixie and I was like, man, this is why guys settle down. They want *this*. They want somebody to laugh with and to know she'll be there every night and have supper together even if it's just some crappy drive-thru tacos I picked up on the way home. Because they're suddenly not crappy if we're eating them together in front of *Die Hard with a Vengeance*."

"That was a stupid movie."

"Shut up. It's a great movie. You're a stupid movie."

"What?" he said, baffled.

"Nothing. I'm just—confused."

"Well, here's my advice, which you have to listen to because I bought you a beer. I acted like an ass trying to keep away from your sister. And then when she got snatched, I would've given anything, both legs, whatever, to have five minutes to tell her how I felt. Because that regret was like a goddamn boulder on my chest. I could've lost her forever and nothing would've been right ever again. And it can happen, man."

"I know. It was horrible the way you lost Missy. I'm glad you're happy again. You deserve it."

"That is—unexpected from you. Thanks. We tried to stay away because we knew you wouldn't approve of us together. There was no denying it though. I reached a point where I didn't care what we stood to lose. It was worse not to be with her. But you have to chance it. No matter what anyone says or how it looks, you know what's right for you. And you fight for it. No matter what it costs you."

"I'm glad you didn't let me stand in your way, Bro," I said, and I meant it.

"Me too. Your sister's an Amazon goddess. I thank God every day for putting her in my life. If that's how you feel about Trixie, like you're the luckiest bastard with thumbs on this planet... then you know what to do. You tell her, and you keep telling her and showing her that you love her until she believes it. Or takes out a restraining order against you, which is where my department comes in."

"Order of protection humor? Really?" I said, rolling my eyes. "Even if

you're right—”

“Which I am.”

“I can't even get her to talk to me. Much less, let me show her. Although I showed her a good time the night of the fire.”

“Are you sure she had a good time?” he asked skeptically.

“Yes. Of course I'm sure. It was really obvious. Three times.”

“Are you sure it wasn't just theatrics?”

“It was *not* theatrics,” I said emphatically, insulted by the suggestion that she had faked it with me. “She was very clear about the fact that she came, and I could tell.”

“Trust me, dude. You can't tell. They can fake where you can't tell. I don't know if they learn it in health class in high school when the boys are doing push-ups or what.”

“Well I know what I felt. What *she* felt,” I said.

“Then you need to talk to the woman, Damon. She's really got you messed up.”

“She's not playing games with me. She's not like that.”

“Okay, what is she like?” he asked in a neutral tone.

“She's sweet and thoughtful and determined and independent and beautiful and—”

“I get it. You've got it bad for her. So go for it. Don't be sad sack who sits around this bar a year from now telling me how much you miss her.”

“What are you saying?” I said.

The idea of letting her go, watching her succeed in her business, knowing I had a small part in that, as she went on her way alone and my role in her life became smaller and smaller, an acquaintance who did her a favor a long time ago—it made me physically sick.

“That's what's going to happen, isn't it?” I asked. It wasn't really a question though. “I'm gonna have to go to her real wedding and shake some asshole's hand and tell him congratulations. Because I let her go.” The horror of that settled around me.

“It doesn't have to be like that. But you have to tell her what she means to you, that you want to make it real. Otherwise, you stick to the plan and watch her walk out of your life. If you want something with Trixie, you have to talk about it. Start by talking about the fact you slept together, and then she avoided you and you were afraid to bring it up.”

“I'm not afraid to bring it up,” I said irritably.

“If you’re not afraid to bring it up, why are you sitting here with me? Because if you weren’t avoiding an important discussion with your wife, I’m guessing you’d be at home about now,” Brody said.

“Whatever. I’m hanging out with my best buddy. You’re a great guy. When you’re not talking about your intimate experiences with my sister.”

“You know I just said that to wind you up.”

“Yeah, and it worked. I’m not even ashamed.”

“Whatever. Tell her the truth. Tell her you didn’t mean for this to happen but you’ve got feelings for her. The fire made you realize it.”

“What if I did intend for it to happen? What if part of me thought this might have been my shot with her?”

“I’m not sure I’d admit that as a strategy. It seems manipulative.”

“You’re right, but I also don’t want to lie to her. She means too much to me.”

“Lead with that. It sounds sincere.”

“It is sincere. I’m not trying to sound sincere, I am being.”

“Don’t ignore this advice. Tell her you have feelings for her and be totally serious. No sarcasm. No trying to lighten the mood. Don’t mention anything that doesn’t show her in the best light. She’s an angel. Okay?”

“Right. Angel,” I said, a half-smile sneaking in.

“If you want her, don’t give up.”

“I won’t. I don’t want to lose her,” I said. “Let’s go. I need to get home.”

All the way to my house, I blasted old country music, which was mostly depressing and about broken hearts. All those sad cowboys who’d lost their true love forever were enough to underline the fact that I didn’t want to lose my wife.

I unlocked the front door, half of me hoping she’d run into my arms like she did the other night. That had been probably the best moment of my adult life. I’d survived a fire, saved a man, got the girl. That was when the credits should have rolled, Hollywood style. The lamp beside the couch was on, and when I closed the door behind me, I looked around for Trixie.

There she was, asleep on the couch. She had her phone on her chest, her head tipped to the side, like she’d nodded off while reading something. She had a blanket drawn over her lap, her work clothes still on. She’d been putting in long hours, hours without me. I wanted to spend more time with her, watch more trilogies of declining quality like *Back to the Future* and the *Karate Kids* we’d binged one Sunday afternoon. I wanted more of her in my

life, in my arms.

I'd told her weeks ago she was prettier than the flowers in her shop. That hadn't been nearly the truth. She was prettier than anything I'd ever seen, from the sweep of dark lashes across her cheeks to the droop of her bottom lip as she slept. I felt the heavy tug of desire for her, but I forced it away. This was not just desire, though. It was tenderness, affection. I brushed her cheek with the backs of my fingers lightly, thinking how much I liked having her here and coming home to her. This girl, the one I was just helping out, had somehow made a place in my life for herself until she took up so much room I couldn't imagine my home without her in it or my weekends without her, my random Thursday nights—nothing would be any good anymore without Trixie in my life the way she was now or even closer.

For now, she was exhausted, and I could tuck her into bed. I heaved a heavy sigh. I wanted to take her to my bed, hold her while she slept. But I knew that would make her uncomfortable when she woke up there, wondering how she got there or what we'd done that she didn't remember. So I did the grown man thing to do. I picked her up, blanket and all, and carried her to her own room, to her own bed, and lay her down carefully so I didn't disturb her sleep. Sure, I wanted her to wake up, find me carrying her, and be so overwhelmed with the romance that she wound her arms around my neck and kissed me.

It seemed like I was obsessed with a Hollywood ending.

But she stayed stubbornly asleep, her head lolling onto the pillow without so much as a murmur. I took the phone from her hand and plugged it into her charger by the bed. I knelt beside the bed and looked at her for a moment, studying her pretty face while she was relaxed.

“How did I miss seeing you sooner?” I whispered, barely above a breath, “when you were always this person, the only one I'd want to be with.” I pressed a kiss on her forehead softly, barely brushing her warm skin with my lips. “It's a good thing you're asleep. I would've had to tell you I think I love you,” I whispered, a fond and rueful smile taking up residence on my face. It made me feel good that I was the one who got to tuck her into bed when she was completely wiped out. I even drew the blanket down to cover her feet, switched off her lamp and left her in peace.

Dream of this, I willed her silently, dream of me putting you to bed as tenderly as a lover, protective and devoted.

15

Trixie

I woke up in my bed, covered with the blanket from the couch. I looked around, not remembering how I got there. Frantically, I glanced beside me to see if he had gotten into bed with me, if there was a naked man beside me. I was alone, and breathed a sigh of relief. Okay, maybe I was a tiny bit disappointed not to find Damon naked in my bed, but I was relieved to find he was still such a gentleman, that he hadn't intruded without my agreement. In fact, I felt—heart-warmed, if that's even a word. To think he'd probably carried me to bed, to *my* bed, with no design other than to make sure I was comfortable. I looked over to check the time, and saw my phone on the bedside table. It was plugged in. I smiled, but it was almost a teary smile, knowing how thoughtful that was of him to charge my phone for me. It was 7:20—I had obviously forgotten to set my alarm. When I set the phone back down, I found a piece of paper I didn't remember putting there. I picked it up, saw that it was folded in half, *Trix* written on the outside of it.

I sat up in bed, unfolded it and read his note:

Good morning,

You are so beautiful even when you're asleep, that it was all I could do not to kiss you awake, Sleeping Beauty style. I knew how tired you were, and how you're determined to do all this yourself. Let me help if I can. I've missed you.

I made breakfast. Yesterday I stopped at the bakery and got the good sourdough you like. It makes kickass French toast which I left in the skillet on the stove. Take the lid off and heat it up so it's crispy. Don't microwave it—you deserve better than mushy toast, even if it takes a whole five minutes of your busy day.

Did I mention I've missed you? I'm not working this weekend. Ghostbusters and popcorn?

Damon

I smiled to myself, and thought this must be what beaming felt like, when you're so happy that your cheeks hurt from grinning too hard. That was the sweetest thing anyone had ever said to me, and here it was, written down where I could keep it forever. I actually pressed the note to my chest and held it, like I was Anne of Green Gables or some other melodramatic girl in an old-timey romance story. His words felt sweet and funny, like he was, but also secret, intimate. A note a man writes to his wife when he leaves before she's awake, when he's made her breakfast.

I grabbed my phone to text him: *I love the note. I love everything. I love you.* I stopped myself before I hit send, my face flaming. I couldn't do that in a text message. I couldn't risk saying it at all. He'd done so much for me, for my business and been such a good friend, I couldn't impose on him that way, expect him to deal with my messy feelings when he was such a good guy and it would be so awkward. He was nice to me, thoughtful. It was a big leap from being an extra-nice roommate to imagining he felt the same way I did. I was reading too much into a couple of really considerate gestures on his part. Michelle brought me a muffin sometimes for breakfast and I didn't go around trying to French kiss her. This was probably like that, I told myself, so calm the fuck down.

I settled for texting: *Thanks for breakfast that was so sweet!*

Because I was a damn coward.

I heated my breakfast and was eating it when I got a reply: *You better not put that kickass toast in the microwave.*

I laughed and sent back: *So yummy ty*

You microwaved it didn't you. You're killing me.

I shook my head, grinning my face off, *You will never know. Gotta keep the mystery alive.*

RU flirting with me, wife???

Never. Too mysterious to flirt. Just eating toast and kicking ass.

He sent back a heart eye emoji. Did that mean he loved my sarcastic reply about flirting? Did that mean he loved texting me? That he loved the French toast? That he loved me? Did it mean I was fucking thirteen years old and trying to analyze an emoji? Yeah, that last one, definitely. I wanted to smack myself in the face. I dumped the rest of my toast and got ready for work.

Things were going great on that end. My post-coital panic had sent me into a frenzy of workaholic hiding out. So the repairs had been finished, and Nicole and my dad had helped me with the laminate flooring I got and helped

me patch some drywall. I repainted it a soft sage green with white trim. I had gotten a slightly cheaper replacement cooler and used the rest of the insurance money to help cover the cost of the flooring. I put in a huge chalkboard I got at a yard sale and practiced some hand lettering off a YouTube video till I could manage some fancy-looking writing for a daily quote about flowers. It made the shop feel more like mine now that I owned the building and had redone it with a nice, clean fit and finish to my own taste.

I'd ordered new stock, advertised a grand re-opening special for the first week for buy one get one half off bouquets and potted plants. I was running a 10% off on grapevine wreaths with silk flowers and bows I'd made and 15% off artificial cemetery arrangements, too. I made some up in advance and got my part-time help rehired as well. The people in Rockford Falls and even as far away as Overton had been so good to me, placing orders as soon as they saw I was ready to open back up. It seemed like everyone I knew was ready for a new wreath for their door or a bouquet of flowers to cheer up a friend. I was thrilled to be flooded with orders, doing the math in my head as I wrote out instructions for each arrangement.

I loved getting to work with flowers again. I was crazy about the redecorated shop, but fixing it up wasn't the kind of work I loved. I liked coaxing scrawny little plants to get stronger and bloom, loved arranging even the humblest stock flowers into a pretty arrangement that would brighten someone's mood. I delved into my list of things to do and things to get ready. Michelle and Nicole were coming to help after they got off work around four, but it was just me and my part-timer, Cathy, racing around getting bouquets ready and ringing up customers. I had Cathy call her cousin to come make some deliveries because there were more orders than I had room to store! Every surface on the counter, worktable, and desk were covered, and I couldn't risk putting them on the floor where they might get knocked over.

When Josh arrived, we loaded his car, each item tagged carefully with the name and address of the recipient. I sent Cathy in back to make more bows, and I manned the counter while I tried to multitask and arrange some roses in a vase. By the time Michelle and Nicole arrived, I practically tackled them with relief. Michelle handed me a great big Dr. Pepper from the convenience store with lots of ice in it, and I slurped it down gratefully.

My best friends got right down to work, with Nicole barking out instructions and Michelle gathering materials and setting them up for me to

fill the orders. With Cathy's bows and Nicole filling out cards, and Cathy wrapping in tissue or ringing up a receipt, we got an assembly line going and moved a lot of orders through quickly. I felt so relieved after a harrowing day. Business was great, and it wasn't just a one-day surge. I had orders coming in on the phone and website for the rest of the week as well. I took a quick break to add more flowers to my fresh inventory that was arriving day after tomorrow.

When I placed my order, I tacked on a few stuffed animals, scented candles and homemade soaps, and angel knickknacks because several customers had asked if we had any plans to start having gifts as well. I'd have to get the little set of shelves from my parents' garage that used to be in my bedroom as a kid and paint them to showcase the gift items on. I wasn't going to invest in a display case or anything yet, but it seemed like a good idea to expand into small gifts as well as flowers. I usually only kept that stuff around Valentine's Day, but there was a demand in town for it now. Part of me couldn't wait to tell Damon how great things were going and how I'd ordered candles and stuff. I knew he'd have ideas on what to add to inventory and I wondered if we should ask our moms what they thought, since a lot of my customers were in their age group.

"Whew, it's six-thirty," Nicole said. "I'm starving. Do you want me to order pizza or go get something?"

"Uh..." I said. "I hadn't really thought about it. But I'll totally feed my help. Order whatever you want. My treat."

"Ooh," Michelle piped up, "then I want lobster and champagne!"

"Diamonds, I want some diamonds. I'm ordering those, too," Nicole teased.

"Oh, shut up. I meant you can have BBQ or pizza or whatever," I rolled my eyes.

I heard a knock at the door and looked up to see Rachel with three bags of food and a drink carrier from the diner. I opened the door for her.

"What's all this?" I asked. "You didn't have to bring us dinner!"

"Oh, honey, it wasn't me. I'm just the delivery girl. Feel free to tip big, though," she laughed. "Looks like somebody doesn't want you girls going hungry tonight."

"Who sent all this?" I said.

"Your hubby, of course. Sweetest thing I ever heard, he calls up and says, 'my wife's working tonight, it's the first day the shop's been back open, and

she's having a real big day. I gotta work till ten or I'd take it by myself," Rachel said.

I blushed while Nicole and Michelle made obnoxious kissing noises behind me. I fished out a twenty and handed it to Rachel for her trouble and took the bags from her.

When she was gone, I flapped my hand at the girls to get them to stop acting stupid about Damon sending us food.

"It's your favorite! Even the pie!" Michelle swooned. "He really pays attention."

"You bring me a muffin sometimes. It's the same thing."

"It's not. Because I'm not trying to get laid. You've always had a crush on him. So I think this is a pretty clear signal from him. It's a total boyfriend thing to do."

"Early boyfriend, first flush of love, just started sleeping together boyfriend thing to do," Nicole corrected. "Super thoughtful, shows how well he knows you and also shows off a little in front of your friends. No offense to my friend the florist here, but it's better than sending you flowers at work or something. It's food. Food is the universal symbol of love."

"No, flowers are," I protested.

"You say that because you sell flowers," Michelle said. "I'd rather have a burger. No question."

"He probably asked Rachel what we all like, since she always takes our orders at the diner," I said.

"Whatever, he likes you. Your husband likes you. What a concept!" Nicole insisted, laughing.

We all bickered and giggled while we ate our delicious, greasy meal. By the time we closed the place at 7:30, everything had been delivered or picked up by the customers. I'd made up the morning orders as well, and they were chilling safely in the cooler. We cleaned up, I took out the trash, and I thanked the girls.

"I owe you drinks," I promised.

"Lots of drinks. Saturday," Michelle said emphatically.

"We'll have drinks on Saturday," I promised. "I'm closing at three on Saturday so I can get everything cleaned up and in order for Monday."

"We'll see you Saturday, then," Nicole said. "Unless Michelle brings you a muffin so you'll sleep with her. Tell Damon we said thanks for supper."

"Nah, I think she'll thank him for all of us," Michelle said archly.

I stuck my tongue out at her and grabbed my keys so we could all walk out together.

By the time I got home, it was nine-thirty, and I wanted a shower and to go to sleep. I also remembered that Damon got off work at ten. I could get a shower, wait up for him and, as Michelle said, thank him for all of us. I jumped in the shower and blasted myself with hot water, scrubbing all over with my coconut body wash and shaving my legs. My hair was clean and I even used the blow dryer on it for a few minutes so it wasn't a wet, lanky mess when he got home. I put on my nice pajamas, brushed my teeth twice. And flossed. And used mouth wash. I wanted to be minty fresh when he came in the door.

I was in the kitchen trying to decide if it was still too warm out to make him hot cocoa or if I had time to stir up some brownie mix and throw a pan in the oven. I heard his truck and dashed into the living room, not unlike an eager Labrador Retriever, I thought ruefully. I was smiling, wondered if I should go get a beer out of the fridge for him or if that was too 1950s.

Damon walked through the door. He was tall and broad and handsome, every line of his face tired and discouraged looking. A day's worth of stubble was auburn and brown along his square jaw. I stepped forward of my own volition, the words of thanks for the French toast and for dinner dying on my tongue. I went to him, put my arms around him and hugged him. His arms closed around me instantly, hugging the hell out of me.

"Oh, God, I needed this, Trix," he said. "After the day I had."

"What's wrong?" I asked, hugging him tight. He released me and I rocked back on my feet.

He toed off his boots and sat on the couch. His dry-fit RFFD shirt clung to lines of muscle and squeezed his strong arms. I tried not to ogle, but navy blue was a hell of a color on a man with eyes like his and any color was awesome on a body like that. I cleared my throat, sat beside him but not too close. I curled my legs up under me and leaned my elbow on the back of the couch.

"Well, I got my ass handed to me by the chief today."

"Why? You're a hero!" I said indignantly.

"Easy, tiger," he chuckled, "sure, it looks that way from seeing it on the news, but the film from the Overton chief's bodycam and the orders I was given—I went against a direct order to stand back, to go for containment since we couldn't extinguish the blaze. I went back in and searched for that

guy on nothing but a hunch. No one indicated there was anybody in the building still, and if there were, it was likely they were already dead from the smoke. I took a hell of a chance, and I'm not sorry I did it, but I'm suspended for a couple days and got a scolding that'd make your ears bleed. Not even my mama can make a man feel worse than the chief can."

"That is bullshit!" I burst out. "That man would be dead without you. If you'd listened to orders, and he died, how would you all feel? How would his family feel knowing that nobody went in after him and he was gone? I thought your job was to put out fires and save people from them, not to kiss the Overton chief's ass when he was being a lazy bastard!"

"Okay, I take it back. The chief has nothing on you when it comes to a blistering set down. Damn, girl," he chuckled ruefully. "I'm glad you're on my side."

"You bet I'm on your side. I don't care if it says in the rule book somewhere that you're supposed to obey without question. You're not a robot, and your instincts are good. You were right to go in that building even though it scared the hell out of me. You saved that man's life, and you were willing to sacrifice your own on the chance that there was a person dying in there who needed your help—" I swiped tears off my face, angry ones. "Damon, anybody who says you should've done different is a goddamn coward more concerned with how it looks on paper than what it's like to live with the choices we make. I'm calling the Overton chief this minute. I want an apology, and I want it now!"

He caught my wrist, "I believe you'd call him."

He pulled me across his knees and hugged me. "You are such a spitfire when it comes to the people you're loyal to. It's one of my favorite things about you, Trix. But you can't yell at the Overton chief and my boss and make them apologize. They go by the rules, and I didn't. I knew better. I made the choice, I don't regret it, and I'll take the consequences. They're not gonna fire me, they just don't want to set an example of firefighters ignoring orders and trying to be a cowboy and getting their asses killed because they'd see me get away with it. He's making an example of me. I don't even think he disagrees with what I did. I understand why he's doing it. It just aggravates me. That's all. And here you are, ready to poke the devil himself in the eye for me. Goddamn, Trix."

Damon leaned back, cradled me against his chest and kissed the top of my head. "Thank you," he said. "It means everything to me that you'd defend

me like that. You waited up for me, didn't you?"

"Yeah," I said, leaning back from him a little and looking in his eyes. He brushed a lock of hair back behind my ear, gave me the most tender smile.

"I'm glad you did. Did Rachel bring y'all some supper?"

"Yeah, she did, thank you. It was great. Above and beyond the call of duty, really," I said bashfully, sliding off his lap to sit beside him.

"I wish I could've been there, but they needed me for a double shift today."

"So the same guy who bitched you out made you work a double? He's got some nerve," I said.

"Can I kiss you?" he said suddenly. I looked away, and I nodded.

He pinched my chin between his thumb and forefinger, made me look at him.

"Is that a yes?" he asked mischievously.

"Yeah," I said, knowing I blushed bright pink.

Damon cupped my face in his hands and kissed me, softly at first, his lips nipping at mine, clinging and tugging before he worked my mouth open and slid his tongue inside. I held his wrists, anchoring him to me, licking his tongue as he worked it in my mouth, drawing curls of pleasure all over my body with just the stroke of his tongue between my lips. My body seemed to go liquid, to melt and flow, loose and canting toward him. A hum of sensation started between my legs, so that every time the tip of his tongue teased the roof of my mouth or mated with my own, a shiver of pleasure shot down to my clit.

We sat there forever, kissing back and forth, and when he reached into my hair, tugged out my ponytail holder and combed his fingers through my damp tresses, I felt like I'd been stripped bare. It felt wanton and so good, so pleasurable. I pressed my body to his, the satiny pajamas catching and clinging on his shirt, my nipples sensitive to the friction. I rose up on my knees, his hands sliding down the curve of my ass and then up under my pajama top, rough calloused hands abrading the bare, warm skin of my back. I know I moaned at his touch, skin on skin. I swung one knee over his legs and settled back on his lap. Damon pulled me against his chest roughly, hands still on my bare back. He crushed me in his arms.

"I was just going to kiss you, I swear to God," he said raggedly. "I got carried away. I'm sorry."

He released me, and I sat back, self-conscious. Straddling him. I was

awkward and embarrassed. This was so bad. I nearly swallowed my own tongue as I climbed off him quickly. He dropped his head into his hands, elbows on his knees. His posture was completely shutting me out, caging himself in. I laid one palm on his back tentatively.

“You don’t need to apologize to me. You had a bad day. I sort of took advantage,” I said, uncertain.

“You don’t owe me comfort. You don’t owe me anything, Trix, I want you to know that. I’d never think you did.”

His voice was almost anguished, and it twisted something inside my chest uncomfortably. Did he think I’d slept with him last week out of gratitude? I got to my feet and shuffled off to my bedroom.

“Good night,” I said half-heartedly as I closed myself off once again.

16

Damon

Driving by her shop, I could see how busy she was. It was the first full day of her reopening, and I knew she'd have a crowd. Trixie had worked so hard to make this shop a reality, to reopen it better than ever. It was good to see her succeed at it, and to know I had a little part in it. I called the shop during my lunch break.

"This is Trixie, how can I help you?" Her voice was brisk, rushed, lots of noise in the background. I grinned to myself.

"Well, you can tell my wife I'll take care of supper tonight. It sounds like she's having a busy day," I said.

"Oh, Damon! You wouldn't believe it. People around here have been so good to me." She sounded happy.

"I'll see you later. I'm proud of you, Trix," I said.

When I got off work, I picked up her favorites from the Chinese restaurant and had them waiting for her. I wanted her to know she had my full support, that I was happy for her success. That I wasn't going to come home and whine about work and try to grope her again. So instead of sending flowers, which she'd actually have to select and arrange for herself, I was trying to say it with Chinese takeout. That I was here for her, for whatever she needed. I wouldn't pressure her again for more than she might want to give.

Still, I opened a bottle of her favorite wine, a chardonnay that probably didn't go with egg drop soup and shrimp fried rice and egg rolls, but I knew she'd like it anyway. I just wanted to spoil her a little. Not with any expectations, just to show her I was proud of her. That I saw how hard she worked, and I was happy that she was getting the attention she deserved with the reopening. Now if I could just manage to say that to her without tripping over my words or saying something sexually suggestive, that would be the goal.

Staying home from work had made me restless. I'd worked out and returned some library books and got new ones to read. I read half a mystery, got impatient and I showered. I had turned on the cute little robot vacuum and folded up some towels from the dryer. It had seemed like a long day, waiting for her to get home. When I finally got the Chinese food, I lit a couple candles and opened the wine. I was so excited for her to arrive that I panicked a little. Was I making it too sexy with the candles and wine? Should I turn all the lights on and maybe change out of my button-down and put on a crappy t-shirt from the Little League team? I started to freak out like I was a teenager going on my first date with a girl I really liked. *Remember, you're a firefighter, a devoted son and friend, and also her freaking husband,* I told myself. *So quit acting like a nervous kid!*

I tried pacing but it didn't calm me down. When she opened the door, I was on the living room floor doing pushups.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" she burst out.

"Uh, yeah I was just—doing pushups. Why?"

"Well, first of all, that's a weird place to do pushups, but mainly I saw you down there and thought, oh my God is he having a stroke? Did he fall down?"

"And what? Break my hip? I'm not that much older than you, Trix," I said, rolling my eyes as I got to my feet. I felt a little foolish, but her overreaction helped a little.

"I don't know exactly. I just don't—I'm not used to coming in from work and finding a grown man sprawled out on the floor in front of the door like that."

"Well you should probably get used to it. I tend to do it a lot," I told her.

She nodded her head. "Noted. Hey, what smells so good?"

"I told you I'd take care of supper," I said with a smile. "It's from that Chinese place you like."

"The one in Overton? I can't believe you went all the way there for takeout. But you were stir crazy, weren't you?" she asked.

"I was just fine," I said defensively.

"Vacuum's done, laundry's going cause I can hear it. You worked out, went to Overton for food. What else? Oh—new books. Library, too then."

"What are you, a crime scene detective?" I asked. "So I ran some errands and decided to be productive around the house. I've been slacking on the laundry and stuff. You've been busy, and it's not all your job anyway. I was

just making up for lost time.”

“So another three days of this and you’ll have re-roofed the entire place, right?”

“Maybe,” I said, “come eat dinner. You can give me crap about doing laundry while you eat. Tell me about your day. Since I’m a shut-in and everything.”

Trixie kicked off her shoes and set them by the door, left her purse on the table, and washed up at the sink. “This is really nice,” she said. “I know it’s hard for you to be home when you’re used to spending so much time at the station. Thanks for getting supper.”

“You want to make fun of me so bad right now, but you’re afraid it’s mean,” I observed.

“Yeah,” she sagged into her chair. “I mean, there you are, facedown on the hardwood floor. What am I supposed to think? You need one of those Life Alert call buttons or something!”

“What, like Mildred fell out of her chair reaching for the remote? I’m glad that’s how you think of me.”

“Have some soup. It’s nice and thin, and no big pieces you can choke on,” she teased.

“I’m not elderly. I have teeth and they work.”

“Right, whatever, old man,” she laughed.

“You come here!” I started to say, ready to grab her and kiss her, reaching for her, but I stopped myself and went and sat down abruptly across from her and started to serve myself some noodles.

She looked at me funny, but sat down and quietly scooped rice onto her plate and sprinkled it with soy sauce. We ate in silence for a few minutes, and I noticed she must’ve been starving. She ate the whole plate of food and dished out more, nodding at me appreciatively, her mouth full. I scooted some broccoli and chicken around on my plate with a fork, wondering where to begin with her. Should I just tell her what Brody had told me to? That I cared about her and the fire made me see how much? I was hesitant to use his words, to oversimplify that much. But I was afraid if I tried to explain how I felt, how I’d been attracted to her for years, how I’d held back because I knew if it didn’t work out, my mom would kill me—that sounded strange and immature. As if I were being anything but strange and immature deciding over what to say while she ate massive amounts of Chinese takeout and waited for me to start talking.

“How did it go at work?” I asked.

“So great. You know yesterday was basically just the beginning, not open full hours and just making sure I had everything ready. Well, it was way busier than I expected and you sending supper was fabulous. But today, well it made yesterday look like a cake walk. So many people just stopped in to pick up a bouquet and tell me the place looked great and they were glad to see me open it again. A lot of people from my parents’ church and stuff just dropped by and said such kind things and looked around and bought a plant or a wreath. It was wonderful. I felt so much love being poured out over me from the community. I had Cathy and her cousin and another girl from over at the community college come in to help out. The college girl is doing it for practicum experience in her business class so it’s literally free help. And I have so many orders to fill. I’ll be really late tomorrow. So you can exercise by the door all you want, I promise.”

“I’m really proud of you,” I said. “But I never doubted you’d make a success of it; that you’d make that shop take off in a big way once you could do things the way you wanted them done. Since I’m technically off work, I could lend a hand tomorrow if you want, deliver flowers or sweep the shop and work the cash register, make sure your smoke alarm batteries are up to date,” I offered.

“I’d—really appreciate that. If you have an hour or two, I mean. You don’t have to.”

“I know I don’t have to. I just offered. And I’m literally free help, too.”

“You’re a lifesaver, Damon. But you knew that. I mean, that’s what got you in trouble at work, and what got you married to me. Saving people.”

I watched her take a drink of wine, and I wondered if she thought I was just a guy with a hero complex. I mean, I probably did have a hero complex. But that wasn’t why I helped her.

“At this rate, I’ll have you paid back in no time,” she said. “Well, okay, not no time exactly, but in a lot less time than I had figured. As it is, I found some really good deals and did a lot of work myself and didn’t end up using the entire balance of the loan, so I was able to return some of the principal unused. That reduces the payment on the loan and boosts what I can pay you every month, too.”

“Don’t start paying me till we agreed on it, six months, right?” I said. “Quit putting pressure on yourself. Reinvest in the business if you need to. Don’t cut corners on my account. You can take your time, Trix,” I said. It

made me uncomfortable, her talk of less time, of paying me back faster, basically of cutting all ties between us. It brought back forcibly the image I'd thought of when I was out with Brody—of her walking out of my life, a grateful acquaintance. I'd be invited to her wedding, I knew. To some other guy. I swallowed hard then, drained my glass of wine.

She stood up to clear the plates, but I got up, too. I crowded her up to the counter, looked down into her eyes. I ran my hand down her arm and took her hand, held it in mine.

“I need to talk to you, Trix. I've been putting it off, but I can't wait anymore. Leave the dishes. Let's talk.”

She chewed her lip, and I couldn't resist. “Let me bite that lip, then,” I said with a dark smile.

I covered her mouth with mine, softly taking her full bottom lip and nipping it with my teeth. Her arms went around my neck and I pulled her fully against me, groaning at the relief of the contact. I loved the length and shape of her, the way she fit against me. Everything about holding her, kissing her felt so good and right.

“I'm so proud of you, Trix. And I'm so crazy—” I was nipping at her lips, a sensuous, slow, insane kiss.

Then my phone rang, the bleating urgent sound of my mom's ringtone. We broke apart and I grabbed the phone. “Sorry,” I said to her and then answered.

As soon as I was off the phone, I scrubbed a hand through my hair and turned to Trixie who had cleared the table and started the dishes by then.

“I need to go over to my parents' house. My mom needs my help with the water heater. Can we—”

“Go on,” she said with a sad smile. “They need you. You know, you're a really good guy,” she said. I wasn't sure why she sounded so resigned, so unhappy.

“You get some rest. You've got another big day tomorrow,” I said.

When I took off in my truck to go see about the water heater at my parents' house, I really felt uncomfortable. I had a hunch that maybe I should've stayed and talked to my wife. But she'd said to go on, and Mom needed my help. I could've called Brody to see if he'd handle it, but I didn't want to call him away from home to help my parents with my sister pregnant. I'd always been around to help them out, and just because I was fake married didn't mean I wasn't available to them. They hadn't even interrupted our

dinner, really. We were done eating by the time they called. And it was another excuse to put off a pretty high-stakes conversation that I wasn't looking forward to having with Trixie.

So there I went, to my mom's, where I got the water heater working again and talked to my dad about my suspension again even though we'd already gone over it on the phone when it happened. My mom gave me some cake—made with sugar substitute due to my dad's diabetes—and demanded to know if it was too dry. So I sat down at the kitchen table and ate it.

“You know the chief don't mean nothin' by laying you off a couple days, boy. No reason to mope around. You ain't in trouble and you know you did right. Every man there would stand up for you if they'd tried to sack you over it.”

“Nobody's firing me. But I wanted to apply for the assistant chief position in a couple months when it comes up, and this'll be on my record now. Like I'd be a crappy leader because I'm impulsive or something,” I confessed.

“Nobody thinks that. You need bold men in leadership, not like that lily-livered jerk from Overton.”

“Lazy bastard, is what Trixie called him,” I recalled with a half-smile.

“She ain't half wrong either, boy. I don't know a lot about him, but I do know that I haven't heard much good about him. Have you considered going for his job? Bigger department, more money, and men will follow you the way they don't much like to listen to him.”

“Uh, I hadn't figured on moving to Overton. I like Rockford Falls, and being close to you guys, coaching with Brody. Also, his job isn't open,” I said in protest.

“I was just thinking out loud, if a man has a family to support, extra money doesn't hurt,” my dad said.

“I don't have a family to support, Dad. My temporary wife has a job. You might wanna order Mom some flowers from her,” I suggested, a little grumpy.

“How's the cake, son?” Mom asked.

“It's good,” I said. “I like the cinnamon topping.”

“I'm glad. Your dad scraped that part off and wanted frosting,” she rolled her eyes. “And I don't need flowers. I got both my boys here and your sister's making me a grandma finally. I have all I want.”

I kissed her cheek, “Thanks, Ma.”

“You might learn something from me. Be happy with what you have right now. Things could always be worse.”

“Wow, way to be an optimist, Mom,” I chuckled, not quite finding it funny.

Because she was right. Things could always be worse, like when Brody’s prediction came true and I lost Trixie because I didn’t speak up for her soon enough. I could just let her slip away and tell myself I was being a good friend. But good friends, they sometimes got left in the dust.

Trixie

I was nervous about Damon coming in to help at the shop. What if he joked around so much I didn't get everything done? What if I spent so much time staring at his butt that I just ignored all the customers? I hardly slept that night worrying about it, and when he got home, I was hiding in my room pretending to sleep because I wanted to avoid whatever God-awful, letting-me-down-easy conversation he had been setting me up for when his phone rang.

The kiss had been amazing, but as I had every time, I felt like he'd just lost control of himself for a moment, given in to an impulse he'd been fighting. Like he was kissing me almost against his will. Like he couldn't help but indulge in me for a moment, like I was some forbidden treat. It felt delicious and sad at the same time, like I could only have him when he let down his guard or his almighty sense of responsibility for everyone else.

I had a lot going for me in my life. Great friends, loving family, my shop reopening and getting tons of business. I should be able to concentrate on that, and not feel sorry for myself at all that a great guy and family friend had done me a tremendous favor but didn't like me the same way I liked him. Okay, I had fallen for the man. No one could blame me because he was incredible. The best thing that ever happened to me. I wanted to write songs or poems for him. I wanted to write him a long, mushy letter that would embarrass us both and make things even worse. Because Damon Vance had helped me to become a better version of myself, with a pathway to success and happiness open before me. Just because he didn't want my devotion didn't make it disappear. So I'd have to live with it, with knowing I had feelings for him that he didn't return. I sighed and went ahead with my day.

I only reread that note I'd saved from him a couple times before putting it in my jewelry box where I kept all my precious things. I had a lot more precious things than I had jewels to take up room in it, after all. I had ticket

stubs from when Michelle, Nicole and I had gone to see Justin Timberlake in Atlanta a couple of years ago. I also had a business card from the florist shop in Savannah where I'd seen such gorgeous, naturalistic arrangements incorporating tall native grasses for texture that it inspired me, and I saved the card to remind me to think outside the box and be creative. I had the earrings my parents gave me, tiny pearls, when I graduated high school, and the clipping from the newspaper that my sister had saved which was really a wedding announcement but listed my shop as the floral designer. A ring from a stall at a flea market, turquoise and silver, that an ex-boyfriend had bought me a long time ago. And the note from Damon, my most precious of all my sentimental keepsakes.

At work, I made lists, entered receipts in the spreadsheet and totaled up expenses. I checked my budget, made adjustments to my incoming orders accordingly, and double-checked everything to be sure. I was making money. Good money. Pay-back-the-fake-husband money as well as pay-back-the-bank money. My tenant's rent covered the mortgage at my house, and my only living expenses were the portion of the utilities I made Damon accept for letting me live with him. So it was all being saved for payments. That was my big plan now. To pay ahead on the business loan, and to give Damon a divorce present, a lump sum installment on the down payment he'd insisted on making to help out with buying the building. If everything went to plan, I'd definitely be able to make a dent in what I owed him, and encourage him to use part of it to take a trip. I knew he hadn't taken a real vacation since he was a kid and went with his family. He'd had a trip to Mexico planned with some buddies, but that had been right around the time Brody's first wife had died and he'd skipped the vacation to be there for his best friend. Because that's the kind of guy Damon was. The kind I couldn't help but fall for.

I turned on my hotplate and seared the stems of the flowers I was going to work with. I wanted to get a couple of Monday's orders ready, and I wasn't going to risk them wilting in the cooler over Sunday. Searing the tips in a skillet made them last longer, so I could depend on their freshness. I laid out what I needed, recorded what stock I was using on an inventory sheet for final pricing, and got to work trimming and sorting, arranging and binding until the bouquet was complete. The anemones and clematis were magenta and purple, striking, vivid colors that seemed to warm up the backroom just by being there. I made the arrangement sensuous, lush, to let the broad, drooping petals show their sexy, velvety potential. I snapped a picture and

posted it to my shop's Insta news feed because I was so proud of it. Soon, I had a notification that there was a comment—four flame emojis from Damon.

Very funny, fireman, I replied in the comments and then put my phone away. I felt exposed somehow, that he'd seen the bouquet that I had made of bright, pulsing colors in an arrangement I found undeniably sexy. Like he'd walked in on me in the shower or something. But I'd posted the picture knowing people would see it, so that was that.

If it made me breathe harder to think of Damon seeing those flowers, to wonder if he saw anything sensuous about them, I had to put that aside. There wasn't going to be some fantasy moment. *A fantasy where he walked in my shop and locked the door and flipped the sign to Closed. Where he crossed the room to me in four long strides and put his hands on my worktable, palms down, and demanded to know if I had been thinking of him when I made that bouquet, when I took that picture. I'd lick my lips and nod. Of course I thought of him. Everything made me think of him. Then he'd come around the table, slip his hand into my hair and bring my lips to his for a fiery kiss. "What if I told you that fire is no joke to a fireman, it's dangerous. It consumes. The way wanting you consumes me. There's nothing left in me but this soul-deep burn for you—"*

I shook my head at myself. Damon didn't talk like that or act like that. If he said something burned deeply, he meant he needed to go to the ER because he was injured. But no way in hell did he burn for me, no way did he think about locking up my shop and taking me right there on the table, scattering stems and blossoms as we rocked together, my legs twined around him, his thrusts searing my body as I gave in to shudders of pleasure. Searing—damn, I needed to unplug my hot plate. I rolled my eyes. This was my real life, *don't forget to unplug the hotplate or you'll burn the place down, Trixie.*

I finished up my work, waited on a couple customers and took a lot of online orders. I booked the delivery guy for the entire next week because I had that much business coming in. Then I called Michelle.

"Don't you fucking dare back out on drinks for tonight," she said when she answered the phone.

"Hello to you, too," I said wryly.

"You're cancelling."

"No way!" I said. "I can't wait to get you girls drunk and then post it on YouTube."

"You don't know how to upload anything to YouTube," she said.

“Or do I?” I teased. “I’ll buy you drinks, get you to loosen up, then I’ll start filming—”

“Is that what the creepy Girls Gone Wild people used to do on spring break? Pass out Jell-o shots and video release forms?”

“I thought you were a sour whiskey girl, but, babe, if you want Jell-O shots, I’ll find you some.”

“I don’t want Jell-O shots. I’m talking about you skipping out at the last second to stay at home like a good little wifey,” she said.

“I’m not a good little wifey,” I protested. “But I do wanna take my best friends out and have some fun. We all deserve it, plus I owe you enough sangria to float a barge after y’all helped me clean up that water damage.”

“You’re right. A bucket load of sangria for starters, and some tacos. I want tacos.”

“It’s a deal,” I said. “So how’s work?”

“Well, Max Shaffer was just in here with his little girl checking out the new books in the kids’ section.”

“I thought he was a total hermit.”

“I don’t think so. He brings his kid in every week, and sometimes they come to storytime on Tuesday nights.”

“So he just, what, lumberjacks and reads with his daughter? Why have the women of Rockford Falls not formed a torch-bearing mob and stormed his cabin? He’s not hard on the eyes from what I’ve seen.”

“If seeing him reading to his little girl, sitting on one of those rainbow cushions in the kids’ section doesn’t jump start your ovaries, you ain’t paying attention,” Michelle laughed. “All I’m saying is if a man like that’s sleeping alone, it’s cause he wants to.”

“Any other eligible bachelors hanging out at the library? I’ll be divorced in a few months and I want to get the lay of the land here.”

“Right. Because you’re not going to pine after Damon forever? Please. I would not waste a perfectly eligible lumberjack on you, not when you’re in love with your husband.”

“Humor me. Let’s act like I’ll recover from the planned divorce like a healthy person who’s not obsessed with Damon, okay?”

“Fine, well, there’s Drew and Noah. We don’t have a ton of single men around town in case you didn’t notice, babe.”

“Noah’s a builder, right?”

“Yes. Do you never pay attention?”

“Nope, I’m all about my shop, you know that. And a boatload of sangria now. He builds stuff, that’d be handy to have around if something breaks around here and needs fixing. A man with skills,” I said half-heartedly.

“I’m sure he’d love to be pursued for his handyman ability,” she said wryly.

“Okay, then I’m screwed because Drew is off the books,” I said.

Michelle hesitated for a moment, then said, “why?”

I laughed. “You know why,” I told her. “You two have too much damn history.”

“History, schmistory,” she said.

“Michelle. I’m not going to go after your ex,” I said firmly.

“Probably a good thing. He’d just break your heart anyway,” she said.

I didn’t want to bring her down by talking about how Drew had hurt her, so I changed the subject.

“So, what does Noah check out when he comes in?”

“Kid books. Not macho stuff like Damon does. That man’s a book-reading machine. Oh, hey, tell your husband I got in the books he ordered. They just came in this afternoon. A bio on Jack Pritchard he’s been waiting for.”

“Who?”

“Engine 255? The guy that took major burns to save that baby whose crib was on fire? He was only the most decorated FDNY fireman in history. Maybe *you* should hang out at the library and read more, huh?” she teased.

“So he reads about daring firefighters?”

“He reads about all kinds of stuff. Since you live with him, I figured you knew that. You could come to the book club sometime, you know?”

“You’ve been trying to recruit me for ages. What am I supposed to be reading this month?”

“The Iliad.”

“Trojan horse? Helen and Paris? I know the story.”

“Please do not show up and say ‘Trojan horse, Helen and Paris, got it’ at the meeting. I kind of like people to read the actual book before trying to discuss it,” Michelle said.

“You are a book snob.”

“You are practically a nonreader, but I love you anyway. Mainly because you’re buying me drinks tonight. You’re not canceling.”

“That’s right. I’m not,” I said, and hung up.

I was excited to go out with my friends. I just knew that in my heart I'd rather hang out on the couch watching eighties flicks with my fake husband. I'd even bought gummy bears for our next film festival because he loved them. It was kind of pathetic that I knew that and hoped seeing gummy bears by the remote would make him think of me and want to watch something together. I was relying on gummy bears to get a man's attention. It may have crossed over into pathetic territory. I was afraid to talk to him and get brushed off about the kiss, but I also longed to spend time with him. It was so, so bad.

18

Damon

I was called back to work early despite my suspension with two guys out with the flu. I was taking on shifts left and right because the other guys had kids at home. Sure, I could say no when the chief asked if I could cover another double, but when I knew Tyler had a new baby at home, and when Ryan's daughter had her third birthday party... I couldn't turn it down. Not when they are as good as brothers to me, and the best gift I could give Poppy, Ryan's little girl, was to let her have her daddy there when she blew out her candles. So the difference between him missing out on a milestone with his kid and me missing out on the plan to watch Beverly Hills Cop 1 and 2 with my pretend wife wasn't really comparable.

Flu season had come early and was kicking ass this year. I had heard my mom telling Brody he should make sure no one at the police station sneezed near my pregnant sister or himself. Like he could send them home for the sniffles. But the flu was no joke this year. I'd had my shot early when we did the free flu shot clinic at the fire station about a month and a half ago, so I was one of the last men standing. All these macho firefighters who don't think they ever catch the flu so why get a shot? They were all moaning in the fetal position and demanding chicken soup while I do their jobs now.

I was a little disappointed not to get to spend Saturday night with Trixie, but I wasn't going to whine about it.

"You sure about me taking off?" Tyler asked as he got his stuff together.

"Yeah, I'm sure. You've got the baby to take care of. And I bet Penny could use the rest."

"And a shower. Getting a shower is a huge deal to her right now. I guess she's just tired."

"Dude, go pick up a pizza on the way home and tell her to take a long shower, don't hurry," I said. "Rock the baby. Give him a kiss from me."

"You can come give him a kiss yourself when you get time. You've only

seen him twice,” he said.

“I’ll bring food. My mom will make some kind of casserole you can heat up, I’m sure.”

“That’d be great. It’s awesome, I mean he’s the cutest, tiniest little thing ever, but, dang can he scream. And has to eat like four times a night. It’s nonstop, man,” he shook his head ruefully, but he was grinning.

“Maybe get your wife some flowers next week. Just shilling Trixie’s shop and everything, but Penny could probably use the encouragement.”

“You’re like the relationship whisperer. It’s only a matter of time before you have a couple little ones of your own running around. Your sister’s having one, and you’re married now. That kid’s gonna need cousins, and I can’t imagine you wasting any time now that you’ve got a wife at home,” he said.

“Are you wishing sleepless nights and an unshowered wife on me?” I laughed.

“Yeah, it’s the greatest fucking thing ever,” he said with a goofy smile. “And you coach Little League. It’s not like you don’t love kids.”

“I do love kids. I can’t wait to spoil yours. And my sister’s kid when it comes. I’ll be the fun uncle, teach them to drive when they’re thirteen on the back roads, buy ‘em all the stuff their parents say is too expensive... that’s the way to go,” I said, trying to seem cheerful.

“Don’t act like you don’t wanna be a dad. Come on!” Tyler said. “You’re not fooling anybody here. I keep expecting you to pass out cigars any day now and say Damon Junior is on his way. You’d have that kid in a baby-sized fireman’s helmet and holding a baseball bat before he could stand up.”

I had to hold back the smile that threatened to break out on my face. Because for one split second, I forgot that it wasn’t real. I had a flash of hope that it could happen, that Trixie and I could have a little baby or four. Raise a family, watch her bending low over a bush to explain to the kids what kind of flower bloomed there and how to care for it, raise them to watch Die Hard every Christmas. Well, maybe every Christmas after they were twelve because of the language. If it were true, it would be fantastic, I thought. But it wasn’t. It was a dumb story I told myself for three minutes before I remembered it was fake, and I was just the co-applicant on her business loan. A family friend doing her a favor.

She didn’t want to have kids at all, as far as I knew. And even if she did, I figured she, like most people, would prefer to have those kids with someone

she loved. Not, you know, her fake husband. I missed her, missed hanging out with her and cooking and watching movies and making her laugh so hard that she snorted. I had even loved tucking her in at night when she fell asleep on the couch. Taking care of her made me happy. It also made me greedy. I wanted to be the person she would turn to for help and encouragement, to make her laugh, to help her solve a problem. I wanted to be her husband and the father of her children.

I wanted to make it real. Sitting at a fire station while the other guys were home with their families—with or without a bad case of the flu—it made me realize what I wanted. A reason to turn down over time, a reason to be home early, and a reason to hate dragging myself out of bed with the alarm. My wife.

My phone was in my hand, ready to text her, to ask her to wait up for me, to plan a midnight movie marathon and I'd bring the wine. I got a message from her instead.

Hope you have an easy shift. Going out with Mich and Nic.

I was disappointed, I'll admit it. Not that she had friends or plans or a life outside of our house. Disappointed that I didn't get to ask her to wait up, to anticipate coming home to her on the couch in her pajamas, maybe her cute silky ones, with popcorn ready to pop. Somehow the idea of her waiting there for me had taken on a magical quality. I yearned for it.

She'd been working so hard and doing so much of the renovation herself that I knew she needed a break. Hell, she needed a vacation, not that she'd take one when business was so good. She'd turned down my help when I offered. The only time she'd sort of accepted it was when I was on suspension and my mom had needed more help with my dad that day, so I'd had to skip out on the shop. I'd spent the day at my parents' house then, wishing I was with my wife instead. My mom had gone to her doctor's appointment and had her hair colored and I had mentally cursed the home health aid who had taken the day off so I had to spend it there. I loved my dad, and I loved talking firefighting with him. I felt guilty for my restlessness that day, and I had even watched *Backdraft* for the six millionth time with him to make up for it. But my heart hadn't been in it. Now I was at work missing her, wishing I could be with her instead.

It was going to be a long shift if I moped the whole time. Instead, I got busy. I inventoried our safety equipment, which wasn't due to be finished till Tuesday. I cleaned out the fridge and scrubbed the shelves. There were no

calls, but I kept busy. Well, I kept my hands busy, but my mind was on Trixie. The chief came in to take over, and I told him Patrick was asleep in the bunkroom.

“You busted your ass tonight. What’s going on?” he said suspiciously, taking in the sparkling clean kitchen.

“Nothing. I’ll take the trash out when I go.”

“Not nothing. I can’t get you boys to throw out the expired crap in that fridge for nothin’. Y’all would rather run into a burning building than clean. So what’s up?”

“Nothing’s up, chief,” I said. “Just trying to keep busy on a slow night.”

“It was nice of you to cover for Ryan so he didn’t miss the birthday party. I’m sure he’ll return the favor one day soon. When’re you and Trixie gonna start a family anyway? Or is that a sore subject? I know she’s got a job, one of them independent women, I guess,” he said, making his opinion pretty clear.

“We’re both pretty busy,” I said, bristling at the question, at the obvious judgment of my wife for wanting to run her shop instead of staying at home gestating my offspring.

“You trying to pick up over time for a blessed event? When you’ll want some time off? You can tell me. I won’t tell a soul,” he said, chuckling.

“No news,” I said briskly, brushing off my hands and tying up the garbage bag before I heaved it out of the can. “Hope you have a good night.”

I left, not wanting to discuss my procreation plans with my boss, the old chauvinist. I normally didn’t mind the guy, but he was all up in my business over this, and I felt like my sexual habits and contraception choices were private. Like I wasn’t the guy who made jokes about my coworkers knocking up their wives and girlfriends, like I didn’t get Doug an economy box of condoms when they announced their fourth baby on the way. Like I was above a tasteless joke—no, it was just that I was sensitive about this topic. I kind of groaned at myself for being able to dish it out but not wanting to take the same teasing.

It was eerie in the quiet house without her there. My stomach twisted at the knowledge that she’d move out in a few months, and it would be this way every night when I came home. Cranking up the hot water, I took a long shower, tried to get my head on straight.

I was just drying off when I heard a noise in the house. I wrapped a towel around my waist and eased the door open quietly. Instead of an intruder, I

saw my wife fumbling with the front door deadbolt trying to refasten it. Her purse was by her feet so I guess she'd dropped it, and that was the sound I'd heard. I ducked back into the bathroom and I adjusted the towel so it was more secure around my waist. I stepped out into the hallway and bumped into Trixie who had moved faster than I thought possible. She crashed into me. I grabbed her arm to steady her so she didn't lose her balance, but as I did, my towel dropped to the floor.

She bit her lip, stepped back from me for a second and, honest to God, the woman looked me up and down like I was something nice she was considering buying for herself, a treat in a shop window. I'd be lying if I said I didn't love it, the heat in her eyes, the flush of appreciation on her cheeks. I worked hard to look the way I did, and I was proud that she looked at me like she appreciated the view. She stopped chewing her lip and looked up, met my eyes with a sly grin.

That woman would be the death of me. She raised one eyebrow, mischievous and questioning. Then she practically jumped on me. Her arms were around me, and then her legs were around me, my hands under the curve of her ass to hold her. She looked right at me, not diving in with kisses and nips, but looking right in my eyes.

"Damon," she said.

"Glad you remember my name, Trix," I said with a half-smile. It was hard to smile. This felt intense and serious.

"I know who you are," she said. "I had way more tacos than I had margaritas. I only drank one. I'm not even tipsy." She was looking me dead in the eyes and that look went straight to my cock.

"Good, because I have a policy about not taking advantage of drunk women."

"Pro tip: don't talk about drunk women when you're wife's trying to climb your naked body in the hall," she said.

"Like a tree, huh?" I said archly.

I smirked at her and backed her into the wall, my mouth taking hers, all slow lick and exploring, swallowing her soft moan and pressing her into the wall with my body.

19

Trixie

I tried to be quiet, to sneak in and go to my room in case Damon was already asleep. I never planned to wake him, despite the fact he was on my mind. Going out with the girls had only reinforced how strong my feelings were for him. They were both on board with me telling him the truth, being brave and being honest. I was steeling myself for an awkward breakfast declaration the next morning. I wasn't ready to be face to-pecs with his naked body that was still hot and wet from the shower. I know I swore under my breath when he bumped into me, solid and sexy. He grabbed my arm so I didn't fall from the impact of crashing into his big, Marvel hero-style muscular chest. And his towel surrendered. There he was in all his glory. I am not ashamed to say I stepped back to get a better look, to rake my gaze over him like he was the dessert cart and I was on a diet.

Everything about him was gorgeous, lightly tanned, every curve and line and hollow strong and cut. His powerful legs told the story of those early morning runs he took, and his shoulders spoke of pushups and free weights, and so did the sculpted chest and arms. The abs were great, but they were just skimmed over by my gaze as I feasted my lucky eyes on his narrow hips and his long, thick cock, already at half-mast. It was so much bigger than I had remembered, and I remembered it as romance-novel-legendary-sized.

"I'm going to have you tonight," he growled, his mouth on my neck, hot kisses trailing down my throat.

"Yes," I said, "definitely." I nodded my head for emphasis and accidentally hit him in the head with my chin.

"Oof!" he said, sending us both into a fit of laughter.

He maneuvered us into the bedroom, our kisses growing messy and urgent. Damon backed up to the bed and sat down, holding me in his lap, his hands everywhere on my body. He tilted my face up so our lips met, hungry and frantic, his teeth nipping my bottom lip. I didn't cling or hold on. In fact,

I was focused on removing as much of my clothing as possible since he didn't have any on. I tugged at my cute wrap top that I'd worn to the bar, but kept getting tangled in the string that I needed to untie.

"Here, let me," he said against my lips. I leaned back a little and he threaded his fingers through the silky ribbon, untying it deftly and parting the crossover front of my top. "There," he said, and dipped his head to take my nipple in his mouth. I hadn't worn a bra, partly to be comfortable and partly because I had this fantasy of him stripping my top off and finding me braless. That was a dream that had come true now. I shivered and trembled as I shoved my fingers through his hair and held his face to my breast. He sucked and licked, dragged his teeth along it until my nipple was an aching spike at the tip, my breasts heavy with longing. I wriggled on his lap. His hand in the small of my back brought me flush against him, and I felt his hard cock bob against my bare stomach. I groaned, "God, I want you. I want you inside me, Vance."

He growled against my breast, nipped me with his teeth, making me arch into him. I ground against his thigh insistently. I felt his lips curve in a smile as I shoved the sleeves off my arms and let my top fall to the floor. I rose up on my knees above him, my breasts in his face, and my hair fell around us. I smiled at him, and he looked up at me with this perfect expression of hot arousal and pure joy.

"I've regretted it ever since that night, that I didn't try to make you sleep in here and stay with me. I would've taken you a dozen more ways. But most of all, I wish I'd kept you on top of me. I will this time. Only don't leave and go back to your room. Promise," he said, his breath hot on my skin. I nodded.

"I want to stay," I said, meaning more than just one night in his room. I wanted to stay forever.

"Then stay as long as you want, Trix," he said, pressing a kiss to my collarbone.

I slid back to my feet, pushed off my jeans and panties in one movement, and straddled his lap again, my knees on either side of his legs and his hands curving onto my ass.

"I missed you so much tonight. I'm glad you went out. You deserve it. But I'm greedy and I want you here with me. I want to be home with you, inside of you—" he broke off, palming my head, bringing my mouth to his. "I'd say more but I'd have to stop kissing you and I can't."

"Don't stop," I said into his mouth, my hair tangling around his fingers,

my tongue in his mouth. It was humid, blurry, and lush. I felt like my body was one aching knot that needed him to unwind it, to free me. I rocked my hips into him so he could feel the slickness between my legs, the wetness gathered there from the way he kissed me, the way he'd sucked my nipple and groped my ass. Everything he did made me wetter.

Still, when he lifted me by the hips, notched his cock against my slit, I caught my breath. Our eyes met, his with a question, mine with a yes. Then the heavy slide of his cock, so thick, began. The velvety-soft head nudged inside my tender wet lips, and with a long thrust, he buried himself within me. I choked, feeling so full from his invasion, so tight that I could do nothing but sit there, trying to catch my breath. Experimentally, I rocked my hips forward and a blaze of light flashed through me. It felt incredible, so I did it again.

“Oh God,” he groaned, his mouth on my neck, sucking, biting, gathering me in his arms and bucking into me. I felt so close to him, so intimately connected, our bodies wrapped around each other. My hands were on his bare back, feeling the bunch and flex of his muscles as he tried to maintain control. I started to roll my hips in a figure eight, which felt really good to me and apparently made him have visions of the divine because he was moaning like I was killing him but in a good way.

“Trix, yes, Jesus, Trix—” he broke off. Suddenly, he kissed my lips hard and deep and then lay back on the bed, “This is your chance, the chance I promised you. To ride me till we pass out. Try anything you want. Use me, baby. Take what you need.”

I bit my lip. That was easily the sexiest of all the sexy things he'd ever done. He lay back and surrendered, offered me his body for my pleasure. I leaned forward and brushed my lips to his. He wrapped his arms around me, trapped me to his chest and jerked his hips, thrusting deeper. A sound escaped me. I kissed him back and then sat up, seeing the miles of smooth bare flesh, the muscles and cut lines, the face of the man I loved that moved me with a tenderness I was afraid I'd speak aloud. I touched his lips with my fingertips and gave him a soft smile, telling him without saying the words. Then I started to move, rocking back and forth, trying a slide up and down, taking his cock out of me and gripping it in my hand, stroking him and then rubbing the sensitive head all along my outer lips. It was driving him crazy which I enjoyed a lot. Then I teased the tip of him inside me and touched my clit with my fingers. It was good but not good enough.

Boldly, I reached for his hand, guided it between my legs. When his fingers started to rub me, I gasped, and the world slipped sideways a little. I was bouncing up and down on his cock, riding him, taking him in all the way with every thrust, rolling my hips, arching my back, and all that time, his fingers plucked at my clit that felt swollen and tender, so that every brush of his fingers had the sharp intensity of a pleasure that was almost painful. I whimpered and said his name and he put his thumb on my clit and rubbed relentlessly until a snap of ecstasy lashed through me like a live wire, leaving me crying out, twitching and shaking in its grip. I felt my inner muscles clench around him, and he groaned in response, going deeper, his hips working that cock into me even harder. I collapsed on his chest, wrung out from my climax. He flipped me over and pounded into me for a minute. All I could do was cling to him and try to catch my breath as he tunneled into my body, that powerful cock just pumping into me, shaking the bed.

I thought he'd come instantly, the fevered eyes, the flush on his face, but he slowed down, covered my mouth with his, switched to softer, slower thrusts. He was romancing me, caressing my body with the backs of his fingers, making my breasts tingle, making my clit spark to life again already.

"Let me turn you around," he said, then slid his tongue in my mouth so sensuously that I felt like I could rise off the bed from that ecstasy alone. I nodded. I expected him to flip me over and pound into me, but he pulled me onto my side, curled up behind me so our bodies spooned together close. It felt like heaven, being wrapped up in him, cradled against that big chest. His long fingers reached around, slipping down my stomach and between my legs, teasing me and making me gasp and whimper with the sensations that rippled up my belly and made my toes curl under with pleasure.

He fingered me, fondled me, traced my folds with gentle, wicked strokes of his calloused fingers. Then he pulled my right leg back just enough that his cock fit between my thighs. I caught my breath when he cupped my sex with one hand, tilted my hips back toward him and penetrated me. The angle was so different, so good. I drew my knees up to my chest to take more of him in my body, but there was his hand, rubbing my clit as that big, hard cock plundered me, taking everything I had to give, relentless and rock hard, burrowing into my pussy and rubbing against places inside me that made me want to lose my mind and die screaming with ecstasy. He drew me back against him, stroked my stomach to get me to lower my knees a little. Then he fingered my clit while he rocked into me, the most romantic, tender

rhythm that felt both intimate and completely filthy. I'd wanted him for so long, but never imagined it would be so red hot, so dirty and good and right. I rocked my hips back into him.

"You like that, baby?" he asked, his mouth on my ear, and then he started kissing the back of my neck.

"Oh, God, yes," I groaned. He curled his fingers between my legs, caressing my clit, teasing and pulling back, teasing and pulling back until I was so wound up I could've slapped him. Then the faintest brush of his fingertip on the underside of my tender clit sent me screaming in a spiral of pleasure as he kept working his cock in and out of me.

"How—are you lasting this long?" I demanded as I tried to get my breath.

"Easy. It's how much I want you, how long I've wanted you. I've ached for you every minute. I could go all night, just making you come in different ways."

"I'd like that, but I want you to come too. Show me how to make you feel good, please," I said, looking over my shoulder. He slid out of me, let me roll onto my back and he kissed my lips again.

"Anything you do to me will make me feel good. You have to know that. The only thing holding me back is that I want to make it good for you. I want this night to be unforgettable."

Damon took my jaw in his fingers, turned my head, caught my lips with his, unsteady with the rock of his thrusts but fierce and good, his tongue sensuous and consuming as he kissed me. His arms were around me, and I felt tears sting my eyes.

He drew away and turned me over. He pulled me back into his lap, "Like this, close as we can be," he said, and positioned me so that his cock impaled me, penetrating my sensitive sex again, "Does that hurt?" he asked.

I shook my head. I was tender, but he wasn't hurting me. I was wet again for him, and his fingers on my nipple, his tongue questing in my mouth made me wetter. I had to bite my cheek to keep from crying. I wanted to weep with how close I felt to him, how connected.

His stubble was rough against my jaw, his lips soft and hot. They made me shiver and cling to him. I was undone, ruined with pleasure and now broken down to the point that I couldn't look him in the eye. He would know. He would see how much I loved him, how devastated this night had made me because it was everything I ever wanted. Because he was everything I wanted and couldn't have. Not for real. Not beyond tonight.

Damon ran his hands up my bare back, kissed my temple and my cheek, moving in me with a slow, undulating rhythm that was almost hypnotic. “My beautiful, beautiful bride,” he said, his lips on mine. I felt tears slip down my cheeks, but I was powerless to wipe them away, powerless to do anything but hold on to him and kiss him back like my life depended on it. Like it was more than making love, like it was a last, bittersweet goodbye to the only man I’ve ever loved. I pulled away from his kiss and hid my face in his neck, my arms going around him tighter. With a jagged shudder that tore through his body, he tensed with short, deep thrusts. He came, pulsing inside me, a hot rush that stung at the same time it felt glorious. He stroked my hair, held me close, kept me in his lap.

“God, you’re my undoing, Trix,” he said raggedly, kissing my hair. “What’s wrong, baby? I saw you crying. Are you—did I hurt you?”

I shook my head, still burying my face, afraid to let him see me. He cradled me in his arms for a few minutes before putting me away, tipping my face up to meet his eyes.

“What’s wrong? Tell me,” he said, his voice urgent. I opened my eyes, saw the worry on his handsome face.

“I’m fine. I guess, it was too much. It felt—it’s stupid, okay? It felt real for a minute,” I mumbled, trying to say it lightly, a little sarcastically even. But it sounded anguished. I sounded like I’d been taken apart, like I was heartbroken.

“Who said it wasn’t real?” he asked “Look at me Trixie. Do you think this is a fling? This is you and me. I don’t grout tile with flings, and I don’t argue about Ghostbusters with flings. I do that with you. With my wife. I think about you when I’m at work, when I’m in the shower, when I’m going for a run. You. Nobody else.”

“I know we said that we’d be monogamous until the divorce, and I appreciate what you’re saying, that you’re doing that,” I muttered.

“No. Listen to me. Get this through your stubborn head right now. I am in bed with you because that’s the only place I want to be. Do you understand me? Do you think it’s like this with everyone else?”

“Unlike you, I haven’t had sex with everyone else,” I said wryly.

“I haven’t had sex with *everyone else* either. Besides, this doesn’t feel like any of that, and you and I both know it. This is—not what we bargained for when we co-signed a loan and went to the courthouse. We were supposed to be in name only. But the lines have blurred, and that didn’t start between

the sheets. It started the night your zipper got stuck. There was something between us, chemistry. Then we started watching the Back to the Future movies, bickering about them, laughing together. You fell asleep on my shoulder.”

“What you’re saying is I should never have asked you to help me with the zipper. I should’ve cut the damn dress off and thrown it out,” I said grimly.

“Never. Not in a million years would I have wanted that to happen instead. I like where we’re at. It’s—”

“Oh my God, Damon. Are you getting hard again?” I said, surprised.

“Maaaybe,” he said with a sheepish grin.

I climbed off his lap and backed away, pulled the sheet up to cover myself. I saw, to my horror, that I’d left a love bite on his shoulder.

“I like you. I can’t help it. And if my body responds to having you near me and naked—that’s not a bad thing, is it?”

“This is complicated. So complicated. Why did I let it get this way?” I moaned.

Damon crawled up the bed and stretched out beside me, naked and magnificent. He propped his head up on an elbow.

“Maybe you like it as much as I do,” he said archly. I pulled the sheet up over my head. He tugged it down and laughed. I covered my face with my hands.

“So are you only comfortable going to bed with men you’re not married to? Is that the problem? We’re not illicit enough?” he teased.

I removed my hands, “I like you too much already. Before. With other guys, I wasn’t in this deep, you know?”

“Are you saying you like me more than them or that I’m better in bed?”

“Both,” I said.

“Good. If you said neither, I would’ve kicked you out of my room,” he teased. “But seriously. You’re not my usual type. And before you smack me for saying it like that, I mean you’re not someone I want to be done with in two weeks or less. You’re in my life to stay, and you’re important to me. Not only because my mother would kick my ass from here to the county line if I hurt you. I like you as a person, which makes me sound like a callous bastard for hooking up with women I didn’t know as well as you or like as well as I like you. I’ve made mistakes, and I wish I hadn’t. I wish I’d done things differently.”

Then he leaned over and kissed me. I grinned so much it hurt. Because he

was sweet and fun and considerate and incredible in bed. He just—liked me. If I felt more for him, if I was gathering scraps of his attention and holding them like hot coals and burning myself for the warmth—that was my problem. It wasn't his fault.

After a few minutes, and against all odds with my angst over the relationship, I fell asleep. The next thing I knew, I yawned blissfully and stretched against the warmth of him wrapped around me. He kissed my forehead.

“You stay warm. I'm going to make us breakfast,” he said. I grinned at him. I couldn't help it. What woman could be luckier?

20

Damon

The car chase movie marathon was better than I could have imagined. Because it was the first time I'd watched those movies with Trixie, with her curled up beside me, wearing one of my t-shirts and asking irritatingly intelligent questions about the plot holes in the screenplay. Eventually, her evil plot worked. I know it was an evil plot because she cackled and said, "Yes! My evil plan has succeeded," when I was looking up at her from between her thighs.

"So you bugged me with questions about the movie until I went down on you?"

"Well, yeah. I watched the first movie all the way through because I have a sense of fairness. When it sucked, I shifted into Plan Mode. Start trolling the movie until you can't resist me. You love it when I take everything so seriously, and I knew it would be at turn on." She gave me a mischievous grin.

"You realize you could have just asked me and I would've said yes. During, literally, the opening credits of the first movie, you could have said, 'hey, Damon, wanna eat me out right here on the couch?' and I would've probably grabbed your ankle and thrown your leg over my shoulder so fast you would've squealed."

"Really? So I wasted all those thoughtful questions about the action movie franchise?"

"No, those kind of questions are never wasted. Now I can never watch these again without wondering why no one involved in the making of the films ever stopped to think that none of it makes much sense."

"So essentially I ruined the movies for you?" she said, crinkling up her nose.

"No. You made them better than they've ever been. I enjoyed that second movie more than I did the last time I watched it. Maybe it's the taste of you,"

I said, kissing the inside of her thigh. “God, your skin is so smooth, it’s all I think about.”

I climbed up her body, stretched out on my couch and kissed her neck. “Let’s turn off the movies and put this to bed.”

“I’d love to,” she said, smiling.

“I haven’t tired you out yet?” I said archly.

“I’m just getting started. Are you too tired, fireman?” she teased.

I followed her into the bedroom thinking I was the luckiest man alive. I had her to come home to.

Weeks passed and it just kept getting better. There was so much business at Trixie’s shop that she promoted her part-time worker to full-time and hired another part-time girl to work the counter. This had the added benefit of my wife being home by 5:30 every night. I had talked to the chief and traded a couple shifts so I could be home for supper four nights a week. It was less overtime and a more regular schedule. Better, he said, for starting a family. I wasn’t trying to start a family but I sure as hell appreciated getting to spend the evenings with Trixie.

We went to the library one night for the book club, and got into a spirited argument over the book. Her librarian friend and some older people from town, including my mother were all there, taking sides in our discussion. Trixie was adamant that the main characters should not have ended up together, and she had ‘Reasons with a capital-R.’ They wrapped up the meeting half an hour late because of us.

“I’m surprised you didn’t whip out a deck of Google Slides and ask for a projector,” I said on the way to the truck. “You really hate that girl in the book.”

“She was a fundamentally awful person, and he deserved better. Look at how she handled herself when he was fighting the war,” she said, incensed.

“Maybe he wanted her, and it didn’t matter what happened, that would never change,” I said.

My hand was on her arm, and I pulled her to me. Right there, kissing her under the streetlight, I felt the happiest, the most right I ever had. The fury and passion in her argument fueled the kiss. Nipping and sucking at my lips, she drove me wild. I got the truck open and pulled her into my lap. She rose up on her knees, straddling me. We never broke the kiss. Not while I reached up inside her shirt and palmed her breast, not when she unzipped my pants, her breath broken in a high-pitched whine from the havoc of my fingers

between her legs.

The last headlights had left the parking lot, leaving us alone there in the dark, deserted space lit by only the hazy bluish glow of the streetlamp outside. I tucked her close to me, my arm low around her hips, her jeans thrown somewhere into the floor. "Please, please," she said into my mouth. That was all I needed. In seconds, I was inside of her, tight and hot. I tipped my head back against the headrest, riding the sensation of tunneling into her sleek grip. She rose up and covered my mouth with hers again, and I drove my hips upward, unwilling to let her slide up my length when I could bury myself inside her tight passage and groan as I pounded into her. The cab of the truck grew humid with sweat and sex and heavy breathing. Hot and breathless, we ground against each other. She rode me, the wild arch of her body curving back and rocking down on me until we came together in a blinding explosion of hot, wet pleasure.

When she drooped against my chest, I tucked her head under my chin, smoothed her sweaty, tangled hair. "I love taking you to the library," I said.

"Yeah, who knew your mom's book club could be so exciting," she teased, her arms going around me and hugging me.

"I love being with you like this," I said. "This is maybe the best night of my life."

"It's only eight o'clock," she said. "We can do better than this. And hey, since when is the night we got married not the best night of your life?" she teased me.

"All I got to do was unzip your damn dress," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Now, are you gonna climb off my lap or we gonna do this all over again?"

"Let's do it again," she said, nuzzling my neck, grinning smugly against my jaw as she felt me grow hard against her.

"I will if you will," I said. "Take off your shirt."

"I can't. We're in the truck. Someone could see," she said.

"You're shy now? We're fucking in a parking lot like teenagers," I laughed.

Just then, there was a tap on the window and a flashlight beam in our faces. Trixie shrieked and buried her face in my chest. I rolled down the window.

"Brody, what the hell?" I demanded as my best friend glared his police-issue flashlight at us.

"Just trying to preserve the peace in our wholesome little town, Damon,"

he said flatly. “So take your wife home. My mother-in-law—you know, your mom—called me to see if I’d find out if you’d been in an accident since she tried to call you after she got home from book club and the call went through but all she heard was someone moaning.”

I laughed. “Jesus. Thanks a lot to my mom,” I said. “What a narc. And you couldn’t just say, Mrs. Vance, your son is a grown man and I’m sure he will call when he has time?”

“And miss out on all the fun? Come on. This was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to embarrass the shit out of my best friend,” he said. “Now zip your fly and take your wife home. You’re too old for this kind of crap.”

He was trying not to laugh. I was outright laughing, and Trixie had her head buried in my chest still. “Baby, it’s fine. It’s just Brody. And he knows if it shows up on the police blotter that I’ll pants him at his child’s christening. So we’re fine.”

“Seriously, Trixie, I was just giving Damon hell. There’s no need to be embarrassed. Some people are exhibitionists,” he said. “There’s no shame in it.” He snickered.

“Don’t give her any shit, bro,” I said. “You made your point. We’ll go home. Tell no one. Not even my sister.”

“I have to tell Laura. I can’t miss the opportunity to tell her that her big brother was defiling the library parking lot with his blushing bride.”

When he drove off, I put my arms around her and held her. “Trix, I’m sorry about that. I know we embarrassed you. He and I have a shitty sense of humor—my whole family does, in fact. I won’t expose you to that again. Are you okay?”

She peeked up at me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “One more time before we go home?” she said, grinning.

“You little minx!” I laughed. “You were loving that. Him catching us and giving me shit. I felt terrible, like I should have protected you. I felt like an animal taking advantage of you in a public place—”

“So do it again,” she said. “I dare you.”

I captured her mouth, my hand roaming under her shirt and plucking at her nipples. Soon I guided her hips, thrusting my cock into her fierce and deep. I was claiming her, and it felt incredible. Fiery ropes of pleasure snaked up my legs and my abs clenched, my arms flexed and gripped her hard. I nibbled her bottom lip, licked the corner of her mouth, brought cries of pleasure from her with my fingers before I drove into her with a burst of

frantic thrusts and shot out into her, bucking my hips as her hands gripped my hair, my face buried in her chest, sucking her nipple through her shirt as I came. She rocked her hips against me a few times, giving me a tremor of residual ecstasy. I kissed her full on the lips, captured her in my arms.

“You’re mine,” I said. “All mine.”

“Take me home,” she said. “I don’t want to have to find my pants and put them on, so don’t stop anywhere on the way.”

She stroked me with her hand, tucked my cock back into my jeans and zipped me up with such a sly caress that it made me half-hard again already. I cupped her sex with my bare hand, stroking through the slick mess of our lovemaking, dipping my fingers inside her and loving the sensation of her milking my fingers, bearing down on them, rocking onto my hand wantonly. I loved that she wanted me so much, that she liked sex with me that much. I thumbed her clit and in no time, she came again, a high, desperate cry and then the shock of her gushing on my hand.

“That felt amazing. It was so—primal. Your hand in me, being in your lap—damn,” she was trembling and I was gazing at her, feeling like a king.

“Take me home,” she said again. “I wanna see if you can do that again.”

“I bet I can,” I said, kissing her, sucking on her lips, barely able to drag myself away from her body long enough to drive home.

Every night she was in my bed. Every morning I made breakfast for us and we ate together, even if it was just a quick piece of toast and coffee. As long as we were together, and got to see each other, that was what counted.

One morning she had sat down on my lap as I tied my boots. “Let’s play hooky,” she said. “I was a good girl in school. I never skipped class. Let’s do it today.”

“What, Senior Skip Day, fifteen years late?” I teased.

“Are you gonna be naughty with me or not?” she asked, arms looped around my neck.

“Hell yes. Anywhere and all the time, baby,” I said. I messaged the chief that I thought I was coming down with something. She called her full-time manager and told her to open the shop, and that she could close at noon and take the rest of the day off.

That day, my God, we took a bubble bath together and we tried to pick out a rug for the living room online but ended up watching stupid TikTok videos and laughing at them. We made taco soup for lunch and then forgot about it because I bent her over the table and had her from behind until she

nearly blacked out from coming so many times. Then we had an afternoon nap in each other's arms. I never wanted to be anywhere else.

Around four, she got a call from somebody who'd heard she might rent the apartment over her shop. I agreed to help her clean it out over the weekend so she could have another income stream coming in. She insisted on whipping out the calculator app and doing some math on how that would affect her budget and payments. When she wanted to discuss insurance policies for having a tenant, I had to suck on her nipple until she got back in the Skip Day frame of mind. By the time she'd had an orgasm in my mouth, her thighs were gripping my face as she ground against my lips and tongue, I couldn't hold back any longer.

"I am crazy about you, Trixie Vance," I said, kissing her stomach. "I'm glad you wear my ring."

"Me too," she said a little shyly. I couldn't help noticing that every time I said something about feelings, tried to tell her how special she was to me, she kind of brushed it off, didn't say much. If that meant she wasn't into me romantically, I would have to accept that down the road. But for now, I'd take what I could get and enjoy the hell out of it.

I was pretty damn happily married. Coming home early with a bottle of wine, kissing my wife, having dinner together, having a shower together. Waking up with her in my arms every day. So when she said she was going to Kiera's for the weekend, part of me was selfish and wanted to ask her to stay. Sure, I had to work Saturday, and I knew she missed her sister. But sleeping alone seemed bleak and lonesome and cold.

"Do you want me to take off Saturday? I could drive you," I offered.

"I can drive, you know," she teased.

"I'll miss you, okay," I said almost grudgingly.

"Are you saying you're completely spoiled?" she asked.

"Yes," I pulled her into my arms. "I am spoiled and greedy."

"You can go to your mom's for supper. She'll love it."

"We were just over there Wednesday night," I said. "She'll tell me I'm an idiot for letting you out of my sight."

"Do you think I'm going to use my married sister as a wingman and go pick up a guy? We're going out, but just for fun and to get her a break and some girl time. You and I have a deal. I'm just going to hang out with Kiera."

"I know that, and I trust you. I'll still wish you were here," I said, feeling foolish. "I know that's lame."

“It’s not lame. I’ll see you Sunday night,” she kissed my cheek and she was off. Without me.

All day Saturday on my shift, I kept checking my phone. She’d texted once, a selfie of her and her sister at a craft store with the caption ‘wild girls weekend,’ but that was it. I was missing her. I convinced Brody to go out for a drink after work. I could use some guy time after all.

“You’re such a sad sack. Your wife goes to Savannah for a couple days and you need me to babysit you,” he said, taking a drink of his beer.

“No. I just thought we could use some guy time.”

“That’s not a phrase. Don’t use those words. It sounds stupid,” he said gruffly.

“You’re too sensitive.”

“I’m too sensitive? You dragged me to a bar so you could whine about missing your wife,” he said.

“I didn’t notice your ass kicking and screaming when I asked if you wanted to have a beer,” I said.

“Maybe you didn’t have to twist my arm but that’s because I’m a devoted friend. And I appreciate all the time you put in with me when Missy died, and every year on the anniversary of her death. You’re a good man, Damon. I hope Trixie realizes that.”

“Damn, you *are* a sensitive guy!” I crowed, laughing.

“Fine, I can’t say something nice to my lifelong best friend?”

“No. Our friendship is built on roasting the hell out of each other and drinking cheap liquor.”

“And a foundation of always being there for each other,” he pointed out. “Which we have been.”

“Except when I found out you were in love with my sister. I couldn’t handle it, and I know I owe you an apology. I’ve already apologized to her like four times and she just gets meaner and laughs harder every time. You’d think pregnancy and motherhood would have a gentling effect on that woman,” I shook my head, amused.

“She’s perfect the way she is, and I owe you a black eye if you say any different,” Brody said.

“See, if I’d been able to think clearly, I would’ve been thrilled that she found someone so protective and caring. But I got hung up on her being my baby sister, and some idea of betrayal that you were my best friend and you’d gone behind my back.”

“Did you want us to stand right in front of you?”

“Clearly the answer to that is no, since I lost my shit when I saw you together. I’m saying I don’t blame you for hiding it from me because the way I acted justified any deception on your part. And I’m grateful every day that my spitfire little sister has you, and that she helped bring you back to life. So, welcome to the family.”

“Damn, you’re slow. We’re over it. You acted like an ass. We still love you. That’s what family does,” he said.

“I’m gonna need something stronger to drink if we’re gonna keep up this degree of heartfelt sharing.”

“Hey, you’re the one who wanted guy time which sounds like we’re gonna hang out in a sauna and talk about our feelings,” Brody said.

“So a crappy bar is the only difference here, I guess,” I said. “And what’s wrong with missing my wife? I got used to having her around. She’s a great girl. I have a lot of respect for her. She’s a good friend.”

“And it doesn’t hurt that you’re batshit crazy in love with her,” he said wryly, taking a drink.

“I may have feelings for her, but we’re in close quarters. That’s natural.”

“When you went for your fire safety certification, you had a roommate, right?”

“Nick, yeah. Why?”

“Did you fuck him?”

“What? No!”

“Then it ain’t because you’re in close quarters, man. Don’t bother telling yourself that.”

I shook my head, “You are such a bastard.”

“I know. Especially when I’m right.”

“Yeah,” I admitted.

“Since we’re oversharing, what got to you about her? Besides how she looks.”

“We started watching movies together, eighties movies at first and now we’re watching the Fast and Furious series in order. She really thinks about stuff and takes it seriously, asks the smartest, out of left field questions that get me thinking. It’s how she sees things, and she’s just completely herself, different from anyone I ever met. Everything goes deeper with her, and she —”

“That’s what she said,” Brody chuckled.

“Shit. You know what I meant. She’s a deep thinker. And when I went to that fire in Overton and got the guy out, it really scared her, and she was waiting up for me.”

“Sounds to me like she’s pretty crazy about you. I know when Laura was being held hostage, I knew in my bones that if anything happened to her I was gonna lose my mind. I’d kill every fuckin’ person in that cabin, then I’d drink myself to death. There wasn’t gonna be any going back. I was completely off the rails.”

“So you were scared and mad and that all translated into a, uh, powerful reaction,” I said.

“Did y’all fuck like you were out of your minds?”

“Pretty much,” I said, with a stupid grin forming on my face.

“That’s not close quarters, man,” he said again. “You gotta tell her.”

“I know. But I’m chicken shit, bro. It’s possible that she looks at me like a fling, like I treated all those other women—”

“Those other women only wanted a fling too. You didn’t treat them bad, and if you want to know how she feels, you ask her. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“The worst? She doesn’t feel the same way but feels like she owes me because of the loan and marrying her and tries to be in a relationship with me out of a sense of obligation,” I said miserably.

“Well, shit. That is a worst-case scenario. So you have to ask her to be honest with you, and you have to trust her. Don’t go thinking you know what she thinks. Because you’re wrong. I’m wrong every time I assume anything with Laura. Don’t go there.”

“Thanks,” I said. “It’s crazy how I can run into a fire knowing I’ll maybe die and not even hesitate, but I can’t tell my wife that I love her.”

“Because it’s a lot harder to live than it is to sacrifice your life, idiot,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Especially if you think you gotta live without the woman you need.”

“You’re a wise son of a bitch sometimes, Brody,” I said and ordered us another round.

We were joking about baby names for my upcoming niece or nephew—I suggested Damon or Damonette—when our phones rang at the same time. We exchanged a look and then he answered my sister’s call. I saw my mom’s number and picked up.

“We’re pulling into the ER now, Damon. Your sister thinks something’s

wrong with the baby,” she said. “Get over here.”

I hung up and looked at Brody. His face was gray and slack, terror flitting in his eyes. I pocketed his keys and told him to get in my truck. He was in no shape to drive, scared shitless for his wife and child.

“She’s gonna be fine,” I told him.

“I can’t lose her, Damon. For fuck’s sake, I buried Missy. Isn’t that enough? What the fuck?” he said. “She was fine when I talked to her at five. What if she’s been sick this whole time and was scared to tell me?”

His anguish was painful to hear. I shook my head as I drove.

“Man, my sister ain’t afraid of anything. She’d tell you. And she called you. She wants you there. You gotta be there for her and make it okay for her. She needs you.”

“Yeah,” he said, latching on to that idea. “Get me as close to the entrance as you can. I don’t want her worrying and having to wait on me.”

He was leaning forward, hand on the door before we ever got there, so anxious to get to her, to see with his own eyes if she was okay.

“It’s probably just indigestion. My mom was making pierogies tonight and Laura always overdoes it on those,” I said trying to console him.

“She’s bleeding,” he said, his voice hollow.

“Oh,” I answered. There was nothing else to say to that. “Well, she’s got good care and we’ll be there in a minute. I’m just gonna call Trixie before I come inside. I won’t be a minute,” I said.

I hadn’t even got the truck stopped by the entrance before he vaulted out and was inside the building. I parked and dialed my wife. It rang and rang and went to voicemail. I called again, still no answer. I texted her: *Trix, please call me*. And I waited, staring at my phone as the screen went dark again and I got no response.

I waited, drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, made excuses in my head for her. Her phone was on the charger and she wasn’t with it. She was playing with the kids and didn’t hear the ringer. She and her sister were doing face masks or some girlie shit in the other room and she couldn’t hear the phone. It wasn’t that she was screening my calls or that she didn’t want to talk to me. She’d call as soon as she got the message and say she was sorry and give me a perfectly normal reason for not answering. Never mind that I’d answered her calls and texts when I was on a goddamn moving fire truck en route to a blaze before.

Sixteen hours ago, I’d been drunk on the crackle of desire between us, my

mouth at her neck, the tug of her fingers in my hair while I moved inside her. We had been as close as a man and a woman could be, and now she wasn't even picking up when I called. I needed to talk to her, needed my touchstone, my wife. I needed her to tell me it would be okay, that I should keep her posted on how Laura and the baby were, and that she'd see me tomorrow night. I needed her arms around me, to comfort me. I needed her to *know* this was happening. She'd know what I should ask, how I should talk to my mom to not scare her more. I dialed one more time and got sent to voicemail. I hung up without leaving a message. I wasn't going to say things like this to a recording. What would I even say?

Trixie, this is your husband. My sister is in the ER probably losing the baby. I want you to know. I want to hear your voice. I'm afraid she's having a miscarriage, and afraid what it'll do to Brody and her. I need you more than I ever imagined I could need anyone. And I'm scared because I keep imagining it's you in there on a gurney, losing our baby, bleeding and scared, and it makes me feel like I'm dying just to imagine that. Come home to me. Please.

I couldn't confess all that. Not to a voicemail recording. I shook my head and went inside to be with my family.

21

Trixie

“I just can’t, okay?” I said.

“Stop being pitiful. This isn’t bad,” my sister insisted.

“Oh my God, you are the worst,” I said. “You’re so freakin’ mean on Keto. I’m gonna force feed you bread and get myself some sympathy. Don’t tell me not to freak out.”

“Well, it wouldn’t do any good. You’ve been so damn dramatic your whole life.”

“I’m older. How in hell would you know how I’ve been my whole life when you weren’t born.”

“Let’s see—Mom and Dad never mentioned that you were an unusually calm toddler and suddenly turned so extra after I came along, so I can assume you were always like this. Anything happens and you are straight up doom and gloom. I’m really just glad you didn’t go into health care. You’d scare the shit out of every patient. You’d be like, this could be really bad, so prepare yourself.”

“I’m not that bad. Okay, maybe right now I am, but not all the time,” I sighed. “I just can’t believe this happened.”

“Babe, you had a lot of sex. And you’re pregnant. That’s how biology works. I mean, technically you only have to do it once, but I think the amount of sex you and Damon had probably increased your odds of getting knocked up.”

“You are no help at all,” I moaned. “I’m on the pill. I don’t even understand how this could happen. I’m not supposed to ovulate.”

“Well, don’t yell at me, sis. Yell at your ovaries. They must’ve got excited that you were getting some action after all this time,” she laughed.

“You are snort laughing during my crisis. Leave me alone to panic in peace,” I said.

“Nope. It’s my bathroom. This is my only sanctuary to get away from the

kids. I'm not leaving. You're stuck with me. So how you feeling? Apart from shocked that you can get pregnant on the pill."

"I know it's not a hundred percent effective, but this is just embarrassing. I'm thirty-four years old, single and in debt."

"Excuse me. You're not single. You're married. To the father of your baby. Isn't that, like, the ideal way to get pregnant?"

"It's not a real marriage and you know it."

"Seems like there was a lot of fucking going on for it to be in name only," she snorted.

"I'm buying you a bag of potatoes, I swear to God," I said.

"What is your problem?"

"My problem is I'm standing in my sister's bathroom looking at two positive pregnancy tests. My problem is this was an accident. My problem is I'm in love with a man who doesn't love me and who only married me as a huge favor and we're getting divorced in a few months. How can I tell him I'm pregnant? He'll want to stay married to me out of obligation and then, bam. I ruined his chances of ever being happy."

"He's not unhappy. Men who have that much sex are not unhappy. My husband is lucky to get it once a week and he's happy."

"Too much information, and, again, absolutely not helpful."

"I am very helpful. I gave you those pregnancy tests, didn't I? I had them in my cabinet from when we were trying to get pregnant a couple years ago."

"Fine, so you have a fully stocked bathroom cabinet and no sympathy for your knocked up sister," I grumbled.

"You are the grouchiest pregnant woman I ever met," Kiera said. "And you just have to tell him the truth. You didn't plan this. It just happened."

"He'll think I'm trying to trap him. I have to divorce him before he finds out."

Kiera rolled her eyes. "Be a grown-up, please. I've known him all my life just like you have. He's not that kind of guy. Tell him the truth and trust him to know you wouldn't try to trap him. He called you. Call him back. Tell him."

"I can't tell him this over the phone. I'm embarrassed enough as it is. Then I call him and say, what? I was screening because I peed on a stick and congratulations you're going to be a father?"

"That's classy. Say that about the pee."

"I'll just have to tell him when I get home tomorrow. Which means I

should go lay awake until morning and then drive home.”

“If you stay awake all night you’ll be even crazier than you are now. Take a bath, get some sleep.”

“I’m sorry I’m acting psycho,” I said. “Thank you for putting up with me.”

“I love you, you psycho,” she said and hugged me. “And I’m going to be an aunt! Finally! I’m going to go buy every loud baby toy there is and a bunch of batteries to pay you back for that Baby Shark thing you got Max last year. I hope your baby gets up in the middle of the night and demands waffles just like he does. And plays with loud toys when you just want to go back to sleep.”

“Don’t put a curse on me. I’ve got enough drama right now,” I said and shoed her out so I could shower.

The whole time I was under the hot water, I kept thinking awful things. *He’s going to be upset. He’s never going to trust me again. He’s never going to touch me again. I’ll be trapped in a heartbreaking, sexless marriage because I accidentally got pregnant from screwing my fake husband’s brains out for weeks.* I was like my own episode of a Jerry Springer show.

22

Damon

In the morning, after a restless night, I checked my phone and saw I didn't have any messages from Trixie. That didn't sit right with me, and I decided to call her, just to see if she was okay. I was ready to dial when I got a message from her. *Sorry I missed your call was asleep. You ok? Flight comes in at five.*

I'll pick you up, was all I replied.

Laura and the baby were fine, but we'd all been scared. No one more so than Brody.

I couldn't get it out of my head, everything Brody went through last night. How horrible that fear would be. I couldn't shake it. I worked out. I did some laundry and went to the library and took some lunch to my parents. They kept asking about her, about how her visit was with her sister. I didn't know what to tell them. I just said she was having a great time, because I didn't want to say, oh she didn't bother to call me back last night. We were all relieved about Laura and the baby, and I could tell my mom hadn't slept much either. She was going over to see them later and I said to let me know if they needed anything.

Later, I got ready and went to pick up Trixie. I felt grim, like I looked forward to seeing her but I was uncomfortable, too. Something about her not messaging or calling, about saying she was asleep and not bothering to call, just texting her flight info—it didn't seem like her. It was inconsiderate, and she wasn't an inconsiderate person. I knew her well enough to say that for sure. She was sometimes bashful and awkward, usually stubborn, but she wasn't unkind. So I felt like something was off in my universe.

When she came out of baggage claim, she hung back a little like she was suddenly shy. I gave her a hug, kissed her briefly. I had missed her, but I knew stuff wasn't right between us. She acted like she didn't know what to do with her hands. The woman who usually stuck her hand in my back pocket

whenever I put my arm around her was fidgety, diffident. I felt the unusual quiet. She wasn't bursting with stories about Max or about Kiera. She wasn't saying much of anything.

In the truck, on the long drive home from the nearest airport, I decided I had to tell her about Laura.

"The reason I kept calling you last night was they had to take Laura to the ER. She was bleeding."

"Oh my God! Is she okay? How's the baby?" I glanced over, saw genuine anguish on her face.

"She's on bed rest for a few days, but they had a heartbeat and everything on the baby. Gave us a hell of a scare. Brody especially. I've never seen him like that, and I was there when his first wife died of cancer. This was just pure—agony." I shook my head.

"I can imagine. I'm glad they're both okay. I'll make something for them to eat and take it over tomorrow. I'm sorry about not answering the phone," she faltered.

"You said you were asleep. Must've been real tired," I said.

"I was."

"Did you have fun in Savannah?"

"Yeah. We stood in line at this mansion restaurant thing forever but it was worth it. So yummy," she said, but her voice was hollow. "And we went shopping."

"Doesn't look like you bought much," I said, observing that she'd just brought back the one suitcase.

"I got Max a Baby Shark hat and gloves. Kiera's still pissed about the musical toy I got him for his birthday that plays that."

I nodded, turned on the radio. I wasn't going to give her hell about how much I'd needed to hear her voice the night before, how scared I'd been. She didn't deserve guilt from me, and my hurt feelings were my problem.

"You have to know if I'd known Laura was sick I would've called back. I would've answered."

"I thought you were asleep," I said.

She didn't answer me. She was staring out the window. I'd felt closer to her at a barbecue dishing up potato salad than I did sitting in the cab of my truck with her, married to her right then. It hurt and felt hollow at the same time.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you last night," she said.

“I missed you,” I admitted. “It was pretty damn scary. My mom’s crying, Brody’s shaking so hard I’m not sure he can even walk a straight line, and I’m just trying to get everybody to calm down when I’m scared shitless too. Seemed like about the worst thing that could happen, and there was nothing I could do to stop it.”

“I hope Laura can get some rest. She had to be terrified,” Trixie said, and her hand went to her own stomach as if in sympathy.

“I don’t know I could’ve faced it. I drove Brody to the hospital to be with her, and after I called you, I had to make myself go in the ER. It was cold and noisy there, and it seemed like nothing good could happen in a place like that,” I confided. “I kept thinking, she’s gonna lose the baby. And maybe she won’t make it either. Maybe they can’t get the bleeding stopped in time, you know?” I cleared my throat.

She reached over and took my hand and held it.

“I’m sorry. I’m glad it turned out fine, but that doesn’t make it less horrible that you all went through it. If I’d been there I don’t know what I could’ve done but I wish I’d been there with you.”

“I wanted you there so bad, Trix,” I admitted. “I wanted—this sounds so stupid—I wanted to hold you and feel that you were okay, that you were fine. I don’t know how you and my sister got mixed up in my mind somehow, but I saw what Brody was tryin’ to live through and thought I could never do that. I wouldn’t wanna be in his shoes for all the money in the world.” I shook my head and broke off.

She got quiet then, and let go of my hand. I saw her swipe at her face like she was crying.

“I didn’t mean to upset you. You’re gonna be wishin’ you’d stayed in Savannah,” I said.

“When you start dropping your g’s I always know you’re either turning on the charm or you’re upset,” she said. “You’ve done that since we were kids. Anytime you said darlin’, I think panties fell off clear to the county line.”

“Never knew it was that effective. Darlin’,” I said, trying to lighten the mood, tease her a little. But she looked away.

“Your sister almost had a miscarriage. You needed me and I wasn’t there.”

“You’re allowed to go out of town, Trix. You can have a life and not just babysit me. I didn’t reckon on havin’ a family emergency. You couldn’t have

known it'd happen and, like you said, you couldn't do nothin' about it if you were here. It was selfish of me to want you there with us, so you could be scared and sad right along with me. I shouldn't have gone on about it and made you feel bad. What you want for dinner?"

"I'm not hungry," she said.

"You feeling okay?" I asked. She shrugged.

"I'm fine. I'm just tired."

When we got home, she thanked me for the ride, like I was some friend who did her a favor.

"Good night, Damon," she said and went, hand to God, into the spare room where she used to sleep and shut the door.

Why did she go to bed at eight o'clock? And why wasn't she in my bed? I called my mom and checked up on my sister and then turned in early myself to stare at the ceiling and think about every minute we'd been married from the

first night she had me undo that stuck zipper on her dress.

23

Trixie

I got up early, showered and went into the shop. If I stopped and puked in the driveway, that was my problem. I wanted to avoid Damon. I got to work on a saddle arrangement for a funeral and then put together some daisies and sent them on over to Laura's house with a Get Well Soon card. It didn't feel like enough to make up for not being there the other night, but I had to do something.

Laying on my side, staring out the window last night I longed to be in Damon's arms, my back against his chest, his breath warm on my hair. But I didn't belong there. I wasn't really his wife. Just some sad, pathetic girl who had a crush on him and needed his good credit score for a loan. He didn't owe me comfort as well.

When my sister called, I didn't even want to answer the phone.

"What'd he say?"

"Nothing."

"You didn't tell him," she accused. "You're chicken."

"When I was at your house and he tried to call, it was cause Laura was in the ER. She almost miscarried her baby, Kiera. I wasn't here to be there for Damon, and I didn't even answer his calls. He was shaken up about it. He kept saying he couldn't be in Brody's shoes and never wanted to go through that kind of thing again. How could I tell him?" I said.

"Easy. You say, I'm sorry about that, but I'm pregnant with your child."

"Easy? He doesn't want to be in Brody's shoes!" I wailed.

"Okay, honey, you have to calm down and think straight. What does that even mean?"

"I don't know. That he doesn't want to lose a kid. Or maybe he doesn't want to have any kids? I don't know. But it didn't sound good for me and the nugget here."

"Aww, the nugget? We called Max the little bean. You gotta have a cute

name for the baby bump.”

“Right now it’s the morning sickness nugget,” I groaned.

“Eat crackers. Like all the time. Constant cracker consumption is the only answer.”

“Thanks,” I said, and got some saltines out of my drawer and munched one. “These are stale.”

“Get new crackers. Jeez, you’re gonna be a mother. Learn to make a grocery list,” Kiera teased. “And you have to tell him. Maybe he was just scared for his sister.”

“What if that’s not it? What if he really doesn’t want kids and especially with me, his fake wife?”

“Well, I’d say it’s a little late for that discussion,” she said. “Get some fresh crackers and let me know how you’re doing.”

Work kept me busy, and Damon was at the firehouse when I got home. I ate and took a bath and went to bed early. The next day was the same, us working opposite shifts. It made avoiding him easier. Since I was, in fact, chicken. I didn’t want to tell him I was pregnant. I smuggled my prenatal vitamins in and kept them in my bedside table, not wanting him to spot them in the bathroom and ask questions. I drank plenty of water and ate entire sleeves of soda crackers to keep the nausea down. Kiera kept checking on me and pushing me to tell him. I blew off Michelle and Nicole with excuses about work when they wanted to go out for more tacos and margaritas. I couldn’t drink alcohol, the smell of tacos would make me puke, and I didn’t want to answer questions about either of those issues. So I just hid at home and slept a lot.

My mom called to ask me if I was depressed when I skipped dinner at her house. I told her I was just wiped out because business was going so great.

“I made chicken and dumplin’s,” she said. “You love those. What’s going on?”

“Just work, like I said. And, you know, I like to spend time with Damon whenever he’s home. He’s working crazy hours right now,” I said, nearly choking on the lie.

I was not spending time with my husband, but it was an excuse that would make my mom happy. The same woman who’d practically tossed me into his lap since I was a teenager. It wasn’t like I was going to tell her that my fake husband got me pregnant and I hadn’t told him. I mean, that was not gonna make her proud. My life was a hot mess, so I threw myself into work

even more. My bills and books were up to date, my orders finalized, and I'd taken a booking for a wedding next month.

The only time I crossed paths with Damon, I told him there was lasagna in the fridge.

"Laura liked the daisies. And she said Brody ate most of the casserole you took them."

"Is she doing okay?" I asked.

"Yeah, she's tired of being stuck at home. We're invited to my mom's tomorrow night for dinner, you can see her then," he said.

"I can't make it. Sorry. I have a bunch of arrangements to do for the Cook funeral," I said. "The flowers won't be in till afternoon so I'll have to stay late and work on it."

"Oh. Okay," he said. "Is everything okay with you?"

"Yeah, why?" I asked, my voice edgy even though I tried to be casual.

"Ever since you got back from Savannah, things have been off between us. Don't tell me you haven't noticed it."

I hadn't expected direct confrontation from him, not about relationship stuff. But easygoing Damon had checked out, and this one was suspicious.

"I'm just working more than you're used to, which is good. I can pay you back faster, get out of your hair. You can have your house back."

"You're not in my hair," he said, frustrated. "How's it going with your tenant over the shop?"

"Not too bad. She works nights so she's mostly quiet. She's a little flaky though. I had to go unplug her flatiron for her one day because she left it on and called me in a panic. I think she doesn't get enough sleep, honestly."

"That's a total mom thing to say," he said.

"What?" I think my panic showed.

"It sounds like something my mom would say. Or your mom. Like, are you eating your vegetables? You should go to bed earlier. That kind of thing."

"Oh. Okay. Maybe I'll go get some sleep now. I'm pretty tired."

"You sure you feel okay? You've been sleeping a lot," he said.

This more observant Damon needed to back off. I felt like the bad guy in a Scooby Doo episode, trying to hide my antics from the gang. I stammered something about going to work early tomorrow and scampered off to my room to feel like an idiot. It was either that or blurt out that I was with child, which didn't seem like the best option.

24

Damon

Things had been going so well before she went to Savannah. Maybe her sister had said something to her that made her withdraw from me. Maybe she was having second thoughts about playing house with me. Whatever it was, things had gone to crap since she came back. She avoided me. If I was home and came into a room, it wouldn't be five minutes till she had to go to bed or call her mom or some other excuse to get away from me. It was upsetting, and when I asked her about it, she brushed it off. I knew something was wrong, and I wanted her to tell me what it was so I could fix it. So I could have her back.

Living with her like this was worse than being alone, I decided. Because it was so damn frustrating. I wanted to talk to her, really talk, watch a movie, laugh, take her to bed. But all I got were mumbles about work and being tired. She was stonewalling me, shutting me down anytime I tried to so much as give her a hug or make plans to hang out with her. Brody was more available than she was, and he had a pregnant wife he was worried about. I literally saw him more than I saw her because we grabbed lunch together one day. I didn't bother him about my marriage drama, because he had enough on his plate.

"Laura's great, man. She's a warrior. There's no keeping her down. Her test results are all good, and she's back at work, bitching that I put her on desk duty. She said if I bring her one more Gatorade, she's gonna throw it at me. Keeping hydrated is really important during pregnancy. And I don't mean iced coffee," he said with an eye roll that was practically affectionate. He doted on my loud-mouthed sister just the way she deserved.

"I'm glad you guys are over the scare and baby Damonette is doing well," I said.

"We are not naming our kid after you. Have your own kid if you wanna give it a dumb name," he said.

“We’re not doing that.”

“Last I checked y’all were doin’ a lot of ‘that’.”

“I mean we’re not starting a family. It’s not a real marriage,” I said flatly.

“You were gonna go all in, tell her how you felt. Did it not go well?”

I shook my head. “I was planning on telling her. Then she went to see her sister, and she’s been so busy since she got back. There’s not been time. We haven’t even had a meal together, much less a conversation.”

“You gotta make time, buddy.”

“I would if she didn’t run out the goddamn room every time she sees me,” I blurted out.

“How’d you piss her off so bad?”

“I didn’t. I think she’s just—done with me. Like maybe I wanted more than a fling for the first time in my life, and she didn’t. I was just—convenient but she had enough.”

“That’s crap. She’s not done with you. She’s upset about something. Quit making it about you. Find out what’s wrong and fix it.”

“I want to,” I said.

“Then quit feeling sorry for yourself and don’t give up.”

I still hadn’t found a minute to talk to her. I was wondering if I should just call her. It was easier for her to blow me off on the phone than in person, but I was about to crawl out of my skin waiting to talk to her. As soon as my shift was over, I’d go by the flower shop and corner her, tell her to give me ten minutes, kiss her into submission if I had to. It was time to hash this out, no matter how terrifying it seemed.

I only had two more hours on my shift when the call came in from dispatch about a gas leak downtown. I immediately recognized the address as Trixie’s shop. I was on that truck as soon as the address was given. We sped to the street, and I was off the side before the truck was stopped. She was standing outside the shop, arms crossed, face too pale. I went to her and started checking her over.

“Are you hurt?” I asked, assessing her for injury. I took off my heavy uniform coat and draped it around her, “Are you hurt?” I demanded. She shook her head mutely.

The other guys went in to check things out and turn off the gas. I was too busy looking at her weary face and the shadows under her eyes.

She didn’t say a word to me. I folded her into my arms, held her against me. She finally leaned into me, rested her head on my chest. I stroked her

hair, then shrugged her away and tipped her face up. I cupped her cheek in my palm and kissed her. I kissed her so long I was breathless and didn't care. I was sliding my tongue in and out between her lips, making her rise on tiptoe, making her clutch my arms. I could feel her start to melt for me, and I kept going, kept kissing her like my life depended on the slow, sexy slide of our tongues against each other, and the crackle of that wildfire chemistry kindling to life after way too long.

She was plastered against me as close as I could have her, and our mouths were fused together. I didn't care that we were on the sidewalk, that a crowd had gathered when the fire truck veered onto the street. I cared that she was safe and whole and in my arms. I could tell her something with my kiss that I couldn't put into words. This was what Brody had described when Laura was kidnapped. This ferocious need to protect, to possess. It thrummed in my blood. I drew back from that devouring kiss and looked at her, those big eyes dark with need, but the weariness, something like fear in her face.

"Are you hurt?" I asked again.

"Gas is off," one of the guys said. "The tenant upstairs left her stove on. I guess the pilot light went out, but the gas infiltrated downstairs. It'll be clear in a few minutes to go back inside."

"No," I said. "I'm going to flip the closed sign and lock up. I'm taking her to the hospital to be checked out."

"I'm fine. I just got lightheaded, and I noticed the smell, and I called 911 and came outside. It's no big deal," she said. She was swaying on her feet, stubborn but weaker than she'd admit. I shook my head.

"Go get her purse and flip the sign," I ordered one of the other guys, not even looking away from her long enough to see which one followed my instructions. I took her purse when it was handed to me and I found her car keys. "I'm gonna text the chief, tell him I'm taking off now and I won't be in tomorrow. Thank you guys. I owe you a case of beer later on."

I slid my arm around her and tucked her in against my side, walking slowly, matching my stride to hers until we reached where her car was parked. I opened the passenger door and eased her into the seat.

"This is like when you plugged in my phone and tucked me in," she said, her voice watery.

I dropped to my knees on the pavement beside the car and knelt beside her, took her hand, searched her face.

"I could've lost you. Jesus Christ, Trix. I'm gonna throw your tenant out

as soon as I rip the gas line out of the wall. Next one can use a fuckin' hot plate for all I care. I won't have you in danger."

"It was an accident. It could've happened to anyone, really. Don't blame her. And I need the rental income to pay you back."

"Enough of that. You're not paying me for anything. Stop. You're working yourself to death. You've lost weight, you're pale. You barely talk to me. Talk to me, *please*," I practically begged, my voice hollow, my hand sliding up her arm to her shoulder and her hair.

She looked at me, eyes welling with tears and shook her head mutely. Tears slid down her face. I leaned my forehead against her shoulder for a moment, then gathered her against me, kissed her hair.

"What have I done? Tell me, dammit," I said, but my voice was broken, sorrow showing through. "Everything was perfect. We were happy. I know we were. I don't know what happened. You have to tell me so I can fix it. Please," I choked out. She clung to me, sobbing, shaking her head, refusing again and again to speak.

She pulled away from me and turned her face where she wasn't even looking at me. I reached across her and fastened her seatbelt, shut the door. I sat in the driver's seat, adjusted it so my knees weren't up around my ears because she had to sit up so close to the wheel. We would've laughed about that two weeks ago. Hell, I would've had her in my lap, riding me, that exquisite look of wonder on her face as I made pleasure blaze through her body. It hurt me physically to think of it.

All I could do was give her the space she wanted, and make sure she wasn't sick from the gas leak. I took her to the ER, the same entrance where I'd dropped Brody off a week ago to check on my sister. This time, I parked in the fire lane and rounded the car, helped her out and charged in demanding a wheelchair.

"You can't park there," she said faintly.

"I'm a fireman," I said, "let them fucking say something."

A security guard came out to wave me off. I rounded on him and said, "My wife was in a gas leak. She needs to be examined now."

"Sir, they'll tow your car."

"I don't care," I said. "I'm not leaving her. Here's the keys. If they want it moved, they can move it."

I badgered the registration clerk and shoved my insurance card at her and insisted on following when they took Trixie back to the cubicle to be

examined.

“Sir, you can’t go in during the exam,” a nurse told me.

“That’s my wife,” I argued.

“Rules are rules,” she said wryly, “we get plenty of domestic disputes in here and women get examined without their partners. No exceptions. Wanna complain? We got security.” She crossed her arms. I stepped back and went to sit in the waiting room.

“Tell her I’m waiting,” I said.

I sat in the plastic chair and stared at the floor tiles. I wasn’t capable of making a call or sending a message. I was vibrating with fear, with tension. After half an hour, the same nurse came out.

“Are you here with Trixie Owens?”

“Vance. Her name is Trixie Vance,” I said. “Yes.”

“You can go back now. She’s in the first exam cube.”

I slid the curtain back and saw her lying on a narrow gurney, a cotton blanket over her. She was on her side, curled up, and she’d been crying.

“I can go home,” she said. “I’m going to be fine.”

I went and sat on the edge of the gurney and took her hand and kissed it, “I’ll do anything,” I said. “You were going to leave me, weren’t you? I knew when you didn’t answer my call you were done. But I want to try again, just tell me what we need to work on. Is it my work schedule? Is it—do you need more help at the shop or do we need to get counseling or something?”

Trixie buried her face in her hands and turned away from me. A doctor came in and looked at me like I was doing something wrong. I climbed off the gurney and sat in a chair, aggravated and worried.

“Good news is I can give you the all-clear today. No ill effects from the gas exposure and your blood count numbers are good. The bad news is, your math is wrong. Your estimate of four or five weeks... looks more like eight or nine weeks to me,” he said. “Do you have an OB appointment yet?”

She sat bolt upright, shook her head, eyes wide.

“OB appointment?” I asked, my eyes flicking from the doctor to my wife.

“I have one for Friday morning,” Trixie said weakly.

“The nurse will be in to give you discharge instructions. Keep taking your vitamins and get plenty of rest,” he said. Then he left.

I was back on the bed in an instant.

“OB appointment?”

“I’m so sorry, Damon,” she said, and started crying again.

“Trix?”

“I’m pregnant. I found out in Savannah. It’s why I didn’t call you. I couldn’t tell you on the phone. I didn’t want you to find out this way. You’re mad, I get it. But I didn’t mean for it to happen, I swear I’ve been on the pill this whole time. I didn’t—do this on purpose. To trap you. I know how it looks.”

“How it looks? It looks like you’re pregnant and you were afraid to tell me.”

I swept her into my arms, her palm on my shoulder blade, holding on tight. I kissed her and kissed her.

“God help me, I thought you were leaving me. Were you leaving me?”

She shook her head, “I don’t understand. Aren’t you done with me?”

“I thought *you* were done with *me*,” I said. “That all you wanted was a fling and you were over it.”

“I’m not over it. Not by a long shot.”

“Good, because neither am I. I’m taking you home,” I said.

25

Trixie

He held my hand all the way home. He took me into the house and locked the door. Then he was pressing me up against it, kissing me. All I could do was hold on and suck his tongue deeper in my mouth and admit to myself how much I'd missed him, how much I'd missed this connection with him.

"I should've told you," I gasped. "I'm sorry."

"Are you still dizzy?"

"No, why?"

"Because I'm about to put my mouth between your legs and I don't want you to fall."

My whole body clenched at his words, at the naughty promise in them. I felt liquid and trembling at once.

"Then you better take me to bed. It's safer," I said archly.

We were in his bed in no time, Damon peeling off his uniform and stopping every few seconds to kiss me again.

"How could you ever think I wouldn't want our baby? That I would blame you or be mad?" he asked. "What did I do to make you think that?"

There was anguish on his face. "What you said about Brody, about never wanting to be in his shoes. You never want to be a father, never want to be in that position. I was going to tell you in the car from the airport and you said that. I'm not blaming you; I'm saying that made me see clearly that—"

"That I'd rather die than lose a child, than lose you. I didn't say it right, or you would've known that what tore me up, besides worrying about Laura, was the fact I kept seeing you, your face drawn with pain and fear, sick and in danger of losing our baby. It was the worst nightmare I could imagine to face that. Because what I want more than anything is you, a family and a life as your husband. I've loved you for so long, Trix. I should've told you months ago."

"Why didn't you?"

“Every time I came close, I thought of what I had to lose. Because even being your fake husband, watching movies with you, making dinner together, I didn’t want to give that up or ruin it if you didn’t feel the same way. Once you waited up for me that night and I’d had you—I would’ve done anything to keep you. If it meant pretending it was just a fling, just for fun, I could do that if it meant I had you in my life and in my bed. I was a coward, Trix. Forgive me.”

“So was I. I was an idiot. Even my sister told me you wouldn’t be mad that I’m pregnant, but I wouldn’t listen because I was so—chicken,” I blurted out.

“You’re *my* chicken,” he said, and kissed my forehead. I laughed.

Then I stopped laughing abruptly because he was stripping off my leggings and sliding warm hands up my shirt, big palms and long fingers along my rib cage and up, up, fondling my breasts, making me catch my breath. He pushed up my shirt and kissed my belly, looked up at me with wonder in his eyes.

“I am the luckiest man. I should send your shitty former landlord a fruit basket to thank him. I never would’ve gotten you if it weren’t for the bad plumbing in that building.”

“You’re right—you are an idiot. You could’ve had me anytime you wanted me.”

“Anytime?”

“Anytime. That day you came in to get flowers for your sister... the night in the bar when you touched my neck. I swear, I panicked. I think if you’d so much as kissed me I would’ve come right then.”

“Let me see,” he said mischievously. His fingers skated up the side of my throat, curved behind my ear and then back down until he sucked my neck. I shivered.

“Why’d you tell them your name was Owens at the hospital?”

“Because I thought once you found out I was pregnant it’d only be Vance for about another forty-eight hours. You’d leave me. I’m sorry I thought that. I was wrong. I just panicked. I wasn’t thinking straight. I know you’ve never been anything but kind and accepting to me. You’ve shown me love at every turn. I should’ve trusted you more,” I said.

“You should always trust me. And I won’t give you any reason to stop. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Then he kissed my chin and my bottom lip and the corner of my mouth, making me gasp and respond, as if he held all my reactions in the palm of his hand. Like he only needed to choose the touch that would make me gasp or moan or say his name. He made it seem so easy, so natural. When it was anything but simple, not when any other man I'd ever been with had felt like an alien, someone that could never understand me.

"It's been you my whole life, Damon," I said.

"It's been you too, Trix. I just need you to say yes."

"Yes to what?" I said with a nervous giggle. "I already married you and I'm pregnant with your baby. What other kind of validation do you want?"

"To know that you're here because you want to be. Not because you needed me for a loan or because I'm helping you and you feel an obligation to me. Because you *want* to be with me."

"How could you ever think I don't? I've been tearing myself up because I thought I failed you, that you'd hate me."

Damon took my face in his hands, his aqua blue eyes intense and bright, "Never. Never think that. I would do anything to keep you. I love you. I couldn't hate you. I will never leave you. I will always be here for you and our baby. You are everything I want, everything I will ever want."

He fell to kissing me, as if he could not convince me any other way. My body responded to his, as if his lips turned a switch that lit me on fire. I wanted his hands on me, wanted all of him.

"I thought it had to be the night I was out with the girls and came home and you were in a towel. But it seems like it was—the first time we were together that I got pregnant. When you were in the fire. When you took me up against the door, and then again in your bed. That was the night we made our baby, Damon."

He kissed my neck, just below my ear, and slid his hands over my hips, "I should've known as soon as I touched you that something magical was happening. The way it felt to be inside you, how right it was. It doesn't surprise me at all that we made a baby that night. Not when I needed you so much, when you needed me. That just means this was meant to be even more than I thought it was."

"Do you really think that?" I said.

"Quit worrying. Let me make love to you, Trix. My wife. My woman. Until the day I die, I swear it."

The kiss he gave me then made me shudder and curled my toes. It was

poignant and sharp and fiery. I was panting by the time he let me catch my breath so he could work over my nipples, making them stand sharp and taut for his lips and tongue. When he stroked my stomach, I writhed, begged for more. He was in no hurry. Damon just took his sweet time, kissing and caressing every part of me, the backs of his fingers infuriatingly gentle on the side of my breast, on my thigh. Where I wanted him to grip and grab and thrust, he stroked and teased instead. Thirsty for him, I caught his mouth with mine and sucked his tongue, getting a very satisfying moan out of him.

I reached for his hips and ran my hands over his ass appreciatively. "I want you inside me, Damon. I've missed you so much," I breathed against his lips. He kissed me again, then he cupped my sex, pierced me with a long finger, then another, groaning when he felt how slippery I was.

"You're ready for me," he said, sucking my neck, hitching my thigh up and wrapping my leg over him.

Damon rocked into me, spearing me with his cock, making me twist and writhe under him. He worked in and out, really going in deep and then inching out so slowly, lush and hot.

"God, you feel amazing." Then he made a strangled noise when I gripped him, clenched around him like a fist. I worked my hips down over him, pushed against him. He tunneled into me, my body stretching, rearranging to accommodate his size, his powerful thrusts. Every time he buried himself in me, he gave a little twist, a nudge against my clit that sent sparks through me, a jolt of pressure and icy bliss that scalded me. Finally he just penetrated me fully, rubbed against me, rocking, his big, heavy muscled body pressing me into the mattress as he licked my lower lip and sucked it, grunting as he rocked forward and ground against my throbbing clit. I bore down on him, screaming, my nails digging into his shoulders, the heavy slab of his back unyielding under my hands. I came with a great clench and my limbs jerked, my head thrashing on the pillow and animal noises spilling from me as he kept going and going, dragging it out of me when I didn't think I could take anymore. When I babbled and begged him to stop, he licked my earlobe and whispered, "Take it," and I felt my body seize up and shake with a piercing thrill that made my legs cramp up with the force of it.

I gripped his hair in my hands and kissed him, a kiss of tongues and teeth clashing, of him lifting me with one arm into his lap and pumping me up and down on his cock, lifting me and shoving me back down his length. I jerked my hips forward, arched my back so my breasts were practically in his face.

He captured a nipple and sucked it, laved it with his tongue, scraped it lightly with his teeth until I was keening, demanding that he come, that he give me every drop he had.

“I want it, all of it, you’re mine,” I gasped, bouncing in his lap, riding him, his arms around me, dragging me up the thick erection and then thrusting it back into me. “More,” I said, “don’t hold back. Don’t stop, please.” I was half out of my mind on orgasms and all I could think was how much I wanted to feel him empty inside me, how the hot liquid gush of him inside me, coating my thighs would be the one thing to relieve all this sweaty tension between us. I felt the first heavy lashings of his climax shoot into me with a force that bowed me back. I arched, leaning back on my hands to watch where we joined.

“Oh God, look at you, look at taking all of me in,” he groaned, and his head went back, his thrusts going wild and a spill of thick cum pouring into me. I made a carnal sound, my hand shooting out to grab his back and press him closer. I rocked against him after he was done, milking the last drops from him. He kissed my cheek.

“All of me, always,” he said raggedly. “I want to give you everything. You’re mine.”

“That’s primitive,” I said, trying for lightness.

“Very. You’re my woman,” he said with a mischievous grin and pulled me down into his arms with a laugh. “I’m like a caveman now. My woman. My child. Mine.”

His voice and face were serious, and I nestled into his broad chest, feeling completely whole and safe and loved.

“I never imagined life could be like this. It feels too perfect,” I said. “I was lucky to have a house and my shop, bad plumbing and all. Some people don’t get even that much.”

“I know. But now I have you. And baby makes three. Just think, in a few years, I’ll be coaching our little nugget on Little League right alongside Laura and Brody’s kid. They’ll be cousins, and they can grow up together, so close in age. That’s just another layer of how lucky we are.”

“We really are. It’s crazy.”

“Not crazy, Trix. It’s perfect. There’s nothing crazy about that.”

I loved writing that check. The one that paid off my loan. I had sold my

house to a couple who fell in love with it and paid way more than I would've asked for it. It reminded her of the house she grew up in, and it was a sentimental thing I guess. Then I sold the extra lot attached to the house separately to a guy who wanted to build a duplex there. I leased the apartment over the shop to someone who didn't forget and leave stuff on all the time.

I had a husband who placed a standing order for red roses every Thursday afternoon, because he said roses were for lovers. I told him that once, right before I babbled about funerals and crap because I was nervous and had a huge crush on him. Now we were looking at cribs from IKEA and turning that spare bedroom into a nursery for our baby. So far, he'd painted the walls a soft baby blue—he bought the paint the week we found out we were having a boy. I wanted to do a Mickey Mouse room, but he was pushing for a Ghostbusters theme. I think I'll win this one.

He came home last week with a red race car. The kind big enough for a toddler to ride in. When I explained patiently that he was going to be too little for that for a long time, he just grinned.

"It'll be Fast and Furious time before you know it, and our kid isn't gonna be a passenger, that's for sure. He'll be the kind to drive the getaway car."

I had smiled in spite of myself and then made him swear not to show him those movies until he was at least twelve.

"What if he's a fairy tale kid? Knights and dragons and castles. He'll grow up hearing about how I loved you all my life, and how you turned out to be the prince who rescued me."

"Nobody rescued you, baby. You and that little boy saved me, if anybody got rescued here," he said, his hand curving protectively over my round belly. "I would've been nothing but a lonely workaholic with a string of forgettable flings."

"When we tell our kids that bedtime story, leave out the flings part," I said.

"Fine, we'll keep it G-rated."

"Is that the doorbell?"

"Let me get it. It's Chinese food."

"You got me Chinese?" I squealed.

"The baby needs eggrolls, I've been told."

"He really does. I've been craving them so bad!"

"And I got cherry popsicles. They're in the freezer."

"You are the best!" I said.

“Don’t you forget it,” he said, bringing in the bags of Chinese food and spreading a blanket on the floor. “I thought we’d have a picnic in the nursery.”

“That’s perfect. I’ll go get—”

“You sit down. I’ll go get everything we need.”

He came back with two glasses of sparkling cider, “A toast to my bride,” he said. “You accepted help from me and gave me a purpose and a life and family I always dreamed of. I can never thank you enough. All I can do is love you forever.”

He kissed me softly and clinked our glasses together. His arm slid around my shoulders and I leaned into him, just soaking in this perfect feeling of belonging and the promise of the future with him; the future I’d always wanted.

Epilogue

One Year Later

Sometimes things turn out even better than you could have imagined. When the plumbing busted in my shop a little over a year ago, all I hoped for was a set of pipes that didn't leak. Now I had everything and then some. My shop was doing great, turning a tidy profit, and I had two full-time workers plus a part-timer and a delivery driver.

I had Damon, our home and our son. They meant everything to me.

There was a pack and play in my office so Ashton could nap when we're not spoiling him while I'm at work. Our perfect baby boy with his daddy's aquamarine eyes and a little fluff of downy curls coming in, with just a hint of ginger to them.

He was the most adorable baby I've ever seen, all plump cheeks and dimpled hands and cute ticklish belly. He wasn't sitting up yet, and we joked that he'd never learn to walk because we didn't want to put him down long enough for him to learn. It's not just me. He had Damon wrapped around his little finger. My mom came into the shop most days and played with Ashton, begging to take him to grandma's house. But I just can't let my baby out of my sight yet. I'd miss him too much. If I couldn't stop and snuggle him, tickle him in the spot that makes him chuckle and be the one to feed him that baby cereal with the apples that he loves, I don't think I'd know what to do with myself. He filled up a part of my heart I hadn't even known was there before he was born.

The barbecue at the Vance's was really just an excuse to get both grandbabies together so all the grandparents could spoil and snuggle them. My mom took off with Ashton, bouncing him on her hip, to go see Brenna, Brody and Laura's little girl. She's a spitfire like her mother, tall and noisy already. My in-laws came out in the backyard with a big blowup ball pit for the kids to play in. Before I could protest that Ashton was too little to even sit up, my mom climbed in the ball pit and held him in her lap while he chewed

on a red plastic ball and Brenna squealed at him and threw balls in the air. I laughed and turned to Damon.

“How is any of this possible?”

“I was in the right place at the right time that night in the bar when you were upset about the shop. I had a way to fix your problem, and a hunch that maybe you’d fix my whole life. That I could get the girl in the craziest way possible. And like most of my off-the-wall plans, it worked out.”

“I’m glad it did,” I said. “It’s a beautiful day out, and everything is so perfect it almost hurts.”

“Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and just go check on him and watch him sleep because I can’t believe it. Or I lay there and look at you in the moonlight and think there must’ve been something good I did to earn this, and I just can’t remember what it was.”

“Maybe when you saved my business?”

“No, I would’ve had to save an entire village of orphans or something to get a life this good. There’s just no way to explain it. How we got this damn lucky. But I won’t take it for granted, I can tell you that. I remember coming home to an empty house and reading my library books for company. I remember looking at you on the Fourth of July and thinking that I didn’t like your boyfriend.”

“I didn’t have one.”

“I thought you did, and I didn’t like him,” he said, and I laughed. “Cause he wasn’t me. So I found an excuse to talk to you, to get flowers for Laura. Just to see you, get you to talk to me.”

“I bet you were sorry. I was such a mess that day!” I laughed. “I can’t believe you didn’t just run screaming out of the shop.”

“I’m tougher than that. Any guy who can’t take a little awkwardness doesn’t deserve a woman like you anyway. Don’t forget, it seemed like everybody in town was mad at me for acting like an ass to Brody and my sister right around that time. I was just glad anybody was talking to me,” he said.

“I wish I’d answered your call when I was in Savannah. I wish I’d trusted you more. I’m never going to stop being sorry for that.”

“You have to. Because you have nothing to be sorry for at all. We both made mistakes, and we managed to fix things in time. Before I lost you for good. I kept imagining that I’d have to shake hands with the guy you married, that you’d invite me to your wedding and if I didn’t go it’d be obvious I

wasn't over you so I'd have to go."

"Wait, was I marrying the imaginary boyfriend from Fourth of July, or somebody else?" I teased.

"Somebody else. But I knew I'd have to act like it was fine and I was happy for you. I'd have to show up at least for the reception."

"Well, be glad it didn't happen. I decided when you agreed to marry me and help me buy the building that I'd have to give you free flowers for your wedding as a thank you. I'd have to make your bride's bouquet with my bare hands," I said. "It was like I wanted to act like it would be a friendly gesture, but I was eating my heart out over this imagined horrible future situation."

"Maybe your imaginary groom and my pretend future bride ended up together."

"No, I hope they died in a fiery car crash. I couldn't stand her," I laughed.

"Yeah, he was a preppy loser," Damon agreed.

I laughed and he pulled me back against him and put his arms around me. We watched Ashton and Brenna playing, my dad taking pictures every five seconds and my mom waving him away. The sun-drenched backyard, the birds in the trees, the smell of hot dogs and hamburgers on the grill where Brody stood by soberly in a Kiss the Cook apron Laura had forced him to wear—all of it was absolutely perfect. The way my husband's arms wrapped around me from behind, the ease of the way he held me, and the excitement and comfort of that alone was a miracle. To have all of these people we loved around us, our perfect little boy, so much happiness—it was beyond anything I could have imagined when I was ankle-deep in murky water in the backroom of my flower shop last year.

When I thought of how hopeless, how lonely I was then, it made the magic of my life now even better. Because I'd been alone and scared and not sure how I could handle everything life threw at me. Now, with Damon by my side, I knew I was a better version of myself and that I didn't have to be afraid. Because we had each other. It was such a beautiful life and I was thankful for it every minute of the day, every hour of the night in my husband's arms.

I shut my eyes and leaned back against him, listened to his breath and the breeze and birdsong, the laughter of the people we loved the most. There were moments I knew I'd never forget, and this was one of the best.

The End

Hot Cop (Sample)

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1

Laura

I tapped my phone screen and reviewed the notes again. Yeah, he was supposed to take five of these pills a day. I read the directions closely and sorted them into the big pill organizer. I didn't even know they made forty-compartment flip-top plastic organizers for medication, but now I was getting to know one really well. Each day was labeled, and there were five little flip-top boxes for different times of day—before breakfast, one for each meal, mid-afternoon, and bedtime. I counted out the pills and loaded the week's worth of that medication in the time slots where it belonged. Then I twisted open the next amber-colored bottle and started distributing that medication into its appropriate section.

It was tedious, and I was impatient because I didn't want to make a mistake, but it was taking forever. I was just doling out my dad's meds for the week. His health had been declining for a couple of years and now he was in kidney failure. Between trips to dialysis and keeping track of his diet and medications and trying to cook and clean, my mom was at her wit's end. My dad wouldn't agree to have a home health aid come in to help out either.

So just like that, when my mom called me in tears because she was so exhausted, I made a decision. I was a few years into being a city cop, including four years as an officer in Charleston. I loved the pace and the challenge of my job—but that was nothing when my family needed me. I could be there for my mom and take some of the burden off of her. I could take over some of the tasks caring for my dad, which would be good for them both. She could get out, have coffee with her friends again, go shopping, and meet with her book club at the library. My dad could be taken care of by someone competent and loving, but who didn't put up with his demanding crap the way my mom did. If they needed a housekeeper once a week or if he needed a home health aid to help administer some of his meds and stuff, they'd damn well have one. I was Daddy's little girl, and I could convince

him. If I couldn't persuade him to accept help for my mom's sake, I also wasn't a lightweight who was squeamish about arguing with him either. They didn't raise me to be a pushover, and they taught me to be loyal and brave. This was an opportunity to do those things. Maybe not the way I thought I would when I started studying criminal justice, ready to catch the bad guys and uphold the law. Maybe the most fundamental thing in my life, my family, was calling me home.

My mom had tried to keep me from quitting, tried to keep me from moving back to Rockford Falls. She always wanted me to chase my dreams and if she let me come home, that probably felt like a failure to her. I had to make her understand that being with her while my dad was in bad shape, helping them both out, was what I really wanted. I knew they'd hire me back in Charleston in a heartbeat. The force had offered me unpaid leave, but I knew in my heart it would take longer than twelve weeks. My dad needed a transplant. My mom needed support and a break. I couldn't put a deadline on that kind of situation. I wasn't about to walk out on them when they still needed me just because my leave was up. So I resigned. I packed up and moved home.

It was total culture shock, obviously. From living on my own, keeping my own hours and doing everything my way to sleeping in my childhood room that still had a Jonas Brothers poster up on the wall. I'm not going to lie—Nick was still fine as hell. I'd maybe watched Jumanji more than once, and not even just for the Rock. My favorite JoBro was in it. But gone were the days of watching mindless movies and scrolling my phone or going out for margarita night with my friends. The concerts, the sporting events, everything about the nightlife I loved in Charleston was about as far from sleepy little Rockford Falls as you could get. Charleston had been a terrific place to be in my twenties. Super charged and exciting, but friendly. I'd had good times there.

Instead of talking with the crime scene team about getting DNA results, I was counting blood pressure pills into a tray. Instead of deciding whether to put a pink streak back in my strawberry blond hair at my salon appointment, it was a messy bun for me. I wriggled my hot pink toenails inside my cozy socks. No more pedicures and strappy sandals and sexy first dates. Okay, my dates were never really that sexy. Mostly they were intimidated that I was a cop. The truth was, I came home because I wanted to. Would I miss some of the fun of living in the city? Sure. But I didn't regret my choice.

I poured some pineapple juice and took it to my dad with his pills.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said, “got my OJ?”

“Daddy, it’s pineapple. You know that. We have to watch your potassium and your phosphorus. They’re rough on your kidneys.”

“I already gave up my lunch meat. You know I love my lunch meat. And all that crap your mom made me eat—whole grain this and brown rice that—turns out it was all bad for my kidneys.”

“Daddy, you know that didn’t cause this. And you’re back to white bread now. Be happy. The rest of us have to eat our whole grains you can just chow down on good old Wonder bread. Now here’s your juice. Drink up.”

“I taught you to ride a bike. Don’t give me that crap about drink up like I’m five years old,” he grumbled, teasing me.

“Cool. Then don’t act like you’re five and I won’t. Jeez, was I this annoying when I was little? Bottoms up.”

“You were the messiest kid I’ve ever seen. Damon, now he was a model child. Tidy and quiet. Played with his army men or his puzzles, always picked up his toys...”

“Yeah, I’m the bad seed. That’s why you love me. Now take your pills. I’m driving you to dialysis later.”

“Big fun. What do you say we skip it and go have a beer, don’t tell Mom?”

“Nice try, big guy,” I laughed. “We gotta get your blood cleaned out or whatever.”

“Yeah, you’ll read a magazine, learn some new recipes, and I’ll sit back there freezing my ass off and waiting for hours while they poke me with needles.”

“Oh come on. A recipe? What am I? June Cleaver? I got the latest Guns & Ammo issue on my phone and I’m rereading my favorite JD Robb. Ain’t nobody here looking for low sodium casseroles to make you, Daddy.”

“I can’t even have potatoes,” he moaned.

He swallowed the pills and drank the juice. “Wait, is this the one I can’t have pineapple juice with? There’s one pill—cholesterol maybe—that your mom says it’s dangerous if I drink citrus anywhere near it. You checked the label, right?” he said.

“Shit,” I said, pulling out my phone and scrolling through my notes.

He hooted with laughter, slapping his knee. “I had you going there for a minute.”

“You old fart! You scared me to death,” I shook my head, “There’s no contraindication for pineapple juice on any of these.”

“I was just screwing with you, Miss Bossypants,” he laughed. I rolled my eyes.

“Dad, you’re a hot mess. It’s no wonder Mom needs to get out of the house more,” I teased. I kissed his head and took the juice glass to the sink. “Now be good or I’m gonna make you do pull-ups.”

“I’m not supposed to do those—”

“Excuses, excuses,” I teased. “Who was it that put that chin-up bar in the basement when I was nine and told me I had to do ten a day or no allowance?”

“It worked, too. Inside of two weeks you’d gotten strong enough to do a regulation pull up and hold it steady.”

“So don’t give me any crap about following doctor’s orders or I’ll put your ass on that bar. No potatoes till you give me ten chin-ups a day.”

“I’m pretty sure the doctor wouldn’t go for that.”

“Snitches get stitches,” I laughed. “Isn’t that what you taught me?”

“Damn it. I never thought you listened that good,” he chuckled.

Still, seeing the yellowish, papery look of his skin, hearing the rasp to his laugh was like a punch in the gut to me. It was good to joke around with him, to see flashes of his personality. I made a note to check Netflix for some action movies later. He always loved those, and I was sure Liam Neeson was saving a train or an embassy that my dad would enjoy.

“Want me to get you the tablet so you can watch something? The Weather Channel?” I teased.

“I thought I might look up Backdraft,” he said.

“Oh God, no more Backdraft. No more Frequency. No more fireman movies!” I said with a roll of my eyes.

“Easy for you to say. There are a million movies about cops. Lethal Weapon. Training Day. Beverly Hills Cop. Firefighters, we only got a couple. It’s hard to make a good comedy out of men risking their lives to save people from a blaze,” he said, needling me good-naturedly.

“And cops don’t put our lives on the line? Really? If somebody breaks in your house, you gonna call a fireman? Nah, that’s just if your kitten gets stuck in a tree,” I laughed.

“Well, if you call the cops, you gotta get them to get up from the booth at Dunkin Donuts long enough to climb in the squad car. I swear, I never knew

growing up what all them lazy kids were gonna do with their life. About half of them ended up on the RFPD force,” he said.

“You are so full of crap. I’m out there keeping the peace in Charleston, making the streets safe and busting drug dealers, and you talk about your glory days holding a water hose,” I laughed.

“Yeah, I bet Charleston fell apart when you left. Bunch of drug dealers and hookers dancing on top of cars with you gone. You kept it all under control,” he said wryly.

I laughed again. There was nobody like my dad for talking shit about anybody who wasn’t a firefighter. It was in his blood. He and his brothers had grown up to be just like their dad—second-generation firefighters. My big brother Damon was a proud third-gen fireman right here in Rockford Falls. I grew up around that station with my dad and uncles. I climbed the trucks, wore the too-big helmets and boots, helped with chili suppers and food drives for the soup kitchen. My dad knew I loved that place, that institution, just like I knew he had a soft spot for law enforcement, too.

“Hey, I was the lynchpin holding that city together. Stay away from CNN if you don’t wanna see the riots that broke out since I left. I’m sure it’s a disaster.”

“Now I know you work hard. Being a cop’s almost as good as a firefighter, and don’t you forget it.”

“Almost, huh?” I asked. “Well I won’t let that go to my head.”

“The difference is you get to pack a gun. Even though I walked into plenty of sticky situations on a fire call only to find out there was a domestic disturbance involved and some guy pitched a cigarette into the garage or tried to set his girlfriend on fire—”

“Yeah, that’s not really a fire department kinda problem,” I said. “Dispatch was snoozing on those.”

“True. They always sent us in when they didn’t know who to call. You don’t call the paramedics, the cops might walk in and it turns into a firefight —”

“So you send unarmed firemen in raincoats?” I said dubiously.

“Okay, so not all the time, but it did happen a few times.”

“People are usually happy when the fire truck pulls up. Not so much with a squad car.”

He chuckled along with me. After a while, I got him downstairs and poured myself some coffee. I gave him green tea and ignored his grimace at

the cup.

“It tastes like grass.”

“Yeah, it does. But it’s good for you. One small cup.”

“I want a Coke.”

“Artificial phosphorus. I might as well dig a hole in the backyard and let you jump on in,” I said. He snorted.

Damon, my brother walked in just then. He had the same auburn hair as me, taller of course, and a weightlifter’s physique. I was strong and solid thanks to my fitness program, but I had curves. Damon always looked like he was in a competition for the lowest body fat percentage on the crew. He ruffled my already-messy bun as he went for the coffee pot.

“So how do you like living with your parents now that you’re thirty?” he teased.

“She’s a pain in the ass,” Dad piped up, and we cracked up.

“See, the whole time we were growing up, I tried to tell you that but you’d just say my mother was gonna wash my mouth out with soap if I talked that way about my sister,” Damon joked.

“Fine, you were right,” Dad grumbled over his green tea.

“This coffee is fantastic. Did they let you do coffee and donuts duty in Charleston? Or did you have to be pretty to be the coffee girl?” my brother teased, giving me shit as always.

“What? I look like you, and I know you love your pretty face,” I said, squeezing his cheeks. “So I’m adorable. But no. I learned to make decent coffee because I like coffee.”

“Did your boyfriend like coffee?” he teased.

“There is no boyfriend. I took my vows to the badge, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. Cause you knew you couldn’t cut it as a firefighter,” he said, “seems like that rings a bell.”

I elbowed him as I went past to get more coffee, and my brother rolled his eyes. “You know I’ll pitch in with the old man here. My schedule’s just been crazy lately because we’re short-staffed.”

“I know,” I said, as he draped an arm around my shoulders and I leaned into his hug.

“I still can’t believe you gave up being an officer in Charleston to come home, but it’s sure as hell nice to have you back,” he said.

“Thanks. It’s real nice to be back. My ego got out of hand in the city with no one talking shit to me 24/7. I know I can count on my big brother. I’m

booking a housekeeper for Wednesdays to start with.”

“I don’t want strangers in here going through my stuff,” our dad grumped.

“Then pick up your stuff and put it in a drawer. I’ll buy you a safe if you need someplace to hide your old Playboys. I guarantee Mrs. Atkinson isn’t gonna be here to hunt for old-fashioned porn. She’s going to do the floors and the woodwork and bathrooms to give Mom a break.”

“Well, if she’s doing all that, what are you doing?” Damon asked. “Besides making coffee and giving me hell.”

“Well, this afternoon I’m cleaning out the fridge and then I have big plans to replace the shower curtain liner with a new one because the old one is mildewed. Maybe if I’m feeling wild I’ll run the self-cleaning feature on the oven.”

“So what you’re saying is you’re already stir-crazy?” Damon asked.

“This from the man who cut off his own cast when he had a broken arm because he was bored?”

“I was fourteen. And in my defense, no one told me I wasn’t allowed to use the table saw for that.”

“I thought you were out in the garage building a bird feeder. Thought it might build character. We were lucky you didn’t cut your damn arm off,” Dad said.

“My point isn’t that Damon’s an idiot—though I have several examples to prove it—but that this family doesn’t do well with downtime. Dad, I think that’s half the reason you’re so grouchy. That and the kidney failure obviously.”

“Yeah, that part’s a barrel of laughs,” he deadpanned. “Good thing you’re here sweetie.”

“Yeah, I’m a total Florence Nightingale, I know,” I said. “There’s a reason I didn’t become a nurse. Anyway, I’ll settle in. I’m just antsy because I’m used to working fourteen-hour days...” I trailed off, not wanting my brother to know how restless I really was.

“They’re down an officer here in town. Ray Shaw’s finally retiring. Brody’s the chief now. I’m sure he’d give you an interview if you wanted to join the RFPD.”

“Brody’s the chief?” I asked, trying to pretend that my cheeks didn’t flush at the mention of his name.

Brody was my big brother’s oldest friend, tall and handsome and out of

reach, my teenage crush. If we're being honest here, he's the reason I have a type. My type is tall, dark hair, quiet and brooding with the warmest brown eyes—those coffee eyes that missed nothing, that seemed to hint at depth and compassion and strength, dark eyes fathoms deep. I felt a pull in my stomach remembering his eyes. The eyes of a man I never dated, never slept with—a man who was just my brother's friend who married a sweet girl I was always low-key jealous of. Now he was grown up and the chief of police. I tried to act more casual than I felt.

"That's great. I'd love to talk to him. I mean I'd love to talk about a job, have an interview," I said, stumbling over my words in a way that made me feel younger again and stupid.

"He's not much on catching up. He's been a bit of a loner since Missy died."

"I heard about that. I sent a card," I said.

I didn't come back for the funeral. I hadn't really known her and hadn't seen Brody in years, so I hadn't taken off work. Now somehow, I felt a pang of regret that I hadn't offered my support in person. I knew Damon had always been a good friend to him, almost like a brother. So I was sure he supported him a lot during that time. I shook my head. I had too much time to sit around and think. That was my problem. A job interview was just the thing for me.

"I've got to head to the firehouse. Just wanted to stop in and say hi. Where's Mom?"

"I made her go into town. She's getting her hair colored. I can't believe she's been doing it all on her own for months."

"I'm sitting right here, daughter," our dad said grumpily.

"Yep. You sure are," I teased. "Not that he's not a complete delight to take care of, it's just a big job to handle the house and cooking and the health care needs of another human. At least with babies they don't talk back," I said to Damon, shooting a mischievous look at my dad.

"I can still take you out behind the woodshed and bust your ass, little girl," he said wryly.

"We don't have a woodshed, and Mom always busted my ass with a wooden spoon. You were the good cop, remember?"

"Those days are gone. It's bad cop worse cop now, right Damon?"

"It's no cops. It's firemen only," he said. I rolled my eyes.

"Remember when she was little and we thought she was so sweet?" Dad

asked pointedly to Damon.

“Yeah, those were the days,” he said.

“Then she started talking, and we found out we were wrong,” Dad sighed.

“More green tea?” I asked sweetly.

He rolled his eyes big time at that one. “You sure you counted my pills right? Cause I remember we never thought you’d learn your times tables.”

“Yeah, sis, we thought you’d have to be a stripper when you grew up because you sucked at math too bad to wait tables,” Damon chimed in.

My mom walked in then, tossing her shiny, newly darkened hair in its neat bob.

“You look fabulous!” I said, hugging her.

“See, she’s nice to her mother. Saves the backtalk for me,” Dad said.

“Well?” Mom posed, showing off her haircut.

“Have you got a tan?” Dad asked.

“Laura was a sneak. She called ahead and paid for the works. I had my hair done, my nails done, and a spray tan. I feel like I’ve been to Jamaica!” she said. I grinned. It was money well spent. My mom deserved a little spoiling.

“You look beautiful as always,” Dad said. “But don’t you go running off to Jamaica with some guy that has two working kidneys.”

“Don’t even joke about that,” my mom said, kissing his cheek, “Never.”

“It’s grim humor. I enjoy it,” he said.

“Dark humor,” my brother corrected.

“Oh, go to work, you’re as bad as your sister,” he said with a wheezy chuckle. I was worried about him, but it did us all good to hear him talking shit and full of spunk. When he really felt bad he was cooperative. It was scary as hell, and none of us ever wanted to see him like that again.

I followed her to go hang her coat up, “I called Hester at the hospital auxiliary. She’s getting me a list of names, people who help out with home health care.”

“Your dad—”

“Is going to have to deal with it.”

“But I—”

“Need my help? I know. Look, I’m the bossy one. And you always encouraged me to do what I knew was right. So here we are. I’m being bossy, and I know what’s best here. Between you and me and the cleaning lady and the health aide, we can do this and keep our sanity. I also checked at the

library and book club is still during Wednesday afternoons.”

“But your dad has dialysis Wednesday mornings and—”

“And so we’ll make sure someone is here on Wednesday afternoons in case he needs something. You look great, but you’re run down. I know it, Mom,” I said.

“I want to go back to the gym,” she admitted. “I used to go to the seniors’ aerobics class. I’ve gained thirty-eight pounds since your dad went into kidney failure. He lost weight and I found it,” she said ruefully. I nodded.

“Then figure out when you need to be there, and I’ll make sure we build that into the schedule for the people who’ll be helping us out.”

“I’m not sure about this. Your dad won’t like it.”

“Dad also doesn’t want you running yourself ragged trying to meet everyone’s needs but your own. I’m here, and I’m a fixer. Let me help you both.”

“He sure has perked up with you around. He’s talking shit nonstop. He loves to try and get your goat, always has,” her smile was teary.

“You know how we are. It’s all affectionate. We tease each other. I compared him to a baby. He said he missed it before I learned to talk.”

My mom looked shocked.

“Your face is gonna freeze like that. You have to get used to us again. I’ve been gone a long time.”

“But, honey, Rockford Falls never changes. That’s the great thing about it.”

“No, being close to my family is the great thing about it. I was happy in Charleston. But I think it took coming back home to realize how bad I really missed you all. Even Damon. But don’t tell him I said so.”

“I won’t say a word,” she promised with a sparkle in her eye.

“I may head down to the station tomorrow and see about getting an interview here in Rockford Falls,” I said tentatively.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked. I shook my head, a grin forming on my face. “Because there is nothing that would make me happier than knowing you were staying. Putting down roots.”

“If the next word out of your mouth is grandchildren, Mom, I swear I’m putting hot sauce on your tongue,” I said.

“Okay, okay,” she said. “But you know I want a baby to love on.”

“Get a cat.”

“Cats don’t like to be held. Also they shed.”

“Well, I’m a cop. I just moved home to help with dad. The odds of me hooking up with my future life partner—”

“Why can’t you just say husband? Why?”

“Because it pisses you off,” I said. “But the odds are not in my favor at this point. I’m thirty. In small-town years, that’s like seventy-five. I’m an old maid and a police officer so people probably think I’m a lesbian.”

“It’s not the cop thing. It’s your hair. Fix it once in a while.”

“I have lesbian hair? Is that even a thing?”

“I have a Pinterest board of hairstyles for you. There are even TikToks on how to fix the hair you have now.”

“You have a Pinterest board devoted to my potential hair?” I said, making a face.

“Yes. I’ve been cooped up with your father for months. I had to do something besides eat Pringles and fold laundry.”

“You have a point. You could have developed a serious drinking problem—which is where I’m headed if I don’t get out of the house and get a job soon. For real. I was eyeing the old bottle of Baileys on the fridge that you use for fudge at Christmas. I was thinking, hey maybe I put a little in the coffee, and Dad’s stories about the firehouse will be more entertaining.”

“Don’t do it. It won’t work. They weren’t great stories to begin with,” my mom quipped.

“And you always say I got my smart mouth from my daddy,” I teased.

“It’s good to have you home, baby. That old fart drove me nuts even before he retired. Then he got sick, and I’m worried all the time, doing everything I can and it’s never enough to keep the Grim Reaper away. Once we were housebound, it was binge the carbs or commit a homicide.”

“He’s not an easy patient. It’s a good thing I didn’t become a nurse. All I’m saying’s I’d be on the news as ‘local nurse slays four’ by now.”

“I know. I can’t even watch a soap opera. He has to have the History Channel turned up so loud I can’t hear myself think.”

“I have noise-canceling headphones. I’ll loan them to you while I’m at work.”

“I’d love that.”

She went back downstairs to Dad. I heard them talking low, heard her laugh and him laughing with her. It had done her good to get out for a while. They loved each other, but too much nonstop togetherness plus a serious illness was enough to stress anyone out. I was glad I could be there, and for

the hundredth time, I was thankful for any time I had with him. He might drive us all crazy, but he was my dad. There was no one like him.

I sighed and shook my head, looking for something to do. I had Brody Peters on my mind. Ever since my brother mentioned him, mentioned the prospect of seeing him, I felt like a jar of fireflies had been let off inside me, a sparkly excitement was rolling through my veins. I wanted to get back to work. I was a hell of a cop, and I liked the idea of working in my hometown. I'd be lying if I didn't say it gave me pause that it would mean working for Brody. I was a grown woman and a professional. But working closely with someone I used to have a major crush on was bound to be awkward. I wanted to fit right in on the hometown force, not fumble my words like I had in front of Damon or do something stupid like get caught checking him out.

Maybe he had gone bald and turned into a racist asshole. A girl could always hope. That would make it easier not to be attracted to him. I could control myself, and I never dated anyone I worked with. Not for lack of offers, because when you work long hours together, and go into danger having each other's backs, close friendships develop. But I made sure mine stayed just that. Friendships with coworkers. Not personal relationships and nothing romantic. If there was one thing I remembered my dad saying when they hired their first female firefighter, it was 'don't shit in your own hand. You never get involved with somebody you work with'. It wasn't exactly a beautiful piece of wisdom, but I took it to heart.

Remembering that I used to fantasize about my brother's friend wasn't exactly the best way to prepare for an interview with him. I had never been close with him, but I knew Damon thought the world of him. So I knew that Brody was a man of integrity. Not some creep who'd harass the officers, and definitely not the kind of person who'd put up with that kind of crap from his force. There was nothing to worry about on that front—he wouldn't try to take advantage of me, I wouldn't try to flirt with him. I was a grown woman who could control myself. I'd never yet met a man who could make me lose control, because there wasn't one. I was a good cop, and my mother's daughter. Appropriate and modest behavior, strict professionalism—it was in my blood. I might goof around with the other cops, but there wouldn't be any joking around with Brody. I knew that for sure. Because if he looked half as brooding and serious as he'd been when we were younger, no one would dare crack a joke around him.

So if I went to bed that night having a dirty dream about Nick Jonas, that

was fine. Celebrities weren't off-limits. Only potential bosses and my brother's best friend.

2

Brody

The slab of sugary cake from the grocery store bakery, thick with buttercream frosting swirls, sat on its paper plate. Congratulations my ass. Ray Shaw was retiring. He deserved it, and he'd be missed. But replacing him was a pain in my ass. Rockford Falls wasn't exactly packed with qualified candidates.

You had two kinds of applicants here. One, the dumbass redneck boys that barely passed high school and wanted to run around waving a gun to prove how tough they were, maybe get back at some people who hassled them growing up, show them who's boss. Two, the naïve kind who thinks they're gonna catch all the bad guys and keep this sweet little town as squeaky clean as ever. I didn't want to deal with either type. In my seven years as chief, I'd had my fill of both. The first kind, I had to waste time policing their off-duty antics and make sure they weren't misusing the badge or intimidating anyone, threatening to arrest their mom's neighbor for playing music too loud or trying to get their ex-wife's new man to take a swing at him so he could drag them in for assaulting an officer. The second kind was a lot of trouble to keep alive. They didn't think anything too serious went wrong around here—and for the most part they were right, but they were also the type who went into a domestic disturbance call thinking they could help settle the argument and everyone would hug it out. When you've got a guy holding a Santoku knife to his wife's neck in the middle of supper, you don't wanna waste time talking about feelings.

I only had three applications, and they were all small-town boys who fit neatly into those two categories. Petty assholes looking to settle a score and starry-eyed idiots who thought jaywalking and littering were all we had to deal with. I let out a heavy sigh and took a big bite of cake.

“Since when does Captain Fitness eat baked goods?” I heard Damon barge into my office.

“You realize I carry a gun. And this is my private office. If you took me by surprise, shit could happen to you,” I said wryly. “Besides, it’s damn good cake.”

“You could’ve saved me a piece,” he said.

“Nah. Cops only. I’m sure they have Fig Newtons over at the fire house. Besides, moderation is key.”

“That piece of cake is about the size of the state of Indiana, bro.”

“Who asked you?” I asked. “Plus, I have to vet applicants for Ray’s job. It requires a lot of sugar.”

“Guys whose juvenile records were expunged and wanna be cops?” Damon asked.

“One of those—history of B&E and domestic battery, and I’m supposed to give him a gun?”

“Wife dropped the charges?”

“Girlfriend, and she refused to file charges on three occasions,” I corrected grimly.

“Heather West’s boyfriend? What’s his name? Donnie? Donnie Abrams,” he said. I rolled my eyes.

“I can’t tell you names.”

“Whatever. It’s a small town. He was a little shit even as a kid. Used to throw rocks at my dog.”

“Forget that fucker. Banger was a great dog.”

“Yeah, he was the best,” Damon sighed.

“So, you kicked his ass?”

“Me? No way. I was eight years older than Donnie Abrams.”

“You kicked his ass,” I said, lifting one eyebrow.

“Fine, maybe I did,” Damon shrugged.

“Uniforms come in yet?” I said.

“Not yet. Tracking email says they’ll be at the firehouse by tonight. They would’ve been here sooner if Josh hadn’t had that growth spurt and we had to redo the order.”

“I know. He grew like four damn inches.”

“That navy blue is gonna be nice. Just so they’re in time for league pictures.”

“They will be. I said tonight. The Rockford Rockets have never looked so good,” Damon said.

“That’s partly down to the chili supper you all had at the firehouse to

raise money.”

“I got sick of our Little League 10U team having to wear matching t-shirts when the other teams had uniforms.”

“Nothing wrong with sponsored-by-Biggie’s-BBQ on the back of our shirts,” I chuckled.

“Yeah, it was great for intimidating the other teams. They have better equipment and nice uniforms, but look out, we probably got some bad farts from the mesquite pit,” he chuckled. I snorted.

“So no luck filling Shaw’s position?” Damon asked.

I shook my head. “Not at all. I’m gonna have to advertise outside town, I guess,” I said.

“You know Laura’s back,” he said. I narrowed my eyes, surprised at that news. His baby sister had been four years or so in Charleston on their police force. I couldn’t believe she’d come back here.

“She did? What’s wrong?”

“My dad’s not doing great. It was too much on my mom. He wouldn’t let her have a nurse or anything in to help, and Laura got it in her head she was gonna come back and fix it all up. Funny thing is she’s been back less than a week, and she pretty much *has*. She just smarts off to my dad when he tells her what he won’t stand for, and he lets her have her way. My mom looks ten years younger already. Just because she’s had some free time and some help. I feel like crap for not doing more but—”

“You’ve got your hands full at the fire station. I know that. Your family knows that. And you take him to dialysis every week, right?”

“Yeah, but that’s not all there is to do. Laura coming back proved that all right. But my point is, she might be interested in the job.”

“Really? She’s sticking around?”

“Looks that way. She acts like she’s here for the long haul. And she gets stir-crazy staying around the house. My mom’s sick of her running the basement stairs for a workout, says it sounds like they’re being invaded.”

I shrugged, “Tell her to stop by. I’ll talk to her, see if it might work out,” I said.

I wondered to myself if Laura really wanted to downgrade to such a small community when she was on a good career track in Charleston. I knew family was important to her, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to hire somebody who might not stick around. The price and effort of training her only to have her move back if her dad started doing better or if some boyfriend came after her

was an expensive risk. My department had a healthy budget thanks to our municipal priorities, but I was pretty conservative with expenditures. So I wasn't going to splurge on a city cop who was only here for a season. I wasn't a man who liked to be left empty-handed. It had happened in my personal life one time only, enough to keep me from ever wanting a broken heart like that again. The cost was too high. I always counted the cost. Whether it was professional or personal—and measured what the fallout might be.

So I'd be lying if I said I didn't cringe a little bit at the thought of having to interview Damon's little sister for a position. She would damn sure be qualified—that was the problem. She was also a flight risk—and I didn't look forward to explaining to her or her brother why I had reservations about hiring her. I knew she'd be brash and full of ideas about how they did things in Charleston—I didn't mind that. What I minded was investing time and capital in a trainee who fled to the city with that price tag trailing behind her. Employee retention—that was the buzzword I'd be using in the interview. I sighed. The administrative part of being chief as well as chief wasn't without its migraines.

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Natasha L. Black is an Amazon Top 100 bestselling author. Dreaming and fantasizing ever since she was a young teenager, her love of writing flourished from a very early age. After working for 15 years as a veterinarian, she now follows her passion in writing for a living. She currently resides in a lovely country home in a rural area of Dallas, writing steamy novels to fulfill her readers' desires.



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