



Booth

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Booth Dixon has a lot on his plate—teaching languages by day, translating historic documents for the president by night, and now? Trying to buy the perfect home for the love of his life, Dee.

Booth never expected to find his mate while house hunting—or that she'd be recovering from a near-fatal crash caused by a corrupt senator with a god complex. Dee has survived the unimaginable, and Booth is determined to give her the home, the love, and the future she deserves.

After the horrific accident nearly cost Dee her life, Booth refuses to let anything stand between them. Not greedy home sellers, not shady senators, and certainly not the fate that tried to take her from him. But as Dee's body heals, a deeper magic begins to stir—one that binds souls for eternity. Booth is ready to claim his mate.

But with a greedy sister coming out of the woodwork, a justice system cracking under pressure, and a love that defies destiny, Booth and Dee must trust their bond to build the life they've fought so hard for.

Love is powerful. Magic is eternal. And the Dixon Troop always protects its own.

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Chapter 1

The house was a no-go. Booth thought there was something going on if they wouldn't even meet them halfway on the price, and the insurance wasn't anything that they'd even look into. Walking away felt better than being trapped in something that was going to cost them a great deal of money in the long run. He and Dee were disappointed, her more than him, but they'd talked it over, and this was the best solution to buying a lemon of a home their first time.

"I have two more houses that you might like to look at, Booth." Bonnie Lawson was one hell of a sales agent. She'd been honest about the houses that he'd been looking at and giving her opinion on ones that she told him she would not buy. The Lancaster house would have been a good buy, but only if they could get it for a better price and have the insurance on it that would prevent them from having to put in an entire septic system three days after they moved in. It was something that she told them about the house. "Tell me when you're ready and I'll line them up for you."

"I will. Dee gets out of the hospital in a few days, then I'll have her set up the times. She still won't be able to come with me, she's still in a wheelchair, but I can video chat with her, and we do well with that." She told him that she'd set things up for them. "Thanks. If you have business cards, I'll give them to my family and friends who are looking to buy a house. You're the best I've ever had to work with."

"Thank you." She gave him about five of them, and he was happy to have them. If his little brothers' mates came along, they were going to need houses as well. Falkner was studying to be a doctor, so he was living at home, but he'd be finished up soon, and that would mean a house for him as well as Cullen now that he was out of the service.

Booth was nearly finished with the paperwork that he was translating for the president. Jamie had won the last election, so he was finally in his second term. The papers had been found when a family was renovating their kitchen and had found a little room filled with antiques and hordes of paper that someone had written on decades ago. There were recipes, too, of things like pine nuts and quail that he was going to have to get someone to make for him. It sounded delicious to him. He smiled when his cell phone went off, and the picture was of Dee, his one true love and mate.

“I was just thinking of something. Could you read his mind to find out why he doesn’t want insurance? I’d like to think that it’s not us but something really wrong with the place. It would certainly make me feel better about walking away.” He reached out to the man and found out why he wasn’t going to sell the house at a reasonable price. He told Dee. “So he’s just greedy, is he? Well, at least we know. Not that I want to go back to the house. I think the guy is a jackass for not selling when he had a buyer but that’s on me.”

“I’m just glad to know that when someone else buys it, they’ll not be ripped off because he knows something is terribly wrong with the place and won’t get ripped off by him.” She told him there was that as well. “Something else that he wasn’t going to do was he wasn’t going to allow anyone to have the house inspected before moving in. He seems to think that people should take his word for what’s not wrong with the place and be nice about it. I don’t believe that he’s ever going to sell the place, no matter what his excuses are.”

“Why even bother putting it out there if you weren’t going to be nice about selling it? Sounds to me like he’s got a burr up his bottom that makes him cranky. Oh well. I guess you have other houses lined up now.” He told Dee what Bonnie had told him. “Good. The doctor thinks I’m doing a really good job of healing, and I should be out of here in a couple of days, so long as my PT goes well. I can’t wait, I’m sick of myself in this room.”

“I’ll bring you in something to cheer your room up for you.”She told him he didn’t have to do that; he’d done enough for her.“I’ll be fine, you’ll be fine too.We’ll do something to the room andyou’ll not have to be sick of it anymore.”

Nearly four months ago, she’d been in a car accident.A senator from Michigan had decided that the rules of the road didn’t apply to him.So while drunk with a .45% alcohol level and enough coke in his truck to fell a large bear, he pushed her into oncoming traffic while she was stopped at a stoplight.There had been six deaths because of him and a dozen others injured.He’s been in jail awaiting trial for his part in all this since blaming Dee for not getting out of his way, being that he was a senator and had more rights than she did.Or so he thought.

If not for her next of kin, she’d written down Cullen, he might well have missed finding her.He thought about that all the time.How, without the help of his brother, being her best friend, he might well have missed out on finding the love of his life.Since he’d figured it out, he’d been by her side since.It never felt like he was bored with her only being in the hospital, but he found new ways daily to make sure that she smiled and felt good about herself.

They thought that Dee had broken her spine and would never walk again.But as the swelling had gone down, she regained the ability to not just wiggle her toes but to bend her legs as well.It was going to be a lot longer for recovery, but she was making her way to be walking again, and he couldn’t be happier.

Picking up some balloons on his way to see her, he was glad that they had enough of them that he might be picked up in a good wind.Not really, but he was going to tell her that just to see her laugh.For some reason, she thought that he was funny.Which was fine with him, he loved her very much.

Bonnie called him as he was headed to Dee’s room.He’d picked them up some dinner and had brought the balloons in so that her room could be cheery.Bonnie had them

two more houses to look at, and he was excited to be able to look them over in the morning. Right now, he just wanted to hang out with Dee and talk to her for the rest of the evening.

“I had physical therapy today.” She laughed at the balloons hanging in front of the window. “They’re very bright, aren’t they? Anyway, I went to PT and had a wonderful day. I was able to walk three steps today without help. I’m making progress every day.”

“Of course you are, you’re my girl, aren’t you?” Just as they were finishing up dinner, his dad came into the room. He and Mom would come by a couple of times a week. Since she’d been transported to OSU, it was easier for them to get around to seeing her and getting to know her, too. “Dad, have you heard anything more about the senator? I heard that he was pitching a bitch about being in jail for so long.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m here for. While I did get the paperwork filed that Dee was suing him and his estate, he had decided to counter-sue her for her lack of driving skills. He’s claiming that the accident was all her fault. I don’t understand how he thinks that’s going to stick. The street cameras have him pushing her into traffic against the light.” Dad shivered. “Every time I see that camera shot, it’s all I can do not to be sick. It’s small wonder that more people weren’t killed when he did that. Not that six isn’t bad enough, but watching it shows just how arrogant the man is.”

“Jamie is still livid about the whole thing. He told me the other day that he’s getting calls for him to step down from his seat. I don’t know how people trust him. Didn’t you find other incidents where he did the same thing to someone else? Twice?” Dad said that he’d pushed someone else into traffic in the winter, and luckily, there was no one hurt then. “I don’t know how he can look himself in the mirror after that. I’d be ashamed of myself if I were that drunk and stupid.”

“You have nothing to worry about, Dee. I’m taking care of everything. With him

supposed to be suing you, it's going to take a little longer in the courtroom, but nothing I can't handle. I've called in a couple of attorneys to come and sit with me. I think it's going to be fun to see the man get his comeuppance." Dee told his dad that she just wanted it over with. "As do I, sweetheart. As do I."

The rest of the evening was spent talking about nothing in general. They were getting things for their house, and knowing what they'd need, helped. But since they didn't have a house as yet, everything was piling up in his apartment so that he could barely walk around. Sheets and towels had been washed and folded again, but they weren't in the small packaging that they'd been in when he'd taken them out to clean. They'd also been able to find some good deals on furniture, and he'd rented a storage locker to put those things in. He thought that they were doing quite well for themselves for people without a house.

When his dad left, he decided to go on home too. It was an hour-long drive to see her and spend the day, and he was getting very little done on top of seeing her. School would be starting up in a few weeks, and he'd done nothing to prepare himself for it other than to go in and put some posters up in his room. He had been going over the books that they had assigned him, and he was happy with those. This year, he was teaching Spanish and had a single class of Latin that he was looking forward to.

Booth had been teaching Spanish since he'd gotten out of college. He could actually speak several languages and was glad that he knew enough to translate the paperwork that had been found in the house in DC. It kept him busy while he was at home or in Dee's room when she went to therapy or some other test they would take her to.

He did miss his brothers while he was driving back and forth from Columbus. They were very close, the six of them. They had an older brother and a sister, too, who lived in another country, but they'd get to talk to them on occasion as well. Then there were his grandparents.

They were all alive, both sets on his mother's and father's side, and were about the best at having around when a person felt down in the dumps or just needed a hug. Grandpa Roger gave the best hugs and would nearly squeeze the stuffing out of a person when he had one to return to you.

Ending up at a hotel rather than going home, he checked into the place with no other plans than to fall into bed and sleep until he woke up. He was exhausted and needed some downtime more than he realized. As soon as he was in the room, he did exactly what he wanted and fell into the bed, clothing and all, and didn't wait to make sure he had clean clothing for tomorrow.

He did wake once in the middle of the night, not having any idea where he was. It took him several long moments to have his mind remember that he was in a hotel along Forty and fall back to sleep. He did take off his shoes once he realized where he was, and that made him sleep just a little better. Christ, he was so exhausted.

Getting up with the sun, he was happy to be able to drive the last little bit home. Once he was in his apartment, he stripped down to his body and took a long, hot shower. Still feeling the effects of the driving, he was only going to lie down for a little while, ten minutes, he told himself that he needed just a little bit more rest. It was nearly seventeen hours later when he finally woke up in his bed naked and feeling better than he had in a very long time. He hurriedly called Dee.

"I'm so sorry." She said that she'd had Cullen go to his place and make sure he was still alive. "I was more tired than I thought I was. It would help if I didn't come home at night and work on paperwork, but I'm just too stubborn. I hope I didn't worry you too much. I don't even remember Cullen coming by, if that makes you feel any better."

"He told me that you didn't even move all that much, but just grunted at him. I'm so sorry that you're driving all the time. I did tell you not to come see me every

day.Maybe now you'll heed what I said."He said that he couldn't not come to see her."But what if you'd fallen asleep while driving?That's all we need for us both to be in the hospital."

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“I’m going to make myself take a hotel room or sleep in the room with you. I can’t burn the candle at both ends anymore. That’s dangerous too.” He laughed a little. “I can’t believe that I slept around the clock. I was at the first hotel for eight hours, drove home, and slept for another seventeen hours. We need to get you home so that I can sleep in one place and not wake up wondering where I am all the time.”

“See? You’re going to have an accident, and I won’t be able to see you when I get home. If we have a home.” He told her how he was going to make sure that there was plenty of room for her chair when she got to the apartment. “Your dad said we could live in the big house, there are bedrooms on the lower floors that we could use.”

“That might be the way to go. I never thought of that. But I’ve made arrangements to go and see these two houses with Bonnie, and we’ll chat. For all we know, a better house is out there other than the Lancaster home.” She told him that she hoped so. “I do as well. I feel better now than I have in a long time. Nothing on you, it’s all my fault for not going to bed at a decent hour when I get home. I’m forever reading this or that so I can get things ready for when you get home to me.”

“I want to get home, too.” She sniffled just a little. “Cullen was so sweet in going to your place to find out if you were all right for me. He said that he tried to wake you but couldn’t get you to move at all. You must have made him a little nervous, too, as he went to check on you a couple more times while you were out.”

“I’m still in awe that I slept that long. I really must have needed it.” She said she was glad that he’d gotten some rest, but not to do that again. “I won’t. I’m going to take better care of myself from now on. I really have been being stupid about my body, and that’s not good at all. My other half must have needed it as well.”

After getting off the phone with her, he realized how late it was. Getting things squared away with the boxes of things that had been delivered, he was suddenly tired again. Taking another shower, he went to bed at ten and set an alarm. He wasn't nearly as tired, but he also didn't want to sleep too late or he'd miss another day with Dee.

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Dee was getting bored when the nurse came in to ask her if she needed anything. She didn't, but did ask if there was anything that she could do. Anything. She'd even make calls if she had to, just for something to do.

"I don't have anything for you to do, but I can get you a wheelchair, and you can travel around if you want. If you handle that well, I can even get you outdoors. The weather is really nice today, and you can hang out there for a little while." She said that she'd love to feel the sun on her face. "Promise that you won't walk around. Just stay in the chair so you don't get hurt, and I'll let you go out."

"I won't do anything I'm not supposed to. But getting out of here sounds like heaven." After she got permission from the doctor for her to go out, she moved the chair around on the floor so she could prove she'd have no problems with it. At first, they were going to send a nurse out with her, but in the end, she was going out on her own. "Thank you so much. I can't believe how excited I am for just a little bit of sunshine on my face."

She had to pace herself in going out of doors. There wasn't much to see, but since it was all different from her room, she enjoyed it to the max. Even when the breeze was a little chilly, she shivered and enjoyed that as well. Sitting off to the side so she'd not be in the way, Dee put her face up to the sunshine and enjoyed her afternoon more than she could have realized she would have.

It only took her about an hour to know that she had to go back in. She wasn't in any

pain, but tired. Rolling herself around was a lot more work than she thought it would be. Still, she had fun and would do it tomorrow if they would allow her to do that. She should have had Booth get her a cell phone so that she could have taken pictures for her trip and then called him. It was the only thing that would have made it better, and that was telling Booth how much fun she had had.

Going back to her room, she needed a little help getting into her bed. She thought about getting into the chair, but needed a nap more than anything. Once she was in bed, a fresh one as it turned out, she was able to set herself up so that she could not just take a nap but watch television if she wanted to. It was a good day today, and she was going to cherish it for a long time. At least until she was able to get home and have her own things around her.

When she woke up, Cullen was in the room with her. He'd been coming to see her once a week, and she enjoyed it. The two of them had been friends forever, and she loved still being able to see him when she was laid up. He was her best friend and would be until the end of time. The man was beyond kind to her, and she loved him more like a brother than anything else.

"I brought you some dinner. I talked to Booth. I didn't realize how bad he was looking until I saw him today. He looks like he's gotten enough sleep for a long time." She told him how he was going to take better care of himself. "When I was in the service, I would go two or three days straight without sleep, and when I finally got some, I'd be laid out for days at a time. I know just how he felt. He told him that he was going to bed by ten every night so he doesn't make himself ill while trying to do everything at one time."

They talked about houses, and he said how he was getting ready to do the same thing. Get him a house so he could get out of the apartment that he had. Cullen never was much on company, so she understood it more than most.

“Bonnie is going to help me as well as Falkner. I think between the two of us, we can find something to live in with our mates. Though I don’t believe there is one out there for me. She’d have to be pretty understanding to come to be with me. I’m still having nightmares.” She knew that he had them before getting out of the service, but didn’t know that he was still having them. She never asked him what they were about, thinking that they would give her nightmares as well, and told him as much. “And you’d be correct. I’ve been at this for too long, I think, and not that I can put myself in better positions to sleep, I think they’ll go away sooner rather than later.”

“I hope so. You’re too special of a person to be having nightmares like you are. I just know that of all the people I know, you’re the bravest man I’ve ever met. I mean it, too. You’re wonderful.” She saw his tanned face pink up just a little, and it made her smile. “You’re wonderful, Cullen. I hope everyone that you meet tells you that too.”

“I just hope that my mate is out there and she has a strong heart. I’ve been through some stuff, and I’m afraid that it’s ruined me for regular people and social settings.” He laughed. “Not that the service had anything to do with that, I don’t think. I’m a little socially inept anyway. I always have been.”

“I don’t believe that. You’re not a slob or a pig when you eat with me. Look. Your shirt is still nice and clean, and you don’t have anything in your mouth while you talk either.” They both laughed, and she could tell that he was needing to move again. To get out of the enclosed space of her room. “Will you still come to see me when I get back to Dresden with you? I hope that this isn’t the only time you come around. I’ll have to have one of the others beat you with a stick if you think I’m going to allow you to leave me alone.”

“I’ll see you more when you get back home. You’ve always been my best friend besides my brothers, and I don’t think that I could go that long again without seeing you.” She told him good, because she would miss him as well. “You know to tell me when you’ve had enough of me, right? I don’t want you just hanging around me

because I'm your brother-in-law now."

"Hey, I never thought of that. We'll be related now. You have to come and see me more now that we're related by marriage. Who would have thought that we'd ever be anything but friends? You saved me twice now. I owe you everything that I have with Booth." He said that she only had to make him happy and that they'd be even. "I hope that I do make him as happy as he makes me. I love him so very much. And I love you so much, too, big brother."

When he left her with a hug and a kiss on the cheek, she watched the news. There was a lot happening in the Columbus area, and she was glad that she didn't live here. She wanted a place to be that was quiet and where everyone knew your business. Not that she wanted her neighbors to know their business, but it was better than she had it now with no friends or neighbors who would check up on her sometimes.

At ten o'clock, Booth called to tell her that he was headed to bed. They talked for a few minutes, her telling him that she'd been outside today and him telling her that he'd gotten things squared away with all the boxes that stuff came in.

"I opened them up to see what was in them, then taped them back closed, putting which room they went in on the box. That way, when we get to a house, we won't have to figure out what goes where again." She told him that it was a great idea. "Thank you, my dearest. There is plenty of room here now for you to get around, too. That's what my main worry was about, how easy it was going to be for you to get in and out of rooms with your wheelchair."

"I can walk a little now, too. I'm getting stronger daily." He said that he knew that and could tell it more and more. "Good. I'd hate for all this work to go for nothing. I've been lifting weights, too, so that I can have some upper body strength when I have to wheel myself around as well."

“You’re going to be just fine. And in the event that I’ve not told you recently, I love you very much too.” She thanked him and told him how much she loved him. “I’m going to go to bed now. I’ve physically worn myself out today with moving things around here and at the storage rental. I think that we should order the mattresses now so that when we get us a place to live, we can set up the bedrooms right away. What do you think?”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea.” The two of them spoke for a little while longer, and when they hung up, she felt as tired as Booth did. She was ready to be asleep by ten-thirty, too.

At eleven, the nurse came in to ask her if she needed anything before going off shift. No, she didn’t, but it was nice to know that they were still taking good care of her. Of course, when you had the president of the United States telling them you got the best of care, she figured that people listened. Laughing a little, she rolled over and closed her eyes. Sleep wasn’t far behind.

At three in the morning, she woke up needing to go to the bathroom. With some help, she was in and out again in less than half an hour. She hated that she still needed help with the smallest of things, but she was getting stronger daily and predicted that by the end of the month, still two weeks away, she’d be able to get herself around without any help. That’s what she wanted more than anything to be able to get herself in and out of bed without any help.

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While lying there, trying to get her body to relax, she thought of the other things that she wanted to do. She wanted to sleep with Booth. Not necessarily sex yet, she did want to be able to participate more than she thought that she could now, but she'd be happy just to have him snuggle up with her and hold her. It had been a very long time before she'd been hurt, since she had been hugged, and she wanted Booth to be the first.

As she was drifting off, she thought of the houses that he was going to be looking at in town before coming to see her tomorrow, and was hoping that they could be in their home before the holidays. She loved Halloween and handing out candy to the kids. She only hoped that she'd be able to do that this year, too. Her apartment complex was filled with little kids, and she'd have to buy several of the big bags of candy so she'd not run out. She wondered how Booth would feel about blow-up things in their yard when the bigger holidays came around. Dee so loved Thanksgiving and was looking forward to their first Christmas together, too.

She was awake again by six-thirty. Her breakfast was brought in for her about fifteen minutes later, and she was finished with it before Booth called her at eight. He was on his way to the first house this morning, and he wanted her along for the ride. She loved that they could get together on this and thought it funny that he'd put her in his shirt pocket like she was right there with him.

The first house didn't have a big enough yard. It had a lovely front yard, but there was very little of it in the back where he could shift if he wished and not be seen from the road. Even touring the house, they didn't care for it, so in no time, they were set to go to the next one. She was excited about it as soon as he pulled into the driveway.

“Oh, babe, we might have found our forever home in this one. I hope that we can have better luck with this one than the other one.” He laughed. “The specs on the house said there is a pool. So far, so good. I love you.”

Chapter 2

He couldn't get over how much he loved the house. He'd not asked the price yet, afraid that it would be well out of their price range, or something was wrong with it that was going to cause them to have to have a lot of repair work done before they could move in. He, like Dee, wanted to be in a home by the holidays, and he didn't know if that was going to work or not. Dee asked him how many bedrooms it had.

“Seven, including the master suite. There are six bathrooms, too, including two half baths on the first floor.” So far, he was loving this and tried his best not to get too excited. “This is the living room. It's huge with a fireplace. Can you see a television over the fireplace that we can watch the games on? I never asked you if you enjoyed football or not.”

“I do. I love all kinds of fall sports. And basketball.” He knew that Dee wasn't trying to get as excited, but when they entered the kitchen, they couldn't believe how up to date it was. It was as if they had only done it in the last few months, it was that good looking. “Is there a pantry? I don't know what that door is for.”

He opened the double doors to find not just a pantry but a walk-in refrigerator too. The shelves were piled high with containers to put things in, like flour and oats. The kitchen was for cooking in, and the little table in the corner had him thinking that it was for the staff to have their meals at when they were working. He loved the look of the countertops as well as the large island in the middle of the room with its own sink and tap.

“You should find out the price before we go much further. I'm thinking we need to

put an offer on it now, but I don't want to seem too greedy."He said that he'd been thinking the same thing."Go find Bonnie.I know she said you had the run of the house, but this is just too perfect."

Finding Bonnie was a lot harder than he thought it should have been.But she was on the phone with the seller, and he wanted to let her talk to them as much as she needed to.When she got off the phone, her smile could have lit up the entire house, it was so happy.

"That was the owners.He's had the house on the market for four years now, and we're his fifth realtor.No one has been able to get the house with the mortgage that they need.Like you, everyone is a first-time buyer.Unlike you, you have the money to put into escrow for the down payment to hold it for yourself until your loan goes through.When he has a serious buyer, he wants them to put a down payment on it so that he doesn't have to show it so much.I understand that completely.I also know that you can well afford the down payment while you wait, too."

"I can, but I don't want to lose it just because he's going to change his mind about something later down the line."She assured him that that wasn't going to happen."Tell me the asking price.To be honest, I'm afraid to know.But you tell me so I can stop figuring out where my furniture will fit in this place."

After she told him, he asked her to repeat herself four times so that he had the right price.Deer made fun of him for having asked so many times.Bonnie got a good laugh out of it as well.

"All right, Booth.That would include insurance on the house in the event that something happens as soon as you move in.I rarely hear of anyone using it, but when they do, it's come in very handy.The appliances stay, though if I were you, I'd replace them.The ones in the kitchen weren't replaced when the kitchen remodel happened six months ago.There is no carpet throughout the house, nor are there any

kind of leaks in the new roof. Also, the furnace and air conditioner are brand new as well.”

“What’s the downside?” She asked him what he meant. “This is our perfect home. There has to be something that is wrong with it.” She said that other than the down payment, there was nothing to worry about at all. “Not that I don’t believe you, but there has to be something that is going to make it so we won’t get it.”

“You’re too paranoid. Just tell me what you want to give for it—and I would give a bit lower on the price, though I think you’re going to think you’re getting a good price at the asking price. But tell me so I can call the man.” He told her what to offer after talking to Dee. “Good. I’ll get back with you soon. Just have yourself a look around, Booth, and take that lovely wife with you and tell me when you’re having your moving-in house party.”

They were on the second floor, going over the master suite, when Bonnie found them. He had accepted the price so long as the downpayment was made, so they could be assured of it selling, and with a quick call to the bank, not only did he have the money transferred for the man, but they were approved for the loan as well. They had a house.

“I can’t believe it. Now you have to take me back to the kitchen so I can look around. Oh, Booth, it’s perfect.” It seemed to him that it was too perfect, but he was getting caught up in the house moving in as much as Dee was. “I can see us using this room the most when your family comes over. Do you guys hang out in the kitchen when you go home for dinner?”

“We do actually. Mom doesn’t cook for us all anymore; she just wants to visit, so she’s enjoying the staff cooking for us. But we certainly do enjoy hanging around in the kitchen with everyone.” Dee was so happy she wanted him to come to the hospital so he could pinch her. “I’d never do that unless you were to pinch me first. This is just

too good to be true.”

Before they left, keys in hand, Mr. Millner, the owner of the house, transferred the money back to his account from the downpayment since he already had a loan go through, and that was the end of it. They owned the house with the bank, of course, and he couldn't wait to tell his family. But he was going to wait until he got to the hospital so that Dee could help him tell them. They'd be so excited. And it was so close to his parents' house that he could walk there without any trouble. It was closer still to the school that he taught at, so that was a good thing as well.

He talked with Dee all the way to the hospital. As soon as he was there, he picked her up and swung her around the room, he was so happy. When they settled down, both of them almost too excited to be talking one at a time, he showed her the pictures of the rooms she'd already been in with him.

“I love that there's no carpet in the house. It'll make it so much easier to clean up.” He thought so as well. “Do you think we'll need a staff still? It's not nearly as big as the other house we looked at.”

“Simply because we both work. I just realized the other night I have no idea what it is you do for a living.” She told him that she was a dancer for the Institute of Dance in Washington. “No wonder you're in such good shape. It would have a lot to do with you healing quickly, too. Not to mention me giving you bits of magic all the time. As soon as we get you home, I'm going to claim you, and then you'll be nice and healed. After that, we'll work on the bonding stuff.”

“Bonding stuff? You make it sound like it's no big deal.” He said that for him, it wasn't until she got better. “Thank you for that. But I want to sleep with you. Snuggle up in the bed together so we can be warm together.”

He'd made sure she had a cell phone when she asked for it last evening. She no longer

had to borrow one of the other nurses when he wanted to talk to her. And seeing the house together had made that very easy on them both. As soon as they were settled down, they called his parents and let them know that they had finally purchased a house.

“That’s wonderful news. And so close to us.” He told them he was within walking distance to the high school as well, and that made them both happy. He hated driving to classes. He’d sometimes forget that he drove when he’d been living in his apartment and would have to walk back to get his car. Now he’d not have to worry about that happening again. “When will you be taking possession?”

“We have the keys now. The previous owners have moved out already, as it’s been on the market for some time, and the things that are in the house aren’t that big of a deal for them to come and get. I kind of liked that the house was empty when we were looking around. It was easier to see our things in it.” Dad thought that was wonderful, and then he told them how they’d been buying linens and things for a house when they got it, so they were pretty set up as it was. “The only thing that we didn’t get was a vacuum, and we now don’t need one. We don’t have any carpet in the place at all.”

“Not even in the bathrooms?” They both said they didn’t at the same time. “Well, that’s simply wonderful. I’d like a bit of carpet in the bathroom when I go in there, but I can see the benefits of not having it in there as well. It would be wet all the time.”

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After talking to his parents, they talked to his brothers too. Cullen said that he was looking at houses in the morning with Bonnie, and Falkner was looking now. They both wanted what they had. A big house that they could have some fun with. Cullen wanted to be able to hide from his mate once in a while, and of course, his married brothers told him he'd not want them at all when he found her. But he could see Cullen wanting time to himself. He'd been a loner all his life, and now wouldn't be any different.

"I have a job. Working security for a firm outside of Columbus. I don't have to go there, but one day a week, they'll set up the times that I'll go to the houses that need security. Dad said they'd been doing security for about fifty years and are ranked number one in the country." He asked him if he thought that he'd be any good at that. "I've been on security detail all my service career, and I don't think this is going to be much of a change for me. I'm actually looking forward to it."

"Then I say go for it." They talked a bit more, and when Dee's lunch was brought in, they brought him one as well. The staff here had been stellar, and he was going to write up a review about them as soon as Dee was home. Which, according to her, wasn't going to be all that much longer either. "Do you have to travel here to have your PT done once you're home?"

"No, they'll be sending someone to the house three days a week for me. I'm all for that. Once I'm home, the less I have to travel. I just want to go home and stay there with you. When are you going to start moving furniture in?"

"The little bit that we have will start in the morning. I'm going to have a crew come and pick up things from the storage locker and then set them up in the house. I'm

going to have to make arrangements to have the mattresses sent to the house now instead of the apartment, but that won't be too bad. The sooner we can get things organized, the better it will be for us moving in. Mr. Millner said that the things in the barn were for the yard. I didn't have time to go out and see what was out there, but I'm sure that if it's not anything we want, then we won't have to keep it."

There was little that they didn't talk about with the house and the move. It was going to take some organizing to get it all put where they wanted with Dee not there for another few days, but he figured that with the help of his brothers, he'd be able to get it all put in the right place if it was in the wrong room when she got there.

Booth made himself leave at nine o'clock. He was feeling really good and didn't want to get back in the same place he'd been before. Too exhausted to move for twenty-four hours. On the way home, he thought of the house and nothing much more than that. Tomorrow, he'd go over there and have another look around so he'd know what he needed to get finished up on it. The first thing he thought he wanted to do was go into the barn and see what was in there. He'd not even realized that they had one, much less knowing what was in it.

Going to bed at ten, he felt like he was punishing himself for being so tired. But almost as soon as his head hit the pillow, he was out. This was a good sleep, he thought, and not one where he didn't move at all. At least this way, he'd not be sore when he got up and would be able to start his day out without being too creaky. In just a few days, he'd be in his own home with his soon-to-be wife, and he was about as excited about that as he'd been about anything in his life.

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Arnold didn't like being trapped in the jail cell. He'd been in here for the last few months, and he was frankly sick to death of his own company. After the first three days his family stopped coming to see him and he was both glad for that and pissed

off.He'd told them not to come as he was going to be out in a few days, and they just decided that since he wasn't home, they didn't have to worry about him anymore.Damned family.He only wanted them around when he was out and about.He didn't call them either, he didn't want them to know that he missed them.And that was a surefire way for them to get on his last nerve.Then there was that Townhouse woman.

Why she was able to be out on his roads was beyond him.He'd told her in the car, yelling at her every time she came to a stop, that he was Arnold Fullner and that she was to pull over so that he could get around her.He knew now that pushing her into the traffic had been a bad move on his part, but blaming him for the six deaths wasn't going to settle right with him.No, siree, that wasn't his fault that there had been an accident when he'd told her no less than a dozen times to get out of his way.His attorney told him he was going to be liable for her hospital bill and treatment, too.

"We'll just see about that."He read the missive from the president, too.It said that he was going to resign from his senate seat, and there wasn't going to be any fuss from him about it.Another thing he was going to see about, too.Just because he'd had a fender bender did not mean that he should give up his job for the state of Michigan.They all loved him there."Well, not according to Mr.President, they don't."

They were calling for him to resign.Not just resign when the trial was over but right fucking now.He didn't understand why they were in such a hurry to get him out of office, he'd been good to them since he'd been senator and didn't think that this one thing should put him out.Well, not one but four things.

He was driving under the influence.He had coke in his system.There was the damage done to his truck that wasn't going to be fixed by the insurance company, as they had dropped him right away after the first accident he'd had this year.Driving on the roads without insurance was a big no-no, and he'd been doing it for nearly a year when he'd had this little accident.He was also down for six homicides.Those weren't

his fault.If that dumbass Townsend hadn't been driving the right speed that he'd yelled at her to be driving none of this would be an issue.If she'd just pulled over, he could have gotten around her, and none of this would be any trouble for either of them.The last time he'd heard from his attorney, three weeks ago now, she'd been paralyzed, and he was going to have to take care that she had professional help for the rest of her life.Damn-damn-damn.

“I do not need this kind of shit going on when I'm up for election again.They'll have to vote me in as none of this shit is my fault.None of it.”He didn't even wonder if anything had been his fault.He knew better.Once they were saying that he was being sued, he got his attorney to sue right back.That usually had someone stopping in their tracks, but not this woman.She was a greedy bitch that needed to be taken down a few notches.“What does she think is going to happen when this goes to trial?Nothing, that's what.She'll get her skinny ass reamed if I have anything to do about it.And she will not win the case because she's all crippled up either.I won't allow it.”

Arnold thought about the last accident that he'd had.It was a hit and run, and he thought for sure that he'd gotten away with it.But someone had cameras on their house that not just recorded him driving into the car on the side of the road, but they'd been able to capture not just his face when he was in the truck, but they had a clear shot of his license plate as well.That was another thing that he was pissed off about.Why did every Tom, Dick and Harry have cameras all around their homes anymore.It was as if no one trusted anyone nowadays.He had cameras too but his was to catch someone that toilet papered his trees out front—turned out to be his own damned kids doing it—and any other vandalizing that had been happening to him a great deal of late, like monthly.

“You have a visitor.Before you ask, it's your attorney.And he doesn't look all that thrilled to be here.”He didn't speak to the officer who had come back to talk to him.It was beneath him to have anything to do with underlings like this man unless there was a news camera around.Then he'd be just what the camera needed him to be.A

good man with his hand out to shake and to perhaps get a few bucks from for his campaign fund. His plan was to be president someday, and he was going to get there within four years or else. He didn't know what the or else would be, but he was needing the president now to back him up on things that were going on, not telling him to resign like he'd done anything wrong. "Get back against the wall."

He did what he was told while in the system. They weren't going to be talking about him to every news reporter in the world. It was bad enough that he was in here at all, much less being gossip fodder. He got back against the wall, got his chains on his wrists and ankles, and walked like the duck that he felt like when he was told.

"It's about fucking time you got here. Where have you been?" His attorney, whose name he didn't remember, said he'd been fielding questions about the nine hit-and-run incidents he'd been in. "What do those other ones have to do with this trial? Nothing. You tell them to stay out of my business or else I'll call up some heavy hitters and that'll get their asses."

"The president is calling them in. Every time he finds one, he notifies me as well as the attorney for Ms. Townsend. It looks like he's out to get you." Arnold said they were best friends. "I don't think so. The last time I got a call from his office, he told me that you'd be better off pleading guilty to the homicides with this accident, or he's going to be bringing them all in. You understand that he's the one who is pushing for you to go to prison, don't you?"

"I'm not going to prison for a fender bender." His attorney asked him if he'd read all the charges against him. "Yes, yes, I have. No biggy. I want you to make sure that somehow they're not going to bring up the deaths. There isn't any reason for them to be muddying up the trial with those things. Just throw some money at the other attorney, and that'll have him in our pocket."

"You can't throw enough money at this man. It's Sherman Dixon." He didn't know

who that was. “You should know him. When you asked him to back you for the senate race, he not only turned you down but also gave money to your opponent. He said that he’d rather back a losing horse than a jackass like you. I think he might have said that to your face.”

“I remember him now. He’s an idiot. What do you know about this woman who is supposed to be suing me? What is her beef with me and this accident?” He named off all the things that he’d read about in the filing against him. How she was going to need extensive care after she got out of the hospital. Not to mention the fact that she couldn’t do her job anymore because of the damage to her back.”

“What does she do? Flip burgers for a living? It would be just like her not to be able to flip burgers and blame that on me. Stupid bitch. Try throwing money at her again, see where that gets us. She’s been out of work for so long now, I’m betting that she’ll take whatever we give her.” Arnold laughed. “I bet by now she’s gotten her car repossessed as well as her apartment complex coming down on her for non-payment of rent.”

“I’m going to be honest with you, Mr. Fullner. Her insurance is paying off her car, which was totaled when you shoved it into the traffic that night. When are you going to listen to me and understand that this isn’t going to be swept under the rug? You’re going to be facing some serious prison time with this one. Dixon isn’t going to be giving up, and she won’t either. There isn’t an amount that she’ll take so that you can skip your happy ass away from this.” Slamming his fist against the table, he told the younger man that he wasn’t going to go to prison. “Yeah? Well, you keep telling yourself that. You’d be better off pleading guilty to all of it and hoping you can at least get parole out of this. As it stands right now, you could very well get back-to-back life sentences for your part in the death of fourteen people if the judge allows them to bring your other cases against you that are pending. You being a senator again is nothing compared to the prison sentences you get.”

“Damn it if you let this happen I’m going to be suing you. You just do your job by

keeping me out of prison, and I'll allow you to live for another trial. You little shit, I'm not going to prison. I've said this to you at least a hundred times in the last few months. I'm not going and if you mention it again I'm going to own your ass and that's not even counting the shit that you think I'm going to be owning you." He just sat there, his eyes brimming with hatred. "Now, tell me why my wife isn't coming in to see me. I know for a fact that she's got it on easy street with living in the big house in DC."

He handed him a thick file, and he read it over. She was divorcing him. While he was down the cunt was going to leave him high and dry. Without her support, he'd look guilty and asked the young man if she knew that.

"I don't believe she cares anymore. She's been asked to leave the DC home and can't go back to Michigan either. The town that you lived in no longer wants any of you around." He was handed another file. "The kids have been asked to leave the private school as well. There is no tuition being paid, and they won't accept another excuse as to why it's not being paid."

"Do you have any good news?" He told him what he knew about Ms. Townsend. "Well, see, things are looking better already. Tell my wife she isn't going to leave me, she owes me. The kids will have to be homeschooled, I'm guessing, until I can get out and figure out why I'm not being paid. I don't suppose you know why I'm not being paid, do you?"

"Yes, but you won't like it any better than your wife leaving you. She has, by the way. The divorce has been handled by her attorney, and you only have to sign the paperwork, and it's a done deal. It is even if you don't. The judge is going to fast-track it for her so that she doesn't have to be attached to you." He was handed yet another file. "This states that the state governments aren't paying you because they want you to step down. They refuse to have you paid while you're in jail. It's legal, and everything is signed. If you manage to get out of this, then you'll only get the money

you're owed after you're released. There will be no backpay for you being in jail."

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“How the hell am I supposed to live with me being in here under false pretenses? That woman has me all tied up, and she’s going to have to get me out of this, or else I’m going to take everything she has. I suppose she’s being paid from her hamburger job, right?” He told him what he knew. “Getting married. So she’s been able to go on with her life, and I’m stuck here in jail because of her.”

He waited for his attorney to say that it was his fault again when he knew better. Not only was the shit hitting the fan about his wife but damn it, everything else was going to shit too. He needed to get on the good side of the president so that he’d give him some boosts to his woes. At least make it so that he was getting paid. Something had to be going right in his corner. This was bullshit and he wasn’t going to allow it to mess with him anymore.

“I want you to draft a letter to the president and tell him that I need his help. We used to be good friends, and perhaps he’s been jaded by that woman and her burger job.” He finally told him what she did for a living. “Dancing? What kind of job is dancing? It doesn’t matter, you get a letter drafted to him and tell him that I’m not having a good time here or some shit like that. Tell him that I need something to go my way and if he’d back me out of this crap I’d be his slave for life. Not really, but I do need for him to back me a bit in this so that I can see the end of the tunnel quicker than I am with you as my boot licker.” He asked him if he understood. “Also, you tell my wife that this isn’t a good time for her to get a set of balls. Make it nicer than that, but beg her if you have to, so that I have her on my arm for when I get out. I’m going to need to show a sorrowful man with this, and her being gone isn’t going to help me.”

After he was taken back to his cell, he felt good. Things would go his way now that

he'd gotten his stupid boot licker, what he was going to call the attorney from now on, on the right path of getting his ass out of here. He'd do it or so help him, Arnold would come down on his ass so hard that he'd never see the top of the grass again if he could help it.

Chapter 3

Dee was tired, but she was trying her best not to show it. The house was wonderful, and she loved every inch of it, but she'd been up and around in her wheelchair, and she needed a break. It was Booth who wheeled her into the bedroom that they'd set up on the main floor for her.

"Now, no arguing with me. You're going to take a nap." She told him she was fine. "No, you're not. You're hurting and tired, and a little nap will be good for you. Just let me put you in the bed here, and we'll leave you alone for a while. The house will still be here, and so will the mess with the towels is going to be when you wake up. Just rest."

"Can you lie down with me?" He said he'd hoped that she'd say that. "All right. You lock up, and I'll get into the bed. I am sore and tired, but I'm loving the house."

"I'm loving you too much to let you be looking like you just want to go back to the hospital. You've done too much today, and we don't want that to happen. My parents will be over tomorrow, along with my brothers and their families. Logan said he has a gift for you, but he's in no hurry to bring it over until you're rested." She'd met Logan the other day when he'd come to her room at the hospital. He was a nice man. "I'll lock up and you rest here."

He put her in the bed without any trouble. Then kissed her on the nose. She was almost too exhausted to wait for him to get back, she was that tired. But once he got the house locked up for them, he came back and toed off his shoes while she was waiting

for him.

“I’ve had the locks changed. I don’t know why I trust Mr. Millner not to bust into the house, but I felt better just knowing that there aren’t a lot of keys to the house around.” She told him that was a good idea. “Thanks. Also, before I forget, I went out to the barn and there is an old lawnmower out there with some trimming tools. I doubt that it’s been used all that hard, but we will need to replace it soon. It looks really old. Also, there are boxes marked with the names of holidays. I have a call in with Bonnie to find out if that was meant to be left or not. I decided not to touch it in the event that he wants them back. I know my mom has a stash of Christmas decorations that rival most department stores.”

He got into the bed and laid there looking at her from his side. She was having a hard time keeping her eyes open, and he seemed to understand that. He began talking to her about things in a whisper so that she could rest.

“I went by the school and set up my room yesterday. It looks good. They painted all the walls while we were on summer break. I have five classes this year. Not as many as I’ve had before, but I have lunch duty too, so that’ll keep me at the school during lunch. I was actually thinking that I’d come home and eat, but that can’t happen now.” She closed her eyes, the fight to keep them open winning. “There are cats in the barn, thankfully. They’ll keep the mice out of the house, too. This time next year, we’ll be so moved in here that we’ll wonder what all the fuss was about.”

When she woke up, she was alone in the big bed. It took her a few minutes to figure out where she was, having no idea sent her into a slight panic attack. But when she remembered that she was at home and in her own bed, she laid back down and looked around the room.

The room was going to be her office when she was able to get around. Betty, Booth’s mom, and his grandmas, Milly and Bethy, had invited her to help them out on some

projects they had going. Mostly it had to do with the school fundraisers they had yearly, but there was the flower fund for the planters that they filled along Main Street too. It depressed her at times that she wasn't going to be able to go back to dancing, but she was all right with the change so that she could be with Booth and his family, too.

Getting out of bed, careful where she put her feet, she made her way into the living room, where she found three of the Dixon men arguing about the television that looked bigger than life. Apparently, they wanted to put it higher up on the wall, and two of them wanted it lower. Putting her fingers in her mouth, she whistled to get their attention.

"Who cares where the thing goes? It can be lowered and raised as it needs to be." They laughed and told her she was right. "Where is Booth? Shouldn't he be here doing something with you guys?"

"He had to run to the school. And he did run. Something about an alarm going off in his room. None of us could believe that he left you with us either." She asked if something was wrong. "No, just that you were sleeping so soundly, we weren't afraid of waking you up. How are you feeling? Do you need anything?"

"Do you suppose one of you could get me something to drink? I'm not good at getting this wheelchair around the dining room yet." Dallas went to get her something to drink, and he brought her some cookies that were in the kitchen. "Thank you. Now tell me again why you're hanging our television and not Booth?"

"He was here until the school called. He was there until we showed up and then came home with us. This is a housewarming gift from all of us. Anyway, they told him that there was some kind of alarm going off in his room and that he had to come back and see what it was. To say he was pissed off would have been an understatement. He should be back soon." She was glad for the tea and cookies as she was suddenly

famished. “We’ll be ordering food when he comes back. There’s a pregame on tonight for football, and he had the most empty house that we could come and get dirty with.”

“You need an empty house to watch football?” Dallas told her what was going on. “Oh, I can see that. So your wife is having a baby shower, and you guys have been told to get lost. Understandable. I don’t know that I’d want you all around either if I were having a bunch of women over. She invited me, but I had to decline. I didn’t know if I’d be home as yet today.”

“She said she was going to come over and show you what all she got when the thing is over. Plus, she wants to watch the game. Amy only has one month to go, and she’s feeling it. Christ, I’m going to be a dad.” They all laughed at Dallas, and Booth showed up just as they were thinking about ordering food. Their dad showed up with a gift for Dallas, and she loved it. The little rocking chair was going to be perfect for the little baby when it was about two. “Dad, this is wonderful. Did you make it?”

“I did, as a matter of fact. I’ve decided that I’m going to make one for each grandchild as they come along. I’m even making one for the children at Waylon’s home. His children are just as much my grandchildren as this one will be, and I couldn’t be happier.” They ribbed their father a little bit when he got teary-eyed. But she noticed, too, that Dallas was fighting tears as well. They might be big gorillas, but they were about as soft-hearted as she was. “Let’s get some food. I’m starving.”

The game wasn’t over by the time the women showed up. But the gifts were a lovely way to take some of the pressure off the men, thinking that their team was going to lose. It was funny to see Dallas and the others holding the tiny little sleepers in their hands, and how dwarfed it seemed to be against their hands. They didn’t bring over everything that she’d gotten. But from the pictures, it looked like she did really well in having everything that she was going to need for the little one. She asked if they knew the sex yet.

“No. We want to be surprised. I know it’s silly nowadays to not know what you’re having, but we decided that it won’t change a thing if we know what the gender is, so why go through all that when we can be as surprised as everyone else. Besides, I think the brothers have a bet going on the weight and the date of its birth. I can’t wait to see who gets the closest.”

The food came right at halftime, and it couldn’t have been a more perfect time. Dee couldn’t believe how much food they had ordered, but then she remembered when they came to see her, there were never any leftovers when they were finished either. She was sure to load up her plate because she didn’t want to be left with no seconds when she finished her first plate of food.

“What was the alarm going off in your room?” He rolled his eyes and told her why he’d had to run back to the school. “Well, that’s not right. What if you’d been in the middle of something with me, or we were moving furniture? To bring you in for a faulty wire isn’t right when they could have fixed it.”

“They also had some books for me to approve. I didn’t realize that they were ordering books for my class until then. I usually just send the kids a link, and they can download the book that way. It usually saves the school quite a bit of money not to have to buy all those books.” She asked him if he charged for the download. “I don’t. I suppose that’s as good a reason for them to order them, too. They’re missing out on the funding that goes with it. The government gives them so much money to use, and if they don’t, I don’t know what happens to it. Maybe they don’t get it the following year. I don’t know.”

“I don’t either.” They shared a plate of fresh fruit, and when it was empty, he got up to get them something more. “Do the kids have to purchase their books for class?”

“No, they’re given the books. I see where you’re going with this. If they ordered them, that’s an expense. You’d think that they’d hold off and use the money for something

else. That's why I've always used a link to get them their books. Fewer things that have to be carried around, too." The two of them speculated on the books until the game started back up again, and then there was very little talking but for the game. All the baby things had been put away, too, in favor of the gridiron.

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After the game was over, they finished hanging the TV. It had been put on a shelf, and they decided, after watching a game with it at that level, that it needed to be just a bit higher. Just over the fireplace was where it ended up, and she thought that it looked lovely there. Along with their new furniture, the living room was finished up. Only about half a dozen more and they'd have the house finished, she thought with a laugh.

When everyone left, she was tired again. This time, she was able to lie on the couch and not have to go to the bedroom. Booth sat down near her feet and talked to her while she rested, and by the time dinner was being called, she felt about as good as she'd felt in the hospital. But less bored.

"Cullen thinks he's found him a house. He'll know more about it in a couple of days. Falkner is still debating if he wants one or not while he's studying for his exams." She asked how much longer he had to go. "This was his last quarter. I think if he passes his exams, which I don't see being a big deal for him, he'll take his boards and be a doctor. It's something that he's been working on for a few years now."

"Good for him." Booth told her that they were all proud of him. "Of course you are. It's a big accomplishment for the family for him to be a doctor. I'm proud of him, too."

"I heard from Bonnie about the boxes in the barn. Everything in it, no matter what we find, is ours." She told him that was a funny way of saying it. "I thought so as well, but since there isn't anything in there but large crates or boxes of holiday stuff, we'll figure it out the closer we get to Thanksgiving. It's been raining outside since we moved in, so I didn't want to bother with it right away. It could be stuff that we just take to the end of the street on trash day. I don't care. Do you?"

“No, not really. Like you said, if it’s junk, we’ll just take it to the end of the road and be done with it. Do you know if they ever decorated around here before we purchased it?” He said if they did, he never remembered. “I’m not from around here, so I wouldn’t know either. I was just thinking that it could be a Christmas tree for the front porch or something like that.” She smiled at him. “Then again, it could be a big blow up Santa, and we’ll be the envy of everyone on our street.”

“Now I want to go out and see.” They were still laughing as they went to bed. Booth was going to sleep with her tonight, and she was glad for it. The bed was certainly big enough for the two of them. But she was worried that there might be too much room between them. She wanted to be held.

He came out of the bathroom with pajama bottoms on. He looked sort of out of place in them, and he told her that he usually sleeps naked. Wondering why he wasn’t, he told her that he didn’t want to wake up hard as stone with her next to him because of what the doctor had said. Gentle and ease into things.

“I don’t know if I could be gentle with you lying next to me.” She felt her face heat up at his comment. But he got into bed with just the bottoms on and held her to his chest. “This is perfect like this. We can get some nice snuggles in and not have to worry about me pouncing on you in the middle of the night.”

She felt comfortable with him and knew that he was right. They’d been flirting all day and even before she got home, touching each other. Now was not the time to have sex where she’d end up back in the hospital in worse shape than she came home. She thought of his claiming her, and before she could ask him about it, she heard him snore softly. Smiling to herself, she laid her head down and closed her eyes. They had the rest of their lives to make love, and they didn’t have to hurry anything along.

Waking in the middle of the night, she was confused again. But as she laid there, letting her mind settle as to where she was, she realized that she was alone in the

bed. When the bathroom door opened, then closed, she knew it was Booth, but was still in panic mode when he got in beside her. She smacked at him twice before her head understood that he wasn't going to hurt her.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know... I was in the car again, and I was being crushed." He said that he had her. "I was tossed all over the place in my little car. I knew I was going to die and didn't know what to do. I'm so sorry that I hurt you."

"You're fine. I should have said something before getting into the bed with you. I knew you were panicking. Are you all right now?" She said that she was, but felt bad because she'd hurt him. "You didn't hurt me, honey. I'm fine. I'm just worried that I hurt you when I tried to hold you. Please tell me that you're all right?"

"I promise you that I am. I was just scared." She thought of the accident and thought about what she'd been told about it. "I was upside down when they got to me. I didn't know what to think, I couldn't think, actually. I just remembered that man behind me screaming at me to pull over. Well, I was terrified to do that. I didn't know who he was or what he wanted in wanting me to pull over. Not to mention, we were on a busy street and there wasn't any place for me to pull over. Then, when we got to the roundabout, he pushed me into four lanes of traffic. You have no idea how terrifying that was for me. I thought for sure that I was going to die."

Booth held her while she cried. It was still fresh in her mind, and she would remember that feeling of not being able to move her legs when she was first out of surgery. So many things could have gone wrong, but here she was lying with her best friend and mate, and she couldn't have been happier.

Dee must have dozed off at some point because when she woke again, the room was bright with light and Booth was still beside her. Holding onto him as he held her was something that she'd never thought would happen to her in all her life. When he turned and looked at her, his smile was about as bright as the sun, and she kissed him.

“This is what I needed. Everything in life is just time spent waiting for you to come along and be with me.” He grinned with such boyish charm. “I love you, Booth Dixon. So very much.”

“And I love you, Dee Dixon. With all that I am. And as my mate, I claim you to be my other half, my only one true love for now and forever. I claim you as my bride.” She felt her body warm up, her body sizzle with something powerful.

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Booth pulled the box down off the shelf and waited for the dust to settle. He’d been pulling down boxes for the last two hours and hadn’t opened any of them. He was waiting for Dee to get finished with her PT so that she could come outdoors with him. She’d been in her therapy for the last two hours, which was why he was out here going through box after box. Just waiting on her.

He pulled the box down that was marked one of two and had Thanksgiving written on it. Once he had it out of the shelves, he pulled the second box down, two of two down, and put them together. There were similar boxes like this one. Christmas, Halloween, and more Thanksgiving. He didn’t know what they were, but they were certainly heavy.

“I’m finished.” He asked her how it had gone. “She can’t believe the progress I’m making already. She said that being home has done me more than all the time in the hospital.” She waved her hand over the clothing that she had on, and was now dressed warmer. “This has got to be the most wonderful bit of magic you have given me. I love being able to just change my clothing at a whim. I just have to be careful and not do it in front of someone.”

“Yes, me too. I’ve been able to do it longer than you, and it’s saved me tons of money on clothing, too. She asked him if he could name them. “Outfits with names? It never

occurred to me to try that.I'm sure someone has looked into it before.I just think of what I want to have on, and it's on me.Even if it's the same shirt, it's clean, so I don't worry about that either."

"It was just a thought.What's in the boxes?"He said that he'd been waiting for her so she could be surprised as well."Good.Let's open the Halloween one and see what we have."

It took them twenty minutes to get the box open.There weren't any locks or anything on them, but the lids were down on them tightly.Once they got the first box open, they were delighted to find pumpkins, big bats, and ghosts to hang in the trees and other yard décor in the large box.She was excited, she told him to open the next one.

"It's a giant blow-up.Look, it's a ghoul.I wonder how tall he is."Since it was still a couple of weeks away for the holiday, they decided to open it in the barn.Once they got all the parts out and started it to be blown up, they were so happy that it seemed to be about nine feet tall and about as wide, with not just a ghoul monster but bats and pumpkins as well.He couldn't believe their luck in finding not one but two of the blow-ups in the same box.The second monster was a tall vampire that looked funny rather than scary."You think that the other boxes have them in them as well?"

Just pulling the tops off the boxes, they could see that it was the same heavy-duty plastic.While they couldn't tell what was in them, they knew that they were going to be the hit of the neighborhood.He was so excited to get them out and up that he wanted to push the limits of the time and put them all up now.But Dee told him he had to wait, and so he put the lids back on the boxes and put them back up on the shelves.

"I was struggling to get them down.I'm betting that Mr.Milner didn't want to fuss with them anymore and left them behind.I don't know that I've ever seen them up, as I said before, but they're not easy to move around.And with him being an elderly

man, I'm betting he just said fuck it and left them for us. I would have, too." Dee squeaked when she found a larger-than-life tree to put up in the yard with lots of lights on it.

"There is a sled back here, Booth. How much you want to bet that it goes in the yard with the big Santa? I'm so excited. We have to get them out the day after the previous holiday. That way we can enjoy them more." She clapped her hands, acting childlike more than ever. "I can't wait to have kids now. We'll have so much fun with them putting these up for them. It's going to be epic."

"I'm betting that my parents will love these up too. They love the holidays more than we did as kids. Mom especially loves Christmas. Did I tell you about the ornaments that we'd all get when we traveled? She would put us up a tree so that we could decorate it with the things that we'd gotten over the years. Jayden is going to take pictures of them when he gets some for his own tree and catalog what he gets and where he got it." She asked if they could do that too. "Of course. I think that it would be fun to give the ornaments and the book that we put together for our children when they move out."

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“I’m going to look for the first book that we can fill up with pictures right away. With all the holidays. Oh, Booth, I love you so much. I’m so happy that you found me.” He kissed her then, wondering if he’d be able to love her all the more tomorrow because the love that he had for her today was overwhelming. “I have nothing from my childhood. My parents were never ones for ceremony on such things. We’ll be the opposite of them. Forever.”

They finished looking through the boxes and moved onto the totes that were on the lower shelves. He was just pulling one of them out when his brother Falkner joined them. He wanted to tell him that he hadn’t found a house yet and had stopped looking because of the holidays. He wanted to be moved into his home by then, but didn’t see it happening.

“I don’t want to move in the winter months. It would be just like waiting for something horrific to happen. I’ll move in the spring when I have my results back and I can concentrate on life instead of what’s coming around the corner for me next.” He asked if he had a date yet for his boards. “Yes, January sixteenth. After the holidays, which will be good for me. I’ll have plenty of time to study and get ready, and not have to wait for spring to worry about whether or not I’ll pass.”

“Sounds like you have it all planned out. I’m glad for you.” With his help, they were able to get the boxes put away and the totes pulled down. They found a treasure in them as well. There were dining sets for each holiday, and Dee had to have the Halloween ones brought in right away so that she could wash them up and put them out in plenty of time to use. He thought that they were fun and was happy she was getting such a kick out of them. Falkner thought he was a dork and teased him about them for the rest of the afternoon and into the evening.

“Why don’t you stay for dinner.I don’t know what we’re having, but it’ll be good.I swear I’ve put on ten pounds since we moved in, and it’s only been a couple of weeks.”He asked him how he was doing with Dee being injured.“I claimed her, and she’s all but healed.She’s still weak, but she’s getting PT done three times a week, and that’s helping.I think she’s nervous about the upcoming pretrial for her accident, too.She’s been waking in the middle of the night, screaming because of what that man put her through.”

“Dad said that there are many more deaths than the one from her accident.They’re all pending.While I had an idea what that meant.I had to ask Dad about it.He said that Arnold is awaiting trial for four more accidents that he’s had involving being drunk and high.”Booth asked him not to mention that when talking to Dee.She was nervous enough.“I can do that.I never thought about it giving her nightmares.She’s been through a great deal in the last six months or so.”

“We heard from the attorney for Fullner, and he said that he’s countersuing Dee for her lack of driving skills.The man is a monster.She told me what it was like waking up in her car when it was upside down.Scared me to think about it.”Falkner said it would him as well.“Anyway, we’ll have the pretrial and know where we stand.I hadn’t realized that he’d been in jail all this time, had you?”He said that he’d not.

“Dad told me that his wife filed for divorce and that he’s not getting paid while being in jail.Good is all I can say.The man shouldn’t have been elected in the first place if you ask me.But then I’m not at all political, so I don’t know how any of this works.”Booth said that he didn’t know either and would like to keep it that way.Too much information is simply too much right now.“I understand that.But hopefully, this guy is going to prison.He nearly killed Dee, and that doesn’t settle well with me.”

“Me either.”Going into the house, they were greeted with Dee dancing around the kitchen.She wasn’t doing anything strenuous, but she was having a good time.When she saw the two of them, she told them how happy she was and that nothing could

rain on her day at all. He hoped so. He just remembered that his dad was coming over tonight to go over some things with Dee. And he'd bet that she'd have nightmares again. She loved him so that's all he needed to make sure that she was all right at night.

Chapter 4

Arnold didn't like the things that were going to be brought up at his hearing. He was going to get to talk to the judge first and let him know about not being happy about things. With the things that were on the list today for him to get into trouble with made him look bad, and as a senator, he wanted himself to look good all the time. It was the only way that he could keep his people liking him.

Sure they were a little pissed off at him right now. It was something that should have pissed them off. Him being in jail and not helping them was pissing him off as well. But it was only a fender bender, and them bringing up the deaths wasn't going to bode well for anyone. They needed him, and that was what he was going to tell them when he got out of this jail situation. He was a great senator, and if they kept messing with his life, he was never going to get to be president. That was the only reason he'd taken the senate job when he'd won it was for that sole reason.

Standing up when the judge entered the room, he continued standing until he was seated along with everyone else. It was his day in court, and he was going to stand here until he could say what needed to be said to get him out of here.

"Mr. Grandle, what is it your client is trying to prove by standing when I'm seated. Doesn't he know the rules of the courtroom?" He told him that he'd tried his best to make him aware of the way things were going, and he wouldn't listen. "So he's running the show today, or so he thinks."

"He thinks a great deal that things are counterproductive in this courtroom, your

honor.If you let him speak, we might be able to clear up a few things that you have in front of you.Also, you'll note that I've asked to be taken off as this man's case as his attorney for the reasons stated in the information that you have there."

"I see that."The judge finally looked at him.He straightened his tie up, knowing that was a sure fire way to tell he was pissed off at whatever was going on around him."Mr.Fullner, what is it I can—"

"It's actually Senator Fullner, your honor.And for as much as I've been in the local jail, I can see how you'd forget that.I've been in the cell around here for nearly six months."He said that he'd gotten word that he'd been fired from his senator gig."No, sir.I'm still running the state of Michigan.When I get out of here, I believe that the good state will have a parade in my honor to see me back at the wheel of things for them."

"Not what I heard, but what is it that I can do for you today?In the event that you aren't aware of it, this is my little bit of property in here, and what I say goes.So you state your business, so we can get down to the real work here."He said that he shouldn't have been arrested in the first place."And why is that?I'm sure you have a good reason that, after killing six people and nearly paralyzing another young woman at the heart of all this, why pray tell should you have not been arrested when you did?"

"First of all, I'll say this again, there should be roads that are just for mine and your kind of servants to the country.That woman was driving the speed limit and annoying me to no end.Did you know that she even used her turning signal at every little turn?My god, it was like driving behind some student driver who hadn't figured out that turning signals aren't that necessary for driving.Not to mention the way she drove.I won't even get into how she yielded at every turnabout.I just push my way into the next lane, and that's how you get around them in a hurry.And I was in a hurry.And she knew it."He took a deep breath and let it out slowly."I'm getting off

track here. She had and still has me so upset by the way she was driving that I feel the hair on my arms stand up. She is the one that is at fault with all this. The woman shouldn't be allowed on open highways, much less be able to drive when there are more important people around than she is. If she was late for her burger-flipping job, she should have left earlier. It's what I do when I have to be somewhere."

"Yet you told her several times that you were running late and—" He said that he was running late because of her. "Listen here. This is the second time that you've interrupted me, and I won't tolerate it again. When I'm speaking, you shut your trap. As I was saying, you told her that you were running behind and that was why you pushed her into the oncoming traffic. That was why there were six deaths and several injured. You are the only cause of this accident, and so you're aware, it wasn't a fender bender where everyone walked away unharmed, it was a horrific accident where lives were taken."

"If you keep bringing that part up, I'm never going to get out of here." The judge asked him what he was talking about. "The deaths. Those were caused by her. Everyone wants to blame me for them, but the real guilty person was that woman. She should be here and not at her burger-flipping job."

"Your honor, Mr. Fullner seems to think that my client is a scourge of the worst kind because she might have a job in a restaurant where she might be turning burgers. While that is as good a job as any, at least she was working, Mrs. Dixon is still recuperating from the accident that Mr. Fullner caused, where she might well have lost her ability to walk, and she'll never dance again. She was a dance instructor for the Washington Dance Studio here in DC. And something that he should be aware of, Mrs. Dixon is here." The woman stood up but was using a walker instead of walking on her own. He'd bet anything that she didn't need the thing, as she was trying to make him look bad. If not for him being chained up, he would have gone to her and jerked the thing from her to see her walking as normal as anyone else in this room. "I'd like to also point out that the families are here for the people that were

killed when Mr.Fullner caused the accident that took their family's loved ones away from them."

"What is going on in here?"The judge asked him what he was complaining about now."The families of the dead people?Why are they even allowed in the courtroom?Everyone is out to make me look like a bad guy, and I'm everything but that.When will you stupid people get it into your heads that Mrs.Dixon caused the accident for driving like an old woman on streets that are made for people like me?"

"I've heard enough."The judge seemed to be taking things over, and that wasn't going to do.He'd not even gotten to find out when he was going to be getting out of here.Nor where his wife and family were.He addressed the man again and was told to be quiet and to sit down."I'm here for the pretrial of Mr.Fullner today, and that's what we're going to get to.To see if there is enough evidence to have a trial for you and to see what you have to say for yourself.Although I think you've said plenty."

"I just want to know when I'm getting out of here.I've plenty of other things to take up my time right now, and this is just cramping my style in becoming president someday.Can't we just say that it was a terrible day for drivers and move on?There are several more cases that need to be addressed as well, so if you could see to them, we can really clear up my calendar."The other attorney stood up and handed a thick file to the judge.His own attorney was trying to get him to sit down and shut up."What do you want?I have things to do and this isn't getting me anywhere close to being done."

"Your honor since Mr.Fullner brought up the other cases pending against him, I'd like to say that this seems to be a pattern of his to cause accidents wherever he goes, even so much as killing people in the process and getting out of jail to keep on doing what he's been doing.There are eight cases pending Mr.Fullner and 'fender benders' as he calls them, and all of them have been put off in favor of him wiggling his way out of spending any jail time on any of them.For as many deaths that have occurred,

you'd think he'd be in prison by now and not out causing more mayhem whenever he's on the streets."Telling him he couldn't bring those up right now got him told to shut up again.He was getting sorely pissed off about the way things were going."If he gets out of jail time again, people aren't going to trust the system anymore.I certainly won't."

"Mr.Dixon, is it?"The other man nodded at the judge."Mr.Dixon, is this what I think it is and the judgments, or the lack of judgments on Mr.Fullner's other accidents?"

"Yes, sir, it is.It is also the names of the victims that have yet to be compensated for the deaths of their family members in the three trials that have gone to court.The other fourteen pending cases are there in that file as well."He asked if he'd heard him right, in that it was fourteen other cases."Yes, sir.Every time I found one, I was just as shocked as you seem to be about it.There are a total of twenty-three deaths because of Mr.Fullner's driving while intoxicated and or drugs which were found in his system in ten of the accidents.He's also filed claims against his insurance company for his 'fender benders' and received the full amount of his totaled vehicle over five times.I believe it's because he's not had the vehicle for all that long, and the payoff is what they issue him.There is more, sir, that can be brought up at this trial since he's the one who brought them together."

The judge looked at him.He was still standing and was going to continue to do so until he got his day in court.When he wasn't in jail, he had to have a single person around just to remind him when he was to show up at hearings, as it was.His idea was to get them all taken care of today, and that would be the end of it.He told the judge that's what he wanted.

"You want me to look over all this paperwork right now and end all of the cases against you, is that what you're telling me?"He said that it would make his life a good deal better to not have to go to court every few weeks to get something taken care of that didn't mean much to anyone."You think these don't matter all that much?"

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“Not to me. And not anyone else around that would get their heads out of their asses and know that accidents happen. That’s what insurance is for. Just you judge on them so that they all go away, and I’ll be as good as I can be driving. That’s the best that I can offer you, as I know that there are going to be idiots out there that are going to cause me to lose my temper again and have to take matters into my own hands.” He was told to watch his language. “Yes, sir, I can do that. Can you do this for me?”

“I’ll need a couple of hours. You know what you’re saying, don’t you? That you want me to judge you on all these pending cases so that they’ll not be hounding you to go to court, is that correct?” He said he was correct. He just wanted them to go away, and with his help, it’ll happen. “All right. Court is adjourned until one o’clock. That should be enough time for me to get a good accounting of what this paperwork says. Unless you have a rundown, Mr. Dixon.”

“I do as a matter of fact. The costs, too, that the accidents have incurred to road damage and other personal damages that were a part of the accidents.” He handed him some more papers. “As you can see, there is a running total on deaths that were caused, damage to property, both city and private, that was incurred. Also, the date and times of the accident and the trial dates that are pending. You’ll see there that Mr. Fullner has three pending for the next month.”

“Thank you. Give me a few moments to go over this, and I’ll be right back.” When the judge stood up and left, Arnold sat down. Finally, things were going his way and he’d be Scott free on all this pending shit. He looked at his attorney, the boot licker, and told him that was how you got things done.

“You think you’re going to get off from all of this?” He said he was sure of it. “I

don't.I think he's going to read over this list that he was given and throw the book at you.And I hope he does."

"There's no reason for you to be such a sore loser.You'll still go down as the winner in this case.That's all you attorneys know is winning, right?"He asked him if he was an attorney too."I suppose I have the paperwork to be one but I wouldn't know shit from shit if I had to go to trial.It was an easy five years for me to get what I wanted.And I do.Get what I want every time.You need to learn to be more aggressive if you want to win any more cases after this one.However, this will look good for you.How you'd gotten a good standing senator out of a bad situation.Not that I'd ever admit that it was bad for me.Grease a few palms and voilà, I'm out again to do what I do best.Make me look good."

"You honestly think that this is going to end in your favor."It wasn't a question, but he answered that he was going to get what he deserved."I hope you get what you deserve and more.I hope he throws the book at you and you'll be in prison for the rest of your natural life."He told him there was no reason for him to be nasty about it."Nasty?I'm stating a fact.And if for some reason you get off, I'm going to quit being an attorney and become something that you seem to hate with a passion, I'm going to flip burgers for a living."

"Well, I guess time will tell."The room was hushed now, and he realized that everyone in the room was looking at him.He was in such a good mood that he decided that when this was over, he was going to treat everyone here to lunch.Not that he paid the bill, but someone would from the committee that put him in office.Someone somewhere might even get their asses reamed for him doing it too."When this is finished, I'm going to take you all to lunch.My treat.As soon as I'm free, we'll meet at the deli across the street from here, and I'll purchase you all lunch.It'll be fun for us all after having to sit in here for most of the morning."

He could see the confusion in some of their eyes.He got it, too.They were confused

that someone as great as he was had said he'd buy them lunch. It was probably the first time any of them had had such a treat in a long time. Yes, he was going to be getting votes for this, he'd make sure he did a little campaigning while he was doing it, too. Not that he'd be eating with them, he wasn't that crazy, but he'd buy theirs for the fun of it. Yes, they'd remember him at the poles when the time came.

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Sherman sat in stunned silence while the judge ordered Arnold to be taken away. The sentencing was nothing that he expected, but it was better than he thought he'd get today. When someone patted him on the back, he turned to look at the stranger and wondered who they were. Finally, when they told him he was his son, Booth, he hugged him tightly to him and told him that he'd not expected that.

"No, I can tell. I don't think Fullner did either." Sherman laughed a little and said that was for sure. "The fact that the judge has seized his home and properties tells me that people are going to get their money too. There is no way he is going to be able to fob anyone off any more than he had either."

"It's a good day for the people that he terrorized." Sherman looked at his son and asked how Dee was taking the sentences. "She's all right with her being lumped in with all the other cases, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's very fine with it. She said it's wonderful to know that everyone will be getting something out of this rather than just heartache." Fullner was also going to be responsible for her hospital stay, as well as any other long-term hospital stays for any other victims of his driving.

The judge had sentenced Fullner to twenty-three life sentences to be run back to back for each person that he killed. Ordered him to pay for all damages to property and taxpayers' money on needed police, fire, and all. Fined him several million dollars for

his part in all accidents to cover the cost of funerals and any other out-of-pocket monies that had been needed because of the accidents. He'd even suspended his license, not that he'd ever be driving again while in prison. Fullner was taken away to begin his prison sentences now, with the time that he'd been in the local jail not counted as his sentencing.

"Dad, this calls for a celebration. You've done something that nineteen other lawyers couldn't do. You got a deadly driver off the streets and into prison where he belongs." Sherman blushed a little. "You worked really hard on this, and if anyone says you went overboard in what you were able to find, they don't deserve to be called a friend. You did just what was needed to be done at the right time. I think the judge was a little overwhelmed when he first got the paperwork. You could tell by the look on his face that he thought that you were joking before he got it. Then it was like, what am I supposed to do with all this information?" Booth laughed. "Dad, I'm very proud of you on this work. You always go the step beyond, and it paid off for a great many people. It doesn't matter what the man said on his way out. I love you for your work in getting justice for Dee and the rest of the people who had been victimized by him."

"Thank you, son. You've no idea how much that means to me right now." And it did mean a great deal to him because it had come from one of his sons. Booth made him feel like a million bucks just then, and he couldn't have been happier about it. "I've been keeping in contact with your mother, she's about to bust her buttons. She told me that she's so proud of me, too."

"She should be, we're all proud of you, and Dee is the most of all. She was sure that his status was going to get him off like all the other times. I'm surprised that he's not been put in jail before now. Did the system fail us, or did he just keep falling between the cracks?" Sherman said that he was blaming it on the overworked system that he was a part of. "Status shouldn't have been a part of it, but it looks like he was getting off too because he was a bully."

“That he was. When he was sentenced in the first case, he went to see the other family that had been involved and paid them a large, undisclosed amount of money. They said that he threatened them with higher taxes, as well as their voting rights would be revoked. He isn’t a good person by any stretch of the imagination.” Booth agreed with him. “He’s finally been brought to justice, and I’m thrilled to have been a part of this, catching up with him this time.”

Sherman decided that he was going to keep all the information that came with this trial in the event that Fullner appealed the decision. He could and probably would, as it turned out, and if he got out, well, Sherman was slightly worried for all the people that had been involved in his demise. Fullner wasn’t the type of person to forgive or forget. He was the type to take vengeance out on someone for something that might have happened decades ago. And it would be all the harsher because of the time that had lapsed when it happened.

After lunch with Dee and Booth, along with his lovely wife, Betty, they decided to walk home. The weather was turning colder by the day, but today, along with the chill in the air, the sun was shining, and it looked like it was much warmer than it felt. He loved days like this and was going to shift into his gorilla and enjoy some time in the woods with Betty so they could burn off some steam. Maybe he’d even chase her around a bit and get a little ape time in, he thought with a laugh.

Once they were home, they decided to take a nap. He could live with that, he’d been stressing over this trial for the past three months and was glad that it was over now, and he could go on with his life. Not that he didn’t enjoy it, he had a great deal, but now that it was over, he didn’t think he’d take on something this large again. It was too much for himself to be an attorney for the family, and he’d let the younger kids do it. Although there weren’t any attorneys in his immediate family, there was enough in the troop that he could find someone else to take on the hardship of representing the family.

It was nearly midnight when he made his way up to the bedroom. Betty had gone up an hour ago or so, and he'd been in the middle of purging his desk of all the paperwork that he'd used to convict Arnold Fullner. He'd made himself so many notes over the last few weeks before the hearing that he could have written a book on it. He was sure that there would be a market for such a book, how to not get into trouble with the law when you drive like a fool, he thought, was a good enough title, and even thought about writing it himself. It would be fun just to get his notes in order for this project, rather than the one where he'd had to sit in a courtroom all day for three days.

After locking up the house, glad now that he had indeed gotten out with his gorilla for at least an hour, he decided that he was going to sleep the sleep of the dead tonight, being that he had had so many restless nights before tonight. He also thought that he could sleep around the clock, but knew that he'd never sleep past six in the morning as he'd been getting up at that time for the last fifty years or so.

"Did you see tonight's paper?" Sherman told Betty that he'd not seen a paper for the last few weeks. "Well, this one you should read. It talks about the trial today and how Arnold had finally gotten what he deserved. It also talks about his attorney and how the young man had asked to be quitted of him weeks before today. They said that justice was finally given to the people that he'd been harassing since he'd first gotten his license. I didn't know that things for him had dated that far back."

"They did, but since they were all settled out of court, I only mentioned them in the listing of things that he'd done when I gave the judge the paperwork for it." He took the paper from her when she handed it to him. "Front page too. It must have been a very slow news day for them to have put this on the front of it."

"I think there are a lot more people glad that he's in jail, other than the ones that he put into a world of hurt when he was driving around like a fool." Sherman told her that property damage alone was more than he'd thought possible for a man who had

only been driving for the last twenty-four years.“Are you saying that he’s only forty years old?”

“Forty-five.He was a late driver, and that was more than likely because he couldn’t get his license until he was seventeen because of a tractor accident that he caused some trouble with when he was only fifteen.”She asked him what he’d done.“Tipping cows and driving through a field of corn before it was ready to be harvested.It was a lot of money that the Fullners had to pay out to keep him out of jail then.It is a good thing they had money, or there is no telling what would have happened to the younger Arnold back then.Then he had to wait on his next birthday before he could apply to get his license.It seems like he’d not learned a thing from all the terrible things he’d done in the past.”

“I think that it was a shame they had money.Had he had to pay that one off, he might well have learned a lesson about what was going to happen when he drove things like he did.”Sherman told her that there was that.“Those poor people.I’m so happy that they’re getting what they need to be able to move on.I know that I would.And I’m betting that Dee is happy to have all this off her shoulders as well.I think she was more afraid of him coming back on her than he might well have been going to jail.He seemed like the type of person who would try to get even with someone for some of his misdeeds.Or what everyone else perceived as his misdeeds.To think that no one but you had the balls to take him to task.I said this before, and I’ll say it daily.I’m very proud of you for taking the man on and winning.You are the best there is, my dear heart.”

Long after Betty went to sleep, he laid there thinking about the newspaper.Finally unable to sleep, he took the paper to the bathroom and decided to read the entire thing.Just as he was finishing up the three-page article, he knew that he’d never get the sleep he needed now.There were people asking for him to run for the judge position that was empty right now, and he didn’t think that he’d be up for it.He enjoyed his quiet time too much to want to run to court daily to see what other idiots

got themselves into.

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Laughing to himself, he made his way to his bed and closed his eyes. He'd be up in a few hours and would enjoy the day like he'd gotten eight hours of sleep. Today was going to be a better day simply because he was going to tell himself that it was going to be. That usually didn't work, but he had a feeling that it might today. He was going to give it his all to make sure that it did anyway.

Chapter 5

Booth was all set for school to start on Monday. He had just finished up his room when Dee had come by to help him. Instead of leaving when he could, he asked her if she'd help him hang up some of the posters he'd gotten of Spain on the walls with Spanish descriptions.

"I'm using these as a teaser to see if they want to learn the language instead of just being in here for the credit. I love Spanish and Latin, and since I'm teaching them both this year, I'm excited to be able to use my room as a jumping off place for students." She asked him how many were second-year students. "I have one class of first year and two of second year. And about half a class of third year. For which I'm grateful for. Those third-year students will need a refresher course on the first two years, and I'm glad that I'm going to have time for them. The Latin class is for second-year students who are taking some biology and premed classes in hopes of getting into a better college with the knowledge."

"You said that you can come home when you have lunch on some days, too. That'll be nice. We can see each other if I'm home. I'm taking the job that your mother offered me with the organizations that she's on." He told Dee that was wonderful. "I'm not so sure how good I'm going to be in them, but I'm willing to try. She has a lot of

confidence in me doing a good job with her.I hope so.”

“You’ll do wonderfully.”She told him some of the things that she was going to be doing with his mom.“I know that she’s been looking for help on the Mother’s Day program for a while now.Everyone wants to be a part of it, but no one wants to put in the effort to make it happen.You’ll do well with that one.As for the Flowers on Main, I know that she’s only just taken that over in the last couple of years.My grandmas usually help her out with that one.”

“I always thought that the city did that, putting the large baskets on the light poles that run along Main Street.She said that she gets the funding from them, but they rarely have anything to do with it other than watering the planters once they’re up.”She smiled at him.“Then there are the containers that she wants to get to put in front of the police station and the mayor’s offices.I don’t think that’s going to go over as well because she’s going to be counting on the people in those offices to take care of the watering of them.”

They talked while she helped him with the posters.There were only five of them, but they were large in taking up nearly a five-foot space on the walls.But once they were up, the room took on a more festive air rather than a classroom look.He was quite proud of it.He asked her what they were doing for dinner tonight.

“We’re grilling out.I’m not sure what it would be.Salmon was on the menu, but that got changed at the last minute when the cook realized that they didn’t have enough for both of us.I was willing to forgo my portion, but she insisted that we both have a good meal.I suggested burgers and hot dogs on the grill, but I think the cook was thinking something more.”He asked her, like, what?“I’m not sure, but there was mention of cake, too, when I left the room.”

“I like cake.”She said she knew that about him.“Yeah, I have a sweet tooth when it comes to cakes and pies.I’d rather have cookies for every meal, but I know better.”He

laughed when she did. “I know I’m such a kid at heart.”

“Speaking of a kid, my sister got in touch with me. She saw the announcement in the paper about us getting married. I’m not thrilled about seeing her, but she insisted that she come for a visit. I made her reservations at the nicest hotel in Zanesville. We’d be fighting all the time if she were to be staying with us. She’s not happy about it, but I don’t care. Lynn isn’t the easiest person to get along with when things aren’t going her way.”

“So she’s thinking to come here and do what?” She told him money. “What do you want to do about it then? Pay her off or not? I’m willing to do whatever you wish.”

“My wish is that she’d never come around, but I can’t have that. After she comes to visit, then Shawn will. My parents will get wind of her coming, and they’ll want to visit too, so as not to be outdone by their children. None of them are the nicest people, just so you know. And my brother Shawn is the worst. He still thinks that I’m a ten-year-old kid that he can bully around all the time. Mom and Dad will pretend that we’re something like a close family when I bet they’ve not seen any of us in a decade or two. They keep tabs on us, but nothing more than that. They’ll say that they didn’t know about the accident when I know that someone here had notified them about it and the judgment against Fullner.” He asked her again what she wanted to do about them. “I’m not sure, to be honest. I want to think that they’ve all changed and will fool me into thinking that they’re here for no other reason than to see me, but in my heart, I know better. They’ll try to say that we’re so close that miles don’t matter. That’s the one thing that my mom says all the time to strangers who come around, too. However, I don’t want to give them any money. They’ll come right out and ask for it, then demand it if that didn’t work, but there will be some kind of exchanging of money if they have anything to say about it.”

“Then there will be no problem with me saying no to them. I’ve gotten pretty good at it as a teacher, and I can do that without any trouble for any fundraiser when it comes

around, they want me to be a part of. In other words, they want my money. I don't part with it any quicker than most would in my family, so we'll be good on that." He laughed hard when she told him that was a good plan. "I'll warn my parents too. Let them know that you don't want them to be sponging off of us when they get here. All right?"

"Perfect, if it works. I'm not saying that you won't try your best, but they can wear a hole in a stone when they want something from someone. I've seen them at work." He laughed again, and she finally joined him. "Hopefully they won't all be here at the same time, so that'll help out too."

As they walked home, Dee told him what sort of things her family had been up to. Mostly, it was living beyond their means, but she said that for the most part, they were all right people. Her parents lived out of the country and wouldn't come home under threat of death, but they'd come if they thought that they could get their hands on someone else's money. Especially hers.

"Why yours? Is there something about you giving them money that they try to hold over you for some reason?" She said she'd been known to bail them out before when she'd first been working. "They'd take your money and run off again, I take it."

"Something like that. They would stick around long enough for me to get into trouble, my rent might be late, or I was close to getting my utilities turned off. Something they didn't want to have to deal with. They never stay that long, usually because I've gotten smarter over the years, I think. Mom and Dad will say that they brought me into this world for one thing, and that was to live off me in their golden years. I have no idea what any of them do for a living other than to try and scam people out of money, but that's all right too, so long as they understand that this bank of Dee is closed to them. And don't get me started on the other two. Shawn used to think that I was only working for him when we were together, and Lynn thought that whatever was mine was hers as well. She once took all the money I had in the bank because she

needed to borrow ten dollars from me, and I told her it was in the bank. I still don't know how she was able to convince them to let her into my accounts."

"I'll take care that that doesn't happen to you again. I'll call the bank today. When are we expecting your sister? You said she was coming first, correct?" Dee told him the date. "That's only in a few days, and after school starts. I wish we had more time to get ready for them."

"That's her plan, too. To keep us on our toes when she visits. She'll also expect us to take her out to dinner nightly when she's here and make it so that the other two meals are paid for by me as well. Not join her, mind you, but just make sure she can go anywhere she wants with the meal paid for by me." While he'd never met these people, he was beginning to dislike them a great deal. But like Dee had said, it was one at a time this time, and he could handle one person demanding things that he wasn't planning on giving up. "She's coming by plane and expects me to be there when the plane arrives or before. That way, she doesn't have to wait for me to pick her up. Also, whatever luggage she'll bring with her needs to be gotten by me so that she doesn't have to travel with heavy luggage around the airport while looking out for me. She's a peach, just so you know."

"I'll go if her plane is coming in late." She told him the time. "Good. I can handle that and her. Set her off from the start on how things are going to go with her. I'll pick her up the way I do my family. I expect them to be on the plane and to go get their luggage with me. How the hell are you supposed to know what's hers in the first place?"

"She sends me the number of the bags along with a picture of what they look like. I usually do all right with that, but there have been mishaps with her stuff. Mostly it's because she'll tell me she had three bags and they'll be four or only two. Just to fuck with me." He said his way was better and it wouldn't get them into trouble by taking the wrong luggage. "I love that you're doing this. I might go just so I can see what she

looks like when you tell her to get her own bags.”

“You go and let me take the lead.I got this.”He would so love to see her face when she tried to manipulate him on things.He was made of sterner stuff, he told himself.“We’ll go together and be on time.That should get her panties in a twist.”

While they had dinner, he was getting as much information on his in-laws as he could.None of them were like Dee in that she saved her money and they flittered it away when they got it.Also, the parents sounded like they were the type of people who would expect someone to pay for their lives simply because of who they were.Whatever that meant to them.

By the time it was time to go and get her sister, two days later, he was armed with as much information as he could get.He wasn’t going to be rude, not at first.Dee had pointed out that she’d not seen her sister in a while, and for all she knew, she could be a different person.He would change his attitude depending on how she greeted him.And Booth thought that he could charm her into things that she might not realize, too.He was simply looking forward to whatever she brought to the table in the form of being her sister.He’d even warned his own family about what might happen.Dad said he’d not allow them to take his little girl to the cleaners when they arrived.Even the bank had been put on special alert.

The plane arrived just on time.He was holding up a sign that said her last name, Smyth, and hoped that there was at least one more Smyth on the plane to cause confusion.As soon as he saw the woman, however, all the kindness that he might have had for her was gone.She acted like she was in charge of the whole damned airport as soon as she come out of the tunnel.

“There you are.Where are my bags?I did tell you what they looked like, Lydia.”She called her sister by her first name, which was very telling.“Why can’t you do the simplest things when I tell you what to do?”

“She didn’t get them because we only just arrived, and the luggage won’t be released from the plane for another ten minutes. I thought it best that we get here as soon as possible, so you’d not think that you’d been abandoned when you got here. Come on, let’s get your stuff.” By the time they were at the conveyor belt, they still couldn’t get her things as nothing was coming out of the chute just then. While they waited, he did some small talk with Lynn to find out if she’d changed at all. “Why are you visiting if I might be able to ask?”

“Why should it matter to you that I’m visiting my sister?” He told her that it was because they were married. “I know nothing about that, and I’ll judge if you’ve married or not. Nothing happens in this family unless I approve of it first.”

He couldn’t help it, he burst out laughing. And he didn’t even try to cover it up at all. “You get to decide if we’re married or not? Is it just your family, or do you have to approve of all marriages around the world? That could be pretty extensive for you. How do you do that?”

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“Don’t be absurd. Of course, I don’t approve all marriages, that wouldn’t even be possible. What is wrong with you?” He laughed some more as the first of her luggage came around the conveyor belt. “That’s mine. Get it.”

“No.” He wouldn’t want Dee to get it either, so she didn’t. They all three watched as it made its way around the conveyor belt again. “You packed it, and I’m not sure how much it weighs. From what I’m to understand, you were only going to be here for a couple of days. For all I know, that could be someone else’s luggage too, and you’re trying to get me into trouble for laughing at you.”

“Lydia, you get it when it comes around. That’s the least you can do for me since I have to be here instead of you getting my luggage for me when I told you to.” Dee said she had better things to do other than to tote and fetch for her much older sister. “Be quiet about that. No one needs to know that I’m older than you. Just you shut up about that and get my luggage when it comes around again.”

It went around two more times before Lynn got the message that no one was going to get her luggage for her. By the time the third and final piece came around, it had been on the belt for so long that it was the last piece there, and the luggage crew was ready to take it to lost and found. So far, this was turning out to be more fun than he’d thought that it would be. The big sister was in for a rude awakening if she thought that either him or Dee was going to be giving in to her demands.

The ride to the hotel was made in tense silence. Lynn had said she was staying with her sister, and he said no, they were just getting their house put together and she wasn’t actually. He couldn’t wait for his mom to meet her. He’d told them all about the judging of who is marrying or not, and Mom was going to go with that. Booth

couldn't wait.

The first thing that was out of her mouth was that the hotel wasn't five-star, and she wasn't going to stay there. Dee told her that since she'd never volunteered any money toward her staying, she'd stay where she put her or pay for her own upgrade. He was never so proud of his wife as at that moment for her standing up to her sister, being a bully.

Not only did she stay, but she also paid for an upgrade to her room, and told Dee that they'd settle this up before she left. Dee told her as far as she was concerned, it was finished, and if she charged anything to the room, she was going to be responsible for it. She'd only paid for part of the room.

"I don't know who you're trying to show off for, but I'm not going to allow you to talk to me this way. You'll get yourself straightened out, or there will be hell to pay. I'm not going to be putting up with this, just so you know." Dee told her that what she knew was that she wasn't going to be her punching bag while she was here, and for her to get used to her having a backbone. "We'll see about that, now won't we. I can and will make a call to our parents if you continue acting like you are. They'll have plenty to say to you, I'm sure."

"I'm sure that I'm over twenty-one and have plenty to say to them right back. They've had no part of my life any more than you've had over the last decade and a half so whatever you tell them you make sure that you mention that you were a bitch first." Lynn was pissed off if the vein in her forehead was any indication. It was throbbing like a heartbeat and doing a good job of making sure that everyone around her knew it. "Since I have a job tomorrow and Booth has to work, too, we'll be forgoing the dinner tonight. I'm tired and you've been a bitch. So I'll see you tomorrow. Don't forget to rent yourself a car, Lynn. I won't be at your beck and call while you're here. I didn't want you to visit, and I don't plan on changing my plans to accommodate you anymore than I have to."

They left. The two of them went to the car and got in. Booth was positive that Lynn was still standing outside her door with her mouth hanging open, wondering what had happened. By the time they had left the parking lot of the hotel, Dee was laughing so hard she told him that she hurt. It was a good day for the two of them, and they still had three more days with the other woman.

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Dee greeted her sister at the front door of her home. She was quite proud of the fact that she'd not remembered to give her the address last night and got to time her visiting because she'd had to send her a link on Maps to show her how to get here. The car that she rented wasn't made for back roads like they had in town, but it suited her sister quite well when she got to the house with a dusty car.

"This is my mother-in-law, Betty Dixon. And in the event you need to approve my marriage to this family, you'll have to go and get a copy of our license when you're in town. We are married, and I don't care what you have to say about it." She told her to stop being a shit. "I'm only giving back to you the kind of energy you're giving me. I've read about that so many times that I understand how it works now. Until you start acting like a human being, I'm going to be acting out at you the same as you are to me. See how that works?"

"I see that you're showing off in front of your supposed in-laws. That's all I see." Dee shrugged and told her that she could believe what she wanted. "I want you to take me to lunch today. We have plenty of things to discuss. Also, don't think I didn't notice this house has to be in the five figures. So I know that you're not hurting for money. You'll give me what in that regard, too."

"The house is in the five figure range but that doesn't mean shit for you. It's our house and what we wanted and I'll be damned if I'm going to be messing with my payments to suit whatever you have going on in your head." Dee sat down at the table she'd

been working at when her sister arrived. “I talked to Mom and Dad last night. You having them call me was quite nice. But that didn’t turn out the way you wanted it to either. They told me that you should be minding your own business when it comes to what you’ve said to me up until now. They also congratulated me on my recent marriage.”

“They were just buttering you up for the strike. They want money too.” Dee told her that she’d turned them down as well. “Just like that, you have money and you’re not going to help out your family? You’ve heard the old saying, family comes first. I guess not for you. Sounds so like you. What if I told you that I’ve been to your bank and they’re going to give me access to all your money?”

“I’d say you’re a liar and that there is no way that the bank is going to allow you free rein over my money or the savings accounts that Booth and I have together. I did talk to them before you got here, so I’m sure they have a better understanding as to what would happen to them if they were to give you so much as a penny from all my accounts.” She said bullshit. “Whatever you call it, Lynn, it’s not going to happen. I’m no longer a child where you can bully me into getting what you want. Not now, not ever again.”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” She said that was the second time she’d said that, and it still made no sense to her. “I’m the oldest, and what I say goes.”

“You’re definitely the oldest, but that ship has sailed a long time ago. I’m my own person, and what I say goes when it concerns my life. What did you really come here for? When I spoke to you on the phone, I told you that I wasn’t going to give you any money. Especially for the amount you said I owe you. I’ve never owed you anything in my life, so I have no idea where that might well have come from.” Lynn said that she was willing to have half a million dollars instead of the entire amount. “That’s very generous of you, but not going to happen even if you’re willing to take ten bucks, I’m not going to give it to you at all.”

“You’ll at least give me the money for my ticket to get here and the upgrade on my hotel.” Betty laughed and said she’d heard about that. She still thought it was funny. “You stay the fuck out of our family issues. I’m in charge right now, and the sooner she gets it into her head that what I say is gospel, the better off everyone will be. Now go and knit something and leave us to talk.”

The slap to her sister’s face startled her as much as it looked like it did her sister. But she felt like if anyone deserved it, it would have been Lynn. She stood her ground, too, when she drew back her fist to hit her.

“You let that fly, and I’ll have you arrested so quickly that you’ll be in jail before you connect with my cheek. As I’ve said to you before, I’m not the same person I was before, and you’re not going to be bullying me anymore.” She not only dropped her hand but shook off the anger that was still evident on her face. “Now, I’m not giving you money. That is written in stone. And if you ever talk about my family like that again, I’m going to knock you three ways from Sunday. I will not tolerate you being mean to them simply because you’re a bitch.”

The look of confusion on her sister’s face was perfect. She wasn’t understanding how she’d lost the upper hand on her. Dee knew it was having a family that were normal around her. Knowing that they didn’t demand money from you simply because they thought that they deserved it more than you did. As soon as her cell phone rang, Dee turned back and walked away from her sister, knowing how much she hated to have people turn their backs on her. Answering her phone, she was just as surprised by the caller as she was her sister being a bigger bitch than she’d been the last time she’d seen her.

“It’s Shawn, your brother. Is Lynn causing you any trouble?” She said that she was, but nothing she couldn’t handle. “That’s what Dad said about you when he called me just now. He also told me that Lynn had gone to you, demanding a million dollars from you. You’re not going to give it to her, are you?”

“No. You either if you’re going to ask.” He said that he didn’t need her money; he was doing just fine on his own, thanks. “Why are you calling me then? I mean, the last time I heard from you, you were demanding things from me as well.”

“Let’s just say that, like you, I’ve met someone. And unlike you, I got my ass handed to me when I started treating him like I did you. It didn’t bode well for me, and after getting out of the hospital for a long three-month stay, I learned to keep my mouth shut and out of other people’s business, too.” She congratulated him. “Thank you. Mom and Dad are different as well. They’re good people now, if only a little on the broke side, but I’m helping them when they really need it and not all the time. Lynn has blown any kind of chance to get to know me and my new family just by being the person before you.”

She could see that Betty was ignoring her sister. Lynn was making demands, but the older woman wasn’t worried about them, apparently. As soon as her brother asked to speak to Lynn, she told him that she’d rather he call her on her cell phone, as she liked the one that she had. That made him laugh, which was what she’d been hoping for. Lynn’s cell phone rang as soon as the call was disconnected from her own phone.

While she didn’t know what was going on with what Shawn was saying to Lynn, she could tell that it was a mostly one-sided conversation. Whatever he was saying to her was pissing her off at him and she went back to work on the calendar she was putting together with Betty’s help.

They were going to share a calendar, but Dee wanted to have a hard copy of one that she would put in her office. Right now, they were using the dining room table as a desk, as there was so much information going on between them, and she didn’t want to miss any of it. But her desk and chair were going to be delivered tomorrow afternoon, and she’d be able to hang it up then. So far, she was loving working for the other Dixon woman.

“There are dates, too, that the other two have. Milly and my mom have their own timeline on getting things done as well. You’ll have to have theirs as well, honey. They do a lot, the two of them, but they’re much more relaxed about timetables. You’re like me and want it done now. Aren’t you?” She said that she likes things to be finished so she’s not scrambling at the deadline. “That’s me, too. They make an art of getting to the deadline on time.”

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Lynn was putting her cell phone away when she finally looked at her. She didn't know how long she'd spoken to Shawn, but it hadn't changed her one bit. She was still an angry person who seemed to like having a chip on her shoulder about everything.

"I'm not coming back here." Dee told her she was glad to hear that. "I don't want you to think this is the end of this either. I'll be calling you all the time to get what you owe me for all the years you've been conniving behind my back."

"What does that mean? I don't think of you at all when you're not around." She scoffed at her, and Dee had to laugh. "You're a piece of work. But I don't care. Once you leave, I'm going to change my phone number and not have to talk to you again. I'm finished with you and your demands."

"We'll just see about that." Again, she laughed at Lynn, but when she turned and left the house, she didn't even bother going to the door to see her off. The longer she was gone, the better she liked it. And good riddance to her. Her and Betty went on with their working together like they'd not had a woman who had lost her marbles in her home, but were good friends going over work that they both loved.

Chapter 6

Booth decided that he was going to enjoy his classes even if he had to tell himself that every day. Because what he really wanted to do was to be home with his wife and have fun with her. They'd not bonded as yet, and he was a little afraid to ask. She'd been hurt badly, and he knew that it hung on their minds all the time. Especially Dees.

“Mr.Dixon, I don’t understand how to break down this sentence.”He worked with Tony for over an hour earlier this morning on the same question.There were only four sentences to be broken down in Spanish, but he didn’t seem to be getting it.For a second-year student, he seemed to have forgotten everything that he’d learned so far.“I can read it all right, but breaking it down is hard for me.”

“Have you gone over your notes from last year?I told you at the end of last year that you’d need your notes to do well this year, Tony.Did you keep them?”He said that he was having a hard time finding them.“Then I suggest you get with one of your classmates and see if they can let you copy them.They’re very important for you to get a good grade in this class.”

He’d not only told the class to keep their notes from the previous year, but he’d told them that he’d keep them for them so that they’d have them.He’d done that for about half the class, and it looked like the other half was scrambling to get their notes together from being at home all summer long.

Booth rarely assigned homework.He preferred that they do the lessons in the classroom and turn them in first thing at the beginning of class.They could do it at home if they wished, but he was there to help them with any questions that they might have, and he thought that was better.The only trouble he had was students like Tony who thought that if he waited long enough between questions for him, he could have him do his homework for him.That was another reason for the keeping of last year’s notes.So he’d not have to do all the work for them.

At the end of class, Tony had gotten the notes from one of the students who was doing well in the class.For the first few weeks of class, they didn’t speak anything but English.After that, the entire class would speak only Spanish, and it would be from the start of class until it ended.It would help them with pronunciation and sentence formation.

Booth didn't have a class at noon. He thought he was going to have to do lunch monitoring but that was taken over by the football coach who wanted to make sure that his boys were not screwing around at the lunch hour. They'd had trouble with the football players before, but with the new coach, it seemed to have gone away. He was walking home to get something to eat when his cell phone went off.

"It's time." He didn't know the caller and asked what was time. "Amy. She's in labor. The midwife is on her way here. We're going to have a baby today." He took off running to his home so that he could be there when Dee found out. Mom would have been at the house too, but he didn't know their schedule anymore, so he didn't know if she'd be around the house or already on her way to Dallas' home.

He was only home for a few minutes when he called the school to let them know that he'd not be returning until tomorrow. He was as excited as the rest of the family seemed to be and couldn't wait until the new baby arrived.

Amy would be attended by the midwives of the troop, and Dallas would be in a room with him and the other brothers. Being that Dallas was the silverback of the troop, special care would be given to both him and Amy when the child was born. This was the first such child born to the family in a whole generation. Hugging his brother, he thought he was very calm for a man about to become a dad. Just as he was telling him that, their dad showed up with Mom, and she went to be with Amy.

"I hate this tradition. When you boys were born, all I wanted to do was to be there with your mother, and they wouldn't allow it. Dallas, you should change that rule before the next one comes along to make sure you can be with your lovely Amy when she gives birth." Dallas said that he'd do that as he didn't like being shut off from her at all. "You've gone the entire time with her around you, and why does this make it so she has to be alone now anyway?"

"You know what? I'm going to do it." Dallas stood up and smiled at their dad. I want to

be there, and since I'm in charge, I'm going to bully my way into the room to be with my wife."He was nearly halfway up the stairs when he turned back."Wish me luck.I think I'm going to need it."

When he got to the bedroom, Booth held his breath thinking that he'd either get in or be back down there with them when he simply opened the door and stepped in.it was a good five minutes before they realized he wasn't coming back out and was going to get to stay with Amy.Good for him, he thought.Good for him.

It was another three hours before anyone heard anything from the upper floors.He didn't know what was going on, but the silence was killing them.Dad started pacing, and the rest of them watched him.Something that they'd learned over the years was that their dad could pace a room off better than anyone they knew.And it was best not to disturb him when he was at it either.

At four o'clock, they heard something from the bedroom.The baby had been born.That's all they knew for the moment, and Dad was getting antsy.As soon as the door opened and Dallas came down the stairs with a bundle in his arms, they all held each other for the good news.No one really cared what the baby was; they just wanted it to be healthy.

"We have a little girl."Dad started crying as the bundle was handed to him."Amy was great, Dad.You should have seen her.She was in charge the entire time, and when she was born, Amy said she was going to nap for a little while for me to take the baby to you so that you could see her.Isn't she perfect?"

The little girl was perfect.She had ten fingers and toes, and her little mouth looked like a bow.She had a head full of dark hair like Dallas did, and when she yawned like she'd had enough of all the things going on today, Dad laughed and held her tightly to his body.

“She’s just perfect.” Each of them got to peek under the blankets that held her tightly. When it was his turn to hold onto his niece, he held her in his arms and marveled at how tiny she was. Her little fingers wrapped around his much larger one, and he could have given her the moon if she asked for it. Not only was she the perfect little girl, but she was beautiful like her mom was as well. Christ, it was like holding nothing; she was so small.

Handing her off to his next brother, he hugged Dallas. He didn’t have eyes for anyone but the pink little bundle that was currently in Cullen’s arms. He made a bigger comparison to her and his rifle, and how she weighed less.

“Martha said she’d feel heavier the longer we held her. I don’t know, she seems to weigh nothing at all to me now. The only comparison that I have to her is that she weighed nine pounds and four ounces. She’s twenty inches long. I know that’s a big baby, but Amy didn’t seem to think so.”

When he took her back up to the room, the five of them, plus Dad, got on their phones and started buying things. He and Dee had decided to wait until the baby was born before they ordered what they had in their carts. One cart for a girl and one for a boy, since they’d not had any indication as to what the baby would be. He was happy to hit the buy button and have it all delivered tomorrow.

Mom came down the stairs first. She looked like she was walking on clouds; she was so happy, and then the other women came down with Dee bringing up the rear. She, too, looked good, and he wanted to take her home and work on their own baby, but he only kissed her. He wasn’t going to force her into anything at this late date, and he told her that he loved her with all his heart.

“I want a child with you.” He kissed her on the mouth and told her that he was game when she was. “I don’t know how it works, us having a child when I’m on the pill, but I’d love to get some practice in before we actually have a child. Understand?”

“I understand that we have to practice a great deal.”She nodded and laughed with him.“You were told that the birth control wouldn’t work if you’re in heat, right?I mean, I’m not sure how thatworks, but I do know that if you want a child, we’ll have one if you’re ovulating.”

“Good.Let’s go home and start on that right away.”Then she looked disappointed.“We have to wait.Dallas and Amy want everyone to be here when they announce the baby’s name.I forgot about that.”

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“It’s a big deal when the silverback has his first child. Then, after that, the naming is done. He’s supposed to do it before his family first, then before the troop second. That will be later in the month when the baby is three weeks old. Again, the dates are something that I’m not sure of, but I know that one to be right. Isn’t she the most beautiful little thing?” Dee asked if he’d ordered their stuff, and when he told her that he had, she mentioned having to get some wrapping paper for little girls, too. “I think that it was in the cart, too. I could be wrong, but I thought that we added it to the cart when we thought of the same thing last week.”

“I think you might be right. I remember that now.” She hugged him, and he hugged her back. “This is going to be so much fun. I’m glad that we got together with the others so we weren’t buying the same things. The little sleepers are going to look so good on her. I can’t wait until we can babysit.”

He thought it was funny that she thought that with both sets of grandparents in the house, as well as his mom and dad, too, that they’d ever get the chance to babysit. He thought that the little girl would be going to second grade or beyond before he’d ever get the chance to sit for his big brother. There were others ahead of him in line for that, too.

Gathering them all together in the same room, Amy looked like a queen sitting in the middle of their big bed. He’d never been in his part of the house before and thought it was a really nice bedroom. When his brother cleared his throat, he waited with the rest of them to hear what the little girl would be called.

“We had to work hard on her name. I just want you guys to know that we took her naming very seriously when we knew we were going to have a daughter.” He

presented her to the room before smiling. "I'm so happy to announce that I have a daughter, and her name is Betty Bethanna Millicent Dixon. For short, we're going to call her Anna." There were cheers around the room.

Mom looked like she was going to bust; she was so happy to have the baby named after her and the other great-grandmothers. Grandma Simpson was so happy that they didn't name her Bethy, which was her real name, but named Bethanna like she'd wanted to be named her entire life. Grandma Dixon was just as thrilled to have a namesake for her name, Millicent, and it had her calling little Anna her favorite firstborn. It was something that she said to them all at some point. He was her favorite fourth-born grandson with the name of Booth. He loved that she was going to keep that going for the next generation.

They walked hand in hand to their home. It wasn't that far, but it was warmer tonight, so he was happy to have the nice weather to go home in. Tomorrow, he'd have to bring in pictures of the new baby so that everyone could be happy for the newly born child. He was just happy that he'd gotten to see her when he had. Babies he knew grew up entirely too fast not to take in the changes every day.

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Dee was afraid of sex. She remembered the pain of her back and was afraid that sex would make it so that she was in pain again. She didn't want that. Wanting sex, she hoped would prove her wrong about the pain, but she just didn't know. It was the not knowing that bothered her the most.

"We don't have to do anything." She nodded, then shook her head at Booth. "I know that you're nervous, I can almost taste it on you. But we don't have to do anything at all until you're sure. And I want you to be absolutely sure about this."

"I'm afraid of it." She let out a long breath that she felt as if she'd been holding

forever, knowing that admitting it would be most of the battle she was having with herself. “Not of sex, but what it will do to my body. I mean, the hurt and pain are still so fresh with me.”

“I can understand that. We can take our time with making love and not have intercourse this time. We can certainly take our time with it.” She said she didn’t want him to hurt. “Hurt? I’ll only hurt if I hurt you, love. I’m not the one who is battling the fresh pain like you are.”

“I’ve heard that men who can’t have sex are in pain. Is that true?” He told her that he’d just make himself come, and that would help. “Have you been doing that all this time? Jerking off?”

She had no idea where her bravery was coming from, talking to Booth this way. She was usually so shy when it came to sex, and now was no different. But she didn’t want him to feel like she was never going to have sex with him. Just that she was afraid right now that it was going to be painful for the two of them. She looked into his eyes when he lifted her chin up so that she could see him.

“It doesn’t hurt me to go without you, love. I swear on my heart that I won’t hurt if you only have pleasure and not me.” She said that sounded like she was going to be selfish. “No, there is no reason for you to feel that way. We love one another, and this is going to work for us now.”

“I don’t know. What if I freak out at the wrong time?” He asked her what she meant by freaking out. “You know, freaking out when you’re about to enter me and I can’t do it. What will you do then?”

“I’d back off. I’d never force you into anything you didn’t want to do.” She said what if he was right at the point. “Look, we can go over everything that might happen until the sun comes up, but we won’t know anything until the time is right for both of us. I

love you, Dee, and will forever. If this is something that you have feelings about right now, we can put it off until later, until you're ready."

"What if I'm never ready?" She didn't mean to say that so loud, but once it was out there, she started to cry. "What if we live together for the rest of our lives and never have sex. What if I can't get past this fear of hurting myself again ever?"

"Then we live together happily until someday, you're ready. I believe that it will come to that, one day you're going to be so ready that you jump my bones. I can't not believe that you'll be ready someday. And if you're not, then you're not. It's as simple as that." She shook her head at him and said it wasn't that simple. "It is for me. Because I love you."

He was giving up so easily, and she didn't want that either. She didn't know what she wanted, but him to be so calm about everything wasn't it. Dee wanted him to be angry with her. Like she was with herself. For him to want to lash out at her, to tell her she was stupid. Because really, that's how she felt. Stupid because she couldn't have sex or even to make love to him because of this crippling fear. What she really wanted was for him to say to hell with it and make love to her anyway. So that if she hurt, she could blame it on him. But he was being too nice. Being much braver than she was.

He agreed to sleep with her still. They'd been sleeping in the same bed since the beginning of the school year. It hadn't been that much of a hardship for her to want to be in the same bed as he was, but she found that she slept much better, longer, too.

When he got up in the morning to go to work, she would lounge around in bed for an hour just wondering what it would be like to have him make love to her. But her fear would get in the way, and she'd have to get up and take a shower to make herself feel like she could tackle the day. They'd been living together and married for six months, and not once did they have sex.

And it was all on her.

When they went to bed later that night, having not talked about sex for the last part of the evening, she wrapped herself around him in order to make him want to have sex with her. But all he did was curl his big body around hers until she was warm, and she fell asleep. That's something that she had no trouble doing, and that was falling asleep while he was with her. It was a shame that she couldn't do anything more with him than that, she thought. However, she was fearful of everything.

When she got up the next morning, Booth was gone, of course. He had a job that he loved, and she knew that he'd be there if she needed him. As soon as Betty came over for their morning cup of tea, she knew that if she didn't talk to someone, she was going to explode. So the first thing she did when Betty asked her if she was all right, she came right out and told her.

"I've not had sex with your son yet, and I'm afraid that I'll never be able to." Betty put down her cup of tea and nodded to her. "You know that we're not having sex? Did Booth tell you that and why?"

"He's never said a word to me. But apparently, you need to vent. What's the issue? I'm sure that there is something that is holding you two apart." She told her everything from her injuries holding her back to her fear of pain coming back. She even told her how Booth was being too understanding and it was pissing her off. "I see. You want him to do the deed, as it were, so that the decision is out of your hands. He won't do it. Do you know why?"

"He said it's because he loves me too much." She got up to pace the big room they had been working in. "I love him as well, but I'm not sure how to start this. Or even if I can. I remember the pain in my back and legs, and I'm afraid... I use that word a great deal in conjunction with everything that I'm terrified to do. Walking very far. I can't do it. What if I hurt myself again? I don't even drive anymore, fearful of getting

into an accident that will really break my spine, and I'm not able to walk again."

"What did the doctor say to you when you told him of this fear you have?" She said she'd never brought it up. "Why not? He should know that you're afraid of having sex, and he'll be able to tell you if the fear is genuine or not. I know that Booth claimed you so you'd be healed. I think you need to talk to your doctor and have him tell you what your limitations are. Not that I think you have any, but that might be the first thing you should do."

"I don't know how to bring it up." She said that she didn't have that trouble with her. "Because I love you and trust you. I trust him as well, but...what if he tells me that I can't have normal sex again?"

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“You won’t know that until you ask him. Get him on the phone and we’ll take care of this right now.” She picked up her cell phone and handed it to her. “Call him, and if he can’t get to talk to you right now, I’ll make a few calls myself and get him on the line with you. This is obviously something that is bothering you a great deal, and the only way that you’re going to solve it is to get some answers.”

It took her three tries to get the number right for the office. And when she left a message, Betty made a call to the office, and he called her right back. At first, she didn’t know what to say to him, then she looked at the picture of her and Booth on the buffet. They looked so happy together that she wanted that all the time. So she, like she did with Betty, blurted out what she wanted to know and listened while he explained things to her.

“Fearful of sex isn’t a good thing. You’re young and healthy, and nothing that you can do will make it so that you’re hurt again unless you’re going to be flying from an overhead lamp at some point, even then, you should be fine.” She said she was afraid of the pain. “There might be a little pain because it’ll be something new to you, Dee, and I can’t predict how much of that you’ll have, but worrying about your back and whether or not you’ll hurt yourself again is something that isn’t going to happen. You should have called me first thing when this came up with the two of you. Or I should have brought it up to the two of you. You two will be fine. You have nothing at all to worry about. Have as much sex as the two of you want and enjoy each other. Please.”

“My mother-in-law told me to call you.” He said that Betty was a smart person, and if she said to call him, then she should. “I didn’t know how to bring it up without feeling stupid for not knowing. I mean, I’ve been living with Booth for six months now, and we’ve never had sex because of my fear.”

“You have yourself a good man if he’s been willing to wait on you to be ready. I wish there were more men out there like him. There would be a lot less trouble in marriages if couples would listen to one another like he’s been.” She told the doctor that she thought that she had the best man in her life. “You do. Now, you get yourself ready for a night of debauchery and have some fun with him. You two, more than most couples I know, deserve it. You’ve been through a great deal, the two of you, and you should be having whatever kind of sex you wish as often as you wish. I’m sorry that I never mentioned it before.”

“Thank you so much. You’ve taken so much off my mind.” He said it was his pleasure and for her to have a nice evening. “I plan on it.”

He was still laughing when he disconnected the call. Looking at Betty, when she started loading things into her basket, she asked her where she was going. She told her that she was going home.

“And we’ll not bother the two of you unless it’s an emergency. And trust me when I tell you that it will have to be a big assed emergency too. Like the sky is falling in and there is nowhere for us to go to get out of it kind of thing.” She laughed. “For days, I’ve wanted to ask you if I could help you in some way about sex with my son. I thought that it was something, but I had no idea what it could be. I’m just so glad that you trusted me with the information to get you on the right path. You have made this old woman feel so much younger than I have in years. I thank you for that.”

“Because I asked you about sex?” She said that she trusted her enough to ask her anything at all. “Well, I can’t thank you enough. If we had not had this conversation between the two of us, there is no telling how much longer I would have been pushing Booth away from me. I like that I could speak to you about this. I couldn’t have with my own mother.”

“Well then, I’m doubly happy because you chose me to talk to.” She picked up the

last of her things and started for the door. “I was serious about not bothering you for the rest of the night. You take a long, hot bath and prepare whatever you need to. And most of all, have fun.”

“You’re the best there is, Betty Dixon. I’m so glad that I have someone in my corner just like you so that I can talk when I need to.” They hugged twice before Betty left. Putting her own things away, she was glad that it was still early enough in the day that she could bathe and shave her legs. She wanted her body to be ready as she could make it when Booth came home. She only hoped that he’d still be in the mood after a long day at school.

She took a bottle of wine to their room with two glasses. There were other things that she took up, too. There was a cheese tray that she made up herself. Along with a basket of fruits that were in the kitchen, she had about everything ready when she realized that it was nearly four o’clock. He’d be home any second now, and she was giddy with happiness. Dee was going to rock his world and then rock it again if he was in the mood. She felt like she could take on the world at that moment, and when she heard him coming in the back door, she stood in the dining room waiting for him to come and find her.

Chapter 7

“It’s been a long time in coming, don’t you think?” He’d found her in the dining room, standing there with her bare feet and her hands full. She looked like a goddess, like a nymph of sexual pleasure. He wanted her right then and there, but knew that if he took her on the table that was in the large room, he’d never get enough of her.

Picking her up, making sure that the things that she had in her hands were safe, he carried her up to the bedroom and put her onto the bed. She looked even better there, with the white sheets surrounding her and the blankets giving off just enough color to not wash her out.

Stripping down to his boxers, he stood above her, taking the things she had in her hand, two wine glasses, and a bottle of the best wine that was in the cellar. He moved them to the little table that had been set up with a cheese and meat tray, crackers, and bits of bread. Taking a small bite of the crusty bread, he made his way back to the bed where she was.

Sliding into the bed, he watched her as she moved for him. Her body was beautiful, with long legs, arms that were toned yet soft and strong. She looked more like the goddess that he'd thought that she did as he moved to the center of the bed and knelt down on his knees.

When he rolled her over and settled between her legs, he stripped off the rest of his clothing so that it wouldn't be in the way of their lovemaking. She wrapped her legs around his hips and her arms around his shoulders. Booth took her hands down and put them above her head, and held them there by lacing his fingers between hers. He looked into her eyes as he moved his body down hers, then up again.

"You are wet, I can smell your essence." His cock nudged at her entrance and she felt an answering rush of heat. "Your heat pulls at me, begging me to enter you. Are you ready for me?"

She surged up to meet his cock. His cock slipped into her and then out again when he pulled back. She tried to move up to bring him into her again, but he pulled back.

"No, I will savor you tonight. For all eternity, we have to rush things, but not tonight. We will go slowly this time. You are always in such a rush." He nipped at her chin, and she surged up again.

She ached for him, he could almost taste it, all of him, and lifted her head enough to lick his throat. He rocked into her when she lay back.

“Please, Booth.I beg of you, please.”He told her that she begs so prettily.“I want you.I need you more than I ever thought possible to need another human being.”

He slid into her again, then out again.It wasn’t enough, not nearly enough.Wrapping her legs around him again, she pulled him to her when he rocked into her again and felt him fill her.

His groan rumbled along her chest from his.When he continued to rock deep, she met his downward thrust with her own upward one.Soon they had a rhythm, slow and soft, in and out.Her body was building up, she could feel her climax coming onto her.But she wanted to feel him come first.

As his thrusts became more, filling her more, taking her more deeply, she licked his throat again.He tilted his head and nipped at her shoulder.He jerked in her when she ran her tongue along the vein.

“Bite me, Dee.Take from me, bring me into you.”He rocked harder, his timing off every time she licked his pulse.

She didn’t bite him, didn’t break the skin until he was pounding into her, his cock bumping her clit with every downward stroke.When he let go of her hands to pull her hips up to him, she buried her fingers into his hair and pulled his head back, baring his throat for her.She struck quick and hard, her teeth sinking into his flesh hard enough to leave bruising.He bellowed out her name as he came.She was so mesmerized by his face, the beauty of it, when he came, that she was surprised when her own climax gripped her.She threw back her head and screamed, her entire body ceased in the moment.

As her body became her own, her body began to settle, he rocked again and again, bringing her again.When she was cresting the wave this time, he bit her.His teeth sank deep and brought her again.

Booth wasn't sure he'd ever be able to move again. His body was more relaxed, more sated than he'd ever been. He rolled to his back and brought Dee with him. She was limp, and had he not heard her heart beating, he would swear that he'd killed her. Chuckling a little, he looked up at her when she raised her head.

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“You are more than I ever dreamed of having in a mate, more than I ever wanted in one as well.” She smacked him as he lay back. “You honor me by being my mate. I look forward to fighting with you for many centuries to come.”

She snorted. He laughed. There would never be a dull moment with his mate. And he was glad for that. Holding her in his arms, he did wonder what their future would bring and found that he didn't really care. All he wanted was her, and for now, that was more than enough.

“I would like to have a child with you. Soon. I feel the urge to be a mom like Amy is. She'll be a great one, I think. I'll need help. I know so very little about your kind...our kind that I find myself wanting to find someone I can—did I tell you that I talked to your mom? She's brilliant, by the way, and you guys should tell her that more often. Anyway, she was very helpful when I asked her questions, and she didn't embarrass me at all. I thought that she'd have fun with me for some reason.”

“My grandmas could have helped you, too, but I think they might well have teased you a bit. I'm sure that whatever you talked about was something that my mom will treasure. I think she's wanted a girl, a woman around to hang out with for some time now. And with us finding our mates, she seems to be happier than I've ever known her to be. Even Dad is having fun being the knight in shining armor for the new brides of the troop.” Booth stroked her back, feeling sated more than he thought possible for just a single bout of lovemaking. “I'm suddenly starving to death. I know you brought up a cheese platter, but I think that even if I ate the entire thing all by myself, I'd still be hungry for more.”

“I have sandwiches too. Let me get them.” She got up, and he was sort of happy to see

her limping across the room. Booth knew that had it been he who got up first, he might well have fallen on his face, he was so sore. Even his nose felt just a little out of joint. She handed him the large platter of food. "There are plenty of them, too. I was only going to bring up a couple, just to tide us over, but the more I thought about what you eat as a snack, I made six more. So you have six just for yourself, and I have two."

He ate the first two without even tasting them. Which, of course, made Dee laugh at him. When he was ready to eat the third one, he also ate some of the salad that had been brought up, too. By the time he was eating the sixth of the sandwiches, they'd polished off the cheese and meat platter along with all ten bottles of water that she'd brought up and were drinking the wine.

They played while eating and talked. He told her what he knew about babies that might be born to them, and she told him what she'd been up to all day. Booth told her about his classes that he'd had today and how much he'd not enjoyed them as much as he had thought that he would.

"I think that I'm missing you more than I thought that I would. I would think of something that I wanted to tell you, and I'd have to slow myself down in leaving the school to come home and tell you. Then, when they called and said that Amy was in labor, it was all I could do not to find you and make us have a baby as well. I do want as many children as you'd like to have." She said she didn't know how many she wanted, but she did want at least two. "And close together in age. There is only about fifteen months between each of my brothers, and it makes it so that we're close. I know that you're much younger than your sister and brother."

"Shawn is eight years older than me and Lynn is nearly sixteen. That makes a lot of years between her and Shawn, too. We were never close, none of us. I guess now that things are different between us, it's too late for us to be close. They've always treated me with a little distance because of the years between us." He thought of her sister and

asked her if she was still around. "I don't know. She's not bothered me any if she is. I know that she wants money, and I've told her no, but I don't know if she's going to just go away or not. I've been keeping an eye out for her when I'm out and about. But nothing so far."

They talked about anything that popped into their mind. No rhyme or reason to their conversations, and they'd pop back and forth about subjects, too. It was enjoyable, but they needed to get up and get going. He needed to grade papers, and she said that she had things that she had to do as well.

Booth felt more relaxed than he had in some time. After getting the papers graded, disappointed in the grades that they had gotten, he put them back in his briefcase and was glad that this test didn't count. It was just to see if they had retained anything from the years before in his class, and it looked like only a couple would make it on the path that they were on now.

Locking up the house, he was quite pleased with the way it was coming along. With the doors locked and the wolf on watch, he felt safer in his home than he had in some time. For a long time now, he decided that he was never going to be as happy as he was at this moment.

Going up to bed, he was happy to see that Dee was already in bed and sleeping. She'd not been getting enough sleep, thanks wholly to the two of them not seemingly getting enough of each other. As soon as he was stripped down and in the bed, he closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep. It was going to be a long day tomorrow, and he wanted as much sleep as he could get.

Up the next morning, he was up before Dee was and out the door before she even stirred around. Getting to school, he was happy that he was able to get his work done, and the lessons for the day finished up before his first class. The rest of the day would go better, he hoped, than the day before if he kept on the same path he was on

now. Keeping focused was the only way he was going to survive school while his lovely wife was at home without him.

Twice, he was called away from class, and both times, he thought it could have been handled after class. The principal wanted him to answer a few parent-teacher questions, and he did so without having to refer to his notes. The fact that he'd offered to hold onto their notes for this year was something that he'd done every year since teaching, and he didn't like being questioned about his methods in teaching classes. Especially since it was only the second week of school and he'd been at it since he'd graduated from college eight years ago.

Going home for lunch, there wasn't anyone home but the cook. She made him a light lunch of salad and a sub, and he made his way back to school with plenty of time left over. But by the end of the day, he was exhausted and needed a nap as soon as he walked in the door. He was kind of glad that Dee and his mom were out on a mission, whatever that happened to be, and he could take advantage of the nice quiet house and sleep for a couple of hours. He needed more sleep, too, it seemed to him.

When he woke up, Dee was home, but she was working at the dining room table. The office that she had was finished up, but she said that the paperwork that she had had to be spread out so that she could see it all. He didn't care. They'd been eating in the kitchen since they moved in, and it seemed to suit them both. As soon as dinner was over, the two of them retired to the living room, where they zoned out instead of watching television. For some reason, the two of them were asleep in a few minutes instead of having a nice conversation as they'd been having for the last two weeks.

Waking up the next morning, he was refreshed more than he'd been in a while. When Dee got up with him, she said that she felt like she was finally rested. They'd made love in the middle of the night, but that didn't seem to have made them any more tired. He found himself whistling all the way to school, even though it was colder out than it had been over the last few days.

At noon, he decided to stay at school. The weather had gotten worse, and the snow that had been spitting this morning was now coming down in earnest. It made him happy that the weather had changed; he was looking forward to the colder weather since spring. It was his favorite time of the year, when the snow fell from the skies. On his way home, his cell phone rang and he almost didn't answer it. The unknown number wasn't one that he knew either.

"Where is my money?" It was Lynn again. "I've given you enough time to gather it up, and now I'm tired of waiting. I want my money that is owed to me, and I'm sick of waiting. I have a gun now and I'm not afraid to use it."

"Why do you feel that we owe you anything? I mean, you keep saying that. That we owe you money. Why is that?" He entered the house and saw that Dee was there and hugged her tightly. "It's your sister again. She wants the money we owe her, and I'm trying to figure out why we owe her anything. She's not even been a part of our life up until now."

She asked for the phone, and he handed it off to her. It was her sister, after all, and he didn't know all that much about her. Other than the fact that her asking for money was getting really old.

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After getting the phone from Booth, she nearly hung up. She, too, had had enough of Lynn asking for money...demanding money like she had a right to. As soon as she put the phone to her ear, she thought of two things. She was sick of being bullied, and she was even more sick of her sister being the one who bullied her all the time. Enough was enough damn it and she was going to put a stop to it.

"Don't call here again, Lynn. Or go ahead, we're going to have our numbers changed, and you won't be able to call here. As for the gun that you have, go ahead and try to

use it on us, it'll get you money no more faster than before. You're sick." She took in a deep breath and heard her sister do the same. She was in charge of this call, not her, so she didn't give her a chance to talk. "As soon as I get off the phone with you, which will be in less than two minutes, I'm going to call the police and have you arrested. I'm sick of hearing about your demanding shit from me when I owe you nothing. Less than nothing. Another thing I want to make clear to you is that I don't want to hear from you. Do you understand that? I don't ever want to hear from you again."

Hanging up the phone was easier than she thought it would be. But before it rang again, if her sister was going to call her, she did indeed call the police. There was a limit to even what she would put up with, and her sister was hitting that with every word she spoke. Again, enough was enough in this household.

After getting off the phone with the police, she turned the phone off. If anyone important wanted to get in touch with them, they could reach out. She might not have a connection to all of the family, but Booth did, and he could get with her if they wanted to talk to her. Smiling at Booth, she told him what she'd done and asked him to not turn his phone back on as she'd done the same to hers.

"Good, I was thinking the same thing. That I'd had enough." He pulled her into his arms and held her. "Also, I feel really good. I think that we've been wearing each other out to the limit, and we needed another night like last night. Just rest and relax so that we're not killing one another."

"I agree. I feel better, too." She laid her head on his chest and listened to his heart beating and wondered how she'd ever gone to sleep without hearing the gentle sound of it beating beneath her ear.

"The police are going to pick her up. I don't know where she is, but the sooner she goes away, the better." He agreed with her. "Tomorrow I'm going to have our number

changed so that we don't have to deal with her anymore.I have a feeling however she's going to be a pain in the ass no matter what we do."

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“You could call your brother and ask him to deal with her. He seemed to think that he could. That way, we as a family don’t have to deal with her. She’s not going to like it any way we do it, I don’t think.” She asked him what that would mean if the family dealt with her. “It means we’ll press charges and she’ll end up in jail for some time. She’s threatened to kill us several times now, and she’s not getting what she wants.”

“I’ll call Shawn. I’ll see what he thinks we should do about her. I just wish I understood why she believes that I owe her money. And so much of it. I don’t think I ever borrowed money from her at any time in my life.” She looked up at Booth. “And so much of it, too. I mean, she wanted a million dollars, then half that. Where would she get off thinking that I’ve borrowed that much from her?”

“I don’t know. I honestly don’t. But you said they all did it at one time or another. Perhaps she’s got it in her head that you really do owe her something, and that amount seemed like giving her the most bang for her buck. Or our bucks. We have the money to give it to her. It wouldn’t hurt us, but I have a feeling that she’d just keep coming back and back until it did hurt.” They made their way to the living room to await dinner. “Just see what your brother has to say, and we’ll take it from there. Maybe he can think of something we can do to get her off our backs, and that will be the end of it all. I’d like to do this without much in the way of effort or violence.”

“Do you think it’ll come to that? Violence?” He said that she was already pushing the violence button now, and they’d not really done anything other than just get threats from her. “I suppose so. I just don’t want to have to deal with her anymore. I mean, we’ve gone so long without having any kind of contact. Why now? And why so much

money?”

“She might be in trouble with something.”The two of them speculated until they were called to dinner.Then, during dinner, they talked about what Shawn might have to say.For all they knew, she might well be in on it with her parents, as they too had asked for money.It was hard to tell right now, and they were going to get to the bottom of it soon.

Calling Shawn, she was told that there wasn’t anything wrong with Lynn other than she had been off her meds for a while.There seemed to be a great deal of that going around.But Lynn, being off her meds, was dangerous to others around her.She had something wrong with her mind that Shawn couldn’t remember what it was.It was some kind of chemical imbalance that he knew was dangerous for her being off her medications, but he for the life of him couldn’t remember what it was.

“She doesn’t need the money, not that much anyway, but she has it stuck in her head that she needs it for her rent and other utilities.I pay all of them, so she doesn’t have to worry about them.Lynn lives in a group home with four other women and a caretaker who have basically the same issues.They can’t hold down a job because they’re suspicious of every little thing that happens.Lynn reads books, but I have to be careful what type of book she reads, or she’ll think that she’s done whatever it is in the storyline herself.And to the point where she will have other people convinced that she’s lived that life.”Dee asked him if she had left the home without permission.“That’s the issue.I can’t get a doctor to say that she has to have limited to no outside contact with the world so that she doesn’t do what she’s doing now.And before I forget to tell you, two people are coming to get her to bring her back to the home.I should have called them sooner, but I was hoping that she’d come back on her own.She does that sometimes.Goes away for a few days, then returns.This is the longest she’s been gone for a while.I’m sorry, Dee.I should have taken better care of her, and this wouldn’t have been an issue.”

“She said she has a gun.”He said that he’d bet that she doesn’t, but he’d make sure to warn those coming after her.“What if she hurts someone?She can you know.If we don’t give her any money, she’s going to kill us.I don’t know how that works in her mind, but that’s what she’s saying.”

“I’ll take care that she doesn’t get away again.”Dee asked him where she was supposed to be living.“She’s in Ohio and has been for some time.Near to Dayton and the institute there.”

When Booth’s cell phone rang, he went into the other room to answer it.She’d have to make a list of people who would need the numbers when they changed them, but it might be easier to just make sure that Lynn was in her home setting rather than have to go through all that to change their numbers.But she’d do whatever had to be done.

When Booth came back, he winked at her and told her that Lynn had been picked up by the police.How he knew she didn’t have any idea, but he was happy about it, and so was she.Telling Shawn, she could hear the relief in his voice as soon as he said ‘thank goodness,’ and then he told her that he’d come and get her tomorrow.They made a time for them to meet up so that she could get to know him a little better since it had been so long.

The two of them sat on the couch, knowing that they didn’t have to get up early in the morning for anything.They talked about the things they were planning for the weekend and what was being delivered for the house.The hot tub that they wanted had been on back order, and now that it was in, it was going to be delivered tomorrow and set up.She was happy about that.The cold weather was making her joints from the accident hurt a little, and she was told by the doctor last time she went in that the hot tub would be the perfect thing to soothe her muscles and aches.

“Also, with Halloween coming up in the next couple of weeks, I want to get the blow-ups out and set up.We should have done it sooner, but with everything else

going on, it was just a matter of time before we could get to them.”Booth said he was looking forward to handing out candy this year more than any other year before.So were his parents.“I think they’ve gotten cases of candy to hand out.I know that we have a lot too.I’m even going to dress up somewhat, too.”

“You’ll be the highlight of some of the kids’ nights if you do that.”After getting things put on a list, they were set up for the weekend.She was glad that the snow had already melted off, and it was going to be warmer this weekend, so they could get a few things done.“I’m going to see about getting myself a costume to wear, too.We’ll have to do this for our kids when we have them.Dress up with them.I’ve seen how parents do that.Oh, now I’m excited for the holidays to come around.It’s special how they have one a month for the rest of the year.Don’t you think?”

It was nearly two in the morning when they made their way up to bed.Booth had heard from the police twice more since they told him that Lynn had been picked up, and they told him that she was settled in for a good night.Her doctors had come by to see her, and that was good.As soon as she was asleep, they called to tell them that they’d be working with Shawn tomorrow in getting her back home to her facility.

They didn’t make love, but they did snuggle up under the covers.They continued to talk about different things as they laid there, and once she started to doze off, Booth pulled her closer to his body.It was the best way to sleep, close to one another, and she loved him all the more for it.

She woke up once to go to the bathroom, and when she returned, Booth did the same.Back in bed, they held one another like they had before, and she dozed off much quicker this time.She thought it had a lot to do with the fact that her sister was no longer roaming the streets looking for her, and also the fact that she was going to see her brother tomorrow.She couldn’t remember the last time that she saw him, and was excited that they were going to have lunch tomorrow too.

At a quarter to eight, she woke and knew she was up for the day. Booth was already gone, having left her a note that he was going to get the Halloween stuff out of the big barn. She was going to help him, so after her shower, she got dressed in something that she could work in and met him in the barn.

The big boxes were already off the shelf and ready to be blown up by the time her brother showed up with not just the two doctors who were for her sister, but Lynn as well. To say she was different than she'd been before when she spoke to her would have been a gross understatement. She was calm and didn't seem to know that she had been a terror to her and her family when she'd been off her medications.

Chapter 8

Shawn liked his brother-in-law, Booth, and his family a great deal. When things were going well with his sister Lynn, Shawn had a better outlook on life. Like today, having lunch then dinner with his other sister was nice, and he enjoyed every bit of it. Even when Booth's brothers just happened by—the blow-ups were a huge hit with his family—they wanted to see what else he had in store for the other holidays, and were making them very jealous when they saw the big boxes that had been left behind from the previous owners of the house.

He also enjoyed hanging out with his sister, Dee. It had been at least a decade since he'd seen her, and he was enjoying getting to know her once again. It was great too to share the memories they had as children, there were a few of them that were good, and talk about their parents when they were in a better position than they were now.

“They're both suffering from dementia. But just the early stages. The doctor said that had they taken better care of themselves when they were younger, they might well have been in better health than they are now. Dad has some worrisome aches and pains from when he had a car accident, and Mom is just suffering from whatever she reads about in the newspaper. She has her good days and bad, but it's Dad who takes

the most time. He likes to have things just so when he's having a visit from the health aides. They both live in an assisted living home for now and are getting good care." Shawn turned down the offer of help with the bills. "I have it. I have some money now that I'm working at a good place, and they do what they can with their social security when it comes in. The one that I have the most trouble meeting is Lynn's care. If I can get the doctor to say that she needs full-time care, then things will be easier for her. But until then, I'm going to have to pay what I can. If you'd help with that, I wouldn't turn it down."

"I'll pay for Lynn, and you let me know when you need help with our parents." He promised that he would. "We have money now and have invested well. You let me help out, too, all right?"

"I will. I promise that I will." She didn't say anything more about it, and he was all right with that. If she helped, that would be great, but if she didn't, he'd make it work somehow. He didn't know her well enough to know if she'd help when she said she would or not, and that was something that he wanted to take care of. "My partner and I are doing really well now. Doug has been very helpful in keeping my head on straight, too. I don't have anything mentally wrong with me, but I do get overwhelmed sometimes when everything with them hits at one time, especially with our parents. They can be quite the duo when things start to go wrong with them. They play off one another."

"I can see that. They used to do that when we were children, too. You'd ask one of them for something, and they'd make you go back and forth between them when all you wanted was permission to go someplace that had to do with school. I remember being so annoyed when they would do that." He said he'd forgotten about that but did remember it now. "I remember that I didn't get to go to some of the field trips that were for school because they'd never give me the answer that I needed."

"I did as well. I'd really forgotten about that. And remember how they used to say

‘whatever the other one said,’ like you had to go back and forth with that, too. That was the most annoying thing they did to me. Whatever became my most hated word, they would say. When they start that nowadays I simply walk away from them. I don’t need any more stress in my life with that word.” He laughed. Thinking that it was funny now that he knew how to get out of it with them. “Yes, those were the days when I’d just want to hate them, but I never could. I’m glad that I’m able to deal with it better than I could as a child.”

He was, too. It was much nicer to be an adult and know how to discipline them when they started on their whininess. And they whined a great deal when they wanted something that was beyond their means. Like they wanted out of the assisted living place with a passion, but they also liked living there because it was a roof over their heads and food in their bellies.

“I remember once when I was about six, they decided that I didn’t need to go to school anymore,” Shawn said he remembered that. “Yes, they had me home for a week and couldn’t stand having me there all the time. Wanting lunch and bathroom time. I think that the worst time was when I wanted to go with them when they went places. It’s hard to take a kid to the bar, and they knew that they couldn’t leave me at home. You know, Shawn, they weren’t the best parents, were they?”

“No, I’m beginning to see that a lot of their behavior towards us as children wasn’t all that healthy or legal. They used to take us to the bar when we were kids, do you remember that?” She said she didn’t, but believed him. “Maybe it was just Lynn and me. But I remember the bartender being none too happy about us being there. They would set us up at the bar, too, and we’d eat the snacks that were provided for the patrons. I remember being so thirsty, too, and they’d have to keep buying us drinks. Maybe that’s why you don’t remember it. They didn’t take you when we had cost them so much in drinks. You know, to this day, I can’t eat a peanut. Now I know why.”

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They talked about their parents more after that. Some of the things they did had been illegal, and he wondered how they'd never gotten into trouble for some of it. Like leaving them at home when they were just eight and ten years old. Having them mow the lawn at the same age. But the thing that kept coming to his mind was the bar and the number of times they took them there, and it being really late, and them having them go out to the car and sleep. Alone. It's a small wonder that something didn't happen to them when they'd been so neglected.

"I can't believe how they raised us. And the things that we learned from them. This has been an enlightening thing, if you ask me. I don't know why I'm helping them out." Shawn thought about it for a few seconds. "I'm helping them out because they're my parents, and there isn't anyone else to do it for them. Besides, I never wanted to burden you with them. I did remember how they treated you, and I'm ashamed that I did the same with your money."

"It's all water under the bridge now, as they say. I moved away from all of you when I was old enough, and I managed to save some money and get myself a nice place to live. I had a car and a home, and I was... Well, I thought that I had enough. Then I met Booth, and everything I thought that I had meant very little to me after him. He was and is my world. I love him so very much." Shawn told her that it showed on her face, too. "I feel it. It's wonderful being in love, isn't it?"

"Yes, I don't know what I'd do without Doug and his love. It's a powerful thing, love. And it makes the things that you thought were terrible seem less so with someone around to share them with. I know that is what he's done for me." He laughed a little. "Not that it didn't take me a while to learn a new way to look at things. I wanted until there was nothing left in the relationship. He taught me that having it all

doesn't mean the same as the way I was brought up. And he was right. Having love made me see things that I've never dealt with before."

"I have found that I do miss my other life a bit. Teaching dance was fun for me, and it kept food on my table and a roof over my head. I do miss it, but not as much as I thought that I would when they first thought that I was going to be paralyzed." She smiled at him, and he returned it to her. "I love talking to you about how we grew up, but there has to be more than that between us. I don't want to avoid you because of the memories that it brings back. Let's strive to have better memories and ones that are with the ones that we've fallen in love with from now on. All right?"

"Yes, I agree. I don't want our time to be messed up with just bad memories. You're right about that." He took her much smaller hand into his and kissed the back of it. "I'm so glad that I reached out to find you, Dee. I guess that's one good thing that we got from Lynn being off her medications. Is that the two of us, well, the three of us can connect again. Lynn is in a much better place than she was before since she's gotten on medications that keep her well."

He talked to her about Lynn and what she was up to. She wasn't saying much now that she was medicated. He looked over at his older sister and felt something tug at his heart for her. She'd never find anyone to love her, not in the condition she was in now. Without her medications, she would be just as she'd been growing up. Someone like he'd been when he'd been younger, without the chemical imbalance going on too. He also realized then that while he loved her, he didn't much care for Lynn, and he wasn't sure that he had in a long time. Putting her in the nursing home like he was going to do with Dee's help would free him up from the burden of keeping an eye on her, too, and he found that he liked that idea. She was a burden, and she was hard to keep under control.

After dinner was over and it had been fun too, they talked about the things that were upcoming for them. The holidays for him meant that they'd have Doug's family over

for dinner several times, and they'd decorate the house for the seasons. Since this was Dee's first holiday season with Booth and his family, she didn't know what they'd be doing, but she knew it would be epic with them all around. Even with small children, something that Doug's family didn't have any of anymore, they'd be celebrating big and having a wonderful start to the new year when it came around, too.

Taking his sister to the nursing home in the evening felt better for him than something he'd done for Lynn in a long time. He couldn't believe how much he was looking forward to someone else taking care of her. She was his sister, he knew that, but she was ill, and it was making him ill to be responsible for her all the time, too. On his way home, he called Doug.

"I'm coming home to be with you." Doug asked how that was different than before. "Because I want to be with you instead of us being together because of some kind of twist of fate. I'm in love with you instead of just being with you. I'm not making any sense, am I?"

"You aren't, not really. I thought that you loved me before going to Ohio? I mean, what's changed?" He told him everything that he and his sister had talked about. How his childhood wasn't as good or even nearly as good as he'd thought it had been. Being with him had made him realize that nothing about his life had been normal, and he had that now. "Are you saying that you've settled with me because I'm normal? I still don't understand. I'm sorry. I know you're trying to tell me, but I'm thinking that you're wanting to break off with me."

"Never. I love you with all that I am. And that's the truth, too. Everything in my soul is for you to love you. I never... I don't want to break it off with you. You've given me something that I never realized I didn't have. You've given me a life that I needed and have cherished since we met. You're my everything." Doug laughed. "I'm sorry. I've messed this up when all I wanted to tell you was that I've fallen in love with you so deeply. And fully that I never want to go another day without telling you how much I

love you.”

“You’re doing just fine if you want to do that daily. I love you as well. Very much so.” He felt like he was still messing up, but let it go. He’d show him daily how much he loved him, and that would make it just right. “Come home and we’ll start our new life from today, all right? We’ll be the family that we’ve meant to be all along. I will tell you that I have to meet your sister after this. Whatever she did, I owe her for whatever she did to bring this sort of love out of you and to me.”

“She’d not see it that way. She’d only say that we were talking and that was it. She did tell me that we needed to not dwell on the past anymore, or we’ll avoid each other. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. The past is in the past, and it’s time that the two of us started living and loving for the future. That’s what I’ve been trying to say all along.” Doug told him that he’d said that perfectly. “Good. I’ve gotten it clear for you. Also, Dee is going to take over the money for my parents’ nursing home fees. That will help us a great deal in being able to travel like we wanted to. Lynn is going to be in the nursing home from now on, so I won’t have to worry about her not taking her medications and getting out and about. She needed constant care, and Dee made sure that she found someone who would do that for us. She’s, Dee has been a great deal of help for me getting my head screwed on right too. I’m coming home, Doug. A home that I want to build on with you.”

“I love you, Shawn. When you get here, I want a hug from you in the worst sort of way.” He agreed that was what he wanted as well.”

The rest of the drive home was done with the two of them making plans about their future. He’d not realized how much he was burdening their relationship by taking care of his family all the time had been. Now he was going to live and love. He was going to make memories that he could take to his sister, because she was the one who had encouraged him to do this, so they’d have something else to talk about other than the burdens of their family. Yes, he thought, he was looking forward to having a life

without all the other things going on around him and having a good life. He didn't deserve it; he needed it.

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Falkner needed a break from studying. He'd been working on his education in one form or another since he'd been in pre-school at the age of five. Once he took his state boards, he was going to take a month off and go and see some of the world that he'd been reading about. It was his time, and he was going to enjoy it to the max. Tomorrow, when he was finished up, he was going to get in his car and take off.

"What time do you have to be there in the morning?" He told his brother Cullen that he needed to leave the house at six-thirty to be there on time at seven. "All right. Let's you and I go and get some breakfast in the morning, and I'll drop you off. Also, pick you up."

"I'm leaving as soon as I'm finished. I've packed my bag and I'm going to the airport as soon as I turn in my test." He seemed to know that by the look on his face. "You know something that I don't."

"I do. A party that mom and dad are throwing for you." He said he didn't want that. "I didn't figure you would, but they want you to have a great send-off. They're sending you away, too. On a three-month cruise. So that's what you're going to do."

"I want to go where I want." He said that he could after the three months. "But you don't understand. I want to just roam around."

"I do understand. More than you can understand what they've been giving up for you to be able to do this." He asked what he meant. "They didn't move into a smaller house because they didn't want to interrupt your studies. They didn't go on any cruises of their own, so that they could be there if anything happened and take care of

it for you. You owe them.”

“Gee, thanks.” He thought about the house and how he’d not had to do anything but do his lessons while they held the house down for him. “I guess I’ve been study blind for them, right? I mean, right off the top of my head, I can remember several times when they stopped talking about something when I came into the room. And that’s been in the last week. I just blew it off as they were planning their own vacation.”

“Nope, they’ve been wanting to move out of the big house since Dallas got married and built his own home. They want something much smaller than a ten-bedroom home that they have completely outgrown.” Cullen laughed a little. “I think they outgrew it when I left home, but by then, you were in college with Booth, and they stayed. Then you decided to get your doctoral degree, and they stayed again. They’ve been holding down the fort for a long time, and they want to celebrate you getting your schooling finished up.”

“I didn’t get it, did I?” Cullen told him that he was getting it now and that was all that mattered. “Yes, I suppose, but I was really looking forward to going to the airport and telling them I wanted a ticket on the next flight out and didn’t care where I was going.”

“That might well have been someplace close, and I know you didn’t want that.” He said he was going to pay more attention from now on. “Don’t. You’re kind of fun when you’re like this. Not knowing what’s going on around you. I love being able to tease you into things. But the party is a must-attend. You have to let them do this. And by the time you get back from your cruise, the house will be yours anyway.”

“I don’t want a ten-bedroom house.” He realized how loud he’d been and cleared his throat. “I don’t have any use for a ten-bedroom home, Cullen. I’m going to have enough on my plate just trying to find a place that will allow me to work for them when I fail my exams.” The pop to the back of his head had him bouncing off the

table he was sitting at. "What was that for?"

"You're not going to fail your exams, dummy. I'm going to be surprised if you don't ace it. You've been studying for a long time for them. Since we were in college together anyway." Falkner admitted something to his brother that he'd not admitted to anyone else before. "I know that you're tired. I don't see how you couldn't be tired. I'm right there with you, and I've had the last five months off. Sometimes I wonder if what I did was even worth it, but then I look around my new home and I realize that I've done all right for myself. And for the family, too. It's been hard sometimes. I still have nightmares that would scare a regular person to death, but I'm getting better at sleeping all night now."

"And you do a lot of things for the family, too. Don't think that I've had my head in my books for so long that I didn't notice you. You're the best there is for a baby brother." Falkner laughed and hugged his brother. "I know, too, that you've been running point for me, too. Making sure that my car is working and has gas in it, when I would forget to check. I also noticed too that you've been shoveling the drive when I needed to get out. Little things, sure, but they've meant the world to me. I noticed, but was too buried in my books to have said anything. So I will now. Thank you so much for being there for me."

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“What about the party? You have to go, Falkner. They’ve been planning this for a month.” He said that he’d be there. “Good. So I’ll take you in tomorrow, we’ll have a nice big breakfast sort of as your last meal, and we’ll have some fun. Then I’ll drop you off and pick you up when you’ve fucked up so badly that they’ll be talking about it for years to come. How a student doctor had failed his exam so badly that he’d even spelled his name wrong.”

By the time he’d convinced him that the party was a no-brainer, he was willing to allow him to pick him up in the morning and take him to breakfast. He’d have an hour for lunch, too, and Cullen was going to be there for him by bringing subs and sodas so that they could have time to relax, too.

True to his word, Cullen picked him up at six the next morning. Once they were seated at the restaurant, they talked about anything but what he was going to do today. He’d even laughed a few times, even though when he’d left the house, he was sick with worry. Then, when they pulled up in front of the university where the test was being given, he looked at Cullen with love that he’d forgotten that he’d had for his baby brother.

“I don’t know how I’ll do today, Cullen, but I know that whatever the grade is, it’s going to be good. Good enough? Yes, but I feel like I will do well. And it’s because of you.” He asked him what he meant. “You’ve gotten me out of my head and into thinking about something else. You’ve relaxed me enough that I feel good about today. Not great, but really good. Thank you for that.”

“You’re welcome. And I wanted to tell you something else. Dad is the one who told me to get you and take you out this morning. He said that on the morning that he had

to take his bar exam, Mom did the same for him. She'd taken him out to breakfast, didn't talk about the exams, and kept him thinking about anything but the test he was about to take. He said that every time he thought that he should go through the test again, that he'd not answered some of the questions right, he would think of Mom and her doing what she'd done for him. And he'd just move on to the next section. This is me telling you that you've got this, Falkner. Don't second-guess yourself and mess up. You've got this."

"I feel like I do. I'm not arrogant enough to think that I'm going to ace the test, but I'm going to do my very best at this, and I'm going to be a good doctor too." Cullen told him that he expected no less from him. "Thank you for that, too. I needed that."

Hugging his brother had never felt so good before. Cullen was getting used to being hugged, and he thought that he'd gotten the best one from him than anyone else in the family. Cullen was his baby brother, but he'd never really felt like anything other than his older brother. Cullen was wise beyond his age. He was an old soul, too, with what he'd seen out of the country. And he couldn't love him any more than he did at that moment. Hugging him again, he got out of the car and didn't look back. It was time to do his exams, and by god, he was going to do the best that he could, too.

The first thing he did when he got his exam was put his name on the sheets that were his to do his figuring on. Making sure that he spelled his name correctly had him smiling a bit. He was ready, as ready as he could be to be here today, and it was all thanks to Cullen. The man had given him what no one else had given him. Confidence. Opening his booklet, he was set to begin.

At lunch, Cullen brought them two subs to eat and a cherry pie for them to have for dessert. They didn't talk about the tests or how well he thought he was doing either. Cullen even told him a dirty joke so that he was laughing when he was ready to go back inside. Falkner was ready again to take the exam and didn't second-guess himself once. He didn't allow himself to go back over the test either when he was

finished.He'd given it his all, and there was no point in going back over the test again.However, he did make sure that he spelled his name correctly on all the paperwork that he turned in.

When Cullen was in the parking lot, Falkner had to sit in the car for several minutes before he could say anything to his brother.He'd finished and couldn't remember a single question that he'd had trouble with.That didn't mean that he'd gotten them all right, but he didn't have any trouble with any one question that had him second-guessing himself now.The test was finished, and there was nothing he could do about it now.They were headed to his parents' house when he finally turned to look at Cullen.

"You did me a solid favor today, buddy."He told him it had been his pleasure."No.I'll never forget what you did for me today.Ever.If you ever need anything from me, and I do mean anything, you just ask, and it's yours.Even if it were to cost me my licenses from today, you mean that much to me."

"Thank you.I don't think that I'd ever ask you for anything like that, but it's good to know that I have you in my corner.I love you, Falkner.You're the best brother anyone could ask for."Humbled by him, they drove to the house in a good silence.He couldn't have said what he thought about on the way there, but it was a good time."All right.Here you go, buddy."

The party was in full swing when they pulled into the driveway.The huge sign that said congratulations to him was a nice touch.Mom, Dad, and his family met him at the door, and it was nice to know that they loved him this much.Getting him some food, he wandered around the house looking at what would soon be his.He didn't want it, but he knew that in order for his mom and dad to have what they wanted, he was going to take it.Like Cullen said, he owed them so much.

There were fireworks, too, that his dad had gotten someone to shoot off for them.It

was a lovely evening, even if it was just a little bit cold. And the food had been so good that he'd gone back for thirds when everyone else had had their fill. Even the desserts were his favorite foods, and the cherry pie, he noticed that they'd had for lunch looked just like the one that had been at the party. He loved Cullen even more for getting his favorite pie for them at the school.

Mom and Dad gave him the cruise ticket, and he was more excited about it than he'd thought he would have been before Cullen told him. They also told him that they were planning to move out of the big house and wanted him to have it. Not only did he take the house, but he told them that he was excited about living in it on his own. His parents were going to be close to him as they'd already purchased another home that wasn't far away. Life all of a sudden was taking on a good status, and he was happy for the first time in a very long time. Relaxed as well. He couldn't wait for his cruise to start next week and hoped he could convince Cullen to go with him.

Chapter 9

"Mr. Dixon, my parents are driving me insane about the test scores on that first test that we took at the beginning of the year." Booth told him what he told him every time he brought it up. That the tests were just for his own use and didn't count against the kids who took them. "But they don't care about that part. They said that I took a test and I should be able to know the score of it. I don't care. I feel like I did well on it, but they have this thing about making sure my grades are good."

"It won't matter at all if you did well or not, Thad. I told you, it was just a test to see how well you kept up with your studies over summer break. You know you did well and that's all that matters, correct?" He said not according to his parents. "Well, I'll call them and let them know too that I have no plans on making the test public, nor do I have any intentions of using the test on anything other than what I wanted to know."

"They're not going to like that." He just told him that he wasn't going to use it in his

grading system. "You said that, but they don't believe me when I said it didn't count. It's a test, and that's all they hear. Can't you just tell them what I got and be done with it? It sure would make my life a bit better at home."

"I'll talk to them during my break period. All right?" Thad shrugged and said again that it wouldn't matter what he said, they wanted the score. "I'll talk to the two of them today. That's the best that I can do for you, Thad. If they wanted to, they could test you on the same material and see what they could come up with on a score. If I gave you your score on the test, then I'd have to give everyone their score, and it might be detrimental to the other students to get theirs. Trust me when I tell you that you had the highest score. That's all I'm going to say about it."

Thad looked at him with relief, but still a little nervous. He did wonder at parents who would put that much pressure on someone who was just a kid. They must be overachievers, and they hoped that they could rub some of that off on their kid. He wasn't looking forward to talking to them, but he knew that letting the other kids know that they scored below even a 'D' wouldn't be good for their level of confidence.

Booth called them at one, and of course got someone who worked in the house. Leaving a message seemed like the best bet, but he knew that as soon as the message was given to them, they'd be calling him back during class even though he said that talking to them after four would make it so that he could speak to them about the grades that they weren't getting. He'd even thought about destroying the papers so that he'd not accidentally have them laying out where someone could get to them. Right now, they were at his home in his office. Booth hated to act all suspicious about something when he'd been well within his rights to hold back on the scores as their teacher.

Almost as soon as he put the phone in the cradle in the office, it rang again. Thinking that it couldn't be the Sawyers, he started away when he was called back. It was

them. He rolled his eyes when he was told the phone was for him and asked if he could take it in the principal's office. Granted permission, he hurried to the room to take a call that he was dreading more than he thought necessary.

"This is Mr. Dixon, Thad's Latin teacher. With whom am I speaking?" They were both on the line with him. "I wanted to tell you that the test at the beginning of the year meant nothing to his grades and was only—"

"If it had nothing to do with his grades, then it should be no problem for you to give us the results. When you're testing my child, you can bet that I take a deep interest in his study habits." He told him that no one got the grades and that he'd destroyed the papers after he'd gotten the information off of them that he'd needed. Booth would do that when he got home. "Well, that's going to get you into trouble. My son deserves to know what you were testing him on."

"I agree with you if I had graded them. But all I did was look them over to see what kind of studying that had been done over the summer break." Mr. Sawyer said that he was going to sue him. "Good luck with that. I told the kids before they took the test that it wasn't going to count in their grades that were in the classroom, and I meant it. I have—"

"Perhaps you didn't understand me when I said that I wanted that grade given to me. I don't care what you did with the grades; once I have an understanding of what his score was, then I'll back off. There is no reason for you to keep those sorts of grades hidden from us." He told him that he wasn't hiding them at all because there had been no score on the paperwork. "I demand that you tell me what he got on the test you gave him."

"No grade." The man sputtered a bit before asking him what he'd said. "He, like the other classmates that Thad has, got nothing on the test because it wasn't graded. I looked them over and knew where I was going to—" He cut him off again. "Look,

Mr.Sawyer, I'm not going to be able to finish a sentence with you if you keep cutting me off. There were no grades. I have nothing to give you. Nothing. It wouldn't count on his grade. However, if you keep threatening me, I'm going to give Thad an out for my class and not teach him at all. I don't need this kind of pressure from a student's parents when there is no reason for it."

"He needs Latin for his college performance. I know that you teach the class with a good ear for the language, but so far, you're not impressing me when I have no idea what kind of grades my son is getting. Do you understand where I'm coming from at least?" Booth told him that he was putting undue pressure on his son, and he was going to drop him from his class because of the stress he was under at home. "You will not."

"How do you think your son is going to feel when I tell him that I'm not going to be teaching him anymore? The amount of pressure on him right now is more than he needs to be. Simply because you think you deserve more than you're entitled to at the moment." Booth took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm going to tell you for the last time. There was no grade given on the test. Nothing will come back on him for taking the test that was for my own personal teaching. If you keep this up, hounding him and me about it, I'll take him out of my class so quickly that you'll wonder how it happened. And don't think that I won't report to the head of the school about why it happened. I saw a potential abuse in the form of you trying to get something from him that no one else has seen."

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“You do that and I’ll sue you and the school.”he told him that it would be too late by then that Thad would be so far behind in his studies that he’d never catch up before the end of the year.“You think so?He has to study every night because of you.”

“Then I think you have your answer when it comes to putting pressure on a young man that does very well without it.”He put the phone in the cradle and got up to leave.When the phone rang again, he ignored it.There was no way he was going to get sucked into this argument again.He also made another decision while sitting there.Going out to find the principal of the school, he asked to talk to him.“I’d like to give you my resignation.I’ve had enough.”

“No, Booth, don’t let one parent make you lose your place in this school.I’d have your back.I know that my son took the Spanish test that you did at the beginning of the year.And without him having to worry about the grade, he’s been buckling down and getting his work done because of you telling them that they all did all right, but not great.He didn’t want to be one of your all-right students.You do know that the history teachers did the same thing?They wanted to see how much they retained from the year before, and it worked to get them all in gear when they were told that there was a lot of work to be done to catch up.Don’t leave because of...Thad’s a good kid.Don’t make him suffer because of his parents.”

“I’m giving you my two weeks’ notice, Jim.I’ve recently gotten married, and I miss my family too when I have to be in bed by nine at night on school nights.I’ve enjoyed having this summer off without teaching summer school.I think that my family did as well.I just don’t want to do this anymore, where I get called to the carpet for doing my job to the best of my abilities.”He told him to take the rest of the day off and to think about it.To talk to Dee about it.“She misses me, too.I just can’t do this

anymore, and feel good about myself when things like this happen. I don't even want to finish out the rest of the school year. It's early enough that you can find someone to replace me easily."

"I don't know what to say to make you want to stay, Booth. You're a great teacher, one of the best we've had. Hell, you are the best teacher we have here. And I'll talk to anyone who denies it." The secretary told Jim that he had a phone call; it was the Sawyers again. "Tell them I'm working and will call them back tomorrow. But also make it clear that I'm backing Booth up one hundred percent on his decision to not make the paperwork public." He turned back to him. "Please talk this over with someone. Your parents or your wife, but don't leave today. We need you here."

"I'll talk to my parents and my wife but I see them telling me to go with my gut and my gut is telling me that things aren't going to be—did you hear that they're making their son study nightly for hours because I won't give them a grade that I don't have? I didn't grade them. I never wanted anything to come back on the—damn it, Jim. This is their fault. All this stress that they're putting on Thad could have been avoided if they had just done what I wanted and not bothered with the stupid tests. It makes me question everything that I've done this year, and it's only six weeks into the quarter." He looked around the office before speaking again. "You're a great principal, Jim. One of the better ones we've had here in a decade since I've been teaching. What are you going to do when they go to the board and they demand that I show them... I don't even have the papers anymore. I destroyed them when I was finished with them."

He was going to do that as soon as he got home and was in his office. He'd never had so much trouble from a stupid thing that he'd been doing since he'd gotten out of college. Even his college professors had done the same thing to only see what was retained from the class the year before.

Once he was in his classroom again, he decided to stick it out for the rest of the day. It

would be hard pressed to have anyone come in so late in the day, and he gave the two classes he had left a reading assignment that they could do. It wasn't an easy day for him, but he did reach out to his parents to talk to them about what was going on.

"You've been unhappy for some time now. I know at least since the year before last. You just didn't have the heart in it like you did before." He said that he'd been trying too hard to make himself like teaching, but that the Sawyers had just been the straw that he needed to break the camel's back. "I know the Sawyers, too. They're like that with everything. Have to be the first at it, or they would call foul. The wife is worse than the husband. I've always wondered how their kids were fairing. Makes me feel sorry for that little boy more than anything. No, son. If you want to stop teaching, you do it. And with our love and support. It's not like you couldn't go find a job doing any of the million and one things that you're good at, too."

"I just don't want to go to work anymore and leave Dee at home. I miss her something terrible when I'm at school." Dad laughed and told him there was that, too. "I'm thinking that with her blessing, I could just quit now and not have a single bad thought about leaving them unprepared. I've had enough."

"Of course you have. You've been in some kind of school setting since we put you in pre-school when you were five years old. Maybe in a couple of years you'll feel better and want to go back, but it doesn't matter if you do or not. You wouldn't be able to give your best when you teach because you don't want to be there anymore." Booth agreed with his parents. "It'll be nice to have you be able to stay for football games that we all get together and watch, where you don't have to be in bed at the first sign of darkness, too."

He decided to talk to Dee too while he was at the school. When she burst into tears, telling him that she was almost ready to beg him to call off most mornings that she missed being around him all the time, it was decided. He wasn't going to be working anymore. Unless it was something that he could do to help one of his family members,

he wasn't going to be having a classroom full of kids around anymore. He was also going to start sleeping in, too.

"I got so used to you being right there where I needed you that when you left for school, it was like you took a large part of me with you. And I hated it. I hated myself for thinking that I could convince you to be a stay-at-home husband with me." He said he would have, too. But the Sawyers were just the push that he needed. "Jackson Sawyer? I've met him. He's a pushy sort of bastard, isn't he? And his wife is ten times the worst kind of person. Everyone is dumber than them, I got the feeling that's what they thought anyway."

"I've only ever spoken to them at class meetings, and then it was for me to praise their son to the highest limits. They even asked me at one point if there was a way for me to tutor their son so that he could excel better. I told them that he was already making an 'A' in the class and that was all that was needed for him to pass. I have a feeling that after today's phone call with them, the poor boy is going to be studying even harder than before." He felt better about leaving after talking to his parents and Dee. "I'll be home tonight and we'll celebrate in some way with each other."

Since he was quitting in the first quarter of the year, he decided that there was nothing in the room that he wanted to take with him. He was finished, and even if he decided that he'd start teaching again in the same school, he'd need to start fresh. The things that he'd put in his room recently were things that he'd been using for years, and there were only the two posters that he'd hung that were new. Yes, he was going to leave here today and not return. He'd had enough to last him all the years that he'd been teaching.

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Sitting in the most uncomfortable chairs that she'd ever sat in, Doone kept an eye on her mom. She would lash out at the woman with the kids if she didn't keep reminding

her that they had nothing to do with how she was raising them. The kids were the worst ones that she'd ever seen, in that they were sitting in the toy area, tearing pages out of books that had been there for the last few months they'd been coming to the Welfare office. Putting her hand on her mom's leg again, she huffed at her but kept her mouth closed. It was all they needed right now was to get into trouble over some snotty-nosed kids that should have been in cages rather than let to roam free all over everyone that was in the waiting room.

"The least that someone could do is to make it so that she has to pay for all the damage." It wasn't loud, her mother's voice, but she knew that the other women in the room had heard her. "There is no point in having them disciplined when we all know that this is the way they are at home."

"Lady, are you talking about my kids? They ain't doing nothing wrong. If they wanted to keep the books nice, they shouldn't put them out where kids can get to them. If I want to keep my shit in good condition I put it up where they can't find it." She snickered a little before continuing. "'Course they manage to find that shit too and tear it up but it's only a few pages. The story will be better for it if they don't want to tape them back together."

"Books are expensive." Another woman chimed in that the books in question had been there for months and nobody had done anything to them but for her children. "If they were my kids I'd be putting them in a corner with a good bust to their asses. Ain't no reason for them to be acting like they were savages."

Doone rolled her eyes and looked at her mother. She could tell that she wanted to engage with her word or two, but she only shook her head and said no. They had this appointment and didn't want to be kicked out because she'd said something.

"I'll keep my mouth shut, honey. I know how important this appointment is for us." Her mom was right. This appointment was for her to be able to get the food card

for herself and be able to take some of the burden off her for a bit.“You were good at coming with me.But I know how important this is for the two of us.”

Doone didn't live with her mom, but she was there often enough to be a part of her apartment.The government subsidies housing had saved her a bundle when her mom was able to qualify for it.They just needed a bit more help with food, and then her mom would be set up for the rest of her life.No matter how short it was.

Meggie McFarlen had been diagnosed with cancer in her lungs three years ago.She'd been doing all the right things since they told her that she only had about a year left and had shocked the doctors into believing that she was some kind of medical phenomenon.It had helped that Doone had a friend who had helped her along with a little vampire blood, just enough to make sure that the cancer didn't return, but what really helped too was her ability to walk three miles a day and to keep eating well.That was what was costing her so much, the eating well thing.

Not that she'd deny her mother anything, but fresh over canned vegetables were expensive.But she'd work her two jobs just to be able to see the look on her face when she went to the doctor's office and they told her that the cancer was gone.Neither one of them ever said why it was gone, but with Mom having a second chance, she was doing everything in her power to make sure that it never came back on her again.

“Meggie McFarlen?”Mom stood up and was nearly knocked down again when the mother of the kids said she'd been there before she was.“Yes, you were, Donna, but I told you the last time you were here and showed up several hours before your appointment that didn't mean that we could see you then.Your appointment is for three-thirty.You've been here since eleven o'clock.I told you then that I had other clients before you.Come on, Meggie.Let's see what we can do for you.”

Mom asked if she could go back, and when permission was given, Donna said they'd

better not be making one appointment into two and getting ahead of her. Doone said nothing but picked up her mom's purse and went into the lobby with her mom. Christ, some people were too entitled to be around normal people.

Sitting next to her mom in the tiny office, Doone felt the closeness of the room squeezing her. Taking a deep breath, she told herself this was for her mom and she could bear it when the woman who was in charge sat in her overflowing desk with barely room for the large water bottle that was on her desk, with the oversized fan too.

Since Doone was there only as her mom's ride and to carry things around that she might need, she tuned the two women out with their talking. She didn't completely ignore them, but zoned out enough to wonder where she was going to end up on her shift tonight at the hospital. She'd been a multitask person for years now and knew her job better than most of the staff who seemed to change nightly.

She had a good job that paid well if it were just herself, but she'd been caring for her mom for the last five years. And while she didn't mind helping her mom out, she was exhausted all the time from working so much and not getting the rest that she needed. Today would help a great deal in that she could perhaps quit one of her jobs and just work like a normal person for a change.

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“Ms.McFarlan, do you have your mother’s paperwork?”Pulling it out of her oversized backpack, she handed it over to the other women.“Oh, you’ve filled it out.Thank you for that.That’ll save us a lot of time today.”

As she went over the paperwork that explained why her mom wasn’t working, and how much she made on social security.Which wasn’t all that much because her dad had been the breadwinner until he up and left Mom when she’d gotten sick five years ago.She’d not spoken to him or seen him since.

“Honey?”She looked at her mom with a smile.“We’re finished.Are you all right?You seemed to have taken a sleeping pill there for a bit.”She asked her what she’d missed.“Nothing much.Only I qualify for the food card for six hundred dollars a month.That’s all.”

They were both so excited, but they held onto their excitement until they could get to her car, and no one could hear them.That was a great deal more than she had been providing her mom monthly for food, and she couldn’t believe it.Six hundred dollars a month would see her mom through the entire month, too.

After getting everything in the car situated and put back in the envelopes that they’d been in, Doone took her mom home so that she could rest.The card would come to her registered mail tomorrow, and she needed to make sure she was at home to get it.The fact that it was starting so soon had her giddy.

“I’m going to get myself some of those fruits that I like so much first thing.”She asked her why she wasn’t getting them already.“They’re expensive and I can’t eat but a little bit of them on account of them being so rich.”Mom looked at her from the

couch that she'd been lying on since they'd gotten her home and asked her if she'd mind taking her to the store tomorrow.

"It just so happens that I'm off both jobs tomorrow. I don't know how it happened, but I'm going to think of it as a gift. We'll go to the store and get you all that you want." She said that she still had to be on a budget. "Yes, but I think you've been doing without for a while now, and you can get some of the things that you've missed out on because of the price. I'm sorry I couldn't help you more, but this is wonderful."

"You've helped me out more than I can ever repay you for." She told her that she was her mom. I am, but I'm also smart enough to know that you've been working a great deal of overtime and that second job so that I could eat what I needed to eat."

Because of the little bit of blood that she'd been given when they'd only given her a year to live, Mom had been saying that she didn't want to be that sick again. Instead of listening to her or Mae about the blood and what it did for her, Mom took it to mean that at any time she could be ill again and would die. Neither of them wanted that. So in order for her mom to feel good about what a great thing she'd had done for her, she let her go on thinking whatever she wanted. It was good that she was eating healthy and exercising. It was also good that her mom had a better outlook on life than she did. But with this nice boom, she was going to be able to spend quality time with her mom rather than rushing around getting her appointments met or set up so that she could live a good life.

While her mom napped, she made sure that there were things on her list that she was going to need to get tomorrow, other than groceries. Then she read over the paperwork that came with her home to make sure that they were getting the right kind of groceries instead of getting to the line and paying only to find out that they'd gotten the wrong kind of things that didn't qualify for. It did seem relatively easy to get sidetracked with the card, but the instructions were easy enough for her mom to use.

Since she had worked the overnight shift, Doone wasn't supposed to be in until midnight tonight. Lying in the recliner that had been in their home when her mom had had one, she closed her eyes. She only worked the third shift because it gave her an extra buck fifty an hour more than working days. Doone was going to try her best to get on days so that she could be at home in the evenings more with her mom. She was all she had in the world and wanted to spend as much time with her as she could.

"Doone, honey, your phone is going off again." She looked at it and saw that it was from the hospital, and they more than likely wanted her to come in early again. "Let me get to bed to rest, and you can have the couch. I don't suppose it occurred to you to go into my bedroom and have a nice nap, did it?"

"That's your bed." Picking up her cell phone, she answered it before it went to voicemail and said her name. When they asked her if she could come in three hours early, she told them she would. That would be perfect for her to butter someone up about her getting on days. Plus, this check came in on the same week that she had to pay her own rent, and it would go a long way in giving her just a little extra to have lunch with her mom, she thought.

She had about six hours before she had to be at work, so she decided to lie down on the couch to get in a nice nap. Getting comfy on the thing was nearly impossible because she thought the sucker was older than she was. Maybe she'd be able to afford something newer for her mom now that she wasn't buying her groceries anymore, and that would be good for her. Mom hadn't had anything new since she'd moved into the housing three years ago. Mom deserved it more than anyone she knew.

Chapter 10

Booth was going to miss his brothers while they were gone on the cruise. Cullen had been reluctant to go, but Falkner talked him into it. They'd be gone until after Christmas, but they had their link that they could use when he missed them enough to

need to talk to them. They were going to hold off on the holidays until they returned, and everyone was all right with that. To see Europe this time of year would be fantastic. He was going to take Dee on a nice cruise in the summer.

Now that he wasn't working, it felt good to make plans for the day and the months coming up. He felt like he'd been freed, something that he'd never thought of when he'd been teaching. Just yesterday, he slept in until seven-thirty and felt good about it all day. Today, he had plans to go shopping for candy that he and Dee were going to hand out. The two of them had even gotten themselves costumes to wear when they did it.

He'd been playing with the decorations in the yard since Thursday and thought that he'd had them looking really good. If the number of kids coming by to see them was any indication, he was going to have to be handing out candy for hours after the time that they were supposed to stop. Not really, but he was looking forward to having a good time this year.

"I've been thinking about this holiday. Do you guys always go all out, or is this year something special?" He asked Dee why she asked. "I saw that your brothers have been decorating too. Like it's some kind of rivalry between the four of you." He laughed.

"Not that I'm aware of, but I did hear that Dallas was going to town to shop for some blow-ups like we have. This will be epic if we make it some kind of competition this year. I know that my parents have been going around telling who had what in their yards." Dee nodded but looked confused. "This is fine, you know. A little healthy competition is good for the soul."

"So long as we win, I don't care. But we have some stiff competition from your brother Waylon. His hardware store looks like a haunted house. I don't know that we can go that far." He told her that they could. "Yes, I knew you'd say that, so I ordered us a huge pumpkin. It'll be here tomorrow. Also, costumes for us to wear. As I said,

it'll only be healthy if we win. Otherwise, I'm going to have to beat your brothers at Thanksgiving. We should take an inventory now so we can get them in before Christmas and Thanksgiving."

"I love the way your mind works, love." He finished putting the haunted tree together and was headed for the house when Dee told him that lunch was ready. "I wanted to tell you that I've heard from the board about my classes. As you can imagine, they're none too happy with me quitting like I did. They said that I owed them at least a year's notice. I'm not going back. I hadn't realized how burnt out I was until I got some time off. It's been revealing to me, too, that I'm not stressing about not going back either. I think it's because of you and the rest of the family supporting me the way that you have."

"I'm less stressed as well. I love your family, but I wanted to spend time with you all the time. I know that sounds selfish, but I don't care. I love having you around all the time. And I think that your family does as well." He said that he'd already heard from Faulkner and Cullen about how much fun they're having and are glad that they can just contact him when they want. "Good for them. I know that Cullen got talked into going, but I think he needed to get away, too. It'll be good for the two of them. Besides, who wants to go on a cruise on their own? This way they can have fun together."

After lunch, he did what Dee suggested and took an inventory of what they had left in the barn. He found a lot more Christmas than he'd first thought and was excited to be able to get it out. There was a Santa that stood all by himself, plus there was one in a sled that he thought was filled with little elves and packages. There were little boxes that still had the tags on them that had never been taken out of the box, too. Some of them were Halloween even.

When it started getting dark out, he made his way into the house. Dee had come out to talk to him a few times, and he loved being near to her too. When she told him that

dinner was ready, he expected to grill out, but they were having a hearty soup and homemade bread. The perfect combo for the cooler weather. After dinner, the two of them sat in the living room to watch a preseason game on television. This, he thought, is the way to be a wealthy man.

“I have no worries.” Dee told him that was good. “No, you don’t understand. I couldn’t have done what I did today even if it were a weekend. I’d have to be grading papers and fixing assignments. I love this being a man of leisure.”

“How long before you need to get out and do something again? You Dixons don’t strike me as being the leisurely type of men. Even the women are busy all the time. Did I tell you that I have to bake a hundred dozen cookies to take to the school for some reason? I would love to see Amy or one of the others baking cookies. But I’m going to do it. Bake them all by myself.” He told her good for her. “You might not say that when you see just how many a hundred dozen cookies are. I know that it’s twelve hundred cookies, but that just seems like a great many of them if we’re all making them.”

“They do it for the exchange. You’re to bake twelve hundred cookies all the same.” Dee asked him what that meant. “You keep a dozen of your cookies for yourself, then you trade your other cookies for someone else’s cookies. Until you have twelve different kinds to set out at Christmas. I don’t know that they don’t set them out for Thanksgiving, too, but that’s what you do with the exchange. It’s kinda fun. Mom’s been doing it for years. And she always has the best cookies out at Christmas and beyond. My favorite is Mrs. Amber’s chocolate chip ones with walnuts. I don’t know what she does with them, but they’re chewy from the first bite until the last. I could eat an entire dozen of them on my own.”

“I’ll have to remember that. I don’t like walnuts in my cookies, but I’ll bake you some for the house while I’m slaving over baking twelve hundred others.” They both laughed when he tickled her. “Your mom is making no bakes. I don’t understand why

she has to make them on a cloudless day.”

“Humidity.If there is too much humidity in the air, they don’t set up.You don’t bake them, but do some kind of mixing with oats and chocolate that makes them get firm enough to eat.I love those too.”He laughed.“I think I have a bit of a sweet tooth like my grandpa Simpson does.He loves this time of year when the women start baking cookies and pies.”

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He must have dozed off at some point because he woke up to a darkened room and a blanket pulled over him. Getting up, he stretched and nearly screamed like a little girl when someone knocked on his patio door. It was his brother Dallas.

“Wanna go on a run?” He asked him what time it was. “Not late. About nine thirty. I just need to get out of the house for a little while. The baby is going to hate me because I can’t stand to let her cry, and Amy cries too. It’s too much. They’re both asleep, and I left a note telling Amy that I was going to hang out with you since you can stay up late. So do you wanna go on a run with me?”

“Of course.” He decided to leave a note for Dee, too, and was out the door before he changed his mind about the hour. It was nearly ten when the two of them shifted and ran through the trees like their other halves.

When Dallas said he’d had enough, the two of them laid in his backyard and rested. It was a beautiful night for being out, and they’d worn each other out. It was just something else that he missed having to work early in the morning.

“I’m loving being a dad. But there is so much I don’t know about being one. I’m striving to be just like our dad.” Booth told him that was the best way to go. “When are you and Dee going to have a baby? I don’t mean to pry, but I was just curious.”

“Soon. When she ovulates again.” He wasn’t embarrassed talking to his brother about Dee and her cycle, they’d been raised not to be that way when it came to sex. “Right now, we’re getting used to me being home all the time. I find myself outside a great deal more than I’ve ever been, and I’m loving it. Dee said it’s nice to have me around, too, when she needs to talk to me. She’s not keen on the mind-speak thing yet. I think

she's just nervous."

"So was Amy at first. She didn't know who could hear us. It took her a while to get used to just being able to reach out and talk to me. Now she does it all the time. It's nice having someone so close that you can talk to them." He asked about Cullen and Faulkner. "I've heard from Faulkner but not so much Cullen. I think he's still getting used to not working too. But his stress levels were way up there."

"I understand that. I'm beginning to realize how much pressure I was putting on myself, teaching all the time. Having this summer off from school really made me realize how much I was missing by going to bed early all the time. I know that I did the school dirty by just up and quitting like I did, but I feel better than I have in a decade. And tonight, I got to talk to you and have some fun. I wouldn't have done that before. Not with having to get up early to be to class on time." He asked if he thought that he'd miss it. "Dee asked me something like that tonight. Would I miss working? She said that I didn't strike her as a leisure kind of person. I have stuff to do right now, so no, I don't miss it, but I'm sure that once the newness wears off, I'll have to find myself something to do."

"Yes, I understand that. When Amy was around the house more, it was driving me crazy that we couldn't just pick up and go places. She had to stay close to home in the event that the baby came early. But she calmed me down by telling me that once she was born, we'd have lots to do with her. And while so far that hasn't happened, I can see where we'll travel more and be out of the house a great deal. I'm looking forward to her first holidays. She's too young to understand what's going on, but I'm not. Then next year she'll be one and that will be so wonderful with her." Dallas laughed. "We've been told that the years would go fast now that we have a baby in the house. In no time at all, she'll be going off to college. I don't want to think that far ahead, but the past month has really flown by."

"It's hard to believe that she's going to be a month old in a couple of days." Dallas

said he couldn't believe it either. "Dee and I are going to watch the two of you with Anna and see how you screw up. Because grandma told me that you always screw up your first kid. You're over everything. Overprotective and so on."

"Thanks. But with having all the elders around, mom and the grandmas I don't think we'll screw up too much. Dad told me to get this through my head. 'Amy is always right.' Dad said it took him one or two of us being born before he understood that was true. Mom was always right when it came to us boys about anything."

The sun was coming up when they decided to go to their homes. Dee was just getting up when he got into bed, and she was glad that he'd been out with Dallas. The women were going to get together today and have lunch. Booth said that he had some more inventory to take and he'd be done with the barn. They were finding all kinds of things in the barn that had been left behind for them to use.

In addition to the blow-ups, there was an old lawn tractor. Also, a small tractor that looked like it would have been used for gardens. He thought that he'd enjoy that, having his own garden when the summer rolled around. It would keep him out of doors, and he thought that he'd share his crops, if he had any, with his family. Shaking his head, he wondered when he'd become such a sap about things and decided that he'd worked hard enough to be sappy about whatever he wanted.

When Dee left with all the others, he decided that he was going to clean out his office. It was raining right now, and he couldn't do too much in the yard, so the office it was. Some of the things that he'd brought from his apartment were school things, and he set them aside to deal with later. But as he dug into the rest of the stuff, he realized that he still had all his notes from college and decided that he wanted to see about going back to school to get another job. He didn't know what he wanted to do, but teaching wasn't one of them. Piling stuff up by the door that needed to be shredded, he got sidetracked with trying to find his shredder so that he could take care of the mess he had.

When Dee got home, the office was a mess. Not only had he gotten sidetracked a couple of times and left messes in piles, but he'd never found the shredder. Also, he had a list of things that he needed to make his office complete. In addition to the shredder, he needed a stapler—he had no idea where his had gotten to and a new chair. The one he had was as old as the paperwork that he'd found in his desk drawers.

He thought about getting a filing cabinet, but he knew he'd be storing paperwork that should have been thrown out years ago. Everything that he had was backed up on his computer so keeping hard copies of things was doubling the amount of crap he had. He also thought that he should get himself a new computer, as the one he had now was from his senior year in high school and had to be babied along to turn on when he needed it. He was sort of ashamed of his mess when he realized that his brothers were coming over to watch the game with them.

“Just shut the door. No one will know anything about it.” He said that he'd do that, but would know it was a mess. “So? You've only just moved into the house. If they complain about a little mess, then tell them to go home. I'll eat all the wings that were made myself. I love the hot and spicy ones.”

“You would too, wouldn't you?” She nodded at him and then laughed. “All right. But I'm ordering a couple of things that will come tomorrow if I can order them soon enough. Are you going to be home?”

“I don't know. I can be here in the morning, but in the afternoon I have to go over to Amy's home and sit with the baby while she takes a shower. She said that Dallas freaks out when the baby cries, and she'd rather he didn't have to watch her. Do you really think he freaks out?” He told her what they'd talked about last night. “Oh. I guess I can see him doing that. Holding her all the time isn't good for either of them. But then I'd probably be the same way.”

“Nah, you'd be a pro at it. I have a feeling that our kid is going to be much smarter

than Dallas simply because we both are.”She asked him if he was calling his brother stupid, or, for that matter, calling Amy stupid.“I’d never say that to their faces, but they have been known to freak out with the baby.”

They both laughed, and she helped him move the papers from in front of the door to the middle of the room.Once the door was closed, they weren’t going to bother with it for the rest of the night.But he did get some things ordered and got himself a new laptop that he could use when he got his mess cleaned up.

The game was fantastic.Their team, the Browns, had won the game by a narrow margin.The food was a huge hit as well, and they were all now ready for dinner.Ordering pizzas and inviting the women over seemed like a wonderful end to their day.Even Mom and Dad came over to eat with them.

When everyone left after dinner, he realized how exhausted he was.Not getting any sleep the night before, he was willing to bet that he’d go to bed and crash tonight.Dragging his ass up the stairs after everything was locked up he brushed his teeth and got into bed.He was happy to have Dee curl around him, but that was all he remembered.He really was out before the lights went out in the room.

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Dee had a million and one things going on in her head when the front doorbell rang.Going to see who could be bothering her at eight in the morning, she was ready to blast whoever it was for disrupting her morning.She was both surprised and nervous when a stranger was there.

“I want to talk to your husband.”She said she did as well, but he wasn’t home at the moment.“Where is he?I want those test papers that he gave my son at the beginning of the school year.And don’t think I didn’t notice that he quit the school when I wanted those papers.”

“Mr.Sawyer, right?”He seemed startled that she knew his name.“Yes, well, you’ve been causing trouble since Booth quit.Speaking of which, thank you for that.”

“What do you mean, to thank me for him quitting.He was lazy, that’s why he quit.It had nothing to do with me.”She just stared at him until he had to look away.“Look.I want those tests.I’ve had the teacher at the school looking around for them, and they must be here.”

“If they were here, they’d be shredded, like he told you that he’d done with them.”He said that he didn’t believe her.“Then by all means come into his office and find them if you’re so hyped up on finding them.However, you’re not going to find them here any more than they were at the school.He shredded them.Just like he told you he’d done.”

She knew for a fact that they’d been shredded and were in the bags of shredded papers that he’d taken to be dumped off at the warehouse.They used the shredded papers for packing material, and that was where he was right now.Stepping back so that Mr.Sawyer could enter, he just stood on the steps without coming in.She asked him what he wanted now.

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“I’m sick of talking to you about this. He needs to produce those tests so that I can see how my son did.” She told him she was sick of hearing about it from him, but if he thought they were in the house, then he was going to have to enter to find them. He looked at her with a squinting eye. “He doesn’t have them here.”

“He doesn’t have them at all. And right now, your son is more than likely stressing because you’re harassing his favorite teacher. Yes, he’s his favorite. When he came by here two days ago to tell us you were coming here, he told Booth that he’d never had a teacher like him, and he loved learning from him. But that’s all gone to shit now hasn’t it. Because of you, there is no Latin teacher at the school, and I’d not count on getting one as good as Booth was, either. He’s finished with teaching children who have overbearing parents who think he’s a liar all the time.” Mr. Sawyer said he’d never called him a liar. “Then why are you here at my house looking for paperwork that you’ve been told no less than fifty times has been destroyed?”

The man took a step back and looked at her before speaking. “I never meant for this to get so out of hand. But my wife is hounding me to find them. Or to at least get a grade from them.” She just stood there, not saying a word, and let him squirm a little bit more. “He’s a good kid, my son. And he’s smart too.”

“Perhaps you’re telling the wrong person about that.” He nodded, then looked around before turning back to her. “The paperwork was only to see how much Thad had retained over the summer. Like he does every year when he has second-year students coming into his classrooms. If you know that your child is smart and has been studying over the summer, why do you care what a test score is that matters little to anyone but you?”

“I don’t know, to be honest.” He looked defeated then. His shoulders slumped, and he looked like he’d gone a couple of rounds with a prized fighter and come out on the bottom. “I don’t know why she cares so much. Like I tried to tell her that it has nothing to do with his grade, why are we making such a fuss about it.” He asked if he could come in for a while and just sit down.

“Of course. I’m baking cookies for a cookie exchange, and you can help me decide which ones are better. I’m testing the orange dreams against the snickerdoodle that Booth likes.” She invited him into her kitchen, where she’d been working. “Actually, he likes all kinds of cookies, but these two are ones that no one else is baking, so I get to try.”

“I’ve not had a cookie since...well, I think since Thad was born. The wife said she didn’t want unhealthy foods around and got rid of everything that she deemed not good for him. I suffered for a bit, then I’d go to the office and have what I wanted. I wonder what Thad does to get what he wants to eat?” She told him that he should ask him. He’d probably enjoy sharing with him. “I think I will. It’s time he and I had some father-son time together and get some dinner together. Yes, I’m going to do that.”

When Booth came home, he looked shocked to see Mr. Sawyer in the kitchen with a plate of cookies in front of him. She’d decided on the snickerdoodles to bake and had nearly half of them finished when he came into the kitchen with them. Of course, he had to try them as well, and she thought it wonderful that Ben, the man’s name, asked for a glass of milk. And if they had chocolate, he’d rather have that with his cookies.

Ben’s phone rang twice, and he ignored it both times. When someone came to their front door again, she wasn’t the least bit surprised to find Thad there. He’d been sent to find his dad by his mother, and he was to report back to her when he found the man. Thad liked the cookies and had a glass of chocolate milk as well before the two of them were ready to go.

“I’m sorry.” Booth asked what he had to be sorry about. “Because I made you think

that quitting your job was the way to go. Though in talking to your wife, I think you needed it much more than anyone that I know. You're a good man, Booth. And the best teacher that I've ever encountered. Not many people will stand up to my wife and come out on top. You're a good man, and I'm happy to make your acquaintance." They shook hands and then hugged. Thad too shook hands with Booth and told him that he missed him.

After the two of them left, Booth sat on one of the stools in the room and took another cookie. Before biting into it, he looked at her with a smile. She smiled back and asked him what was going on in his head.

"I love you very much." She said that she loved him as well. "You probably kicked Ben in gear to leave his wife, you know. I've never seen a person so happy about a cookie in my life, and I love cookies."

"I don't know. I think he'll stay for Thad." Booth shook his head and said no, not for Thad because he'd get to keep him. "You think? I don't know. His wife seems to run the household. Not that I've ever talked to her but she seems like a real bitch. Eat this cookie, it's messed up."

"Mom said that you were willing to bake two different cookies for the exchange. Is that right?" She told Mrs. Amber that she wanted two dozen of her cookies for him. "Thank you. You do know that you more than likely saved Thad from a nightmarish home life from now on. Ben will stand up to her from now on, too."

"Good for them." She pulled the last tray of cookies out of the oven and put them onto the cooling rack. "Do you suppose we could go out to dinner tonight? I've been in this kitchen all day, and I'd like to—"

"You stayed in here because of Ben, didn't you?" Her face turned a lovely shade of pink, and she said that he seemed to need it. "Yes, he did. Thank you for cleaning this mess up with him. I think that had he pushed much harder, I would have given him the

papers.I still have them.”

“I know.”She turned and looked at him.“You kept his paper and no one else’s.You also graded it, and he aced the test, didn’t he?”

“He did.He’s a smart kid.And so are you.”She winked at him and she turned off the oven, and put the pans in the sink to be washed with everything else.“I’ll help you clean up, then we’ll go out to dinner.Someplace with cloth napkins, like you told Amy you needed, when you want comfort food.”

“You paid attention.”He said that he did because he loved her.“Thank you for that.I’m going to go up and shower some of this sugar off me and put on something sexy.What do you think about taking me to dinner and we come back here and fuck?”

“Fuck?”Dee nodded at him.“I’m all for that now if you don’t mind.”She told him that she was too hungry for it now.“All right, but I get to do whatever I want to you when we get back here.Anything.”

“All right.Then the next time I get to do whatever I want to you.Twice.”She left him in the room to go take a shower.When she heard him laughing, she knew that she’d surprised him once again.Before he got to the stairs where she was, Dee told him that his computer had come, as well as the other things that he’d ordered for his office.She could tell he was debating whether to go up the stairs with her or into his office to play around until she came down again.Letting him decide, Dee stripped down and got into the warm shower.She was going to tease him all night until he was ready to explode when they got back here.